FOCUSING ON KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Focus on the following terms and concepts while you read through this selection. Understanding these will not only increase your understanding of the selection that follows, but you will find that, because most of these terms or concepts are commonly used in professional writing and rhetoric, understanding them helps you get a better sense of the field itself.

1. sophists
2. second sophistic
3. rhetorical canons
4. epistemological rhetoric
5. bellettristic rhetoric
6. elocutionary rhetoric

PERSPECTIVES ON THE STUDY OF RHETORIC

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When we hear the word “rhetoric” used today, the meaning frequently is pejorative. More often than not, it refers to talk without action, empty words with no substance, or flowery, ornamental speech. A typical use of the term occurred at one point during the Iranian hostage crisis. When Iranian authorities asserted that the hostages might have been released from the embassy had the deposed shah of Iran remained in Panama to face extradition proceedings, a senior White House aide responded to these assertions by saying, “that sort of promise is little more than rhetoric from people who have made commitments in the past and who have been unwilling or unable to keep those commitments.”

Rhetoric should not engender, however, only negative connotations for us. In the Western tradition, rhetoric has a long and distinguished history as an art dating back to classical Greece and Rome. Although our focus in this book is on contemporary treatments of rhetoric, we will begin with a general overview of the rhetorical tradition. We hope this brief review will dispel the disparaging meanings associated with the term “rhetoric” and provide a foundation for understanding the contemporary perspectives explored in later chapters.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF RHETORICAL THOUGHT

The art of rhetoric is said to have originated in the fifth century B.C. with Corax of Syracuse. A revolution on Syracuse, a Greek colony on the island of Sicily, in about 465 B.C., was the catalyst for the formal study of rhetoric. When the tyrannical dictators


on the island were overthrown and a democracy was established, the courts were deluged with conflicting property claims: was the rightful owner of a piece of land its original owner or the one who had been given the land during the dictator's reign? The Greek legal system required that citizens represent themselves in court—they could not hire attorneys to speak on their behalf as we can today. The burden, then, was on the claimants in these land disputes to make the best possible case and to present it persuasively to the jury.

Corax realized the need for systematic instruction in the art of speaking in the law courts and wrote a treatise called the "Art of Rhetoric." Although no copies of this work survive, we know from later writers that the notion of probability was central to his rhetorical system. He believed that a speaker must argue from general probabilities or establish probable conclusions when matters of fact cannot be established with absolute certainty. He also showed that probability can be used regardless of the side argued. For instance, to argue that someone convicted of driving under the influence of alcohol probably is guilty if arrested for a second time on the same charge is an argument from probability. But so is the opposing argument—that the person convicted once will be especially cautious and probably will not get into that same situation again. In addition to the principle of probability, Corax contributed the first formal treatment of the organization of speeches. He argued that speeches consist of three major parts—an introduction, an argument or proof, and a conclusion—an arrangement that was elaborated on by later writers about rhetoric.

Corax's pupil, Tisias, is credited with introducing Corax's rhetorical system to mainland Greece. With the coming of rhetorical instruction to Athens and the emerging belief that eloquence was an art that could be taught, the rise of a class of teachers of rhetoric, called sophists, was only natural. The word sophos means knowledge or wisdom, so a sophist was essentially a teacher of wisdom. Sophistry, not unlike rhetoric, has a tarnished reputation, so that today we associate the sophists with fallacious or devious reasoning.

The Greeks' distrust of the sophists was due to several factors. First, the sophists were itinerant professors and often foreigners to Athens, and some distrust existed simply because of their foreign status. They also professed to teach wisdom or excellence, a virtue that traditionally the Greeks believed could not be taught. In addition, the sophists charged for their services, a practice not only at odds with tradition, but one that made sophistic education a luxury that could not be afforded by all. This in itself may have generated some ill feelings. In large part, however, the continuing condemnation accorded the sophists can be attributed to an accident of history—the survival of Plato's dialogues. Plato, to whom we will return shortly, stood in adamant opposition to the sophists, and several of his dialogues make the sophists look silly indeed. While Plato's views now are considered unjustified in

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large part, an anti-sophistic sentiment nevertheless was perpetuated in his dialogues that has continued to the present day.4

Protagoras of Abdera (c. 480–411 B.C.) is called the initiator of the sophist movement. He is remembered for the statement, “Man is the measure of all things,” which indicates the interest the sophists as a group placed on the study of humanity as the perspective from which to approach the world. This phrase also suggests the relative position many of the sophists accorded to truth: absolute truth was unknowable and perhaps nonexistent and had to be established in each individual case.5 A second sophist deserving of mention is Gorgias, who was the subject of one of Plato’s disparaging dialogues on the sophists and their brand of rhetoric. Originally from Sicily, Gorgias established a school of rhetoric in Athens and became known for his emphasis on the poetic dimensions of language. He also is called the father of impromptu speaking because this was a favored technique at his school.6

Another sophist whose work is significant in the history of rhetorical thought is Isocrates (436–338 B.C.). He began his career as a speechwriter for those involved in state affairs because he lacked the voice and nerve to speak in public. In 392 B.C., he established a school of rhetoric in Athens and advocated as an ideal the orator active in public life. He believed that politics and rhetoric could not be separated; both disciplines were needed for participation in the life of the state. In addition, unlike many other teachers of his day, Isocrates encouraged his students to learn from other teachers—to take instruction with those best qualified to teach them.7

The sophists’ emphasis on technique suggests that rhetoric had not yet achieved formal status as an area of study. The work of the Greek philosopher, Plato (427–347 B.C.), provided the foundation for such developments, although paradoxically, he also is remembered as one of the great opponents of rhetoric. Plato was a wealthy Athenian who rejected the ideal of political involvement in favor of philosophy after the death of his teacher and mentor, Socrates. At his school, the Academy, he espoused a belief in philosophical thought and knowledge, or dialectic, and rejected any form of relative knowledge or opinions as unreal. Thus, he opposed the practical and relative nature of rhetoric advocated by the sophists.

The two dialogues in which Plato’s views on rhetoric emerge most clearly are the Gorgias and the Phaedrus. In the Gorgias, Plato set Gorgias and others against Socrates in order to distinguish true from false rhetoric, or the rhetoric as practiced by the sophists from an ideal rhetoric grounded in philosophy. Plato faulted rhetoric for ignoring true knowledge; for failing to work toward the good, which for Plato was the end toward which all human pursuits should be directed; and because it was a tech-

4 That Plato’s negative view of the sophists was unjustified has been asserted by numerous scholars. His views in the Gorgias, in particular, have come under frequent re-examination. See, for example, Bruce E. Gronbeck, “Gorgias on Rhetoric and Poetic: A Rehabilitation,” Southern Speech Communication Journal, 38 (Fall 1972), 27–38; and Richard Leo Enos, “The Epistemology of Gorgias’ Rhetoric: A Re-examination,” Southern Speech Communication Journal, 42 (Fall 1976), 35–51.


6 Thourous and Baird, p. 38.

nique or knack rather than an art: "Rhetoric seems not to be an artistic pursuit at all, but that of a shrewd, courageous spirit which is naturally clever at dealing with men; and I call the chief part of it flattery. It seems to me to have many branches and one of them is cookery, which is thought to be an art, but according to my notion is no art at all, but a knack and a routine."

In Plato's later dialogue, the Phaedrus, he used three speeches on love as analogies for his ideas about rhetoric. The first two speeches illustrate the faults of rhetoric as practiced in contemporary Athens: either it fails to move listeners at all or it appeals to evil or base motives. With the third speech, however, which Plato had Socrates deliver, he articulated an ideal rhetoric. It is based first and foremost on knowing the truth and the nature of the human soul: "any man who does not know the truth, but has only gone about chasing after opinions, will produce an art of speech which will seem not only ridiculous, but no art at all." In addition to his concern for content, Plato also commented on organization, style, and delivery in the Phaedrus, thus laying the way for a comprehensive treatment of all areas of rhetoric.

Plato's student, Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), was responsible for first systematizing rhetoric into a unified body of thought. In fact, his Rhetoric is often considered the foundation of the discipline of speech communication. While Aristotle could not avoid the influence of Plato's ideas, he diverged significantly from his teacher in his treatise on rhetoric.

Aristotle was a scientist trained in classification, and this orientation emerges in the Rhetoric. Rather than attempting a moral treatise on the subject, as did Plato, Aristotle sought to categorize objectively the various facets of rhetoric, which he defined as "the faculty of discovering in the particular case what are the available means of persuasion." The result was a philosophic and pragmatic treatise that drew upon Plato's ideas as well as on the sophistic tradition.

Aristotle devoted a large portion of the Rhetoric to invention, or the finding of materials and modes of proof to use in presenting those materials to an audience. He dealt as well, however, with style, organization, and delivery, or the pragmatic processes of presentation. Thus, he incorporated what now are considered to be the major canons of rhetoric that have formed the parameters of its study for centuries. The canons consist of invention, or the discovery of ideas and arguments; organization, or the arrangement of the ideas discovered by means of invention; elocution or style, which involves the linguistic choices a speaker must make; and delivery, or the presentation of the speech. Memory is the fifth canon, although Aristotle made no mention of it.

No major rhetorical treatises survived in the two hundred years after Aristotle's Rhetoric. This was a time of increasing Roman power in the Mediterranean, and not surprising, the next extant work on rhetoric was a Latin text, the Ad Herennium, written about 100 B.C. The Romans were borrowers and, as with most other aspects of Greek culture, they adopted the basic principles of rhetoric developed by the Greeks.

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9 Plato, Gorgias 463.
10 Plato, Phaedrus 262.
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The Romans were practical people, however, and the more pragmatic aspects of rhetoric were the ones that appealed most to them. They added little that was new to the study of rhetoric but rather organized and refined it as a practical art.

The Ad Herennium appears to be a representative Roman text in that it is essentially Greek in content and Roman in form. A discussion of the five canons constitute the essence of this schoolboy’s manual, but the practical aspects, not their theoretical underpinnings, are featured. The systematization and categorization that characterized the Ad Herennium’s approach to rhetoric were typical of the Roman treatises that followed.11

Cicero (106–43 B.C.) represents the epitome of Roman rhetoric, since in addition to writing on the art of rhetoric, he was himself a great orator. His earliest treatise on the subject was De Inventione (87 B.C.), which he wrote when only twenty years old. Although he considered it an immature piece in comparison to his later thinking on the subject, it offers another model of the highly prescriptive nature of most Roman rhetorical treatises.

Cicero’s major work on rhetoric was De Oratore (55 B.C.), in which he attempted to restore the union of rhetoric and philosophy by advocating that rhetoric be taught as the single art useful for dealing with all practical affairs. He drew heavily on Isocrates’ ideas in advocating an integration of natural ability, comprehensive knowledge of all the liberal arts, and extensive practice in writing. As a practicing orator, Cicero developed the notion of style more fully than did his predecessors and devoted virtually an entire treatise, Orator (46 B.C.), to distinguishing three types of style—the plain, the moderate, and the grand.12

A final Roman rhetorician deserving of mention is the Roman lawyer and educator, M. Fabius Quintilian (35–95 A.D.). In his Institutes of Oratory (93 A.D.), Quintilian described the ideal training of the citizen-orator from birth through retirement. He defined the orator as “the good man speaking well,” and his approach was not rule bound as were many Roman rhetorics.13 He was eclectic and flexible, drawing from Plato, Aristotle, Isocrates, and Cicero and also integrating his own teaching experiences into traditional theory. His work was so systematic that it not only serves as an excellent synthesis of Greek and Roman rhetorical thought, but it was an important source of ideas on education throughout the Middle Ages.

With the decline of democracy in Rome, rhetoric entered an era when it essentially was divorced from civic affairs. A series of emperors were in power, and anyone who spoke publicly in opposition to them was likely to be punished. Rhetoric, then, was relegated to a back seat and became an art concerned with style and delivery rather than with content. This period, from about 150 to 400 A.D., often is referred to as the Second Sophistic because of the excesses of delivery and style similar to those for which the early sophists were criticized.

The Middle Ages (400–1400 A.D.) followed the Second Sophistic, and during this period, rhetoric became aligned with preaching, letter writing, and education. The

13 Thomsen and Baird, p. 92.
concern with preaching as an oratorical form might be said to have begun with St. Augustine (354–430 A.D.). Many call Augustine a bridge between the classical and medieval periods; nevertheless, he is the only major thinker on rhetoric associated with the Middle Ages. As Christianity became increasingly powerful, rhetoric was condemned as a pagan art; many Christians believed that the rhetorical ideas formulated by the pagans of classical Greece and Rome should not be studied and that possession of Christian truth was accompanied by an automatic ability to communicate that truth effectively. St. Augustine, however, had been a teacher of rhetoric before converting to Christianity in 386. Thus, in his *On Christian Doctrine* (426), he argued that preachers need to be able to teach, to delight, and to move—Cicero's notion of the duties of the orator—and that to accomplish the aims of Christianity, attention to the rules of effective expression was necessary.  

Because St. Augustine believed such rules were to be used only in the expression of truth, he revitalized the philosophic basis of rhetoric that largely had been ignored since Quintilian.

Letter writing was another form in which rhetoric found expression during the Middle Ages. Many political decisions were made privately through letters and decrees; in addition, letter writing became a method of record keeping for both secular and religious organizations as they increased in size and complexity. Letter writing, too, was necessary in order to bridge the distances of the medieval world, which no longer consisted of a single center of culture and power as was the case with the classical period.  

Thus, principles of letter writing, including the conscious adaptation of salutation, language, and format to a particular addressee, were studied as rhetoric.

Finally, rhetoric played a role in education in the Middle Ages as one of the three great liberal arts. Along with logic and grammar, rhetoric was considered part of the *trivium* of learning, much as our three Rs of reading, writing, and arithmetic function today. While the emphasis shifted among these arts from time to time, each was treated in a highly practical rather than a theoretic manner.

The Renaissance, from 1400 to 1600 A.D., signaled the end of the Middle Ages but did little to alter substantially the course of rhetorical thought. Few innovations were introduced; instead, the classical writers were emphasized and many of the Greek and Latin treatises that had been presumed lost were discovered in monasteries. The concern with style and expression that characterized the Middle Ages continued with perhaps even more excess, prompting it to be labeled an age of "social integration."  

Peter Ramus (1515–1572) was a well-known French scholar of the Renaissance who typified the position accorded to rhetoric during this period. Essentially, he made rhetoric subordinate to logic by placing invention and organization under the rubric of logic and leaving rhetoric with only style and delivery. This dichotomizing and

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17 Douglas Ehninger, "On Rhetoric and Rhetorics," *Western Speech*, 31 (Fall 1967), 244.

departmentalizing of knowledge made for easy teaching, and Ramus’ taxonomy was perpetuated for generations through the educational system.

The period from 1600 to 1900 is known as the age of modern rhetoric. Francis Bacon (1561–1626) is a figure who bridges the rhetoric of the Renaissance and that of modern rhetoric. He was concerned with the lack of scholarly progress during the Middle Ages and sought to promote a revival of secular knowledge through an empirical examination of the world. He introduced ideas about the nature of sensory perception, arguing that our sensory interpretations are highly inaccurate and should be subject to reasoned, empirical investigation. His definition of rhetoric contained this notion of rationality: “the duty of Rhetoric is to apply Reason to Imagination for the better moving of the will.”19 Bacon, then, anticipated the decline in the church’s influence, the renewed interest in rhetoric, and the focus on psychological and cognitive processes that would become important to the study of rhetoric in the next centuries.

Three trends in rhetoric characterized the modern period—epistemological, belteristic, and elocutionist. Epistemology is the study of the origin, nature, methods, and limits of human knowledge. Epistemological thinkers sought to recast classical approaches in terms of modern developments in psychology. They attempted to understand rhetoric in relation to underlying mental processes and contributed to the development of a rhetoric firmly grounded in a study of human nature.

George Campbell (1719–1796) and Richard Whately (1785–1859) exemplify the best of the epistemological tradition. Campbell was a Scottish minister, teacher, and author of The Philosophy of Rhetoric (1776). He drew on Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian as well as the faculty psychology and empiricism of his times. Faculty psychology attempted to explain human behavior in terms of the powers or faculties of the mind—understanding, memory, imagination, passion, and will—and Campbell’s definition of rhetoric was directed to these faculties: “to enlighten the understanding, to please the imagination, to move the passions, or to influence the will.”20 Campbell’s approach to evidence suggests his ties to the rational, empirical approach to knowledge gaining prominence in his day. He distinguished three types of evidence—mathematical axioms, derived through reasoning; consciousness, or the result of sensory stimulation; and common sense, an intuitive sense shared by virtually all humans.

Richard Whately, like Campbell, was a preacher, and his Elements of Rhetoric, published in 1828, often is considered the logical culmination of Campbell’s thought.21 His view of rhetoric was similar to Campbell’s in its dependence on faculty psychology, but he deviated in making argumentation the focus of the art of rhetoric: “The finding of suitable arguments to prove a given point, and the skilful [sic] arrangement of them, may be considered as the immediate and proper province of Rhetoric, and of that alone.”22 He also is remembered for his analysis of presumption

22 Whately, p. 39.
and burden of proof, which paved the way for modern argumentation and debate practices. The epistemologists, then, combined their knowledge of classical rhetoric and contemporary psychology to create rhetorics based on an understanding of human nature. In this, they offered audience-centered approaches to rhetoric and paved the way for contemporary concerns with audience analysis.

The second direction rhetoric took in the modern period is known as the belles lettres movement; the term, in French, literally means "fine or beautiful letters." It referred to literature valued primarily for its aesthetic qualities more than for its informative value. Belleslettique rhetorics were distinguished by their breadth—rhetoric was considered to consist not only of spoken discourse but of writing and criticism as well. In addition, the scholars of this school believed that all the fine arts, including rhetoric, poetry, drama, music, and even gardening and architecture, could be subjected to the same critical standards. Thus, the critical component to rhetoric gained an importance not seen in earlier approaches.

Hugh Blair (1718–1800) stands as a representative figure of the belleslettique period. In his Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, based on a series of lectures he delivered at the University of Edinburgh, he presented an overview of the relationship among rhetoric, literature, and criticism. One of his most innovative contributions was his discussion of taste, or the faculty that is capable of deriving pleasure from contact with the beautiful. Taste, according to Blair, is perfected when a sensory pleasure is coupled with reason—when reason can explain the source of that pleasure. Blair's ideas on rhetoric proved extremely popular and laid the foundations for contemporary literary and rhetorical criticism.

The elocutionary movement, the third rhetorical trend of the modern period, reached its height in the mid-eighteenth century. It developed in response to the poor delivery styles of contemporary preachers, lawyers, and other public figures and because the canon of delivery had been neglected, for the most part, since classical times. Like the epistemologists, the elocutionists were concerned about contributing to a more scientific understanding of the human being and believed that their observations on voice and gesture—characteristics unique to humans—constituted one such contribution. The elocutionists also sought to determine the effects of delivery on the various faculties of the mind, thus continuing the link with modern psychology. Despite a stated concern for invention, however, many elocutionary treatises were not much more than prescriptive and often highly mechanical techniques for the management of voice and gestures.

Gilbert Austin's guidelines are representative of the highly stylized approach of the elocutionists. He offered this advice to the speaker, for instance, about eye contact and volume: "He should not stare about, but cast down his eyes, and compose his countenance; nor should he at once discharge the whole volume of his voice,

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25 Golden, Berquist, and Coleman, pp. 175–76.
but begin almost at the lowest pitch, and issue the smallest quantity; if he desire to silence every murmur, and to arrest all attention."26 As another example, James Burgh believed each emotion could be linked with a specific, external expression; he categorized seventy-one emotions and their particular manifestations. Thomas Sheridan (1719–1788), who wrote A Course of Lectures on Elocution in 1762, was perhaps the most famous elocutionist. Sheridan not only was in the forefront in terms of criticizing the speakers of his day, but he sought to establish a universal standard of pronunciation for the English language in addition to offering the usual techniques for delivery.27

The elocutionists have been criticized for their excesses in terms of style and delivery and for the inflexibility of their techniques. Their efforts to derive an empirical science of delivery based on observation, however, foreshadowed the use of the scientific method to study all aspects of human communication, and their theories had a tremendous effect on how speech was taught in American classrooms in the nineteenth century.

The twentieth century has seen a renewed interest in the study of rhetoric, and this era has become known as the contemporary period. While the elocutionists had narrowed the focus of rhetoric to delivery, contemporary rhetorical scholars have revitalized rhetoric as an art that includes the canons of invention, organization, and elocution, as well as delivery. Contemporary scholars also tend to be eclectic, drawing not only on the rhetorical treatises of classical Greece and Rome and other periods but on a variety of contemporary disciplines such as psychology, sociology, literary criticism, English, and philosophy as well. Currently, then, rhetoric has regained some of its earlier importance as a broad liberal art that is more than simply the expression of ideas or considerations of style apart from substance or action.

DEVELOPING YOUR UNDERSTANDING

1. Explain what impact the following sophist maxim has on the definition, scope, and function of rhetoric: "Man is the measure of all things."

2. Based on the abbreviated rhetorical history presented by Foss et al, identify several different definitions of rhetoric. Analyze and discuss their similarities and differences. Then, present your own definition of rhetoric and explain your rationale.

3. Referring to the rhetoricians discussed in Foss et al, summarize the different ways rhetoric, philosophy, politics, and ethics have been related (or separated) in definitions of rhetoric.

4. Develop your own definition of rhetoric (if you have not done so already for question 2). In your definition of rhetoric, describe the relationships between rhetoric, philosophy, politics, and ethics. Then, assess how your position is supported and/or challenged by the history of rhetoric as presented by Foss et al.

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