

# The role of the audience in concepts of rhetoric



It has been said that the success of any democracy is incumbent upon the participation of its citizenry. Indeed, our governmental, economic, and social institutions (explicit or otherwise) require the cognizant and informed participation of us all. We are the juries for our peers. We vote for our political representatives. We celebrate our communities and mourn the fallen. Our lives are rife with situations that call upon us to deliver our opinions, feelings, and best judgments. Therein lies the need for rhetoric, a means with which we might offer those things and gain an understanding of what those things require of us in the first place. Given the “ need” for rhetoric, which author - Plato, Aristotle, Burke - seems to provide the most valuable understanding of it? In other words, if our citizenship necessitates the use of rhetoric in the normal course of our lives, which view of rhetoric might prove the most useful? The activity central to rhetoric, of course, is the physical act of offering our opinions and best judgments: speech with the intent to persuade. The basic concept of rhetorical study, then, is an inspection of the means by which one will persuade their audience. In my estimation, the most important aspect of any of our authors’ concepts of rhetoric is that of the “ audience” (where an audience is the collective recipient of the speaker’s machinations). In fact, it is through each author’s consideration of this concept-of the audience’s centrality to a working concept of rhetoric-that I will proceed with contrasting the three major views of rhetoric and deciding which view is most valuable. I consider the author’s treatment and understanding of the audience to be the best indicator of the value of his concept of rhetoric. In this vein, the Burkean concept of rhetoric seems to be the most valuable. It does not wholly abandon the Aristotelian or Platonic views of rhetoric but, rather, redefines those views with the

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audience as its central consideration. To support this, I will briefly explain the Platonic and Aristotelian concepts of rhetoric and point out how these views consider the role of the audience. Then, I will contrast these views with the Burkean ideal, showing why this view is, in my judgment, the most valuable. The Platonic concept of rhetoric grows out of (or, rather, is inhabited by) Plato's distain for the group of Greek rhetoricians known as the Sophists. This animosity is a result of Plato's belief that the Sophists evolved into educators more interested in winning their arguments and advancing their personal interests than defining and teaching rhetoric as a practical and useful skill (Boyd). In *Gorgias*, Plato takes the Sophists to task, and he constructs a dialogue that indicts rhetoric as a false skill, one that does not better its audience but simply exercises flattery. This dialogue takes the form of an argument between Gorgias and Socrates, as Socrates asks Gorgias to define rhetoric. Gorgias purports that rhetoric is "responsible for freedom for a man himself, and at the same time for rule over others in his own city" (452d6-7). This, coincidentally, is a valuable point about the importance of rhetoric in democracy; if we are to govern ourselves, we must utilize rhetoric to rule. Rhetoric's concern is "persuasion, and that its whole business and the sum of it results in this" (453a3-4). Gorgias, then, conceives the practice of rhetoric as something of substantial benefit. Socrates, however, questions the validity of Gorgias' notions. He asks, "Can you mention any broader power of rhetoric than to produce persuasion in the soul of the hearers?" (453a4-5). For Socrates, rhetoric's aim is to instill beliefs and persuade only; in other words, it does not produce understanding or knowledge in the hearer and is, thus, an ignoble skill (455a1-2). He argues that the speaker's ultimate goal is that of flattery, not the conviction of an

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honest truth in his audience. The production of an argument of truth, Socrates says, belongs to the philosophers—not the rhetoricians. It is in Gorgias' defense of rhetoric that the Platonic notion of the audience begins to emerge. Gorgias claims that rhetoric is a powerful craft, and the rhetorician is entrusted with a great power for “ speaking against anyone about anything, so as to be more persuasive among masses of people about, in short, whatever he wants” (457a6-8). Gorgias claims that the rhetorician is well aware of justice and truth, but Socrates refutes this notion, saying instead that the rhetor simply “ appears to know, rather than the man who knows” (459e7). In light of these conceptions, the Platonic view of the rhetorician's audience is like that of a blank canvas, onto which the rhetorician is able to paint his own opinions. In all of the dialogue of Gorgias, no character refutes the perception that the audience is somewhat vulnerable, unable to distinguish flattery from substance. In fact, much of Gorgias and Sophocles' interaction is spurred by Gorgias' promises that rhetoricians will use their seemingly all-powerful skills for good, not malice. Moreover, the interests of Plato's audience are discounted; the audience seems to be composed of reluctant spectators demanding to be persuaded by kind flattery rather than sound and skillfully executed argument. Indeed, this reaction to flattery seems to be the only obligation of the Platonic audience. Unlike this view of the speaker-audience dynamic as mostly one-way (save the audience's approval of their being flattered), the Aristotelian concept of rhetoric requires the rhetor to establish a measure of credibility with his audience and, thus, grants the audience agency. In *On Rhetoric*, Aristotle outlines his theory of rhetoric—rhetoric, again, being concerned with persuasion—as a technical craft relying on three “ modes” of persuasion. The <https://assignbuster.com/the-role-of-the-audience-in-concepts-of-rhetoric/>

first, ethos, depends upon the character of the speaker; the second, pathos, on moving the audience into a certain condition of mind; the third, logos, on logical proof. Ethos is achieved when the speaker establishes his credibility; the person we perceive as “good” is more believable than the person we deem “bad.” Pathos relies on the fact that our emotions have great impact on our decision-making. An audience put into a friendly or happy disposition by a speaker is likely to be much more receptive than if they are angry or disinterested. Logos relies on the effective irrefutability of logic. If, for example, we argue that  $2 - 1 = 1$  and are able to prove that  $1 + 1 = 2$ , it follows that our argument,  $2 - 1 = 1$ , must be true. If persuasion is the aim of rhetoric, Aristotle argues, these three modes are the means by which we might achieve that persuasion. “It is clear,” Aristotle says, “that to grasp an understanding of them is the function of one who can reason logically and be observant about characters and virtues and, third, emotions” (1356a).

Aristotle’s approach to defining rhetoric values the audience in a way the Platonic concept does not. This is illustrated in Aristotle’s ethos mode, the first element of a rhetoric view, thus far, that deals principally with the audience. The audience becomes, to at least a minimal degree, mobilized, participating in the formation of the rhetorician’s argument by assigning credibility and value to the speaker’s personal character. For Aristotle, the power to effectively persuade does not rest solely with the speaker (as Gorgias says). The audience, too, holds power in their mandate to judge the speaker’s character before they open themselves to the speaker’s arguments. In fact, ethos is the first of the three modes of Aristotelian rhetoric because it is the mode that acts as a requisite for the others; without credibility, the speaker’s efforts at pathos and logos fall on deaf ears.

The pathos mode might be viewed as more or less similar to Socrates' (of Gorgias) belief that rhetoric relies on flattery. But the key difference in that belief and the Aristotelian concept is a difference of the degree to which the audience is given credence to choose their disposition for themselves. The Platonic audience's pathos seems to be basic; flatter, and they will meet one's argument with acceptance. Aristotle approaches the audience's disposition recognizing that there is more to temperament than being happy or sad (such as invoking sympathy or attempting to spur the audience's interest in the topic to begin with). The Burkean concept of rhetoric places even greater emphasis on the audience. Burke defines rhetoric as "the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents" (41). In fact, understanding one's audience ("human agents") is central to Burke's concept of rhetoric, described in terms of "identification" and "consubstantiality:" A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is identified with B. Or he may identify himself with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so. [...] In being identified with B, A is 'substantially one' with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus, he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another. (20-1) In other words, the idea of consubstantiality is that we share the substances of our personal lives—our careers, friends, beliefs, hobbies, even property—with other people. It is in that sharing that we become consubstantial. To identify "A" with "B" is to "make A 'consubstantial' with B" (21). Thus, establishing an idea of consubstantiality helps establish a more accurate idea of an audience: a group of individuals

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sharing in particular substances. The idea of identification is the method by which consubstantiality is established; one identifies the substances shared with others and comes to terms with the absence of other substances. Burke says, “ Identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity” (22). For Burke, identification is what rhetorical action should be based on. “ You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his,” he says (55). For Burke, identification is more than an element of persuasion; it is persuasion. Since identification is a transaction between the speaker and his or her audience (as the speaker reads an audience to identify their respective substances), it is clear that the Burkean concept of rhetoric is the most audience-centered, for its thesis—that identification should be the central action of the rhetor—is an argument for the audience. In the Burkean model of rhetoric, the audience is not restricted in its agency as it is in the Platonic model. Burke does establish a similarity, however, when he invokes Plato’s concern for flattery, saying, “ Flattery is [not authentic persuasion] but a special case of persuasion in general. But flattery can safely serve as our paradigm if we systematically widen its meaning” (55). In other words, moving from the Platonic concept to the Burkean means understanding that if flattery works, then a sincere attempt at establishing meaningful consubstantiality would prove immeasurably more effective. The Aristotelian concept is considerably closer to the Burkean than the Platonic, especially given Aristotle’s emphasis on ethos, but it still lacks an account of the audience’s substance. To move from the Aristotelian model of rhetoric to the Burkean (moving closer, still, to placing absolute value on the audience),

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one might combine the notions of ethos and pathos (discarding logos altogether) and attempt to “ see behind it the conditions” that warrant utilizing ethos and pathos in the first place (Burke 55). No modification of Platonic views or combination of Aristotelian principles is necessary, however. The Burkean concepts of identification and consubstantiality adequately communicate the importance of the audience, elevating the Burkean concept to most useful among the three. Why, personally, do I consider the importance of the audience to be the best measure of a rhetorical concept’s usefulness? When scientists finished mapping the human genome in 2000, they discovered something remarkable: all human beings are incredibly similar in their genetic makeup, only varying less than one-tenth of one percent. This means that all of the differences among humanity are rooted in less than one-tenth of one percent of our genetic makeup. Yet, the history of humanity hangs on a timeline of conflicts bore from that tiny percentage of what makes us different. Wars are fought over that one-tenth of one percent. People die. And more often than not, the violence and strife that ends up claiming lives begins as the spoken word. Bonaparte said that the pen is mightier than the sword; he was right. There is no greater barrier to our advancement as a civilization than the simple idea that our differences matter more than our common humanity. If we dedicate ourselves to rhetorical methods that focus on what we share rather than resorting to carving out divisions amongst us, our most serious disagreements will cease to injure us as lastingly as they might otherwise. Indeed, it may be that the highest aim of rhetoric is to persuade us toward peace and reconcile our differences.