

You're not special

[Sociology](#), [Ethics](#)



Son of famed historian and Pulitzer Prize winner David McCullough, English instructor David McCullough, Jr. Delivered one of the most controversial and memorable high-school commencement speeches on June 7, 2012.

Addressing over 400 capped and gowned graduating students, family, and friends at Wellesley High School, McCullough's humorous Introduction set the attention-garnering foundation for his main argument: to inspire his audience-? and this generation-? to be exceptional and lead extraordinary lives" (McCullough, Jr.).

Perhaps the most revocable piece of McCullough's presentation is his simple and challenging proposition: " You're not special. " A direct response to the exigency that everyone is uniquely gifted, the phrase was immediately demonized by social media and generated a maelstrom of conflicting responses. But rather than analyze this comment as a self-evident rhetorical entity, it is instead important to review McCullough's message in context. McCullough effectively frames ethical, logical, and pathetic appeals with preexisting commonplaces and a calculated delivery to further his positive precept for the future generation.

Situating ethos primes McCullough's audience and lends credibility to his argument before he even utters a word. A rhetor's ability to persuade, in fact, is directly linked to their reputation: preconceived moral judgments affect the perceived validity of the messenger (Crowley and Heath, 148). Thus, McCullough's prestigious social standing-? devoted teacher, advocate of civic engagement, and son of a prolific academic-? commands respect and receptiveness.

For example, McCullough authority as a scholar is reinforced by his reference to ancient philosophers and prominent literary figures: " You've learned, o, I hope, as Sophocles assured us, that wisdom is the chief element of happiness. " By virtue of his extrinsic virtuosity, the audience perceives McCullough as reputable, a veritable expert in the field. This shared rhetorical lens, or commonplace, consequently establishes a positive interpersonal dimension between McCullough and his audience and promotes attentive listening.

An audience engaged with the rhetoric moreover shifts individuals' attitudes from indifference to acceptance or rejection, two states conducive to persuasion (163). Additionally, McCullough later assertions to "carper the heck out of the diem" and resist the easy comforts of complacency' are bolstered by his social eminence. Ultimately, an exemplary rhetoric is more efficacious at telling his audience to be exemplary: McCullough message is transformed through situated ethos.

Just as McCullough rhetorical proposition is strengthened through ethos, so too is the effectiveness of his dialectical conclusion reliant upon all aspects of logical appeal. McCullough first lays an inductive foundation on which to build his deductive argument that " You're not special. " This inundation, in fact, is augmented both in potency and applicability by McCullough detailed enumeration of irrefutable instances and cognizance of contentious reasoning. Many of McCullough particulars demand belief without further elaboration; they are what Aristotle deemed "[...] scientific demonstrations" (119).

Indeed, McCullough statistical evidence not only serves as incontrovertible proof, 1 OFF encompassing: " So think about this: even if you're one in a million, on a planet of 6. 8 billion that means there are nearly 7, 000 Just like you. " McCullough facts also carry eight because he utilizes outside expertise to corroborate his claims: " In fact, astrophysicists assure us the universe has no center; therefore, you cannot be it. " Furthermore, McCullough exposes the false pretenses on which many audience members claim academic superiority and distinction: " And I hope you caught me when I said 'one of the best. But the phrase defies logic. By definition there can be only one best. You're it or you're not. " Interestingly, McCullough further demonstrates the fallacious nature of this reasoning by noting that the venue-? the Wellesley High football stadium-? is a literal level playing field. " Having not only piled on particulars" (124) but also shown the illogic of opposing claims, McCullough conclusion-? that no one is special-? readily follows. His subsequent deduction, thoroughly dependent on the strength of his inductive reasoning, is thus nearly inescapable.

It goes as follows: No one is special; you are someone; you are not special. This syllogism certainly hearkens to the literal meaning of anthem, cutting right to the heart of the matter" (125). McCullough recognizes that an individual's response to a proposition is dependent on preexisting commonplaces which coalesce into larger ideologies. For this reason, his logical appeal challenges the normally unarticulated but widely held belief that everyone has talents which differentiate them from others.

By objectively attacking a near universal commonplace, McCullough makes his message relevant to his entire audience and indisputable. McCullough, in turn, concludes his speech with a collection of dialectical dictums: " Develop and protect a moral sensibility and demonstrate the character to apply it. Dream big. Work hard. Think for yourself. " These final developments are McCullough true proposition to the Wellesley High School graduates of 2012. Though improvable, the rhetorical impact and acceptance of such moral adages relies upon the perceived " wisdom" (119) of the rhetoric.

Thus, McCullough compelling message-? his dialectical claims-? are substantiated by his logically sound reasoning, resulting in a message that fully resonates with the audience. McCullough also furthers his proposition by altering the emotional state of his audience and challenging commonplaces with pathos. Speeches are neither given nor received in a vacuum; McCullough audience, showered with accolades, brings with them preexisting states of self-absorption and entitlement.

As such, a powerful change in emotional intensity is required to induce openness and receptivity. McCullough effects this change through pejorative language and indirect confrontation of sensitive commonplaces. His diction-? including words like " pamper," " cosset," " dote," and " bubble-wrap"-? is colorful and conveys disparaging, valued judgments" (186). Similarly, his degradation of commonplace symbols like trophies ND awards contests the ideological underpinning that such achievements have intrinsic value: " If everyone gets a trophy, trophies become meaningless.

We have of late, we Americans, to our detriment, come to love accolades more than genuine achievement. " Perhaps most inciting is McCullough cynical description of childhood, being doted upon and called sweetie pie. " The net effect is an emotional globalization of the audience which polarize beliefs and generates a genuine, hierarchy affects emotional responses-? individuals are less indignant at those of rater communal standing (176)-? McCullough position allows to him to temper his message and strike an optimal balance between boredom and excessive " C... Enrage" (185). In this way, McCullough increases audience enforceability and the impact of his other rhetorical claims. Just as important as his rhetorical appeals is McCullough delivery, which confers eloquence on a seemingly scathing commentary. In truth, however, McCullough body language, tone, and cadence highlight some weaknesses as an orator. It was evident that he read from a manuscript, and he made no use of deliberate pauses to highlight certain concepts. As such, some of McCullough more grandiose ideas and imagery were not done justice.

Nonetheless, McCullough mastery of one stylistic piece of ammunition is apparent: calculated perception and humor. His tasteful use of levity is effective because it appeals to all sectors of his audience; consider his references to baseball, marriage, Barney, M)LO," and the universal distaste for Donald Trump's hair, which is " C...] quite a phenomenon. " McCullough humorous, multidimensional allure-? a emission unrepresented in multimedia portrayal-? makes the tenets of his oration memorable and adds a much needed human element.

Through situated ethos, logos, pathos, ubiquitous commonplaces, and a cogent delivery, English instructor David McCullough, Jr. Effectively conveys a timeless and fundamental doctrine to his audience: to lead " The fulfilling life, the distinctive life, the relevant life. " And though a superficial synopsis of uniform Not Special" is a caustic condemnation of the future generation, a genuine examination reveals a much deeper, uplifting truth: life is not meant to be accomplished, but experienced.