THIRD EDITION

HANDBOOK OF RESEARCH ON TEACHING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

SPONSORED BY THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION & THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

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Rhetorical studies is an ever-changing field with deep historical roots dating back to Antiquity. This chapter is based on rich bodies of work from prior historical periods as well as the revived and revitalized rhetoric that has developed since mid-20th century. It begins with a consideration of referents for the term rhetoric and a brief historical overview of the discipline of rhetoric as it has developed and changed through the years. Then attention goes to rhetorical concerns that are most relevant to ongoing and emerging issues in the English language arts: rhetorical situations, author-audience relations, and rhetorical purposes and approaches. Within these general concerns are more specific matters that are central to teachers at all levels of education, such as genre, audience awareness and adaptation, persona, motives, appeals, and arguments.

The Term Rhetoric

Although different conceptions of rhetoric have different emphases, the focus of rhetoric, generally speaking, is on the uses of language in social contexts. Attention is on the linguistic means that are used to achieve agreement, as in Kenneth Burke’s (1969) description of rhetoric as “the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols” (p. 43). During the last few decades, during what some have called “the rhetorical turn,” the domain of rhetoric has broadened beyond its former disciplinary boundaries in English and communication studies, as scholars in many areas have turned their attention to language and social practices.

Rhetoric is concerned with communicative acts, and thus attention has traditionally gone to author, audience, subject matter (or topic), and text. These four components can be positioned on a rhetorical triangle, as shown in Figure 42.1. The triangle highlights interconnections, such as that between author and audience, and also shows how, in one conception to be discussed later, a rhetorical aim, such as to persuade or to inform, can aligned with the component receiving most emphasis. It is important to keep in mind that, even though the term rhetoric today is associated most often with the composing of texts, written and oral, it also includes response to texts. There is an approach to understanding texts that is being called rhetorical reading, and some also speak of rhetorical listening. Thus, rhetoric encompasses the four language arts of speaking, writing, listening, and reading. Rhetoric also refers to the discourse practices associated with particular groups, as in the phrases “Chicana rhetoric,” “the rhetoric of science,” and “the rhetoric of accountability.”

Rhetoric encompasses the uses of language and the study of these uses by rhetoricians, and it also includes instruction in aspects of effective communication. It has played a role in the educational curriculum throughout history from ancient times to the present, and today the label is still used for a subject of study in higher education. Rhetorical principles are embedded in writing instruction in the K–12 curriculum.

In this discussion of referents, I must also acknowledge the use of the term rhetoric to refer to language that is flowery and without substance or is untruthful and intended to deceive and manipulate. Although this referent creates a complication for the scholars and educators whose work fits in the scholarly tradition discussed below, there is some historical justification for this use: At one point in the history summarized below, rhetoric focused only on eloquence apart from substance. That, however, was just one phase of a very long history dating back 26 centuries.

Rhetoric Through the Years

Historical treatments have presented major contributions and developments in rhetoric over time: Antiquity, Middle Ages, Renaissance, Enlightenment, and the subsequent centuries up to the present. In the following, I present a brief survey but refer the reader to more detailed histories (e.g., Herrick, 2009; Kennedy, 1994; Murphy & Katula, 2003;
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Nelson & Kinneavy, 2003) as well a recent counter-history by Byron Hawk (2007), who critiqued the “metanarrative” used in many other treatments.

Classical to Modern Rhetoric  In ancient times, persuasion was the focus of rhetoric, especially as persuasive discourse was used in legal and political contexts. Rhetoric had its beginnings in city-states of Greece and Sicily in the 6th century B.C. as governmental structures were changing and democracies were being formed. The Sophists and Plato made early contributions to rhetorical theory, but it was Aristotle who provided the works that would be most influential. Although Aristotle and the other Greeks provided the conceptual framework, it was the Romans, particularly Cicero and Quintilian, who developed a pedagogical approach grounded in Aristotelian theory. Major works by Cicero and Quintilian and also the Rhetoric ad Herennium by an anonymous author dominated rhetoric for centuries, and the Graeco-Roman conception had widespread influence as educators in other parts of Europe followed that model. In the classical education, students studied the five parts, or canons, of rhetoric—invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. Today, English language arts educators tend to focus on three of the five—invention, arrangement, and style—often using the term prewriting for invention and organization for arrangement.

In the Middle Ages, rhetoric was the third of the seven liberal arts in education, and it followed grammar and logic. For years the major rhetorical texts were Cicero’s On Invention and the anonymous Rhetoric ad Herennium, but by the 5th century, with the growth of Christianity, St. Augustine’s De Doctrina Christiana became a major text as rhetorical principles were applied to Biblical study. The classical works on rhetoric received less attention in education, and some seemed to be lost.

During the European Renaissance, with the resurgence of interest in classical art and thought, rhetoric tended to return to the classical conception. This development was supported by Petrarch, who located missing classical texts, and by Erasmus, who incorporated classical elements in his treatises. However, the 16th century saw some major changes in the relation between rhetoric and logic. Largely because of the efforts of the French rhetorician Ramus and his colleague Talon, invention and arrangement were moved from rhetoric to logic, and memory was collapsed into arrangement. These changes left rhetoric with only style and delivery—a focus on eloquence bereft of those elements that emphasize thought processes. The Ramist conception of rhetoric, without the classical emphasis on invention and arrangement, had some influence on the curriculum of the new American colleges formed by the colonists. When the Enlightenment brought new developments in science and technology in the 17th and 18th centuries, there was some questioning of classical rhetorical techniques: Could they accommodate the kinds of communication that were now required? Critics pointed to the seemingly superficial and even manipulative nature of rhetoric, with its emphasis on style.

There was some new life for rhetoric in the late 18th century when Scottish rhetoricians George Campbell (1776/1846) and Hugh Blair (1783/1867) offered interesting treatments of elements of rhetoric, including arrangement, and produced texts that were influential not only in Europe but also in the United States. Campbell incorporated insights from the associationist psychology of the day as he reclaimed arrangement for rhetoric and gave attention to modes and audience analysis, and Bair linked rhetoric to the belles lettres tradition. Then, in the 19th century, Richard Whately (1828) and Alexander Bain (1890) also produced influential textbooks.

The version of rhetoric that predominated in the last decades of the 19th century emphasized certain elements: the modes, especially exposition; abstract qualities for writing (unity, emphasis, coherence); and paragraph structure. This was the form of rhetoric that had become part of “English” as it was formed as a department in higher education in the United States. At this time American higher education was giving attention to the writing skills of entering students and considering them to be inadequate, and rhetoric was combined with new “remedial” composition courses to create what was sometimes called rhetoric-composition. Rhetoric persisted in this consolidated form in higher education, but as a subject of study it lost out at lower levels of American education. The concerns of classical rhetoric received little attention when the Committee of Ten established the school subject that was known as English at the turn of the century.

Current-traditional was the term Daniel Fogarty (1959) coined to describe the approach to composition instruction widely used during the first half of the 20th century. Although Fogarty was speaking of college instruction, his description also fit writing instruction at lower levels. Current-traditional pedagogy focused on arrangement with respect to modes, on paragraph development, and on mechanical correctness. This was a diminished form of
rhetoric, and the term current traditional referred to what needed to be changed.

The “New” Rhetoric Rhetoric was being reinvented in various ways in the mid-20th century, as a number of people were talking about a new rhetoric. Although the new label caught on, there has been and is no single new rhetoric. Here my focus is on four approaches to rhetoric that have carried the “new” label. All developed over the past six decades and continue to have influence today: neoclassical rhetoric, expressivist rhetoric, cognitive rhetoric, and sociocultural rhetoric.

The neoclassical rhetoric label can be applied to the work of those rhetoricians who have attempted to center their theoretical work on the issues of classical rhetoric. Major contributors are Kenneth Burke (1969), who presented a biological, psychological, and sociological extension of Aristotelian rhetoric; James Kinneavy (1971), who focused on the aims of discourse in the liberal arts tradition; and Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969), who brought a new conception of relation between author and audience by pointing to its situated nature. The expressivist rhetoric label goes to the work of a number of scholars, including Ken Macrorie (1970) and Don Murray (1972), who gave emphasis to individuals’ processes of composing and their ownership of their own writing. Finally, the cognitive rhetoric label goes to a body of work that dates back to Janet Emig’s (1971) inquiry into composing processes and numerous other process-oriented studies of writers. Predominant in this cognitive work is the problem-solving theory of writing developed by John R. Hayes and Linda Flower (1980). Finally, the label sociocultural rhetoric goes to a fourth major source of new life for rhetoric where attention is on productive and reproductive practices associated with groups or communities (e.g., Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995). This work, which also began in the latter decades of the 20th century, explores the ways in which a community’s values, norms, and worldviews are maintained but also transformed through social interaction by its members.

Rhetorical Concerns

Through the years, rhetoricians have pursued recurring issues and themes as they have contributed to rhetorical theory. Particularly relevant to English language arts are the matters of rhetorical situations and author-audience relations. After attention to both, I consider the rhetorical concepts of purposes and supports for claims that are relevant to the teaching of writing and speaking. Although discussed separately, all are interlinked. People experience rhetorical situations, and they produce texts to accomplish their purposes with their audiences. To have the desired effect, they must provide credible support for their claims.

Rhetorical Situations In the discipline of rhetoric, much attention has been given to the contexts in which people produce their texts, and much of the discussion of context has often centered on “rhetorical situation”—a notion that is certainly relevant today given the interest in situated practices (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991). Many English language arts educators seek to have students write texts for “real” audiences and “real” situations outside the classroom. The term rhetorical situation should be credited to Lloyd Bitzer (1968), who explained that a rhetorical situation is a “natural context of persons, events, objects, relations, and an exigence which strongly invites utterance” (p. 5). The exigence, or exigency, is the need to write or speak—the need to fill a gap, to communicate what the situation demands. A “correction” to Bitzer’s notion came from Richard Vatz (1973), who argued that Bitzer had omitted something important from his description, the interpretive element. Vatz pointed out that the situations themselves are not rhetorical but, instead, the people interpreting them make them rhetorical. This was an important point: interpretation is required if one is to perceive a gap to fill.

But the concept of rhetorical situation has changed as the field of rhetoric itself has changed during the past decades. It has extended beyond the immediate context to include the larger sociocultural and historical context. Exigencies, or perceived invitations to produce discourse, fit within traditions and customs associated with social groups or communities. The nature of these invitations and their responses conform to the social practices in which people engage as members of the community (cf. Schmidt & vande Koppel, 1993). Community members experience recurring kinds of situations, and those who are immersed in their community “know” when responses are invited and what kinds of responses are expected. This point is relevant to English language arts educators, since they try to help students produce writing that is appropriate for a context.

This new emphasis on sociocultural and historical context is also relevant to the notion of genres, which have, in the past, been considered to be rather static text types to be chosen in somewhat arbitrary fashion by a writer or speaker. A major contribution to a reconceptualization was made by Carolyn Miller (1984) in her article, “Genre as Social Action,” where she argued that genres are social actions—typified actions of members of a group or society in response to recurrent situations. For her, genre “acquires meaning from situation and from the social context in which that situation arose…. A genre is a rhetorical means for mediating private intentions and social exigence; it motivates by connecting the private with the public, the singular with the recurrent” (p. 163). Students experience “old” genres, such as reporting on a book, and new genres, such as blogging and texting.

A second and further broadening is the extension of the concept of the rhetorical situation to include the intertextual context as well, and the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1986) can be credited for much of that expansion. In his dialogic theory of discourse, a writer (or speaker) is portrayed as entering and participating in a tradition that is tied to the past and is also oriented to present and future. Expanding the dialogue analogy beyond a single invitation
and response, Bakhtin (1981) described a text as a response to a “background” of other texts, such as “contradictory opinions, points of view and value judgments” (p. 281). He was speaking not only of prior texts but also current and (possible) future texts. As he said, the writing is “determined by that which has not yet been said” (p. 280). This is a very interesting contribution to discourse theory: the claim that the text someone produces is influenced not only by texts that came before but also by texts that might or might not be produced in the future. It is another way of thinking about the importance of audience and the kind of reception that writers anticipate.

Rhetorical Relations Between Author and Audience Central to rhetoric are the relations that exist, or are created, between authors and audiences. The discussion below considers first the relation that authors have with their audiences and then looks the other way to consider the relation that audiences have with authors of texts they experience.

Authors and Their Audiences. Authors produce texts for an audience, and that audience may be hypothetical or “real,” individual or specific, single or multiple, immediate or distant, supportive or resistant; and among rhetoricians there has been much discussion of the nature of audience. In recent decades, the discourse community notion has complicated the notion of audience by emphasizing collective elements. A discourse community, as James Porter (1986) explained, can be seen as a group whose members share a common interest and whose discourse is socially regulated. In producing texts for their community, authors write for others who, to a great extent, share their values, knowledge, and beliefs and who are guided by similar conventions in communication. In this conception, the audience, in a sense, contributes to the authoring of a text because of the importance of community expectations as well as social interactions.

The classical Graeco-Roman conception emphasized the importance of audience, and audience analysis is where many rhetoricians through the years have put their attention. Composing texts entails “reading” one’s readers, which means considering ways in which this audience will respond. Will they understand? Will they agree? Will they refuse? There is epistemic value associated with audience, since an author wants to have knowledge of what the audience already knows, and there is also heuristic value, since an author generates material by thinking about what the audience would need to know.

Two concepts of importance to English language arts educators over the years are audience awareness and audience adaptation, both of which have been tied to individuals’ social cognition (e.g., Rubin, 1984). Audience awareness is one’s awareness that members of the audience may not have all the background or knowledge (or the same background or knowledge) that he himself or she herself has about the topic or that they have particular other needs; and audience adaptation is the ability to adjust one’s writing or speech for the intended audience. Both awareness and adaptation are thought to develop as individuals mature, although there are situations in which all of us, even experienced writers, are unaware of audience needs and also of the means for adapting a text for them. Teachers encourage students to think about their audiences as they prepare to speak or write and, if writing, to attend to audience also in revising.

A third related concept at the intersection between author and audience is persona (from the Latin for “mask”). This is the “self” that a writer or speaker projects to an audience in a communication, or, from the other perspective, is the “self” for that author that the audience interprets from that communication. It is important to note that there is no singular persona for a particular individual; different personae are constructed and interpreted when situations and texts vary. This notion of persona continues to be relevant today, even with new technologies. For instance, writers seem to project personality attributes linked to persona through the typefaces they use for their texts (Brumberger, 2003). The notion of persona has become increasingly complex now that social factors are recognized to a greater extent, as in James Gee’s (1989) discussion of identity kits—the “saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations” that identify people with a particular groups (p. 6).

Insights into rhetorical matters, including the author-audience relation, can be gained by considering something that Wayne Booth (1963) called the rhetorical stance. He explained that effective writing is a matter of “maintaining in any writing situation a proper balance among the three elements that are at work in any communicative effort: the available arguments about the subject itself, the interests and peculiarities of the audience, and the voice, the implied character, of the speaker” (p. 141). In his essay, Booth considered the challenge that individuals experience when they attempt to achieve a balance among author, audience, and subject matter—those elements located at the three points of the rhetorical triangle pictured above. Achieving a balance depends on the rhetorical situation itself, since there are no articulated “rules” that hold across situations. Writers must use their interpretations to make choices and try to give the various elements the emphasis appropriate for that situation. This notion of balance helps students understand the importance of the author and audience elements and see that there is more to writing than putting information together.

What features of writing help a writer connect with an audience? Rhetorical inquiry has focused on the devices—sometimes called moves—that writers use to connect with their audiences, and these insights are also relevant to students’ writing. Although this body of work is too large to review here, I do want to mention, in particular, the research of Ken Hyland (2001), who has examined a large corpus of texts from a number of disciplines for what he called “addressee features.” These features include using hedges to ward off objections while showing respect for readers’ possible disagreement, first-person pronouns to mark inclusion, and references to shared knowledge to indicate social bonds.
Audiences and Their Authors. Although rhetoric has tended to focus, to a greater extent, on authors’ interpretations of their audiences, the relations work the other way too. Audiences often “read” their authors, attributing motives, evaluating character, and assessing personae. Even though readers or listeners cannot know with any certainty what an author’s intentions are, they do, at least sometimes, try to discern intent as they experience the text. The term rhetorical reading was coined by Chris Haas and Linda Flower (1988) for “readers actively trying to understand the author’s intent, the context, and how other readers might respond” (p. 181). There is some evidence that people who have expertise in their field are more aware of these rhetorical aspects when they read (e.g., Wineburg, 2001) and that people become more rhetorical in their reading as they mature as writers.

For young students, a number of approaches are designed to develop what is called the author concept. Among them are Donald Graves and Jane Hansen’s (1983) “Author’s Chair,” by means of which the children begin to see themselves as authors and to connect themselves with the authors of books they read. Another is Isabel Beck, Margaret McKeown, and Jo Worthy’s (1995) approach called “Questioning the Author,” in which the young people learn that authors of their textbooks had choices as they wrote and that the choices they made might not have been the best ones. The children would “question” the author about these choices and think of ways that the points may have been made more clearly. In addition to these specific instructional strategies, a more general example is the writing-workshop approach to writing instruction, in which students participate as authors in a community of authors (Atwell, 1998).

In this section thus far I have been discussing author—audience relations when a text is presented linearly and when an author attempts to guide the audience along that linear path. I conclude by asking: What happens to the author—audience relation when the text is nonlinear—when it is hypertext? Some theorists, including J. David Bolter (1991) and George Landow (2006), have argued that, when the text is hypertext, audience—author relations are changed. Authors lose some of their authorial control when the text is nonlinear and variable. (For a fuller discussion of this and other aspects of the audience—author relation, see Nelson, 2008; Nelson & Calfee, 1998.)

Rhetorical Purposes and Support for Claims Today, in new conceptions of rhetoric, there is renewed emphasis on two classical concerns, purposes for writing or speaking and means of supporting claims. In what follows I discuss various classifications of purposes and then consider approaches for generating or for analyzing supports for claims.

Purposes. When people produce texts in rhetorical situations, they do so to accomplish their purposes (which might be called goals, aims, motives, or intentions), and, when understanding texts, they also can perform rhetorical reading and rhetorical listening, which entails attending to author’s motives. This matter of purpose is complex and contested. Aristotle had conceptualized rhetoric as an art focused on one purpose, persuasion; and some rhetoricians have argued that, even though there may be other purposes, the basic intent is always to persuade. That has been countered by scholars who have discussed multiple purposes other than persuasion, such as an invitational purpose (inviting listeners or readers into one’s world) (Foss & Griffith, 1995), or who focus on a particular realm of discourse that encompasses more specific purposes, such as “English for academic purposes” (e.g., Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001).

Some rhetoricians have attempted to come up with sets of general aims that are all-inclusive. These include Campbell’s (1776/1846) “to enlighten the understanding, to please the imagination, to move the passions, and to influence the will” (p. 1). They also include Kinneavy’s (1971) to persuade (persuasive), to inform (referential), to entertain (literary), and to express or to discover something about themselves (expressive). As mentioned above, these aims can be positioned on the rhetorical triangle of Figure 41.1, with expressive emphasizing the author; referential, or informative, emphasizing the subject; persuasive emphasizing the audience; and literary emphasizing features of the text itself. In any situation there are likely be multiple purposes, and purposes may change over the course of composing. Whereas in rhetorical theory purposes are differentiated from modes (the ways in which material is structured), some curriculum in the schools tends to conflate purpose and mode. For instance, narration and exposition might be presented as purposes instead of approaches to organizing texts.

Support for Claims. Invention, one of the five canons of classical rhetoric, is the means of generating material for accomplishing purposes through language. During the first half of the 20th century, invention received little attention as the emphasis was overwhelmingly on the arrangement of content. However, with the revival of rhetoric that began in the 1960s and 1970s, invention once more became a major focus. Classical rhetoric had treated invention in terms of topoi, or places, in accordance with the idea that there are mental places where certain kinds of material are stored. The topoi were a kind of heuristic for going to those “places” and seeing what might be said. In a neoclassical treatment, Edward P. J. Corbett (1971) provided a list that includes various means of development, including definition, comparison, cause-effect, antecedent-consequent, authority, and examples. It can be generative in considering a problem, for example, to think about how to define it, relate it to others with some similarity, to consider possible causes or effects, to consider past events, and so on. Because of their usefulness in helping writers think of relevant material, the topoi appear in instruction for young as well as older writers, even though they are not usually called topoi. They are also being used to analyze extant texts (e.g., Fahnestock, 2009).

Other approaches to generating material have also been developed. Well known among rhetoricians is tagmemics
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(Young, Becker, & Pike, 1970), which provides different perspectives on a topic (particle, wave, and field). Also well known is Burke’s (1969) pentad (act, scene, agent, agency, purpose), which has new life through its use in activity analysis (e.g., Ruth, 2009). Another major approach to generating and structuring material is based on Stephen Toulmin’s (1964) model, which focuses on claims, data, and also warrants linking the claim and the data. This approach provides a way for individuals to examine their own arguments or those produced by others and see how strong and reasonable they are. For young writers or speakers, there are related approaches such as cubing, which is also a system for considering a topic from multiple perspectives.

Also relevant for producing and analyzing discourse are the appeals, a long-standing element of classical rhetorical theory. They include logos, the logical appeal that is associated with the subject matter itself; ethos, the appeal to one’s own credibility; and pathos, the appeal to some quality of the audience, such as concern, feeling, passion. To have the desired impact, writers try to generate and organize ideas that seem logical, and they also want to reflect a suitable authorial persona and have the text resonate with their readers. Like the other approaches discussed above, consideration of appeals can be employed in analyzing as well as producing written and oral discourse.

Although discussed separately, this matter of making claims and supporting them is interlinked with the other elements. People write their texts to accomplish their purposes with their audiences; and, to have the desired effect, they must provide credible support for their claims.

Conclusion

In this chapter my attention has been on the relevance of rhetoric to issues in the English language arts. I have attempted to show how concerns dating back to the classical period of rhetoric are central to theory, research, and pedagogy in English language arts today. These matters have been discussed in terms of rhetorical situation, relations between author and audience, and rhetorical purposes and means of supporting claims. All have been and continue to be major foci of rhetorical pedagogy and scholarship.

The ancient Greeks spoke of rhetoric as techne—art, skill, craft—and placed emphasis on its situated, practical uses. “Useful” and “practical” are major descriptors today. As Charles Bazerman (1988) pointed out, rhetoric is “ultimately a practical study offering people greater control over their symbolic activity” (p. 6). Rhetoric emphasizes the capacity of educators to teach effectiveness in the situated uses of language and of students to learn how to become more effective in their communications. It is important, in considering this relevance, to keep in mind that rhetoric, as a techne (art), is not a static kind of knowledge, is not a set of rules. Rhetoric is concerned with doing. Its concerns today lie in language used in particular situations or communities.

Although its roots were in oral uses of language, rhetoric it is best known among English educators today for its relevance to written communications. The link with writing is strong, so strong that often the labels rhetoric and composition seem synonymous. But rhetoric also has strong roots in other uses of language, and has a continued influence today in scholarship on analytic and critical reading, which in scholarly forms are called rhetorical analysis or rhetorical criticism. Because its territory is the social uses of language, rhetoric is relevant to all kinds of communicative acts in all kinds of contexts—is relevant to all the language arts.

References


