

Choosing Rhetorical Strategies to Persuade Your Audience

Whether writing for a scholarly audience or general online readers, authors must take great care to ensure that they are presenting the information in a way that will be effective for their specific audience. When trying to convince an audience to accept an argument or adopt a proposed idea, the chosen blend of rhetorical strategies can make or break an argument. Most arguments make use of “the three rhetorical appeals” – *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos* – in some way, to establish the author’s credibility as a reliable and expert source of information (*ethos*), to present well-reasoned and logical evidence to support their idea (*logos*), and get the reader to care about the issue being discussed (*pathos*). A strong, persuasive argument will often rely on a blend of all three rhetorical appeals, but the relative quantity and quality of these appeals may vary depending on the genre of writing and the intended audience. The goal for any writer is to select the right blend of rhetorical strategies so that the argument can appeal effectively to the hearts, minds, and trust of the target reader. If we consider the different approaches required by authors writing in popular context versus an author writing for a scholarly audience, we can see how different blends of appeals are effective for different audiences.

Authors in both scholarly and popular contexts may first want to establish their credibility, so the audience can trust that the information presented comes from a reliable source who has expertise or relevant experience in this field. While an academic author has some “intrinsic” credibility because of the scholarly journal’s peer review process and the credentials required to publish in an academic journal, they will usually cite other scholars to bolster that credibility. They will also use a standard academic conventions and format that is appropriate for the discipline in which they are writing. This will meet the readers’ expectations and reassure them of the authors’ expertise. An author writing in a popular genre might not have the “built-in” credibility of a scholarly writer, so they will have to work a bit harder to gain the trust of the reader. They may do this by referring to other credible sources, or by describing their own expertise or relevant experience with the topic.

After establishing their credibility as reliable experts on this topic, the authors of both scholarly and popular articles will need to use a variety of logical appeals to convince their readers of the merit of their arguments. Logic, as the cornerstone of any argument, can come in many forms. An academic article often contains detailed results of carefully formulated research studies; statistics; data; detailed definitions; results of other researchers’ studies; tables, graphs, charts, and other visual representations of data. In addition, a scholarly paper is generally organized and formatted in manner that

is logically consistent with the expectations of the reader and the genre. For example, in a scientific journal, this structure might follow the scientific method, having labeled sections devoted to Methodology, Results, and Conclusions. In contrast, the popular article would likely rely on creating a reader-friendly format that uses clear, bolded headings with interesting phrasing and shorter paragraphs to hold attention. They will offer well-reasoned arguments presented in plain language to present the ideas in a logical and common-sense manner that will appeal to general readers. The popular article may also contain statistics, data, charts and graphs, but may not cite the sources of this information in the same way that a scholarly article must, and the information will often be simplified in order to avoid boring a general audience who is reading for interest or pleasure, not for work.

Appealing to the readers' emotions can be an effective strategy to use in the context of popular writing, but it is one that most academic writers tend to use cautiously and sparingly. Since most people are swayed by emotional arguments, these can be very powerful in a general context. An author might tell a funny or sad story to gain readers' interest. Appealing to readers' fears and anxieties, guilt or outrage, or to their hopes and dreams, can inspire their anger or sympathy and perhaps even motivate their actions. In contrast, however, scholarly readers may find that overly emotional appeals undermine the credibility of the author. They may feel that the author is trying to manipulate their feelings because they lack logical support for their ideas. Therefore, writers must be careful how they employ appeals to emotion. Nevertheless, even the most logical and credible academic articles sometimes contain subtle appeals to emotion, often skillfully blended with logical and credible information, to encourage the reader to care about the issue.

Clearly, authors need to have a sophisticated understanding of which rhetorical appeals will be most effective at influencing their specific target audience in any given situation. Sometimes appealing only to logic will not win over the "hearts and minds" of an audience who needs to have some emotional connection to the topic. Conversely, relying only on appeals to emotion will not convince someone who wants to make "evidence-based" and rational decisions. Critically, without establishing credibility, an author runs the risk of having the reader dismiss their ideas as unreliable. Finding the right blend of rhetorical appeals for your intended audience is the key to effective persuasion.