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University Writing Center

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Cavanaugh Hall 427 University Library 2125

(317)274-2049

(317)278-8171

www.iupui.edu/~uwc

The Rhetorical Triangle: Understanding and Using Logos, Ethos, and Pathos

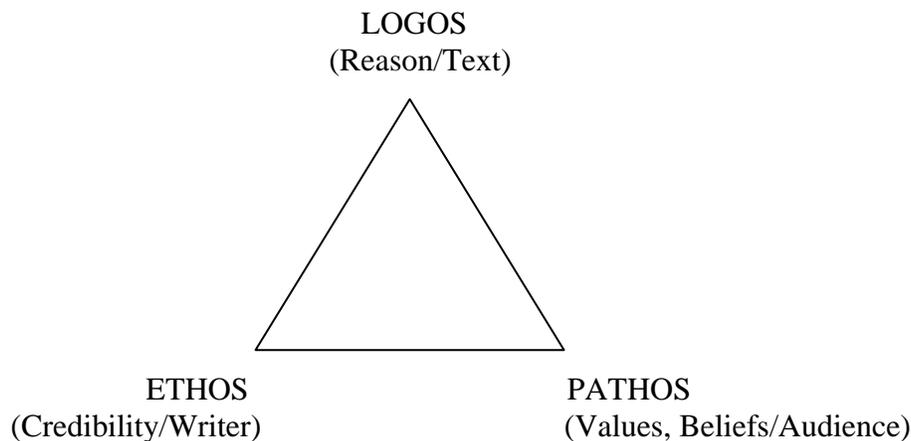
Logos, ethos, and pathos are important components of all writing, whether we are aware of them or not. By learning to recognize logos, ethos, and pathos in the writing of others and in our own, we can create texts that appeal to readers on many different levels. This handout provides a brief overview of what logos, ethos, and pathos are and offers guiding questions for recognizing and incorporating these appeals.

Aristotle taught that a speaker's ability to persuade an audience is based on how well the speaker appeals to that audience in three different areas: logos, ethos, and pathos. Considered together, these appeals form what later rhetoricians have called the rhetorical triangle.

Logos appeals to reason. Logos can also be thought of as the text of the argument, as well as how well a writer has argued his/her point.

Ethos appeals to the writer's character. Ethos can also be thought of as the role of the writer in the argument, and how credible his/her argument is.

Pathos appeals to the emotions and the sympathetic imagination, as well as to beliefs and values. Pathos can also be thought of as the role of the audience in the argument.



The rhetorical triangle is typically represented by an equilateral triangle, suggesting that logos, ethos, and pathos should be balanced within a text. However, which aspect(s) of the rhetorical triangle you favor in your writing depends on both the audience and the purpose of that writing. Yet, if you are in doubt, seek a balance among all three elements.

Questions to help you recognize and utilize logos, ethos, and pathos

The following questions can be used in two ways, both to think about how *you* are using logos, ethos, and pathos in your writing, and also to assess how *other writers* use them in their writing.

Logos:

- Is the thesis clear and specific? (*for help with thesis statements, see the Revising Thesis Statements handout*)
- Is the thesis supported by strong reasons and credible evidence?
- Is the argument logical and arranged in a well-reasoned order?

Ethos:

- What are the writer's qualifications? How has the writer connected him/herself to the topic being discussed?
- Does the writer demonstrate respect for multiple viewpoints by using sources in the text?
- Are sources credible? Are sources documented appropriately?
- Does the writer use a tone that is suitable for the audience/purpose? Is the diction (word choice) used appropriate for the audience/purpose?
- Is the document presented in a polished and professional manner?

Pathos:

- Are vivid examples, details and images used to engage the reader's emotions and imagination?
- Does the writer appeal to the values and beliefs of the reader by using examples readers can relate to or care about?

One Final Thought

While the above questions can help you identify or utilize logos, ethos, and pathos in writing, it is important to remember that sometimes a particular aspect of a text will represent more than one of these appeals. For example, using credible sources could be considered both logos and ethos, as the sources help support the logic or reasoning of the text, and they also help portray the writer as thoughtful and engaged with the topic. This overlap reminds us how these appeals work together to create effective writing.

For Further Learning

A Sequence for Academic Writing. Behrens, Rosen, and Beedles. 179-184.

The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing, 4th ed. Ramage, Bean, and Johnson. 78-79; 408-410.

University of Iowa Rhetoric Department. http://www.uiowa.edu/~rhetoric/morphing_textbook/general/triangle.html

United States Naval Academy. <http://www.usna.edu/Users/english/mace/index.html>

Colorado State University. <http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/teaching/commenting/refresher.cfm>

University of British Columbia. <http://www.writingcentre.ubc.ca/workshop/tools/rhet1.htm>

Iowa State University. http://www.public.iastate.edu/~drrussel/rhet_analy_105/analy/homepage.htm

University of Texas at Austin. <http://www.drw.utexas.edu/roberts-miller/handouts/rhetorical-analysis>

Prepared November 2009 by Jaclyn Lutzke and Mary F. Henggeler.