

persuasion: emotion

In the rhetorical tradition, there are three modes of persuasion: appeals to ethos (character), appeals to pathos (emotion), and appeals to logos (reason). This handout will help you understand how to appeal to pathos.

What is Pathos?

Pathos is about Judgments

Most introductions to rhetoric link *pathos* to **emotion and the disposition of the audience**. While this is a good start, it helps to be more specific when talking about these two concepts. From a rhetorical standpoint, emotions are not things that occur inexplicably; they are tied to value-based judgments directed at specific objects.

Appeals to *pathos* target the link between audience members and their values. Hauser (2002) explains this link best in the form of an emotional syllogism:

Emotional Syllogism	
I am the sort of person who X.	Major Premise
Unless I do Y, I do not really X.	Minor Premise
Therefore, I must do Y.	Conclusion

An advertisement for an animal shelter might try to evoke this emotional judgment from its audience:

Emotion Syllogism for Animal Shelter	
I am the sort of person who loves animals.	Major Premise
Unless I donate to the animal shelter, I do not really love animals.	Minor Premise
Therefore, I must donate to the animal shelter.	Conclusion

When we act on our values, we experience emotions like happiness, pride, satisfaction, etc. When we do not, we often feel shame, fear, or anger. The same goes for the actions of people around us: we are often pleased when the actions of people around us align with our values and angry when they don't.

Example: "Those employees are just sitting around, doing nothing! Grrr. Don't they know that you should work when you're at work?"

Strategies for Appealing to Pathos

What follows are some of the rhetorical tools that you can use to stir the emotions of your audience. While you will not use every tool in every situation, you should still familiarize yourself with each of them.

Note: Some of these tools may also be useful for appealing to *ethos* and *logos*.

Concrete Examples

It is difficult to relate to abstractions on an emotional level. Use concrete examples to place specific images into the minds of your audience, thus making the argument emotionally tangible.

Example: “My policies have helped hundreds of people: the single mother in Alabama working three jobs just to make ends meet, the college student at MSU who can barely afford his textbooks, the young couple in Arizona wondering if they will ever be able to start a family—all of these people have benefited from my policies.”

Example: “Ashley Johnson, like most children, loves the movie *Frozen*. Thinking ahead to her tenth birthday, she asked her parents for snowman-themed party, but she never imagined that she would celebrate the day in a stark ICU with chemotherapy instead of cake. This is the new reality for Ashley and for the nearly 16,000 children diagnosed with cancer last year.”

Connotative Diction

Some words have strong emotional connections for certain audiences. Some are funny. Some are serious.

Others are taboo. You can exploit these words to elicit specific emotional responses, but you should do so cautiously—most readers find this strategy to be heavy-handed.

Example: “These prisons are essentially an American Auschwitz.”

Example: “Fords are **cheap**; sure, they don’t cost a lot, but you’ll pay that price in repairs later. Chevys on the other hand are **inexpensive**, yet still reliable.”

Metaphors and Similes

Metaphors and similes can be effective tools for connecting the emotions of the audience to your argument.

Metaphors work by saying “X= Y,” and similes work by saying “X is like Y.” Take care when using them—you do not want to create a false analogy.

Metaphor: “Our women’s shelter is a tiny rock in the middle of a twisting sea of indifference.”

Simile: “Browsing the Internet is like eating Thanksgiving dinner: at first everything is tasty and exciting, but in the end, you wind up passed out on your couch.”

Tone

Tone can best be described as your attitude toward your subject matter and audience. Think of movies and television shows: comedies usually have a lighter and more upbeat tone than crime dramas. Unless you are being subversive, you should stick with the tone that your audience finds appropriate for the subject matter.

Formal: “Thank you for your invitation to speak at the conference. I look forward to addressing such a talented group of peers.”

Informal: “Thanks for the invite, bro. This is going to be off the hook.”

Pathetic Fallacies

Simply put, a fallacy is an argument that is more persuasive than it should be because its conclusion rests on faulty premises and assumptions. It looks like a good argument, but it isn't.

Bandwagon Appeal (*Argumentum ad Populum*)

This fallacy is often called the “bandwagon approach” because it makes the case that “everyone else is doing it.” This tactic is deceptively effective since it appeals to the audience’s desire to belong and fear of being excluded.

Example: “More internet users use our service than any other provider.”

Example: “Most students finish the academic program in two years.”

Threats (*Argumentum ad Baculum*)

The so-called “appeal to the stick,” this fallacy describes those instances when the writer essentially threatens the audience.

Example: “If you vote for my opponent, I can promise you that we will all suffer the consequences.”

Example: “If we cut the defense budget, we will suffer another terrorist attack. You can count on it.”

Appeal to Pity (*Argumentum ad Misericordiam*)

The “appeal to pity” is not necessarily fallacious—pity is a legitimate emotion—but some writers use overly emotional sob stories to hide other elements of the argument from the audience.

Example: “I know that I was supposed to turn my assignment in two weeks ago, and I know that we had all semester to work on it, but my girlfriend just broke up with me, and it has been hard to concentrate.”

Example: “Yes, my client stole. But should he really be punished? Look at his home life. He has no father. He has no friends. His mother is ill.”

Appeal to Pride (*Argumentum ad Superbiam*)

This appeal functions through flattery, not the strength of the actual argument.

Example: “Surely someone as intelligent as you will agree with me.”

Example: “You’re obviously someone with an eye for fashion. You should shop for something from our designer line.”

Anecdotal Fallacy (Misleading Vividness)

This is the shadow side of using concrete examples. Sometimes, a particular vivid example or anecdote can give a false representation of how serious or widespread a problem actually is.

Example: “I don’t know how that restaurant can have the highest rating in the city. I went there on its opening weekend and it was terrible. There were only three options on the menu, and the waiters didn’t know what they were doing. My order took 45 minutes to arrive. And when it did arrive, it was wrong! The owner came out to apologize, but she gave me some lame excuse about it being opening weekend. I haven’t been back since!”

Example: “How can global warming exist? Last week there was three feet of snow around my house. I couldn’t even open the door. And my pipes broke, flooding the basement. And then the dog nearly died because he got hypothermia. I had to take him to the vet.”

“If by Whiskey”

An “if-by-whiskey” argument takes both sides of an emotionally charged issue simultaneously. This fallacy gets its name from a famous speech by Noah S. Sweat, Jr., in which he took both sides of the issue of legalizing alcohol in Mississippi.

Example: “You have asked me how I feel about whiskey. ... If when you say ‘whiskey’ you mean the devil’s brew... that defiles innocence, dethrones reason, destroys the home, creates misery and poverty... then I am certainly against it. ... But, if when you say ‘whiskey’ you mean the oil of conversation, the philosophic wine, the ale that is consumed when good fellows get together, that puts a song in their hearts and laughter on their lips... then I am certainly for it. That is my stand. I will not retreat from it. I will not compromise.”

Example: “Do I support war? If by ‘war’ you mean imperial domination of other nations for the sake of obtaining their resources, then no. But if by ‘war’ you mean protecting your people, your land, and your values from those that would destroy them, those that would destroy them, then yes.”

References

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