

The Persuasive Appeals

In **rhetoric**, writers/speakers (called **rhetors**) employ certain rhetorical strategies in an attempt to persuade (convince) their audiences (1) that something is true or (2) to take some action—and often, both of these. These strategies can be broadly categorized into what we call **persuasive appeals**, the building blocks of argumentation. The three most commonly referenced persuasive appeals are ethos, pathos, and logos, and kairos is often considered the fourth appeal.

This resource explains each persuasive appeal and provides examples of each. The persuasive appeals are important to understand because not only do they help you analyze the rhetorical strategies of other texts, they also help you make your own arguments more persuasive.

Ethos

Ethos, or the ethical appeal, is an attempt of the rhetor to enhance his/her own credibility in the eyes of the audience. More specifically, rhetors need to demonstrate to their audiences that they have (1) good sense – they understand the subject matter they are arguing about, (2) good will – they are on the audience’s side and understand the audience’s needs, and (3) good character – they are morally good, trustworthy people. All three of these are important to ensuring that the rhetor’s character enhances the argument rather than detracting from it. Examples:

As someone with a doctorate in economics, I say we should raise the minimum wage. Here, the rhetor demonstrates good sense by indicating their credentials.

Raising the minimum wage would help improve you and your family’s financial situation. Here, the rhetor demonstrates good will by showing that they have the audience’s best interests in mind.

I give to charity every year. Raising the minimum wage would stimulate the economy and allow me to give even more. Here, the rhetor demonstrates good character by showing their charitable nature.

Note: If rhetors are NOT sufficiently qualified to speak on their subject matter, they will be expected to compensate for that lack of good sense by referring to external sources that DO have it. For example, you can give an argument on economics even if you are not a qualified economist, but you will have to make up for your lack of experience by referring to qualified, credible economists in your argument.

Pathos

Pathos, or the pathetic appeal, is an attempt of the rhetor to influence or capitalize on the emotions or state of mind of the audience. Rhetors can appeal to all sorts of emotions, such as their audiences’ sense of fear, sympathy, anger, guilt, and so on. It is common for effective rhetors to end their texts with a pathos appeal, as this appeal arguably has the most powerful immediate effect on audiences. Examples:

If we don’t raise the minimum wage, thousands of people will suffer. Here, the rhetor appeals to the audience’s sense of sympathy (and perhaps also fear/anxiety).

Everyday citizens are struggling to pay the rent while the fat cats at the top get massive bonuses. Here, the rhetor appeals to the audience’s sense of anger and frustration.

What have you done to improve the lives of your fellow Americans? Here, the rhetor appeals to the audience’s sense of guilt. Note that this is a risky rhetorical move that could backfire if audience members feel offended or singled out.

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Logos

Logos, or the logical appeal, is an attempt of the rhetor to persuade the audience through logical reasoning or cause-and-effect, “if A then B” type reasoning. Logos is often associated with the use of facts and statistics, including visual means of representing these things such as graphs and charts. However, logos is broader than that: it is any attempt to get the audience to think, “That makes sense.” Examples:

If we raise the minimum wage, more jobs will be created. Here, the rhetor makes a clear “if A then B” argument; however, they will probably want to supplement this logos appeal with some facts and statistics.

The majority of people support raising the minimum wage, so why haven’t we done so? Here, the rhetor appeals to the logical line of thinking that majority support means that something must be a good idea.

Raising the minimum wage has historically coincided with booming economies, so we should definitely do it now. Here, the rhetor appeals to the logical line of thinking that what has worked so far will continue to work.

You might hear the term **logical fallacy** to describe a misguided or illogical logos appeal. There are all sorts of logical fallacies, but it is not necessarily as important to learn them all by name as it is to recognize that all logos appeals are subject to scrutiny—in fact, one could argue that all logos appeals commit a logical fallacy. For example, one might accuse the first example of oversimplifying the situation: perhaps more jobs will be created, but will this decision also bring with it some negative consequences that must be considered? One might accuse the second example of being a “bandwagon appeal,” a mistaken assumption that popular equals good (this strategy is common in advertising). Finally, one might accuse the third example of being an “appeal to tradition,” a mistaken assumption that what has traditionally held true in the past will always hold true in the present and future. Or they may accuse that example of committing a “false cause,” in which the rhetor attributes the effect (booming economies) to the wrong cause (raising the minimum wage)—perhaps something else that happened to be going on at the same time that caused those booming economies?

Good rhetors anticipate the potential lines of attack on their argument and prepare accordingly by supplementing their logos appeals with other types of appeals. For instance, any of these examples would be much more persuasive if they were complemented by an ethos appeal in which the rhetor cites several credentialed economists who agree that raising the minimum wage is a smart move.

Kairos

While not always included with the other three persuasive appeals, kairos is an extremely important element of rhetoric. **Kairos** refers to the timeliness of an argument; that is, it is an attempt of the rhetor to capitalize on contextual events or circumstances that happen to coincide with the argument’s subject matter. Good kairos, then, is good timing: the rhetor has delivered the argument at a time when the audience would be more receptive to it. Example:

As the pandemic continues to threaten a recession, raising the minimum wage could be just what we need. Here, the rhetor capitalizes on the contextual factor of the pandemic to stress the importance and viability of their argument.

Bad kairos, on the other hand, is bad timing: the rhetor has delivered the argument at a time when the audience does not really care about the subject matter or would even be hostile toward it. This might happen, for example, if a rhetor were to argue for giving executives larger bonuses when such bonuses are already at an all-time high, or perhaps when someone makes a joke about an event “too soon” and offends the audience.

One last note: you may notice that there is often a great deal of overlap among the persuasive appeals. For example, the example under “Kairos” could also constitute a pathos appeal in that it appeals to the audience’s sense of fear and anxiety about recession. Being able to recognize how the various appeals relate to each other—and sometimes even complement each other—will allow you to more effectively utilize them in your own argumentation.

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