

# English 3309 – Rhetorical Approaches to Everyday Discourse

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## Required Texts:

- Aristotle, *Rhetoric* (selections posted on Blackboard)
- Blakesley, David, *Elements of Dramatism*
- Brummett, Barry, *A Rhetoric of Style*
- Foss, Foss & Trapp, *Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric*
- Perelman, Chaim, *The Realm of Rhetoric*
- Course packet (purchase from English Department Secretary)

## Course Objectives and Structure:

Discourse surrounds us in our daily lives. We hear it, we read it, we speak it ... we even wear it. It comes to us in the form of word, sound, image, and gesture. Much of this discourse is designed for us and has designs on us. In some cases, the designs are apparent. *Purchase this product! Support that candidate! Keep your grades up so you don't lose your scholarship!* In other cases, we may not quite realize that a particular discourse exists, much less understand how it functions. Perhaps this “invisible” rhetoric is even more important to study, as its invisibility makes it hard for us to recognize the rhetoric that shapes our views of the world, our sense of community, our understanding of ourselves and our values, and even our ideas about what a good “self” is supposed to be and to do. If that statement sounds strange or farfetched to you now – if you are thinking, “I’m a free agent; I like what I like” – test it out again at the end of the semester. In fact, test it out after we study Kenneth Burke’s theory of identification or Barry Brummett’s furthering of Burke. Or, indeed, every time you master a new concept in this course.

For understanding everyday discourses, rhetorical analysis is the indispensable tool. Though no culture could ever claim to have originated the act of making arguments, the formal study of rhetoric began in ancient Greece. In the Athenian city-state, to be an educated man meant to cultivate an understanding of rhetoric and a capacity to make impressive speeches. The emphasis on rhetorical training continued in the Roman Republic, where upper-class males needed to participate in civil society. Though only a few needed to make formal speeches to the Senate, everyone had to assess the speeches made by would-be policy leaders. As the Greeks and the Romans recognized, if citizens have the right to participate in governance and serve on juries, they need to cultivate a top-notch bullshit detector.

Political and legal speeches were the “power discourses” in the cultures of Greece and Rome, so those were the main focus of rhetorical study. But as power structures shift, and as new communication technologies emerge, rhetors find new ways to reach audiences and shape opinions. In our own media-saturated environment, where commodities and brands play so crucial a role in shaping social, economic, and political behavior, rhetoricians need to study more than just formal political speeches. Today, the discourses of power reach us through television, advertising, journalism, popular culture, talk radio, academic and expert discourses (e.g., the rhetoric of law, economics, psychology), and (increasingly) the Internet and social media.

The tools we study can make you a more informed consumer of many such discourses and more resourceful practitioner of rhetoric. At the very least, you will become more conscious of the rhetoric that surrounds you, develop a wider awareness of rhetorical strategies, and gain a more nuanced understanding of rhetorical situations. As my own personal goal, I intend to connect the work of this course with your daily lives. For this reason, we will study both formal argumentation on serious topics and informal discourses that appear in newspapers, magazines, television, and perhaps the internet. The fact that the discourses may seem frivolous – e.g., which type of computer to buy, or whether Miley Cyrus is a horrible influence on teenagers – the

rhetoric they use has profound cultural consequences.

Though we will spend most of our semester studying modern rhetorical theory, we begin with Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. Not only is his treatise foundational to the field, but scholars also find that his ideas illuminate many contemporary discourses. Once Aristotle gives us a basic grounding, we skip ahead to the past century, when the need to understand the success of Fascist rhetoric drove Kenneth Burke and Chaim Perelman to make major new contributions to the field. Unfortunately, we will be skipping many important thinkers – major Greek and Roman rhetoricians (e.g., Isocrates, Cicero), Renaissance writers like Erasmus and Castiglione, and Enlightenment-era philosophers and rhetorical theorists like Hume, who contemplated the relationship of rhetoric to the psychological faculties. Their contributions would easily fill a semester. Indeed, such a course is typically taught under the title the History of Rhetoric. For this semester, though, we will focus on more contemporary theories.

At the end of the semester, you will identify a discourse to study in depth. You can focus on something quite formal – Barack Obama's public comments on the war in Afghanistan, ASPCA fundraising literature, media representations of the Tea Party, post-disaster messaging by a company such as BP (oil spill) – or conduct an equally serious study of a less serious discourse. For instance, you could examine professional athletes' style choices during press conferences, a documentary or television show like *Intervention*, or blogs about fashion week. Once a student wrote an excellent study of the annoying MTV show *My Super Sweet Sixteen*, but it took real staying power on her part. I don't know whether I can survive that one again, much less *Toddlers & Tiaras*, a show that my 11 year old niece characterizes as a form of child abuse. But it can be done. Be wise, though. If you study such a show, you can expect to watch the episodes several times over. Really.

Before we reach that final project, there are several papers to help you engage with rhetorical theories and apply key terms to texts.

### **Three Analysis Papers (5+ pages) – 40%**

Analysis papers using Aristotle, Burke, and Perelman. These should be about **seven** pages long, with five pages seen as a minimum. Initially do not worry about a thesis statement; the paper can have a "purpose statement" at first (*the purpose of this paper is to...*), though an intelligent analysis typically results in an overall thesis/claim that could be moved from the end of the paper to the beginning. (Viola! Thesis statement!) The main goal is to apply specific concepts to textual examples. Of course you should quote language from passages you choose to analyze, but students sometimes forget also to quote (occasionally) the theorist's own language. Do not just rely on paraphrase or key terms; make more detailed use of the theories.

### **Response Papers & Typed Homeworks – 30%**

Topics are announced one class in advance. There are seven of these, each graded somewhat informally. If you do them all well, you can earn all 30 points (7 x 4 = 28 + 2 extra points for the longest homeworks). Most students will earn 24, 25, or 27 points (B-, B, A-), though the C (22) is the proper score if your work is perfunctory. If work is weak or assignments are missing, a lower grade is possible, but I have rarely had to assign such homework/response grade in this course.

**Typed homeworks** are required in response to a set of advertisements, to a television episode (or a substitute assignment), and to a genre study. These assignments require you to answer questions about a text or set of texts. Take the time to think and write, and do make sure to answer questions fully; if I wanted *very* short answers without any depth, I would simply quiz you in class.

You can expect to write a **response paper** to the pair of articles by Bitzer and Vatz, to a couple of chapters by Barry Brummett, to an article about narrative, and to an article either about genre or about Michel Foucault. **Response papers** should be 1-2 single-spaced pages. Typically, such papers start by summarizing the author's main point, transition to a focus more extensively on a couple or three of the author's main arguments (e.g., what was most important or most interesting), and offer some overall reaction or assessment

to the reading. Response papers often comment on the sort of evidence the writer provides (does that evidence seem suitable?) and include some key quotations. In your overall assessment, you are welcomed to express appreciation of the apparent value/validity of the article, or to express your *partial* disagreement. Blanket rejection of the ideas is rarely appropriate in these papers, because it usually bespeaks a failure to engage fully with the ideas. Be specific and rational in explaining your reservations. Alternatively, express agreement (partial or total), but also explain your reasons and/or illustrate the utility of the author's ideas.

### **Final Project & Presentation – 20% + 5%**

Twelve or more pages. Focus this project on a key text or set of related texts (e.g., BP commercials after the oil spill). Alternatively, focus on a discourse feature that appears in a range of texts, such as the “About Us” section of websites of canine rescue organizations. Whatever your focus, you will need to select and defend your “data set” (i.e., your set of texts), identify a useful set of analytical tools (drawn from the theorists we read), and apply those tools to your data. In applying those tools, you should learn something interesting – perhaps because it surprises, or because it could not be seen easily – about your data. You might even learn something about the tools themselves. The additional 5% of credit comes from your presentation to the class.

### **Preparedness, Participation, and Quizzes – 5%**

I prefer not to give quizzes, but I will give them if it appears the class is not preparing itself well. I expect everyone to participate actively in discussions, and I take your active participation as a signal of your preparation. If shyness prevents you from participating in larger group discussions, you need to identify other ways you can (a) demonstrate your preparedness for class and (b) contribute to the overall learning of the group.

## **A NOTE ON READING THEORY:**

This is a theory course. Reading theory can be challenging, particularly if you are accustomed to focusing mostly on literary texts. Not only will your readings use unfamiliar terminology, they will also participate in scholarly conversations to which you are brand new. Expect that you will need to engage the readings somewhat aggressively. There are concepts you need to master, and there are key passages you will need to study. Not all of them will make sense upon first reading. Your work will go faster, and offer greater rewards, if you read the materials quickly once through – to identify the main concepts and key areas of focus – then read a second time with greater care. You will not believe that this is faster, but I promise you I'm right.

If an assigned reading confuses you, do not simply quit reading. You have a responsibility to learn as much as you can from the theorists I assign. If you feel hopelessly confused, identify a handful of key ideas you can grasp, and learn those well. Also, put in writing the questions you had while you were trying to read. Be articulate about the nature of your confusion. Use that writing to gain more clarity and to specify those concepts about which you need my input.

### **Course Policies**

**Attendance:** Regular absences will cause a reduction in your final grade. Only the foolhardy try to go it alone. Really, it is an astonishingly stupid thing to attempt, because these concepts challenge most *graduate* students. You can master these complex concepts with *in-class* support from me. Read, attend, ask questions. Participate in small groups. It's not busy work.

**Due Dates:** Assignments are due at the beginning of class. They become late 20 minutes into the class period. Unless you are using your extension, assignments lose a letter grade for each class

period they are late. For informally graded papers (response and “think” papers), I will take creative deductions. Assignments more than a week late are accepted at my discretion only.

**Extension:** You may take ONE free extension, no questions asked. Just turn in a note that says you are electing this option. The extension cannot be applied to the oral presentation.

**Academic Integrity:** If you borrow from a source, give the author proper credit. In a 3000-level course, I assume you understand fair use of sources, and I demand that you adhere to ethical standards. If you are confused about fair use of sources, ask. Please cite in either MLA or APA style.

**Disabilities:** I am happy to make reasonable accommodations for any student with a *documented* disability.

**Laptops & Smartphones** Do not text during class. Not only is it rude, but it puts you into a cognitive “elsewhere” that pretty much shuts down your learning. If it happens a lot, I will deduct points and/or mark you absent. I would also prefer that you not use laptops to take notes for this class. There can be exceptions to this policy, but you bear the burden of proof.

## Schedule

(This schedule is subject to change.)

<u>Week 1</u> (8/30 – 9/1)	Rhetoric: The <i>antistrophos</i> of dialectic?
<u>Weeks 2 &amp; 3</u> (9/6 – 9/15)	Continuing with Aristotle <b>Analysis paper #1: Neo-Aristotelian rhetorical analysis</b> <b>Due Tuesday 9/20 along with additional work (Response Paper)</b>
<u>Week 4</u> (9/20– 9/22)	Where do rhetorical situations come from? Bitzer & Vatz disagree. Read articles by Bitzer and Vatz (in course packet) <b>Response paper on Bitzer and Vatz also due Tues 9/20</b>  Read Burke on Terministic Screens & Identification (packet and Blakesley) <i>Homework analyzing ads will be due next week.</i>
<u>Week 5</u> (9/27 – 9/29)	Read Foss, Foss & Trapp section on Burke Identification, Terministic Screens, and Advertising <b>Advertisement homework due</b>  Read Barry Brummett chapters in <i>A Rhetoric of Style</i> Explore relationship of Brummett to Burke and to branding
<u>Week 6</u> (10/4 – 10/6)	Read chapters on Burke’s Dramatism in Blakesley, <i>Elements of Dramatism</i> <b>Due 10/11: Analysis paper #2: Burkean dramatic analysis (Darrow in defense of Leopold &amp; Loeb)</b>
<u>Weeks 7 &amp; 8</u> (10/11 - 10/20)	Narrative rhetorics: What makes a story ring true ... or false? Readings on narrative rhetorics <b>Response paper</b> Reality television as a narrative rhetoric <b>Long homework</b>

Week 9 (10/25 – 10/27)

Genre and Rhetoric – **Short paper**  
Read assigned articles on genre in Coursepack

Weeks 10 & 11 (11/1 – 11/10)

Chaim Perelman, *Realm of Rhetoric*  
Also read in Foss, Foss & Trapp on Perelman  
**Analysis paper #3: Perelman and “the rhetoric of \_\_\_\_”: Anatomizing a discourse**

**DUE: INITIAL PROPOSAL FOR FINAL PROJECT**

Weeks 12 & 13 (11/15 – 11/22)

Foucault, Discursive Formations, and Technologies of Self  
**Response paper**

Week 14+

After Thanksgiving we focus on final projects. Presentations occupy the final week of class and continue into the day of our class’s final exam. **I will deduct points if you fail to attend your classmates’ presentations.**

**Final projects are due on exam day in lieu of exam.**

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