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Short Paper #3: Is Rhetoric a Science?

In class we discussed whether science is rhetoric, however, I would like to argue that rhetoric is a science. For my argument I will focus on how Merriam-Webster defines science and rhetoric. Merriam-Webster offers four different definitions of science: “the state of knowing”; “a department of systematized knowledge as an object of study” or “something (such as a sport or technique) that may be studied or learned like systematized knowledge”; “such knowledge or such a system of knowledge concerned with the physical world and its phenomena”; and “a system or method reconciling practical ends with scientific laws.” Rhetoric is defined in two ways: “the art of speaking or writing effectively, such as the study of principles and rules of composition formulated by critics of ancient times or the study of writing or speaking as a means of communication or persuasion” and “skill in the effective use of speech.” I believe that, by the definitions of these words, rhetoric is a form of science in the same way that theology, sociology, and psychology are sciences.

The first science definition is the state of knowing. This simply meaning that you have knowledge and understanding of something. If you study rhetoric, you have a

state of knowledge of rhetoric. The second definition has to do with the systematic study of something. As Merriam-Webster states, rhetoric is the study of writing or speaking. Also, when learning rhetoric students learn different theories and principles which can be taught in a systematic way. Rhetoric is also “skill in effective use of speech” which makes rhetoric something that can be studied or learned. By this, rhetoric meets the first two definitions of what a science is.

The third definition is “such knowledge or such a system of knowledge concerned with the physical world and its phenomena.” People studying rhetoric are studying communication which is both knowledge that concerns the physical world and knowledge that concerns world phenomena. It involves the physical world because it involves communication between people who are a part of the physical world. I believe rhetoric is a world phenomenon because how people communicate, especially how people communicated in the past, is studied by a lot of people and can sometimes confuse or fascinate people, such as hieroglyphs or cave paintings.

The final definition of science is “a system or method reconciling practical ends with scientific laws.” Rhetoric does not meet this definition because it does not have to do with scientific laws. However, because rhetoric meets the other three definitions of rhetoric, I believe this qualifies rhetoric as a science. Rhetoric is state of knowing, is a systematic study of something, is something that can be studied or learned, and is knowledge concerning the physical world and its phenomena.