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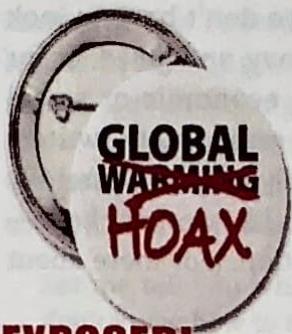
Arguments Based on Emotion: Pathos



LEFT TO RIGHT: Piyaset/Shutterstock; Jan Martin Will/Shutterstock; Blueguy/Shutterstock

Emotional appeals (*appeals to pathos*) are powerful tools for influencing what people think and believe. We all make decisions—even including the most important ones—based on our feelings. That's what many environmental advocates are counting on when they use images like those above to warn of the catastrophic effects of global warming on the earth and its peoples. The first image shows a boy and his boat on what used to be a lake but is now cracked dry earth; the second, a polar bear stranded on a small ice floe as the oceans rise around it; and the third, a graphic design of a melting earth.

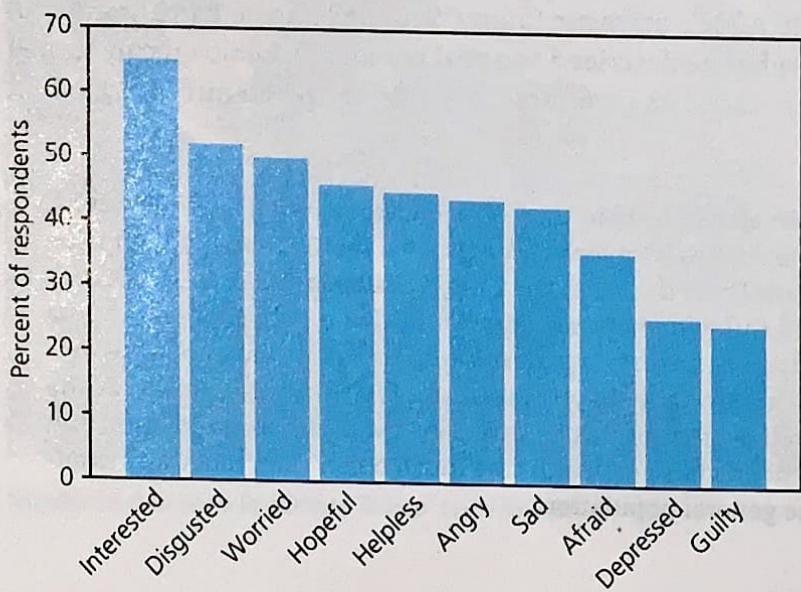
Of course, some people don't believe the warnings about climate change, arguing instead that they represent a hoax and that even if the climate is changing, it is not a result of human activities. And, as we would expect, this opposite side of the argument also uses emotionally persuasive images, like the following one from American Patriot, a news commentary YouTube channel.



EXPOSED!

The arguments packed into these four images all appeal to emotion, and research has shown us that we often make decisions based on just such appeals. So when you hear that formal or academic arguments should rely solely on facts to convince us, remember that facts alone often won't carry the day, even for a worthy cause. The largely successful case made for same-sex marriage provides a notable example of a movement that persuaded people equally by virtue of the reasonableness and the passion of its claims. Like many political and social debates, though, the issue provoked powerful emotions on every side—feelings that sometimes led to extreme words and tactics.

Recent research also shows that images that evoke fear are less effective than those that arouse interest, worry, or hope. When the Yale Center for Climate Change Communication asked both supporters and deniers of climate change what they felt when they thought about this topic, they got the following results:



In spite of the findings from such research, we don't have to look hard for arguments that appeal to fear, hatred, envy, and greed, or for campaigns intended to drive wedges between economic or social groups, making them fearful or resentful. For that reason alone, writers should not use emotional appeals rashly or casually. But used carefully and ethically, appeals to emotions—especially ones like worry or hope—can be very helpful in moving an audience to action. (For more about emotional fallacies, see p. 8.)

Reading Critically for Pathos

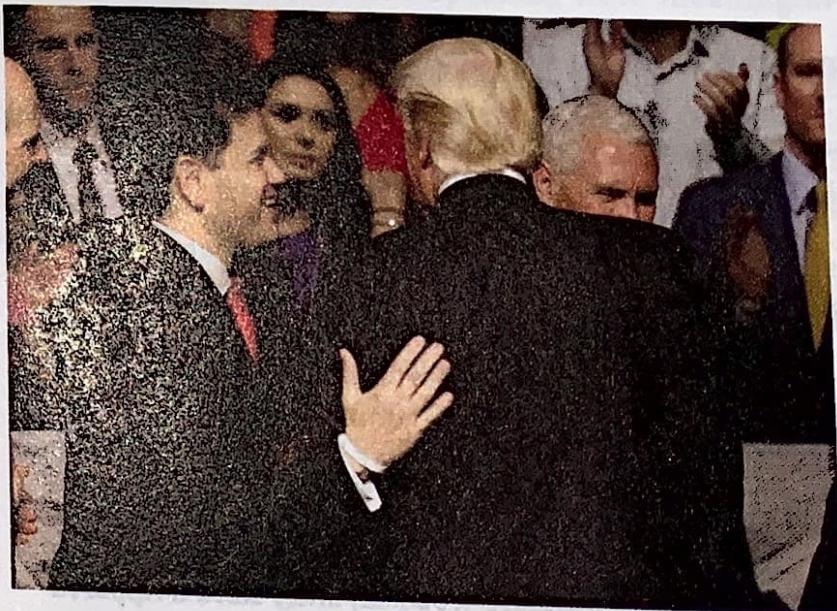
On February 24, 2014, Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa, fresh from two fact-finding trips to Cuba, described his experiences on the Senate floor in a speech praising that island nation's accomplishments in health care and education and urging a normalization of Cuban-American relationships, a recommendation taken up by then-President Obama and Cuban President Raul Castro, who announced on December 17, 2014, that such normalization would begin. Many in the United States applauded this move, but others, including many Cuban Americans in the Miami area, objected strenuously. Florida senator Marco Rubio was one of those speaking most passionately against normalization of relationships. Shortly after Senator Harkin's talk about the "fascinating" socialist experiment ninety miles from the coast of the United States, Rubio delivered a fifteen-minute rejoinder to Harkin without a script or teleprompter. After a sarcastic taunt ("Sounded like he had a wonderful trip visiting what he described as a real paradise"), Rubio quickly turned serious, even angry, as he offered his take on the country Harkin had toured:

I heard him also talk about these great doctors that they have in Cuba. I have no doubt they're very talented. I've met a bunch of them. You know where I met them? In the United States because they defected. Because in Cuba, doctors would rather drive a taxi cab or work in a hotel than be a doctor. I wonder if they spoke to him about the outbreak of cholera that they've been unable to control, or about the three-tiered system of health care that exists where foreigners and government officials get health care much better than that that's available to the general population.

Language this heated and pointed has risks, especially when a young legislator is taking on a far more experienced colleague. But Rubio, the son of Cuban immigrants, isn't shy about allowing his feelings to show: in the following passage, he uses the kind of emotion-stirring verbal repetition common in oratory to drive home his major concern about Cuba, its influence on other nations:

Let me tell you what the Cubans are really good at, because they don't know how to run their economy, they don't know how to build, they don't know how to govern a people. What they are really good at is repression. What they are really good at is shutting off information to the Internet and to radio and television and social media. That's what they're really good at. And they're not just good at it domestically, they're good exporters of these things.

When the Obama administration indeed loosened restrictions on travel to Cuba and began establishing diplomatic relations, Rubio stuck to his guns, consistently and emotionally arguing against this move. And while he was a bitter primary campaign rival of Donald Trump, who ridiculed Rubio during the campaign as "little Marco" who was always sweating ("It looked like he had just jumped into a swimming pool with his clothes on"), once Trump was elected president Rubio continued his



Senator Rubio with President Trump Lynne Sladky/AP Images

impassioned campaign to reverse policy on Cuba. So in June 2017, when President Trump announced tightening of restrictions on travel to Cuba and other changes to the Obama policy, Rubio spoke glowingly of the president, saying that “A year and a half ago, an American president landed in Havana and outstretched his hand to a regime. Today, a new president lands in Miami to reach out his hand to the people of Cuba.” It’s likely that we have not heard the end of this debate, and that we will continue to hear emotion-filled arguments on all sides of this contentious issue.

RESPOND•

Working with a classmate, find a speech or a print editorial that you think uses emotional appeals effectively but sparingly, in an understated way. Make a list of those appeals and briefly explain how each one appeals to an audience. What difference would it have made if the emotional appeals had been presented more forcefully and dramatically? Would doing so have been likely to appeal more strongly to the audience—and why or why not? What is at stake for the writer or speaker in such situations, in terms of credibility and ethos? What are the advantages of evoking emotions in support of your claims or ideas?

Using Emotions to Build Bridges

You may sometimes want to use emotions to connect with readers to assure them that you understand their experiences or “feel their pain,” to borrow a sentiment popularized by President Bill Clinton. Such a bridge is especially important when you’re writing about matters that readers regard as sensitive. Before they’ll trust you, they’ll want assurances that you understand the issues in depth. If you strike the right emotional note, you’ll establish an important connection. That’s what Apple founder Steve Jobs does in a much-admired 2005 commencement address in which he tells the audience that he doesn’t have a fancy speech, just three stories from his life:

My second story is about love and loss. I was lucky. I found what I loved to do early in life. Woz [Steve Wozniak] and I started Apple in my parents' garage when I was twenty. We worked hard and in ten

years, Apple had grown from just the two of us in a garage into a \$2 billion company with over four thousand employees. We'd just released our finest creation, the Macintosh, a year earlier, and I'd just turned thirty, and then I got fired. How can you get fired from a company you started? Well, as Apple grew, we hired someone who I thought was very talented to run the company with me, and for the first year or so, things went well. But then our visions of the future began to diverge, and eventually we had a falling out. When we did, our board of directors sided with him, and so at thirty, I was out, and very publicly out. . . .

I didn't see it then, but it turned out that getting fired from Apple was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. The heaviness of being successful was replaced by the lightness of being a beginner again, less sure about everything. It freed me to enter one of the most creative periods in my life. During the next five years I started a company named NeXT, another company named Pixar and fell in love with an amazing woman who would become my wife. Pixar went on to create the world's first computer-animated feature film, *Toy Story*, and is now the most successful animation studio in the world.

—Steve Jobs, “You've Got to Find What You Love, Jobs Says”

In no obvious way is Jobs's recollection a formal argument. But it prepares his audience to accept the advice he'll give later in his speech, at least partly because he's speaking from meaningful personal experiences.

A more obvious way to build an emotional tie is simply to help readers identify with your experiences. If, like Georgina Kleege, you were blind and wanted to argue for more sensible attitudes toward blind people, you might ask readers in the first paragraph of your argument to confront their prejudices. Here Kleege, a writer and college instructor who in July 2017 was featured on PBS's “Brief but Spectacular” video series, makes an emotional point by telling a story:

I tell the class, “I am legally blind.” There is a pause, a collective intake of breath. I feel them look away uncertainly and then look back. After all, I just said I couldn't see. Or did I? I had managed to get there on my own—no cane, no dog, none of the usual trappings of blindness. Eyeing me askance now, they might detect that my gaze is not quite focused. . . . They watch me glance down, or towards the door where someone's coming in late. I'm just like anyone else.

—Georgina Kleege, “Call It Blindness”

Alexandra Dal's cartoon “Questions” offers insight into what it feels like to be on the receiving end of racial microaggressions on a regular basis.

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Given the way she narrates the first day of class, readers are as likely to identify with the students as with Kleege, imagining themselves sitting in a classroom, facing a sightless instructor, confronting their own prejudices about the blind. Kleege wants to put her audience on the edge emotionally.

Let's consider another rhetorical situation: how do you win over an audience when the logical claims that you're making are likely to go against what many in the audience believe? Once again, a slightly risky appeal to emotions on a personal level may work. That's the tack that Michael Pollan takes in bringing readers to consider that "the great moral struggle of our time will be for the rights of animals." In introducing his lengthy exploratory argument, Pollan uses personal experience to appeal to his audience:

The first time I opened Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*, I was dining alone at the Palm, trying to enjoy a rib-eye steak cooked medium-rare. If this sounds like a good recipe for cognitive dissonance (if not indigestion), that was sort of the idea. Preposterous as it might seem to supporters of animal rights, what I was doing was tantamount to reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on a plantation in the Deep South in 1852.

—Michael Pollan, "An Animal's Place"



THE BIRTH OF A VEGETARIAN

A visual version of Michael Pollan's rhetorical situation
© Robert Mankoff

In creating a vivid image of his first encounter with Singer's book, Polan's opening builds a bridge between himself as a person trying to enter into the animal rights debate in a fair and open-minded, if still skeptical, way and readers who might be passionate about either side of this argument.

Using Emotions to Sustain an Argument

You can also use emotional appeals to make logical claims stronger or more memorable. In a TV political attack ad, a video clip of a scowling, blustering candidate talking dismissively about an important issue has the potential to damage that candidate considerably. In contrast, a human face smiling or showing honest emotion can sell just about any product—that's why so many political figures now routinely smile at any camera they see. Using emotion is tricky, however, and it can sometimes backfire. Lay on too much feeling—especially sentiments like outrage, pity, or shame, which make people uncomfortable—and you may offend the very audiences you hoped to convince.

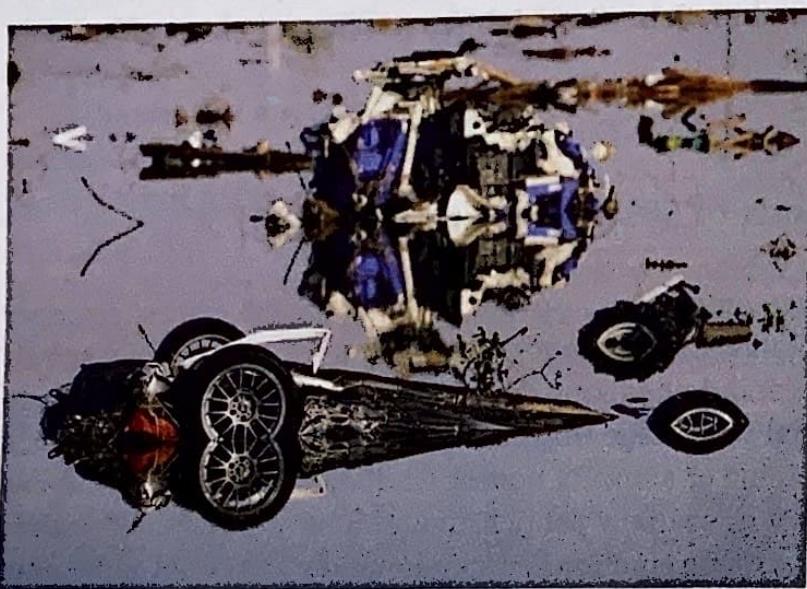
Still, strong emotions can add energy to a passage or an entire argument, as they do in Richard Lloyd Parry's *Ghosts of the Tsunami: Death and Life in Japan's Disaster Zone*. In this passage, Parry describes in vivid detail the scene that greeted one mother the day the 2011 earthquake hit:

On the near side was Hitomi's home village of Magaki and then an expanse of paddies stretching to the Fuji lake; the polished blue and red roofs of other hamlets glittered at the edges of the hills. It was an archetypal view of the Japanese countryside: abundant nature, tamed and cultivated by man. But now she struggled to make sense of what she saw.

Everything up to and in between the hills was water. There was only water: buildings and fields had gone. The water was black in the early light; floating on it were continents and trailing archipelagos of dark scummy rubble, brown in color and composed of tree trunks. Every patch of land that was not elevated had been absorbed by the river, which had been annexed in turn by the sea.

In this new geography, the Fuji lake was no longer a lake. . . . The river was no longer a river. . . . Okawa Elementary School was invisible, hidden from view by the great shoulder of hills from which Hitomi looked down. But the road, the houses, and Magaki,

where Hitomi's home and family had been, were washed from the earth.



A wrecked car lies submerged in floodwaters after the earthquake and tsunami in Fukushima prefecture, Japan.

AP Photo/Wally Santana

As this example suggests, it can be difficult to gauge how much emotion will work in a given argument. Some issues—such as racism, immigration, abortion, and gun control—provoke strong feelings and, as a result, are often argued on emotional terms. But even issues that seem deadly dull—such as reform of federal student loan programs—can be argued passionately when proposed changes in these programs are set in human terms: reduce support for college loans and Kai, Riley, and Jayden end up in dead-end, low-paying jobs; don't reform the program and we're looking at another Wall Street-sized loan bailout and subsequent recession. Both alternatives might scare people into paying enough attention to take political action.

Using Humor

Humor has always played an important role in argument, sometimes as the sugar that makes the medicine go down. You can slip humor into an argument to put readers at ease, thereby making them more open to a proposal you have to offer. It's hard to say no when you're laughing.

Humor also makes otherwise sober people suspend their judgment and even their prejudices, perhaps because the surprise and naughtiness of wit are combustive: they provoke laughter or smiles, not reflection. Who can resist a no-holds-barred attack on a famous personality, such as this assessment of model/actor Cara Delevingne in the 2017 sci-fi flop *Valerian*:

As played by model Cara Delevingne with a smirk that just won't quit, Laureline is way ballsier than Valerian, who still looks in need of a mother's love. She can pose and preen like an expert in her space gear—and those eyebrows!—but there's no there there.

—Peter Travers, in *Rolling Stone*

Humor deployed cleverly may be why TV shows like *South Park* and *Modern Family* became popular with mainstream audiences, despite their willingness to explore controversial themes. Similarly, it's possible to make a point through humor that might not work that well in more academic writing. The subject of standardized testing, for instance, has generated much heat and light, as researchers and teachers and policy makers argue endlessly over whether it is helpful—or not. TV talk show host and satirist John Oliver took a crack at the subject in a segment of *Last Week Tonight*, arguing that the testing business in America has gotten way out of hand and that it does not help students but rather funnels money into the coffers of companies such as Pearson, who dominate the testing market.



Frederick M. Brown/Getty Images

After introducing the subject, Oliver goes on one of his signature humorous rampages, skewering the country's obsession with testing:

Look, standardized tests are the fastest way to terrify any child with five letters outside of just whispering the word "clown."

After showing a video clip of kids rapping about the joys of testing, Oliver continues:

Standardized tests look like amazing fun. I wish I could take one right now: bring me a pencil please—a number 2 pencil! But it just gets better, because an elementary school in Texas even held a test-themed pep rally featuring a monkey mascot.

Fade to a monkey cavorting around the auditorium stage, swooning over testing fun and yelling "here comes the monkey." Then after a video clip showing teachers describing how many students get physically sick while taking tests ("Something is wrong with our system when we just assume that a certain number of kids will vomit"), Oliver asks,

Is it any wonder that students are sick of tests? . . . If standardized tests are bad for teachers and bad for kids, who exactly are they good for? Well, it turns out, they're operated by companies like Pearson, who control forty percent of the testing market.

Pearson, Oliver says, is

the equivalent of Time Warner Cable: either you never had an interaction with them and don't care, or they ruined your [entire] life.

Viewers may not agree with Oliver's claims about standardized testing, but his use of humor and satire certainly gets him a large viewing audience and keeps them listening to the end.

A writer or speaker can even use humor to deal with sensitive issues. For example, sports commentator Bob Costas, given the honor of eulogizing the great baseball player Mickey Mantle, couldn't ignore problems in Mantle's life. So he argues for Mantle's greatness by admitting the man's weaknesses indirectly through humor:

It brings to mind a story Mickey liked to tell on himself and maybe some of you have heard it. He pictured himself at the pearly gates, met by St. Peter, who shook his head and said, "Mick, we checked the record. We know some of what went on. Sorry, we can't let you in.

But before you go, God wants to know if you'd sign these six dozen baseballs."

—Bob Costas, "Eulogy for Mickey Mantle"

Similarly, politicians may use humor to deal with issues they couldn't acknowledge in any other way. Here, for example, is former president George W. Bush at the 2004 Radio and TV Correspondents' Dinner discussing his much-mocked intellect:

Those stories about my intellectual capacity do get under my skin. You know, for a while I even thought my staff believed it. There on my schedule first thing every morning it said, "Intelligence briefing."

—George W. Bush

Not all humor is well-intentioned or barb-free. In fact, among the most powerful forms of emotional argument is ridicule—humor aimed at a particular target. Eighteenth-century poet and critic Samuel Johnson was known for his stinging and humorous put-downs, such as this comment to an aspiring writer: "Your manuscript is both good and original, but the part that is good is not original and the part that is original is not good." (Expect your own writing teachers to be kinder.) In our own time, the Onion has earned a reputation for its mastery of both ridicule and satire, the art of using over-the-top humor to make a serious point.

But because ridicule is a double-edged sword, it requires a deft hand to wield it. Humor that reflects bad taste discredits a writer completely, as does satire that misses its mark. Unless your target deserves riposte and you can be very funny, it's usually better to steer clear of such humor.

Using Arguments Based on Emotion

You don't want to play puppet master with people's emotions when you write arguments, but it's a good idea to spend some time early in your work thinking about how you want readers to feel as they consider your persuasive claims. For example, would readers of your editorial about campus traffic policies be more inclined to agree with you if you made them envy faculty privileges, or would arousing their sense of fairness work better? What emotional appeals might persuade meat eaters to consider a vegan diet—or vice versa? Would sketches of stage props on a Web site persuade people to buy a season ticket to

the theater, or would you spark more interest by featuring pictures of costumed performers?

Consider, too, the effect that a story can have on readers. Writers and journalists routinely use what are called *human-interest stories* to give presence to issues or arguments. You can do the same, using a particular incident to evoke sympathy, understanding, outrage, or amusement. Take care, though, to tell an honest story.

RESPOND.

1. To what specific emotions do the following slogans, sales pitches, and maxims appeal?

“Make America Great Again” (Donald Trump rallying cry)

“Just do it.” (ad for Nike)

“Think different.” (ad for Apple computers)

“Reach out and touch someone.” (ad for AT&T)

“There are some things money can’t buy. For everything else, there’s MasterCard.” (slogan for MasterCard)

“Have it your way.” (slogan for Burger King)

“The ultimate driving machine.” (slogan for BMW)

“It’s everywhere you want to be.” (slogan for Visa)

“Don’t mess with Texas!” (anti-litter campaign slogan)

“American by Birth. Rebel by Choice.” (slogan for Harley-Davidson)

2. Bring a magazine to class, and analyze the emotional appeals in as many full-page ads as you can. Then practice your critical reading skills by classifying those ads by types of emotional appeal, and see whether you can connect the appeals to the subject or target audience of the magazine. Compare your results with those of your classmates, and discuss your findings. For instance, how exactly are the ads in publications such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Wired*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Motor Trend*, and *Smithsonian* adapted to their specific audiences?
3. How do arguments based on emotion work in different media? Are such arguments more or less effective in books, articles, television (both news and entertainment shows), films, brochures, magazines, email, Web sites, the theater, street protests, and so on? You might explore how a single medium handles emotional appeals or compare

different media. For example, why do the comments sections of blogs seem to encourage angry outbursts? Are newspapers an emotionally colder source of information than television news programs? If so, why?

4. Spend some time looking for arguments that use ridicule or humor to make their point: check out your favorite Twitter feeds or blogs; watch for bumper stickers, posters, or advertisements; and listen to popular song lyrics. Bring one or two examples to class, and be ready to explain how the humor makes an emotional appeal and whether it's effective.

