The Art of Rhetoric

What’s in it for me? Sharpen your persuasion skills and ace that next speech.

These days, rhetoric has a poor reputation. Most often, it’s used to deride the evasive way that politicians speak. Frankly, though, its reputation wasn’t that much better in Ancient Greece, where rhetoric was often treated as synonymous with emotional manipulation. Luckily, the philosopher Aristotle helped rehabilitate rhetoric and turn it into a legitimate art form by arguing that the most persuasive speech is generally based on truth and virtue rather than emotion and manipulation. While these blinks are oriented toward giving a speech, the advice they contain is relevant for all forms of persuasion. So whether you have a speech coming up or you just want to improve your speaking generally, these blinks will help you speak more confidently and effectively. In these blinks, you’ll learn

how to write and deliver a speech; how to make people respect you more; and how to wield the wrath of your audience against an adversary.

Rhetoric is the art of exploiting the persuasive aspects of a situation.

Aristotle’s The Art of Rhetoric was written in the city of Athens in what’s now known as the classical era of ancient Greece. During this period, Athens was a democratically-run city-state, so every Athenian citizen was expected not only to attend public assemblies and vote but also represent themselves in legal matters. Public speaking was so interwoven into Athenian culture that the study of how to speak well became a matter of great public interest. This era produced a profusion of books and teachers claiming they could teach the art of speaking to the layman. Among these was Aristotle. He acknowledged that every speech requires its own unique rhetorical style – after all, you wouldn’t give the same kind of speech to rally the troops for battle as you would to argue that taxes should be lowered. Yet all forms of rhetoric basically have the same objective: persuading your audience. The key message here is: Rhetoric is the art of exploiting the persuasive aspects of a situation. According to Aristotle, no matter what kind of speech you’re giving, there are really only three basic methods of persuasion: ethos, pathos, and logos. Ethos is about making your audience perceive you as a more authoritative speaker. Pathos has to do with arousing emotions in your audience in order to influence their judgment. And, finally, logos is about demonstrating your point of view through the use of reason and argument. For Aristotle, logos is the most persuasive of the three. Yet writers on rhetoric prior to Aristotle tended to focus on pathos – argumentation that aroused the emotions. Their manuals were filled with things like advice on how to convince a jury to pity you so that they’ll commute your sentence. To these authors, rhetoric was little more than the art of using words to manipulate people. Aristotle rehabilitated rhetoric’s poor reputation by placing truth and virtue at its core. Truth and virtue, he argued, are inherently persuasive. And this makes sense; if you want people to think you’re a trustworthy source of information, you do actually need to pay attention to the facts. Ultimately, for Aristotle, rhetoric is more than just the art of manipulation. It’s the art of exploiting the facts of a situation to your

advantage.

You'll seem more credible if you adjust your character to your audience.

Imagine you're about to lead an army into battle. Which of your advisors would you be more likely to take advice from – a seasoned veteran, or someone who's never seen a battlefield before? A loyal ally or someone who you suspect is vying for your position? The answers to these questions are obvious. Why? Because the way you perceive a speaker affects how likely you are to be persuaded by them; specifically, you're more likely to believe someone who you perceive to be experienced and trustworthy. That means that as a speaker, it's in your best interest to make your audience perceive you as experienced and trustworthy. That's the principle behind the first method of persuasion – Ethos, or character. The key message here is: You'll seem more credible if you adjust your character to your audience. The first basic way of making an audience see you in a positive light is to focus on the way you present yourself generally. To this end, Aristotle identifies three key factors that audiences look out for: intelligence, strong personal character, and goodwill. You should aim to tick all three of these boxes if you want to appear trustworthy. Of course, the easiest way to express these qualities is actually to possess them. However, you don't have to become a completely different person to present yourself better. The most important thing you can do is thoroughly research the topic before crafting your speech. Knowing the material is the most surefire way of preventing any hemming and hawing and, instead, coming across like you know your stuff. Another thing to pay attention to is how you express emotion. Aristotle argued that a speaker demonstrates personal character by expressing the right emotions at the right time. Be careful not to overdo this, though, as it may come across as phony. The second way to make an audience perceive you positively is to adapt the way you speak to each specific audience. After all, the way you should speak to a crowd of young people is entirely different from the way you should speak to a crowd of elderly people. According to Aristotle, passionate and polemical language works best on young audiences, given their hot, passionate temperaments and their tendency to carry everything to excess. Elderly audiences, by contrast, respond better to dignified language and cautious, balanced viewpoints.

You can influence people's judgment by arousing emotions in them.

The next method of persuasion is Pathos, which is the Greek word for passion or emotion. It was well known in ancient Greece that the way an audience feels affects their judgment. This can be seen most plainly in courts of law. If a jury is enraged at a defendant's crime, you can be sure the gavel won't come down in her favor. On the other hand, if the jury can be made to feel pity for her, she may just get off the hook. So if a defendant is a savvy enough rhetorician, she might be able to win a more favorable verdict by steering the emotions of the jury in her favor. This is true regardless of whether she's actually innocent or not, which is why Aristotle lamented how frequently speakers resort to this tactic. He contended that the reason pathos is so effective is that audiences simply aren't entirely rational. That's why it's necessary for speakers to be aware of the effects of emotions and know how to use them to their advantage. The key

message here is: You can influence people's judgment by arousing emotions in them. While emotions can impair sound reason, emotions themselves aren't entirely irrational. In fact, they generally have very predictable causes. If you learn which causes tend to trigger which emotions, then it's just a matter of evoking the right cause in order to trigger the desired emotion. Take anger, for example. Aristotle defines anger as that ambivalent feeling which combines the pain of being slighted with the pleasure of the expectation of revenge. He observes that we tend to feel anger when another person intentionally insults, belittles, or mocks us, and when they don't express regret afterward. With this knowledge in hand, a discerning prosecutor could potentially whip up rage in the jury. He'd only need to show that the members of the jury or their values have been insulted and that the defendant's behavior isn't reflecting the proper degree of remorse. The same goes for every other emotion too. Fear is caused by an awareness of impending danger or suffering. Knowing this, you can arouse fear in your audiences by making them aware of an imminent danger. And, pity occurs when we feel that someone is suffering undeservedly. So, to inspire pity in someone, you must argue that you're suffering and that it's undeserved. Whichever emotion you want to inspire, discover the cause and you've discovered the key.

You can guide people's thinking by using logical arguments.

The third method of persuasion that rhetoricians have at their disposal is Aristotle's preferred method: Logos, or reasoned argument. This form of persuasion involves presenting the plain facts and then using sound reasoning to argue for a particular verdict or course of action. So long as your audience is at least somewhat reasonable, this should be the most effective form of persuasion. After all, who could deny a logically irrefutable conclusion? Aristotle contends that there are basically two ways of presenting arguments. You can either argue implicitly by giving examples, or you can argue explicitly by constructing logical arguments – what Aristotle calls enthymemes. The key message here is: You can guide people's thinking by using logical arguments. The enthymeme is the core of Aristotle's entire theory of rhetoric. Let's take a look at an example. Imagine that you're a concerned citizen addressing an assembly about a possible invasion. You might give the following argument: A neighboring power is amassing an army on our border; it probably plans to invade us; therefore, we really ought to cobble together an army of our own before it's too late. This is an example of an enthymeme. We started off with a couple of accepted premises, and then we reasoned from those to a logical conclusion. What distinguishes enthymemes from the kinds of deductive arguments we might encounter in, say, a philosophical treatise, is that the conclusions of enthymemes are only probably true, not definitely true. In other words, we can't know for certain that our neighbors are going to invade us, but it's a fairly reasonable assumption to make based on probability. The enthymeme, then, is nothing extraordinary. In fact, most people make these kinds of probabilistic arguments all the time in their daily lives, and the way you argue in speeches should be no different. Now, if they're straightforward, enthymemes may sometimes be sufficient in themselves But other times, they require a bit more explanation. That's where examples come in handy. Consider this argument: A ruler is requesting a personal guard; in the past, rulers who were granted a personal guard attempted to seize absolute power and become tyrants. Therefore, we really ought to deny this request. This argument is also an enthymeme, but it's made stronger because it justifies its conclusion by pointing to historical precedent. Since an understanding of logic is clearly fundamental to this form

of persuasion, an education in logic and argument would greatly benefit the budding orator.

When performing a speech, your main aim is to speak clearly and naturally.

In addition to the three forms of persuasion – ethos, pathos, and logos – two additional elements also have a bearing on the persuasiveness of a speech. These are style and delivery. If Aristotle had his way, only the facts would matter. But, alas, audiences often pay more attention to the beauty of a speech than to its content. The same speech coming out the mouth of a bland and nervous speaker is going to have far less impact than it would coming out of the mouth of a flamboyant and confident one. This testifies to the fact that public speaking is a kind of performance. And, this is what truly distinguishes rhetoric as a form of art. The key message here is: When performing a speech, your main aim is to speak clearly and naturally. For Aristotle, the principal virtue of good style is clarity. That's because being understood is, in itself, a kind of persuasiveness. In general, strive for elegant simplicity in your words. That means being concise, using correct grammar, and avoiding ambiguous language. Speaking in vague and unclear terms is generally the mark of a weak argument. Of course, a few poetic flourishes here and there can spice up an otherwise dry oration – but don't use so much fancy language that your audience loses the thread. Aristotle's favorite poetic device is metaphor, which helps your audience to visualize the point you're making. Be careful, though: an ill-conceived metaphor might communicate the entirely wrong message. If you were to describe the dawn sky as rosy-fingered, this would evoke a rather pretty and wholesome image. Describe it as red-fingered, however, and the meaning is altogether more sinister. Along with style, it's important to consider delivery. As Aristotle says, it's not just what you say that matters, but how you say it. Clarity is essential to good delivery; you should always enunciate your words and insert appropriate pauses between your sentences. And just as important is speaking naturally. A speech would sound terrible if it were spoken in a monotone. At the same time, it would be hard to take a speaker seriously if she spoke everything in verse, like a poem. Instead, your aim should just be to emulate natural speech rhythms. Natural speech is persuasive. Contrived and artificial-sounding speech is just the opposite.

Every speech should conform to a logical four-part structure.

When it comes to structuring a good speech, Aristotle considered only two things truly essential: stating your case and proving it. However, for longer speeches, a short introduction and conclusion can also be useful as these can help listeners orient themselves. In all, your speech should contain at most four sections: introduction, statement, proof, and conclusion. The key message here is: Every speech should conform to a logical four-part structure. An introduction is where you communicate what your speech is going to be about. It should set the tone, arouse interest, and explain why the topic is important. This is a good place to start using ethos by showing off your character. For example, when the Greek dramatist Sophocles found himself accused of a crime, he began his defense by playing up his old age and frailty. From the outset, he persuaded the crowd to view him more as a victim of misfortune than as a

perpetrator. Next, it’s time to narrate your interpretation of events. Narratives that go on too long can be difficult to follow, so it’s important to be selective and only include details that are relevant to your key point. Since narratives appeal to emotions far more than arguments do, this is the section where you can best take advantage of pathos. After the narrative section, it’s time to present your arguments. This is where logos comes into play. The aim of this section is simply to prove the claims you made in the narrative section of your speech, and, if necessary, to refute any arguments made by your opponent. Once you’ve made your case, it may be useful to provide a short conclusion, especially if the speech was a long one. The main function of the conclusion is to summarize the main thrust of your argument, as well as to emphasize why your argument is superior to your opponent’s. Since this is your last opportunity to win your audience over, it’s a good idea to end with an emotional bang that leaves them feeling positive toward you. Finally, the very end of your speech should be concise and punchy. One popular way of ending a speech is to use the technique of asyndeton, which means to omit the conjunctions in a sentence. For example, after instructing students in the art of rhetoric, Aristotle concluded with, “I’ve made my case, you’ve heard the facts, now judge.”

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is: There are three basic methods of persuasion: you can make yourself seem authoritative on a certain issue, you can draw out specific emotions in your listeners that dispose them to your cause, or you can sway them through rational argument. Of these three, rational argument is the most persuasive since it’s grounded in truth and logic. Logos is also the key to unlocking the other modes of persuasion. If you can master the art of sound and clear reasoning, people will naturally find you more credible, making them more susceptible to emotional direction. And here’s some more actionable advice: When in doubt, keep it short and sweet. There are really only two reasons for making a speech: to state a case and to prove it. When considering the points you want to make in your speech, ask yourself, does it contribute to either of these things? If the answer is no, then you can probably afford to leave it out. Remember, effective speakers are ones who have a point and make it.