

Rhetoric: An Introduction

It is early in the morning and my seventeen-year-old son eats breakfast, giving me a narrow window to use our sole bathroom. I wrap a towel around my waist and approach the sink, avoiding the grim sight in the mirror; as a writer, I don't have to shave every day. (Marketers despairingly call a consumer like me a "low self-monitor.") I do have my standards, though, and hygiene is one. I grab toothbrush and toothpaste. The tube is empty. The nearest replacement sits on a shelf in our freezing basement, and I'm not dressed for the part.

"George!" I yell. "Who used all the toothpaste?"

A sarcastic voice answers from the other side of the door. "That's not the point, is it, Dad?" George says. "The point is how we're going to keep this from happening again."

He has me. I have told him countless times how the most productive arguments use the future tense, the language of choices and decisions.

"You're right," I say. "You win. Now will you please get me some toothpaste?"

"Sure." George retrieves a tube, happy that he beat his father at an argument.

Or did he? Who got what he wanted?

In reality, by conceding his point, I persuaded him. If I simply said,

"Don't be a jerk and get me some toothpaste," George might stand there arguing. Instead I made him feel triumphant, triumph made him benevolent, and that got me exactly what I wanted. I achieved the height of persuasion: not just an agreement, but one that gets an audience—a teenaged one at that—to do my bidding.

Try This in a Meeting

Answer someone who expresses doubt over your idea with "Okay, let's tweak it." Now focus the argument on revising your idea as if the group had already accepted it. This move is a form of concession—rhetorical jujitsu that uses your opponent's moves to your advantage.

No, George, I win.

The Matrix, Only Cooler

What kind of father manipulates his own son? Oh, let's not call it manipulation. Call it instruction. Any parent should consider rhetoric, the art of argument, one of the essential R's. Rhetoric is the art of influence, friendship, and eloquence, of ready wit and irrefutable logic. And it harnesses the most powerful of social forces, argument.

Whether you sense it or not, argument surrounds you. It plays with your emotions, changes your attitude, talks you into a decision, and goads you to buy things. Argument lies behind political labeling, advertising, jargon, voices, gestures, and guilt trips; it forms a real-life Matrix, the supreme software that drives our social lives. And rhetoric serves as argument's decoder. By teaching the tricks we use to persuade one another, the art of persuasion reveals the Matrix in all its manipulative glory.

Persuasion Alert

It's only fair to show my rhetorical cards—to tell you when I use devices to persuade you. The Matrix analogy serves as more than a pop culture reference; it also appeals to the reader's acceptance of invisible wheels within wheels in modern existence, from computer software to quantum physics. Rhetoric calls this shared attitude a "commonplace" as you shall see, it is one of the building blocks of persuasion.

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