

Rhetoric

Rhetoric Definition

Rhetoric is a technique of using language effectively and persuasively in spoken or written form. It is an art of [discourse](#), which studies and employs various methods to convince, influence, or please an [audience](#).

For instance, a person gets on your nerves, you start feeling irritated, and you say, “Why don’t you leave me alone?” By posing such a question, you are not actually asking for a reason. Instead, you simply want him to stop irritating you. Thus, you direct language in a particular way for effective communication, making use of rhetoric. A situation where you make use of rhetoric is called a “rhetorical situation.”

Difference Between Rhetorical Device and Figures of Speech

Rhetorical figures or devices are employed to achieve particular emphasis and effect. Rhetorical devices, however, are different from “figures of speech”. Wherever and whenever a [figure of speech](#) is used in written texts and speech, it alters meanings of words. For example, the [metaphor](#) used in the expression “He is a tiger,” is a complete altered form of a simple idea “He is brave.” Try to compare this example to the use of a rhetorical device in the example below:

“I am never ever going to rob anyone for you and never, never ever give in to your sinful wish.”

The [repetition](#) in the above example does lay emphasis on the statement but does not alter the sense of it.

Common Rhetoric Examples

Below are a few examples on how rhetoric is employed by using various [literary devices](#):

How did this idiot get elected? – A [rhetorical question](#) to convince others that the “idiot” does not deserve to be elected.

Here comes the Helen of our school. – An [allusion](#) to “Helen of Troy,” to emphasize the beauty of a girl.

I would die if you asked me to sing in front of my parents. – A [hyperbole](#) to persuade others not to use force to make you do something you don’t want to do.

All blonds are dumb. – Using a stereotype to develop a general opinion about a group.

Nevertheless, the difference between rhetorical devices and figures of speech is so minute that both share many features. A figure of speech becomes a device in rhetoric when it is aimed at persuading the readers or listeners.

Examples of Rhetoric in Literature

Let us try to analyze the use of rhetoric in some literary works:

Example #1: *Paradise Lost* (By John Milton)

John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* has several examples of rhetoric. To quote an example from Book V:

“...advise him of his happy state—
Happiness in his power left **free to will**,
Left to his own **free will**, his **will though free**
Yet mutable.”

The repetition of the phrase “free will” emphasizes the [theme](#) of human creation, which is making free choices, but the phrase “yet mutable” creates [ambiguity](#) that, despite being free, Adam had to be careful, as a wrong act could make him lose his freedom.

Example #2: *Death, be not Proud* (By John Donne)

John Donne addresses death in his *Death, be not Proud* (Holy [Sonnet 10](#)) by saying:

“Thou ‘art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy ‘or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; **why swell’st thou then?**”

The rhetorical question “why swell’st thou then?” serves to play down the horrific nature of death. He devalues death by calling it a “slave,” and that it keeps the despicable company of “poison, war, sickness” and seeks their support.

Example #3: *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* (By Walt Whitman)

We see Walt Whitman in his poem *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* use [anaphora](#) to create a rhetorical effect:

“Flood-tide below me! I watch you, **face to face**;
Clouds of the west! sun there half an hour high! I see you also
face to face.”

Anaphora is a device where the same word or phrase is repeated at regular intervals to achieve a rhetorical effect.

Function of Rhetoric

Rhetoric, as explained above, is a tool for writers and orators which empowers them to convince their readers and listeners about their [point of view](#). Often, we find rhetoric examples in religious sermons and political speeches. They aim to make comparisons, to evoke tender emotions, to censure rivals, and all this is done to persuade listeners.

Advertisers give their ads a touch of rhetoric to boost their sales by convincing people that their product is better than other products in the market. For instance, in an advertisement, a girl – after shampooing her hair with a particular product – says, “I can’t stop touching my hair.” This is an attempt to entice consumers, through visual rhetoric, to buy this product, in order to have soft and shiny hair like her.