

The June conversations that Dr. Deborah Williams will lead are intended to help us explore the nature of rhetoric. So, as the course title asks “What the heck is rhetoric?” Here is Wiki’s response:

Rhetoric is the art of persuasion. It is one of the three ancient arts of discourse along with grammar and logic/dialectic. As an academic discipline within the humanities, rhetoric aims to study the techniques that speakers or writers use to inform, persuade, and motivate their audiences.

We all spend so much time reading and listening; sometimes it feels overwhelming. By stepping back and looking at persuasion analytically, we aim to find a better framework with which to approach our everyday immersions in the persuasive arts.

There is lots of suggested reading. Do what you can and come join in an interesting conversation about conversation.

Reading Instructions for Session 1

Begin with Plato’s Gorgias. What does Plato (Socrates) think is wrong with the sophists in general and Gorgias in particular? You might want to Google the word “sophist.” Next, read the two speeches by Gorgias. What do you think is going on here? Think about what Gorgias is doing in addition to what he is saying. Aristotle’s Rhetoric is one of the foundational texts for the study of rhetoric. However, it is long and complex. In the summary I have selected, please read the following sections. Don’t worry about references to scholarship on Aristotle. You only need to read for a basic understanding of what Aristotle says: 4.1 4.2 5.1 5.2 5.3 What is the main concern of rhetoric according to Aristotle? How do his thoughts on Ethos, Pathos and Logos align with Gorgias and/or Plato?

[Gorgias by Plato](#)

[Gorgias Encomium of Helen1](#)

[Gorgias, A Defense of Palamedes](#)

[Rhetoric by Aristotle](#)

Session 2 Instructions and Suggested Reading

Choose a couple of speeches to focus on. As you read, think about ethos, pathos and logos. Think about Plato's criticism of Gorgias. Which techniques do the speakers employ and why? How effective do you think the speeches are and what makes them so (or not)? Take a look at the pages from the Talmud. What do you see going on? How is this related to our reading so far?

Talmud

Susan B Anthony

Transcription Washington's Inaugural Address

George Washington, Farewell Address, 19 September 1796

Jonathan Edwards, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God

Session 3 Instructions and Suggested Readings

Session 3 Instructions Don't be alarmed by the appearance of the reading material. In the physical book, the chapter is only 30 pages long; but it became 95 when I printed it to PDF from my Kindle! Eagleton is a witty and entertaining writer. My favorite quote is "Ideology, like halitosis, is what the other person has." Don't worry if you are not familiar with the authors he discusses, it's enough to just get his main points. After reading it, please take a shot at writing a definition of ideology that might work for you.

In the 20th Century, the field of Rhetoric became much more interdisciplinary. Influences such as post-Marxist notions of ideology, Freud's discussion of the unconscious, linguistic theories of semiotics and discourse theory, and Foucault's theories of knowledge and power have all helped broaden our understanding of persuasion. Today also, the study of rhetoric views its subject matter as including more than just speech/writing. Rhetoricians also study film, performance, art, architecture, and advertising. Contemporary rhetoric has become a useful toolkit for exploring how communication happens (or doesn't), how meaning gets made and how our world view is created. As Andrea Lundsford and John Ruskiewicz put it, "Everything's an argument."

Here is a quick summary of some things that may be important to our understanding of rhetoric since the mid-1980's.

Lacan, in building upon (and refuting) Freud, theorized that we are "born into language." In other words, it exists before us; and we have to learn its rules in order to communicate. We're not in charge of what words mean; we have to submit to the authority of language.

Discourse theory posits that different discourses exist (although they overlap) and, within a discourse (think of the field of biology, for example), authorities/experts in the field decide what counts as legitimate discourse. A biologist, for example, cannot claim that the human egg is fertilized by fairies. Foucault wrote about how power and authority permeate language. Who gets to determine what counts as a legitimate interpretation of reality? Think of the neo-liberal view of crime vs the view of sociology: Is it caused by socio-economic circumstances or by individual morality? Which side is currently controlling discussions of crime? How does it affect real life policy decisions?

Hayden White (my favorite book is *The Content of the Form*) takes Freud/Lacan/Foucault and explores narrative form. He argues that the way we have traditionally written history misrepresents historical events. Traditional Western historical narratives have represented the past as if it were a nineteenth century novel. There are clear causes and effects, motivations are simple and legible, events unfold in a linear manner, everything marches in forward in continuous progress, all is clear and all the loose ends are wrapped up by the end in a conclusion that makes evident all the elements were already there in the historical record and just needed to be put into narrative form to be obvious. He argues that narrative form is ideological. It is what we might call unconscious rhetoric. What might it be persuading us to believe? What interests does it support? What would it look like to tell history differently? Not all cultures tell stories or write histories the way we do in the West. Think back to the images of the Talmud in session 2. Think of any non-western narratives you might know.

Semiotics is a field of linguistics that argues that individual words do not get their meaning from a one-to-one correspondence between a word and the thing it represents. We know what a chair is because we have experienced many different kinds of chairs, right? We also know what a chair is because it is not a table. The relationship between the word and how we understand it depends on things like historical usage and current context (as Lacan says, we are born into language). For example, the word “believe” might refer to religious faith, or it might refer to evidence in a judicial proceeding. Context shapes meaning. Language is a system of meaning that determines what individual words designate.

Rhetoricians, art historians, and scholars of popular culture have used semiotics as a way to understand things that are not words. For example, visual artifacts can be seen as participating in a system of meaning that works much like a language. Think of the difference between a pair of Birkenstocks and a pair of six-inch heels. Can visual artifacts “speak?” Are they rhetorical? Think about the choices you make in dressing for a particular occasion. Are you thinking about audience? Are you trying to make a particular argument about who you are? Think about how us older people have trouble understanding the fashion choices of younger folks. Are there different discourses of clothing?

Session 4 Instructions and Reading Material

In session 4 we will be thinking about visual rhetoric. We will be looking at visual materials TBA