

UNDERSTANDING RHETORIC

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**A Guide to Critical Reading
and Argumentation**

Eamon Cunningham



Brown Walker Press
Irvine • Boca Raton

Understanding Rhetoric: A Guide to Critical Reading and Argumentation

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PREFACE

Understanding Rhetoric: A Guide to Critical Reading and Argumentation is a composition textbook that outlines three essential skills – rhetoric, argument, and source-based writing – geared towards newcomers and advanced students alike. The book was conceptualized as an alternative to the typical experience of many first-year composition students, namely a course centered around a textbook comprised mostly of contemporary non-fiction readings with a heavy emphasis on writing in four primary modes – exposition, description, narration, and analysis. In place of this approach, this text offers a theory-based, rhetorical approach to composition that stresses the interrelation between the act of reading, writing, and image analysis. Though comprehensive in its coverage, the book's focus is a simple one: how to move beyond a “gut reaction” while reading to an articulation of what is effective and what is not, while explicitly answering the most important question of “Why?” This text gets at this central concern in two fundamental ways.

First, the text teaches composition as a cumulative process, coaching you *how* to question, challenge, and expand on not just the readings you hold in your hands, but also *how* to interrogate the internal processes of writing and thinking. The blend of composition methods in this book attempt to detail the cross-point of product and process in the act of writing (cognitivist theory), note the profound effect of social and historical realities upon our interpretations (social-constructionist theory), and expand the notion of rhetoric beyond mere writing to any act of communication,

image, music, film, and so forth (post-structural theory). Such an approach breaks with the long-standing mode of composition instruction known as “current-traditional rhetoric,” a widespread pedagogical stance that reduces writing to its lowest common-denominators: prescriptive rules and technical correctness. While these are not wholly unimportant, this book will work counter several of current-traditional rhetoric’s central assumptions: 1) the emphasis on product over process, 2) the privileging of arrangement over invention, 3) the characterization of grammatical and mechanical correctness as (often) the sole concern of the teacher, 4) and the artificial reduction of writing into basic modes (exposition, description, narration, and analysis) devoid of any explicit theoretical basis for doing so. By challenging you to consider where your responses come, this text transforms reading and writing from a matter of coming up with answers to questions to learning what type of questions need to be asked in the first place. The “right” questions, the text argues, are fundamentally rhetorical in nature.

Second, the content of the practice-based chapters is framed into a larger mesh of intellectual history to provide a general introduction to the great minds of our collective heritage. Countering the popular notion that tradition somehow locks our wrists to the past, this book highlights the rich (and often very fascinating) body of rhetorical scholarship by presenting the writing and thinking you are doing today as being continuous with a long history of writing instruction that goes back to the ancient world. Since the 1960s, higher education has increasingly rediscovered the wisdom of the ancient rhetorical traditions and has worked to restore the ties between theory and practice, an idea which had largely fallen out of fashion in the 19th and early 20th century. A theory-based model of instruction assumes rhetoric to be a teachable technique available to anyone with an open mind and a decent work ethic. This book provides equal representation from classical and contemporary theory with the recognition that theory cannot be fully grasped without practice, and practice cannot be fully understood without its theoretical antecedent. After all, you can’t write “outside the box” until you know where the box is and what it looks like.

To meet these goals, the text will, foremost, emphasize your role as an active responder to what you read. This approach owes a great debt to Christina Hass and Linda Flower’s “Rhetorical Reading Strategies and the Construction of Meaning” (1988), a work which argues that reading is a constructive (rather than merely receptive) process where “meaning” does not exist *in* a text but in readers and the representations they build

from a text. The “constructive” metaphor makes the process, Haas and Flower say, sound “tidy, rational, and fully conscious,” and you may well be thinking that this “left-brain” approach may sterilize what many students cherish about their time spent in English classrooms. But, I would argue, that seeing how writing can work from the inside-out, as if you were an anatomist examining a text’s inner organs and its workings, is arguably the most productive and generative way to engage in a study of communication, both within the borders your classroom and beyond.

Upon conclusion, you will learn how to construct meaning in new ways – to see even the most familiar of texts anew – while continuously emphasizing the context of a discourse situation which includes, as Haas and Flower note, the writer of the original text, other readers, the rhetorical context for reading, and the history of the discourse itself. This notion should challenge some of your preconceptions about a text as merely content and information in favor of the understanding that “a piece of writing is a result of someone’s intentions, part of a larger discourse world, that has real effects on real readers.” This basic assumption of what a text is should dispel the idea of “rightly” and “wrongly” responding to it while pushing you in achieving coherence and clarity in your thinking and analysis, so that *your* ideas, *your* meanings, *your* insights are built and communicated.

If the lessons of this book are undertaken with an open mind, you will begin to step apart from the crowd, and your reading, writing, and thinking will stand out. You will become an active participant in the writings you examine and begin to bring whatever thoughts and experiences you have into dialogue with the world around you. You will learn to pay attention to how good writing works, to its internal logic and governing ideas, in order to join the very few who can actually look closely at a piece of writing, dissect it, and write sensibly about it.

Eamon Cunningham

UNIT 1

RHETORIC

CHAPTER ONE

A BRIEF HISTORY OF RHETORIC

“We will no longer accept politicians who are all talk and no action, constantly complaining but never doing anything about it. The time for empty talk is over. Now arrives the hour of action.”

—Inaugural Address, Donald J. Trump, January 20, 2017

Whether he knew it or not, Donald Trump’s inaugural address re-cast an age-old skepticism towards rhetoric into a modern context: language is used not to reveal the truth but to conceal it. Check “rhetoric” in a thesaurus, and you’ll find its synonyms are universally negative: bombast, grandiloquence, pomposity, and so on. Turn on the T.V. and you’ll hear things like “actions speak louder than words” and “that’s just empty rhetoric” as insults aimed to slash at credibility and character. For Trump, and for most of contemporary culture, language is seen as the tool by which ambitious politicians weasel their way into public office, weenie out of an accusation, or work around public interest. Language is the weapon of the liar to reverse the order of reality and illusion. If language is the weapon, rhetoric is often thought to be the battle plan for its strategic deployment. But Trump’s incredulous stance towards rhetoric – trotted out before the nation on January 20, 2017 – is as old as the subject itself. What is the origin of this skepticism and has this attitude changed over time? Let’s find out.

Rhetoric in the Classical Period

It's the 5th century B.C., and two men are locked in a heated debate inside a Sicilian courtroom. The case: an old man has brought suit against his protégé for refusing to pay him the arranged fee for instruction he provided in a new art, rhetoric. This dazzling new technique – a systematic method to convince others of your point of view – is powerful, pragmatic, and (as this case illustrates) prone to potential misuse. Each man pleads their case to the judge. The young man defends his refusal to pay his teacher, citing a loss in his first court case after his program of instruction in the rhetorical arts. This is *prima facie* evidence, he argues, of his teacher's lousy instruction and, thus, a violation of the original agreement. The old man comes back. He turns the young man's argument around, claiming that if he used oratory in the first place, even unsuccessfully, that merely shows a defect in the young man's use of the skill, not that it wasn't taught to him. Things grind to a stalemate. Fed up with the bickering, the jury drops the case and jeer both out of the courtroom, *κακοῦ κόρακος κακὸν ὄν* (a bad egg from a bad crow). So goes the legend of Corax ("the crow"), history's first rhetorician, and his pupil, Tisias (the "egg," as it were).

Most popular accounts of rhetorical history begin with the doings of the shadowy Corax and his pupil, Tisias. Everything about these two men is steeped in mystery and legend. The little bit we do confidently know about Corax comes from a number of one-off mentions scattered over approximately one thousand years of fragmented writing. Plato mentions Tisias's rhetorical art in the *Phaedrus* (370 B.C.) but only roundaboutly suggests the existence of a Corax-like teacher. Aristotle mentions Corax by name in *The Art of Rhetoric* (350 B.C.) but does so with careful qualifications regarding his existence. In his commentaries on Plato's *Phaedrus*, Hermias of Alexandria suggests that Corax was the teacher of Tisias, though later scholia on the same text, notably P. Couvreur's *Hermia Alexandrini in Platonis, Phaedrum Scholia* (1901), argues it was the other way around. Accounts of Corax continued into the Roman world. Sextus Empiricus, Marcus Tullus Cicero, Ammianus Marcellinus all make consistent claims to Corax as the father of rhetoric, though these assertions were recorded almost a millennium after his death. What we can know for sure about him is that Corax is mysterious, to say the least.

From 485 – 465 B.C., in the generation before Corax, Syracuse – a region in southeastern Sicily – came under the control of a succession of

tyrannical rulers: Gelon I, Hieron I, and Thrasybulus. Known to history collectively as the Deinomenids, these royals were best known for wresting private property away from the landed aristocracy through a kind of early (tyrannical) form of eminent domain. When Thrasybulus assumed the throne in 466 B.C., enough was enough, and he was quickly overthrown in a popular uprising among the landowners that ushered in a period of democracy that lasted until 405 B.C. Deposing Thrasybulus, however, raised one big question for the citizens of Syracuse: how should all the seized land be rightfully redistributed back into the hands of its rightful owners? This question was to be hashed out in courts of law, but the average citizen had no means to effectively represent himself in such a context, effectively setting the stage for Corax and the democratizing force of his speech. This story is derived almost entirely from Cicero's *Brutus or History of Famous Orators; also His Orator, or Accomplished Speaker* (46 A.D.), where the author retells Corax's story as it was originally laid down by Aristotle.

Aristotle, therefore, informs us, that when the Tyrants were expelled from Sicily, and private property (after a long interval of servitude) was determined by public trials, the Sicilians Corax and Tisias (for this people, in general, were very quick and acute, and had a natural turn for controversy) first attempted to write precepts on the art of Speaking. Before them, he says, there was no one who spoke by method, and rules of art, though there were many who discoursed very sensibly, and generally from written note.

Notice the implications of Cicero's account. First, it concedes that Corax was by no means the first person to speak rhetorically, but he was the first to systematize rhetoric as a *techné*, a skill or art that can be taught and learned. Thus, Corax is the first rhetorician, one who teaches others *how* to persuade on their own behalf: how to seize attention (the "proem"), how to advance a proposition (the "demonstration"), and how to close things out (the "epilogue"). This structure as a model for argumentation is common practice now, but that is only because Corax's early teachings presumably formed the core of what the great Greek thinkers – Socrates, Plato, Aristotle – eventually had to say on the subject.

The legacy of Corax has had an enduring mark on the history of rhetoric, since it is credited as the foundation for two of the three branches of rhetoric which are still recognized today. One set of scholars maintain

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Corax was instrumental in the development of “forensic” or “judicial” rhetoric (the type of speech used to discuss past action especially in legal contexts), where others argue him as a key figure in the early development of “deliberative” or “political” rhetoric (the type of speech used in deliberative political bodies, often in service of power). The credit for the third branch, “epideictic” or “display” rhetoric, often goes to Gorgias, a rhetorical giant whom we’ll see much more about later on. Exactly which of these branches Corax had the most influence on and exactly how this occurred has been a longstanding matter of scholarly squabble.

Students of Corax saw the practical application of his brand of rhetoric in judicial and political contexts, and it wasn’t long before this skill proliferated into all realms of public life. Teachers of persuasion, “Sophists,” soon began popping up all over the Mediterranean basin to educate anyone on how to argue, given that they had a little extra money on hand to pay for the skill. The greatest transmitter of this practice was a Sicilian named Gorgias (485 B.C. – 380 B.C.), who took Corax’s skills off the island of Sicily and into the big city, Athens.

Less shadowy than Corax, but no less important to the history of rhetoric, was Gorgias of Leontini, Sicily. He was rumored to have known Corax and Tisias personally, and it’s pretty clear from his four extant writings (*Athenian Funeral Oration*, *Palamedes*, *Encomium on Helen*, and *On Nature or Not-Being*) that the general principles of his rhetoric follow from this earlier tradition, particularly the belief of rhetoric as a *techne* and the preference of probabilities to immutable truth. He has a compelling personal life, perhaps the most interesting man in the world of his day. In 427 B.C., he was sent as an ambassador by his native city to Athens, and the Athenians liked him so much he never came home. He stayed as an itinerant teacher of rhetoric, traveling from city to city on the Greek mainland, pitching his skill to anyone with a few extra bucks. Never married and with no children, he lived to be 105 years old and made a pretty good living as history’s first successful Sophist. His oratory was truly something to behold, more akin to magic than public speaking. Look no further than the reaction to his *Athenian Funeral Oration*. Gorgias must have been on his game that night since, following the ceremony, a gold statue of him was erected in the temple of Apollo at Delphi to commemorate the event. He was a regular fixture at festival celebrations (an unusual honor for visitors to the Greek mainland) and his performances became the stuff of legend. His speaking style relied heavily on sonic features – alliteration, assonance,

antithesis, parallelism – and his manner of delivery resembled that of a poetic rhapsode or dramatic performer. Some historical accounts describe his ability to “take requests” from the audience to produce an off-the-cuff speech in nearly any oratorical style to the delight and astonishment of those in attendance. Gorgias could lift his audience up and carry them away, turning oration into a rapturous experience that no listener would soon forget. In short, he was good at what he did.

For Gorgias, speech *is* the attraction, not outcome of it. Deliberative rhetoric may pass laws and judicial rhetoric may mete out justice, but these styles have a common limitation: the speaker must be careful to not call attention to the speech *as* an act of artifice, otherwise it will blow their cover as a disinterested and selfless rhetor appealing to the greater good. Shakespeare knew this balancing act well. Hamlet makes this point directly in the play that bears his name, yet this hidden gem of a monologue, sitting in the shadow of the “To Be or Not to Be” soliloquy from the previous scene, is often overlooked. In Act III, scene ii, Hamlet is backstage speaking to the traveling players. Just before the curtain goes up, Hamlet runs down what makes a convincing performance:

Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion/be your tutor:
suit the action to the word, the/word to the action; with this special
o'erstep not/the modesty of nature: for anything so overdone is/
from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the/first and now,
was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the/mirror up to nature...

Don't be overblown. Don't be too dull. Above all, he says, act natural and the audience will eat from the palm of your hand. This is sound advice for the deliberative and judicial rhetorician: call too much attention to the showiness of the performance and the jig is up. Not so with Gorgias. He reveled in the showmanship and his highly stylized speech doubled as a living billboard for what he was selling. Rhetoric that is conscious of itself *as* rhetoric – known as “epideictic” or “display” rhetoric – became Gorgias's stock-in-trade and history remembers him as the founding figure of rhetoric's third major branch.

Plato (428 B.C. – 348 B.C.), the great searcher of Truth in the Ancient world, didn't take the word games of the Sophists lying down and, in fact, a primary theme of the Platonic dialogues at large is both Socrates's and Plato's hostility towards the Sophists. Both viewed them as corrupt

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teachers who taught young men to argue only for victory and money, and many of Plato's works contain strong criticisms of the Sophistic project: *Euthydemus*, *Protagoras*, *Parmenides*, *Republic*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Ion*, and *Phaedrus*. His greatest head-on attack against this practice appeared in his dialogue *Gorgias* (380 B.C.), which contains the first appearance of the term "rhetoric" in published literature. Socrates, the main character of Plato's dialogues, saw Gorgias as a corrupter of the young men who studied rhetoric with him since he propagated a Coraxian form of persuasion to his students: "Rhetoric is the art of persuading an ignorant multitude about the justice or injustice of a matter, without imparting any real instruction." Plato saw this as the mere appearance of wisdom, a façade for deception through gestures of pseudo-cleverness in the way one speaks. What's more, whether one's argument is virtuous or wicked, true or false, is beside the point. For Gorgias, being able to speak well is both a lucrative skill and an end in itself. Eloquence isn't just for those with a knack for it; Gorgias believed it is teachable skill that can be used by anyone – a "rhētorikḗ téchnē" or *skill of speaking* – for any reason, at any time. More troubling yet, Gorgias's clientele, the young nobility of Athens training for careers in politics and law, would take these skills into positions of power and authority, thus perpetuating what Plato saw as one of the all-time great evils done against the Greek people. For Plato, to mis-educate society's leaders on a program of rhetorical deception is to poison the very heart of the state. For a lighthearted and comedic example of rhetoric in the hands of the stupid and incompetent, check out Plato's lesser known dialogue *Euthydemus* (384 B.C.). This dialogue illustrates Plato's distrust of democracy in a nutshell – nitwits egging on halfwits, none of whom have the faintest idea of the higher ideals required for civic life to flourish. And, for Plato, if mob rule is the disease of democracy, rhetoric is the contagion through which it spreads.

Plato's pupil, Aristotle (384 B.C. – 322 B.C.), was foremost in the revival of rhetoric's academic respectability. He defined rhetoric as "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" in the ur-text of composition studies *The Art of Rhetoric*. Aristotle thought the truth of things could be found here in this world – unlike the ethereal and transcendent world of Forms put forth by Plato – and, as such, thought language itself could contain some degree of truth. Like Gorgias, Aristotle conceded that rhetoric was a skill that could be taught, and

teachers forever-after have used his highly pedagogical system outlined in *The Art of Rhetoric* as a baseline for rhetoric and composition instruction in classrooms all over the world. Aristotle's *The Art of Rhetoric* has no equal in its importance to the discipline. It is split into two major parts: a first portion on *lexis* (style in rhetoric) and second portion on *taxis* (types of rhetoric). And among this work's many lasting contributions to the study of composition is a smooth reworking of Corax and Gorgias's modes of discourse (deliberative, judicial, and epideictic), the means of persuasion (ethos, logos, and pathos), and the underlying logical structures of argument formulation (dialectic, syllogism, and enthymeme).

Aristotle's brand of rhetoric is the child of two fathers: the Sophistic tradition (Corax and Gorgias) and the philosophical tradition (Socrates and Plato). Though he rightly conceded the probabilistic nature of rhetoric, he nonetheless maintained it as an exercise in logic, not merely bravado and stagecraft. To this end, Aristotle insisted upon the fact that rhetoric always be delivered in the "plain" style, a direct style of communication that stresses clarity, focus, precision, and logical soundness. Such a recharacterization of the discipline spurned a newfangled focus on the academic applications of rhetoric, particularly in the practice of critical reading, critical writing, and the other dozens of academic activities which form the basis of any good English class today. As the English philosopher Alfred North Whitehead may have put it, the future of rhetorical studies is but a series of footnotes to Aristotle.

If Aristotle gave us the great gift of structure, then Marcus Tullus Cicero (106 B.C. – 46 B.C.) gave us the great gift of showmanship. Cicero, described by Quintillian as "not the name of a man, but of eloquence itself" in *Institutio Oratoria* (95 A.D.), was the most pre-eminent speaker in the Roman Republic, and his legacy has cast a long shadow into the subsequent centuries of rhetorical studies and scholarship. Cicero was also an accomplished politician, philosopher, and linguist and is often described as having one of the greatest minds in the Classical world (so much so that he was posthumously labeled a "Virtuous Pagan" by the Catholic tradition in the Middle Ages). He is most well-known for his writing about rhetoric, producing a total of six books, which are still studied and utilized today. Among his most famous contributions to the field are the "five canons of rhetoric" which appear in *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (circa 80 B.C.), an anonymous work often attributed to Cicero or at least derived from his direct

teachings. The five canons were, and still are, the foundational principles of effective public speaking. From salesmen to CEOs, politicians to professional wrestlers, anyone in a public speaking engagement will likely find themselves talking in Ciceronian terms. The five canons are:

1. **Invention:** Coming up with something to say and deciding on a rhetorical strategy.
 - *Who is the audience? What do they value? How can I target these values?*
2. **Arrangement:** Sequencing the parts of the speech into the most effective order.
 - *How can attention be seized? How much context does the audience need? What counterarguments may be raised and how can they be refuted?*
3. **Style:** Presenting the speech with eloquence and emotion.
 - *How can I appeal to the audience's emotion? What makes a phrase memorable and how can this be integrated into the speech? What type of language will appeal to the morals and principles of the audience?*
4. **Memory:** Committing a speech to memory as if to perform it.
 - *How can I present without hesitation or omission? How much rehearsal is necessary to make the speech appear as if it is off the cuff?*
5. **Delivery:** Using voice, gestures, and performance elements effectively.
 - *How can vocal tone and pace affect the perception of the speech? What body gestures can be used to reinforce the content of the message? How can the auditory and visual elements of a speech coalesce effectively?*

Think of all the great speeches in recent history: Winston Churchill's "We Shall Never Surrender," Franklin Roosevelt's "The Only Thing We Have to Fear is Fear Itself," Dwight D. Eisenhower's "Message to the Invasion Troops," John F. Kennedy's "Ask Not What Your Country Can Do for You," Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream," George W. Bush's "Address to the Nation on the Night of 9/11." Now try to think of any one of these that doesn't pattern itself upon Cicero's rhetorical structures. You'll find that you simply can't do it. We approach public speaking the way we do because Cicero systematized and articulated the five canons of rhetoric two millennia ago. Contemporary rhetoric is saturated in these Ciceronian themes. He's one of us.

Rhetoric from the Medieval Period to the Renaissance

Beginning with the crowning of Otto the Great as Holy Roman Emperor in 962, Europe enjoyed one of the most magnificent flourishings of culture the world has seen, and the study of rhetoric took several more steps forward. Contrary to the popular imagination, the Middle Ages were not an age of religious tyranny that purged the pagan legacy of Greece and Rome down the memory hole. In fact, the great scholars of the Middle Ages had long been curious about the Classical past, and the proliferation of Classical ideas now joined forces with the institutional reach of the Catholic Church. This synthesis was seen most prominently in the crowning achievement of the Middle Ages: the establishment of the university. Central to the education of students in the medieval university were the rhetorical works of Aristotle and Cicero, thus cementing the canonical status of these two great Classical thinkers. The medieval university was built from a curricular model known as the “Trivium”: a three-part course of study comprised of grammar (needed to understand language), logic (needed to process language), and rhetoric (needed to produce language to others). Broken into its two roots, *tri* and *via*, Trivium translates to “the place where three roads meet.” The three roads of all education – the input (grammar), process (logic), and output (rhetoric) of language – meet at the destination of Truth, a metaphor which aptly captures the teleological worldview so central to the medieval education. To the Trivium, add arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy (the “Quadrivium”), and you have the seven classical “Liberal Arts.” This type of education – a systematic program with rhetoric at its center – produced some of the greatest writers and thinkers in history: St. Dominic, Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine, Adelard of Bath, Duns Scots, and William of Ockham.

In essence, rhetoric became the mode of communication at the center of all academic disciplines – not just those classified in the humanities – to express real thought, real truth, in the most effective possible way. And for the first time, written, not just spoken, discourse took on a much more central role. Students in the medieval universities would often be presented with a text for investigation – a selection from Aristotle, assorted Papal bulls, various theological letters – to be read critically, followed with a written task designed to focus the subsequent discussion. This newfangled