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An Introduction to Rhetoric Using the “Available Means”

To many people, the word *rhetoric* automatically signals that trickery or deception is afoot. They assume that an advertiser is trying to manipulate a consumer, a politician wants to obscure a point, or a spin doctor is spinning. “Empty rhetoric!” is a common criticism—and at times an indictment. Yet the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) defined *rhetoric* as “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion.”

At its best, rhetoric is a thoughtful, reflective activity leading to effective communication, including the rational exchange of opposing viewpoints. In Aristotle’s day and in ours, those who understand and can use the available means to appeal to an **audience** of one or many find themselves in a position of strength. They have the tools to resolve conflicts without confrontation, to persuade readers or listeners to support their position, or to move others to take action.

Rhetoric is not just for Roman senators in togas. You might use rhetoric to convince a friend that John Coltrane is worth listening to, explain to readers of your blog why *Night of the Living Dead* is the most influential horror movie of all time, or persuade your parents that they should buy you a car. Rhetoric is also not just about speeches. Every essay, political cartoon, photograph, and advertisement is designed to convince you of something. To simplify, we will call all of these things **texts** because they are cultural products that can be “read,” meaning not just consumed and comprehended, but investigated. We need to be able to “read” between the lines, regardless of whether we’re reading a political ad, a political cartoon, or a political speech. Consider documentary films: every decision—such as what lighting to use for an interview, what music to play, what to show and what to leave out—constitutes a rhetorical choice based on what the filmmaker thinks will be most persuasive.

It is part of our job as informed citizens and consumers to understand how rhetoric works so that we can be wary of manipulation or deceit, while appreciating effective and civil communication. And it is essential that each of us communicates as effectively and honestly as possible.

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• ACTIVITY •

Identify an article, a speech, a video, or advertisement that you think is manipulative or deceptive and one that is civil and effective. Use these two examples to explain what you see as the difference.

The Rhetorical Situation

Let’s start out by looking at a speech that nearly everyone has read or heard: the speech that baseball player Lou Gehrig gave at an Appreciation Day held in his honor on July 4, 1939. Gehrig had recently learned that he was suffering from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), a neurological disorder that has no cure (today it is known as Lou Gehrig’s disease). Although Gehrig was a reluctant speaker, the fans’ chant of “We want Lou!” brought him to the podium to deliver one of the most powerful and heartfelt speeches of all time.

Farewell Speech

LOU GEHRIG

Fans, for the past two weeks you have been reading about a bad break I got. Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth. I have been in ballparks for seventeen years and have never received anything but kindness and encouragement from you fans. Look at these grand men. Which of you wouldn’t consider it the highlight of his career just to associate with them for even one day?

Sure, I’m lucky. Who wouldn’t consider it an honor to have known Jacob Ruppert; also the builder of baseball’s greatest empire, Ed Barrow; to have spent six years with that wonderful little fellow, Miller Huggins; then to have spent the next nine years with that outstanding leader, that smart student of psychology—the best manager in baseball today, Joe McCarthy? Who wouldn’t feel honored to have roomed with such a grand guy as Bill Dickey?

Sure, I’m lucky. When the New York Giants, a team you would give your right arm to beat, and vice versa, sends you a gift—that’s something! When everybody down to the groundskeepers and those boys in white coats remember you with trophies—that’s something!

When you have a wonderful mother-in-law who takes sides with you in squabbles against her own daughter—that’s something! When you have a father and mother who work all their lives so that you can have an education and build your body—it’s a blessing! When you have a wife who has been a tower of strength and shown more courage than you dreamed existed—that’s the finest I know!

So I close in saying that I might have been given a bad break, but I have an awful lot to live for! Thank you.