

Glossary of Rhetorical Terms

Aristotelian triangle See rhetorical triangle.

audience The listener, viewer, or reader of a text. Most texts are likely to have multiple audiences.

Gehrig's audience was his teammates and fans in the stadium that day, but it was also the teams he played against, the fans listening on the radio, and posterity—us.

concession An acknowledgment that an opposing argument may be true or reasonable. In a strong argument, a concession is usually accompanied by a refutation challenging the validity of the opposing argument.

Lou Gehrig concedes what some of his listeners may think—that his bad break is a cause for discouragement or despair.

connotation Meanings or associations that readers have with a word beyond its dictionary definition, or denotation. Connotations are usually positive or negative, and they can greatly affect the author's tone. Consider the connotations of the words below, all of which mean “overweight.”

That cat is plump. That cat is fat. That cat is obese.

context The circumstances, atmosphere, attitudes, and events surrounding a text.

The context for Lou Gehrig's speech is the recent announcement of his illness and his subsequent retirement, but also the poignant contrast between his potent career and his debilitating disease.

counterargument An opposing argument to the one a writer is putting forward. Rather than ignoring a counterargument, a strong writer will usually address it through the process of concession and refutation.

Some of Lou Gehrig's listeners might have argued that his bad break was a cause for discouragement or despair.

ethos Greek for “character.” Speakers appeal to ethos to demonstrate that they are credible and trustworthy to speak on a given topic. Ethos is established by both who you are and what you say.

Lou Gehrig brings the ethos of being a legendary athlete to his speech, yet in it he establishes a different kind of ethos—that of a regular guy and a good sport who shares the audience's love of baseball and family. And like them, he has known good luck and bad breaks.

logos Greek for “embodied thought.” Speakers appeal to logos, or reason, by offering clear, rational ideas and using specific details, examples, facts, statistics, or expert testimony to back them up.

Gehrig starts with the thesis that he is “the luckiest man on the face of the earth” and supports it with two points: (1) the love and kindness he's received in his seventeen years of playing baseball, and (2) a list of great people who have been his friends, family, and teammates.

occasion The time and place a speech is given or a piece is written.

In the case of Gehrig's speech, the occasion is Lou Gehrig Appreciation Day. More specifically, his moment comes at home plate between games of a doubleheader.

pathos Greek for “suffering” or “experience.” Speakers appeal to pathos to emotionally motivate their audience. More specific appeals to pathos might play on the audience's values, desires, and hopes, on the one hand, or fears and prejudices, on the other.

The most striking appeal to pathos is the poignant contrast between Gehrig's horrible diagnosis and his public display of courage.

persona Greek for “mask.” The face or character that a speaker shows to his or her audience.

Lou Gehrig is a famous baseball hero, but in his speech he presents himself as a common man who is modest and thankful for the opportunities he's had.

polemic Greek for “hostile.” An aggressive argument that tries to establish the superiority of one opinion over all others. Polemics generally do not concede that opposing opinions have any merit.

propaganda The spread of ideas and information to further a cause. In its negative sense, propaganda is the use of rumors, lies, disinformation, and scare tactics in order to damage or promote a cause. For more information, see *How to Detect Propaganda* on page 756.

purpose The goal the speaker wants to achieve.

One of Gehrig's chief purposes in delivering his Farewell Address is to thank his fans and his teammates, but he also wants to demonstrate that he remains positive: he emphasizes his past luck and present optimism and downplays his illness.

refutation A denial of the validity of an opposing argument. In order to sound reasonable, refutations often follow a concession that acknowledges that an opposing argument may be true or reasonable.

Lou Gehrig refutes that his bad break is a cause for discouragement by saying that he has “an awful lot to live for!”

rhetoric As Aristotle defined the term, “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion.” In other words, it is the art of finding ways to persuade an audience.

rhetorical appeals Rhetorical techniques used to persuade an audience by emphasizing what they find most important or compelling. The three major appeals are to ethos (character), logos (reason), and pathos (emotion).

rhetorical triangle (Aristotelian triangle) A diagram that illustrates the interrelationship among the speaker, audience, and subject in determining a text. See p. 4.

SOAPS A mnemonic device that stands for Subject, Occasion, Audience, Purpose, and Speaker. It is a handy way to remember the various elements that make up the rhetorical situation.