

Analyzing Rhetorical Language

Connections

Have you ever...

- Told a nursery rhyme to a young child?
- Said something like, “I’ll tell you three reasons why...”
- Heard Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech?

If you’ve spoken, listened, or read in the past 1,000 years, you have heard or used *rhetorical language*. That’s because examples of rhetorical language are all around you. Rhetorical language is as common as a cold in wintertime (that’s an example!) and as useful as a smartphone (another example!). Maybe you haven’t recognized it as rhetorical language, but you have most definitely experienced it (another!).

Rhetorical language is language that is used for a purpose beyond its literal meaning. Often it is used to evoke an emotional response. Four common types of rhetorical language are **analogies**, **enumeration**, **parallelism**, and **qualifying statements**.

Analyzing how rhetorical language affects purpose and meaning can help you better understand and enjoy what you read and hear around you. Rhetorical language can be especially useful in illuminating the author’s point of view and purpose.





Rhetorical Language Affects Point of View and Purpose

An author will rarely state his or her point of view or purpose up front. Writing can be much more effective when purpose and meaning are conveyed through rhetorical language.

Read the following passage and answer the following questions about rhetorical language.

Cecilia ran home from school quickly so she could get the mail before Arnie arrived. Cecilia was expecting the most exciting delivery of her short seven years: a real, working, honest-to-goodness robot! Of course, her brother Arnie said the box tops would amount to nothing, but he would soon see. He would see her perseverance pay off. He would see her four weeks of eating nothing but Tastie Bites prove to be the height of all wisdom, not stupidity, as he insisted. What did he know? Just because he was 12 didn't mean he was king of everything. He would see: when the Tastie Bite Bot swept her room and completed her math homework, he would finally have to admit how smart Cecilia really was!



She arrived home to a mailbox empty as her change purse. She stared into its echoing chamber, unbelieving that a robot could take a whole four weeks to arrive. She walked inside to the kitchen and sat down, bewildered and angry.

Identify the Rhetorical Device

The first step to analyzing rhetorical language is to recognize and identify it.

Rhetorical Device	Definition
Analogy	A comparison between two dissimilar items highlighting one way they are the same
Enumeration	Numerous details about a single subject
Parallelism	Using words or phrases with a similar structure again and again
Qualifiers	Words or statements that limit or enhance the topic

- ? 1. Is the use of the phrase “he would see” an example of enumeration or parallelism? Why?

The repetition of the phrase “he would see” is an example of parallelism, since it is a repeated phrase and not a list of details.

- ? 2. Is the use of the phrase of “real, working, honest-to-goodness” an example of enumeration or qualifiers? Why?

“Real, working, honest-to-goodness” is an example of enumeration because it is a list of details describing the robot.

- ? 3. What type of rhetorical language is exemplified by the phrase “empty as her change purse?”

“Empty as her change purse” is an analogy, comparing the mailbox to Cecilia’s change purse. Both are empty.

Answer the Question, “What Is the Effect of the Emphasis?”

Rhetorical language emphasizes a word or phrase for a reason. The second step is to find that reason. The emphasis affects the meaning of the words. There is a reason the author wants the reader to remember the emphasized words: they tell the reader what the author’s purpose is, what the author wants the reader to remember. Look back at the emphasized language and repeat it to yourself as you ask, “What is the effect of this emphasis?”

As you repeat the words, you will begin to emphasize them in a certain way. There could be a few answers to your question, but there will be one effect that is most reasonable.

- ? 4. What is the effect of the repeated use of “he would see?”

As you repeated to yourself “he would see,” you probably heard yourself saying the words with defiance, pride, and determination to be correct. The effect of the repeated phrase is that the reader sees how important it is for Cecilia to prove her brother wrong.

- ? 5. What is the effect of the enumeration describing the robot?

The enumeration describes the attributes of the robot that are most important to Cecilia; it shows how special the robot is to her.

Connect the Effect to a Larger Purpose

Sometimes, you just want to know the effect of the rhetorical language that the author uses. At other times, you will want to connect the effect to a larger purpose: a theme the author is expressing, the effect of the plot, or an idea the author wants to emphasize. How does the rhetorical language support main ideas or elements of the story as a whole?

- ? 6. How does the author’s use of enumeration to describe the robot and use of “he would see” repeatedly fit in the larger context of the story?

The rhetorical language shows two things, that Cecilia wants to prove her brother wrong and that the robot is special to her. The language reveals Cecilia’s desires and motivation. It emphasizes her excitement and competitiveness with her brother. As part of the whole story, the language shows why Cecilia’s disappointment is so great at the end of the story, when she finds the mailbox empty.

Analyzing Rhetorical Language

Practice
It!

The following passage is from the speech “I Have a Dream” by Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. in 1963.

Read the passage below and answer the questions that follow.

And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today!

Source: From I Have a Dream Speech, by Martin Luther King, Jr., August 28, 1963

1. What type of rhetorical language is exemplified in the phrase, “I have a dream?”
 - a. Qualifier
 - b. Parallelism
 - c. Analogy
 - d. Enumeration
2. How would you describe the effect of the emphasis?
 - a. It emphasizes the fact that these are not reality today.
 - b. It emphasizes the optimism that Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. held.
 - c. It encouraged others to aspire to their dreams.
 - d. It showed what is possible by visualizing a different future.

3. What type of rhetorical device is seen in the phrase, “a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression”?
- a. Qualifier
 - b. Parallelism
 - c. Analogy
 - d. Enumeration
4. How would you describe the effect of the phrase?
- a. It makes it easier to feel the pain of awful injustice and oppression.
 - b. Oppression and injustice are known to be worse in the southern states.
 - c. Those who hear the speech feel compelled to act.
 - d. The phrase compares injustice and oppression to a hot day.
5. Give a third example of rhetorical language in the passage. What is its effect? Why?
6. What is the overall effect of rhetorical language in the passage? How does it relate to the author’s main idea?



Check Your Skills

The following passage is from a speech Henry Kissinger gave at the 45th Munich Security Conference in 2009.

Read the passage below and answer the questions that follow.

By affirming the desirability of the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons, we have concentrated on the steps that are achievable and verifiable. My colleague, Sam Nunn, has described the effort as akin to climbing a mountain shrouded in clouds: We cannot describe the top to be certain that there may not be unforeseen, perhaps even insurmountable, obstacles. But we are prepared to undertake the journey in the belief that the summit will never come into view unless we begin the ascent and deal with the proliferation issues immediately before us, including the Iranian and North Korean programs.

Source: From Speech to the 45th Munich Security Conference, by Henry Kissinger, February 6, 2009

1. Which of the following is an example of rhetorical language?
 - a. “steps that are achievable and verifiable”
 - b. “effort as akin to climbing a mountain shrouded in clouds”
 - c. “the desirability of the goal”
 - d. “deal with the proliferation issues immediately before us”

2. What is the “ascent” referred to in the passage?
 - a. The start of nuclear talks with Iran and North Korea
 - b. The start of climbing a mountain in North Korea
 - c. Getting to a global summit
 - d. Improving the world by conquering insurmountable obstacles

3. Which of the following is an effect of calling the speaker’s goal a “summit”?
 - a. It makes the goal seem less important because it’s ironic.
 - b. It points out that the goal is physically high up.
 - c. It makes the goal seem unachievable.
 - d. It makes the goal seem lofty and a great achievement.

Essential Reading Skills

The following passage is from a speech former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates gave at a meeting of the Association of Public Land Grant Universities.

Read the passage below and answer the questions that follow.

In sum, if public universities and colleges don't reform themselves to contain costs and improve graduation rates, federal and state governments will step in, and like the dinosaur, government has a heavy foot, a small brain, and no fine motor skills. Believe me, I know.

Source: From Address and Q & A at the 125th Meeting of the Association of Public Land Grant Universities, by Robert Gates, November 11, 2012

4. What is being compared to a “dinosaur?”
- Public universities
 - Government
 - Public colleges
 - A small brain
5. What do a “dinosaur” and “government” have in common?
- They both have heavy feet.
 - They are unable to work well with details.
 - They are both studied in the university setting.
 - They both want to be in control of their environments.
6. What does Robert Gates mean by “step in?”
- Take control over
 - Destroy and rebuild
 - Cut away and make extinct
 - Redesign

Remember the Concept

Rhetorical language conveys meaning by emphasizing words or phrases. By recognizing the emphasis, you can determine the effect the rhetorical language has on the meaning of the passage.

Analyzing Rhetorical Language

Rhetorical Language Affects Point of View and Purpose

Practice It!

1. b. Parallelism

This phrase is used to introduce and group numerous ideas together.

2. a. It emphasizes the fact that these are not reality today.

The phrase points to the future while emphasizing that those ideals did not exist at the time.

3. c. Analogy

Oppression and Injustice are being compared to sweltering heat.

4. a. It makes it easier to feel the pain of awful injustice and oppression.

By comparing injustice and oppression with heat, MLK turns the pain of an abstraction into a pain everyone is familiar with and has physically felt.

5. Answers will vary. One possible example of rhetorical language is to “sit down together at the table of brotherhood.” This phrase compares brotherhood to a table, where people gather together to talk and share company. The effect is to compare the descendants of former slaves and former slave owners to a family, emphasizing that they are people who are intrinsically joined as part of one group.

6. Answers will vary. The speech introduces the idea of equality as a dream, something that is not reality but that can be aspired to. It portrays oppression and injustice as an uncomfortable heat. It envisions a future where equality makes descendants of slaves and descendants of slave owners part of the same group, like a family sitting around a table. The rhetorical language portrays the present as unbearable, but it also portrays a possible bright future of equality. It emphasizes the contrast between today’s inequality and tomorrow’s possibilities of equality.

Check Your Skills

1. b. “effort as akin to climbing a mountain shrouded in clouds”

This analogy continues in the next few sentences, all emphasizing the difficulty of the task at hand.

2. a. The start of nuclear talks with Iran and North Korea

Both are the beginning of a long and difficult task, but must be started in order to reach the goal.

3. d. It makes the goal seem lofty and a great achievement.

The word “summit” is something that is considered high, beautiful, and worthy of striving for, even if it is difficult. The connotations of describing the goal as a summit make it seem lofty and a great achievement.

4. b. Government

Government is being compared to a dinosaur. The public universities and colleges are being acted upon.

5. b. They are unable to work well with details.

Governments don’t have feet, of course; however, like a dinosaur with large feet can’t pinpoint precisely what he will step on, government, according to Robert Gates, can’t rework programs with great precision by fixing only the parts that are broken.

6. a. Take control over

The government (again, without literal feet) would take control over programs if the colleges and universities cannot “reform themselves.”