

LBCC Writing Center: What is Rhetoric?

Rhetoric or rhetorical means something said or written to persuade or argue for a position. Papers that ask for a rhetorical analysis are asking students to describe the parts of a topic and how these parts work together, complementing or contrasting each other, in order to create a strong argument.

How can you break an argument into parts that show how the whole works? It helps to use terms like ethos, pathos, and logos. These are elements of rhetoric. It might seem like a time to start sweating, but these lofty-sounding words just describe qualities that belong to an argument. If putting an argument together is like baking a cake, then ethos, pathos, and logos are ingredients used to make the cake batter.

Logos appeals to a reader's sense of reason and logic.

Arguments that use logos effectively outline a thought process backed by facts and draw conclusions that make logical sense based on those facts. Questions to ask yourself:

- Does the argument make logical sense?
- Does the argument lay out or explain its thought process?
- Does the evidence support the conclusions?

Pathos uses emotion to support an argument.

Appealing to an audience's emotions is often a very powerful way to support an argument. For example, many children's charities show pictures of the children whose lives a donation would help. It's important to be aware of pathos in arguments because it can be used to deliberately mislead or manipulate an audience. Questions to ask yourself:

- How does the argument make you feel?
- What does the arguer do to make the audience feel a certain way to support the argument?
- Does that feeling make you want to agree with the argument?

Ethos has to do with how credible an arguer is and how credible their argument is.

This credibility can come from expertise; this is why we consider a doctor to be an authority on disease treatment. Another piece to consider for ethos is whether the arguer has an ulterior motive behind their argument. When a chocolate company says that chocolate is good for your health, it's probably because they want people to buy more chocolate from them.

- Who's saying this information?
- Where do the facts come from?
- Do they use factual evidence, or just hearsay or opinion for support?

Sometimes an argument seems like it could be more than one of these three elements. This is okay. Logos will often improve an argument's ethos. Sometimes logos is used to help create pathos. It's normal for them to overlap, because interwoven elements of rhetoric are often used to create powerful arguments.

Arguments may not always seem to have all three elements of rhetoric, or they may not have the same amounts of logos, ethos, and pathos. There's nothing bad about this: a good argument doesn't always need all three elements of rhetoric, or they may not have the same amounts of logos, ethos, and pathos. There's nothing bad about this: a good argument doesn't always need all three elements of rhetoric in equal amounts. Academic papers consider logos and ethos more important than pathos.

Understanding and considering logos, pathos, and ethos will give you better control over your own arguments. Additionally, you'll also be able to better recognize how an argument manipulates your perspective, and whether the argument is doing that dishonestly or not.