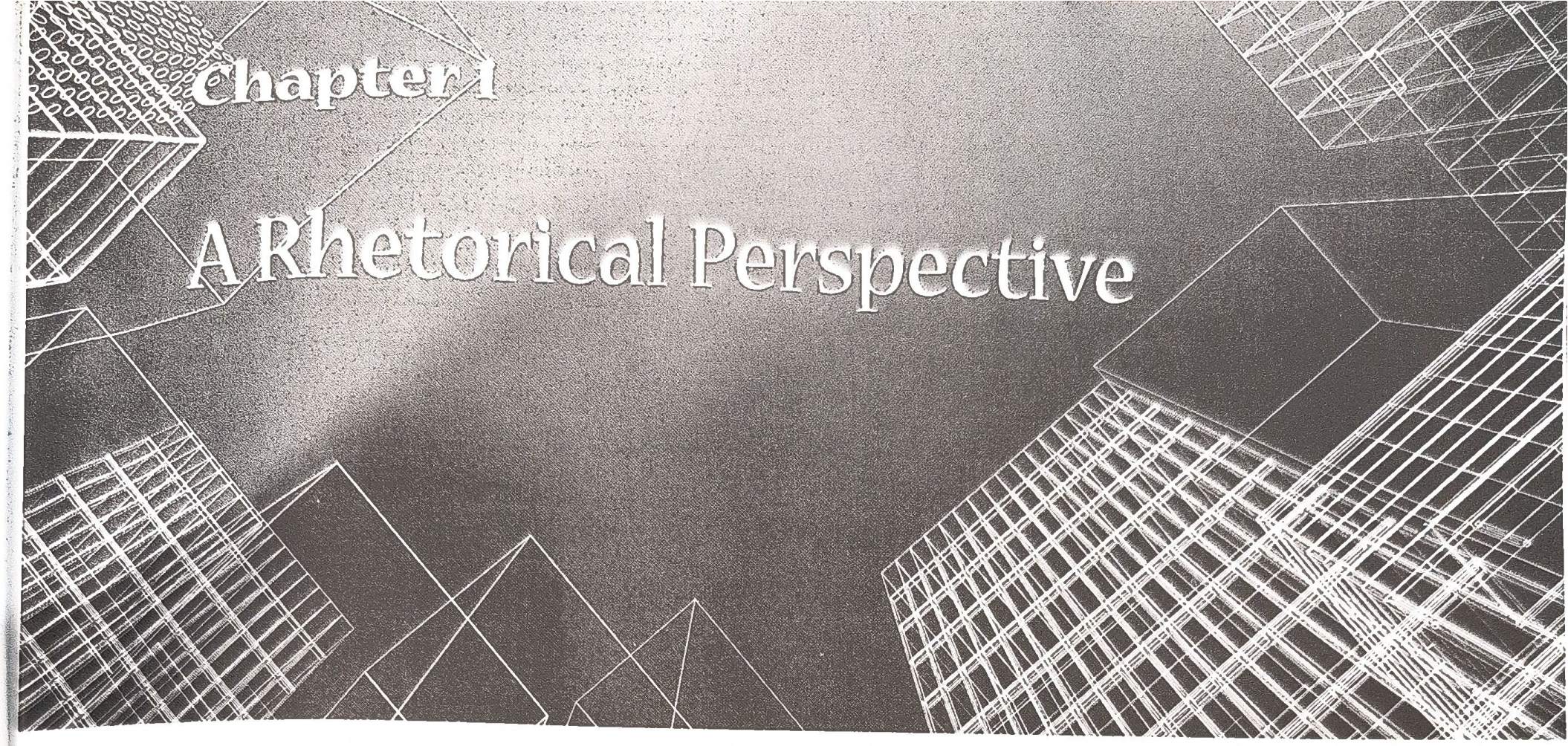

# Chapter 1

# A Rhetorical Perspective

Through its title, *The Rhetorical Act*, this book boldly announces that it is about rhetoric. Because media commentators often use *rhetoric* to mean "hot air" or "lies," you may well ask why you should study rhetoric in a class or read a book about rhetorical action. One way to answer this question is to encourage you to read the prologue and epilogue of this book. Another way is to define *rhetoric* properly and to show the possible value of a rhetorical perspective on human action.

For the moment, we will define *rhetoric* as "the planned use of symbols to achieve goals."[1] Although we will explain that definition in greater detail later in this chapter, you should note these key elements. Most examples of *rhetoric* are not spontaneous, spur-of-the-moment exclamations; rather, they are carefully thought-out messages. This definition is very broad in scope because the symbols that make up those carefully planned messages can be of many types—written and spoken language; nonverbal behaviors; fine arts such as paintings, drawings, and sculptures; music; visual images such as photographs, motion pictures, or television programs—in short, any form of symbol. And finally, the goal, aim, or purpose of such messages is to influence a particular group of people—an audience—in some way, usually to somehow change their thoughts or behaviors. From a rhetorical perspective, we view human communicative acts in that way.

Any "perspective" is literally a way of looking through (*per* = through; *specere* = to look), an angle of vision, a way of seeing. All perspectives are partial and in that sense distorted or biased: each looks at this rather than that; each has its particular emphasis. Put a bit differently, from any perspective we can seem some things very well, other things less well, and still other things not at all. Because someone is always doing the looking and seeing from somewhere, it is impossible to avoid taking some point of view or perspective.

Sometimes perspectives are physical—actual places from which to view material things. For example, go to the top floor of the tallest building at your university and look out through a window. What do you see? Likely, you will see the tops of trees and other smaller buildings on campus, and perhaps even a geometrical pattern of walkways crisscrossing a central quad or plaza. Then, leave the building and as you do, stop on the front steps and take another look at the campus. It is the same campus, of course, but because your perspective has changed, what you see is likely very different. You see the same trees, buildings, and walkways, but from this view point you see the trunks of the trees and the facades of the buildings rather than their tops, and the geometrical pattern of the walkways may not be apparent. From these two different physical perspectives, then, you see some things well, other things less well, and still other things not at all.

Sometimes perspectives, like a *rhetorical* perspective, are mental or intellectual rather than physical. Rather than places from which to view material things, they are orientations or attitudes that frame the way we think. Just what is the mental or intellectual perspective that we call *rhetorical*? It might best be understood by comparing it to other mental or intellectual perspectives with which you might be more familiar, such as a philosophical or scientific perspective.

Whereas scientists would say the most important concern is the discovery and testing of certain kinds of truths, rhetoricians (who study rhetoric and take a rhetorical perspective) would say, "Truths cannot walk on their own legs. They must be carried by people to other people. They must be explained, defended, and spread through language, argument, and appeal." Philosophers and scientists respond rightly that, whenever possible, assumptions should be tested through logic and experiment. In fact, they would argue that you and I should pay more attention to how scientific or philosophical conclusions are reached and tested. Rhetoricians reply that unacknowledged and unaccepted truths are of no use at all. Thus the bias of a rhetorical perspective is its emphasis on and its concern with the resources available in language and in people to make ideas clear and cogent, to bring concepts to life, to make them salient for people. A rhetorical perspective is interested in what influences or persuades people: in other words, in the planned use of symbols to achieve goals.

Those strongly committed to a rhetorical perspective argue that some scientists and philosophers delude themselves, when they claim they are not persuaders and do not use rhetorical strategies in their writings. In a review of two books reporting research on Neanderthals, for example, Stephen Jay Gould, who taught biology, geology, and the history of science at Harvard, said that humans are storytelling creatures and commented on "the centrality of narrative style in any human discourse (though scientists like to deny the importance of such rhetorical devices—while using them all the time—and prefer to believe that persuasion depends upon fact and logic alone)."[2]

When objectivity is highly valued, as it is in science and philosophy, some feel that any hint of the sort of subjectivity that usually characterizes rhetorical decision making must be denied. The folly of holding such a suspicious view of rhetoric is apparent in the evolution versus intelligent design controversy making the rounds in state school board policy debates on what should be taught about Darwin's theory of evolution in high school biology classes. In his documentary about the recent evolution debates, *A Flock of Dodos*, Randy Olson, a protégé of Professor Gould's and a twenty-year marine biologist turned filmmaker, pokes fun at his own colleagues for refusing to engage the creationists and intelligent design advocates in public forums. Scientists are their own worst enemy, Dr. Olson maintains, when they think biology and rhetoric don't mix—that explaining the importance of evolutionary theory to citizens is beneath them. He cautions half-jokingly, "If evolutionists don't learn to adapt to the new media environment, then their message could go the way of the dodo!"[3] Similarly, feminist challenges to traditional philosophy call attention to possible sources of bias in modes of philosophizing, pointing to rhetorical impulses in the works of great philosophers.[4] In other words, rhetoricians can identify persuasive elements in all discourse, including scientific and philosophical communication.

A rhetorical perspective, then, focuses on the sorts of issues on which informed and honest people can disagree. It focuses on how people arrive at social truths; that is, on the kinds of truths created and tested by people in groups and that influence social and political decisions. These truths represent what a group of people agrees to believe or accept; such truths become what the group takes to be "common sense."

Among the important social truths a rhetorical perspective might teach you to examine are the processes by which taxpayers, parents, congressional committees, school boards, and citizens respond to issues that cannot be resolved solely through objective means such as logical analysis and experimental testing. Should affirmative action programs, for example, be used to rectify past discrimination against minorities and women? Early acceptance of affirmative action as an appropriate remedy for past discrimination has shifted as doubts arise about "quotas" or "reverse discrimination." What constitutes discrimination? What remedies for past discrimination are fair to all those who compete for jobs and admission to educational programs? As another example, should air quality standards be set high enough that cars must be redesigned to use alternative energy sources, gasoline reformulated, and industries converted to use less polluting fuels? How can we balance our concern for healthy industries that create good jobs with the impact of pollution on the environment and on human health? Still another example: Will harsh penalties for convicted rapists provide better protection for women, or will such penalties increase the reluctance of juries to convict?

For social questions such as these, philosophers can point out contradictions in our thinking and spell out the implications of a given position. Social scientists can give us the best available data about the lack of women and minorities in categories of employment, about available pools of minority applicants for jobs, about causes and effects of pollution, and about the low conviction rates of accused rapists. When we have looked at the data and examined the logic of the conclusions drawn from them, we still must make decisions that go beyond the facts and make commitments that go beyond sheer logic.

## *Why Has Rhetoric Become a Dirty Word?*

Not so long ago, the predominant meaning [of rhetoric] was "the art of expressive speech" or "the science of persuasion"; now the much-abused word, with a root related to "oratory," is laden with artificiality: empty talk is "mere" rhetoric.

But rhetoric, in its positive sense, fills a linguistic need: "The technique of articulate argument" is too much of a mouthful. If we mean "empty talk," or wish to deride the fulsome fulminations of a blowhard, we already have a large selection of sneering synonyms available: from the euphemism "bushwa" to the acronym "bomfog." ([The word] "bomfog," an acronym for "brotherhood of man, fatherhood of God," is not written in caps—because it relies on its similarity to two small words.)

The most effective way to rehabilitate "rhetoric," I think, is to offer a colorful, yet suitably pedantic term to cover its pejorative meaning. The word I have in mind is *bloviation*, a noun back-formed from the verb *bloviate*. (A verb is useful, too—you can't say "rhetoricize," and "orate" does not have the specifically spurious connotation.)

Bloviation is most often associated with the statements of Warren Gamaliel Harding—"Gamalielese," H. L. Mencken called it—but the word has deep roots as an authentic Americanism. In *Dictionary of Slang, Jargon & Cant*, Albert Barrère and Charles Leland placed *bloviate*'s origin before 1850, and defined it as "verbosity, wandering from the subject, and idle or inflated oratory or blowing, but which word it was probably suggested, being partially influenced by 'deviate.'"

So, if you mean "bloviating," get off "rhetoric's" back: We need "rhetoric" to do a job that no other word does as well.

*Source:* William Safire, *Safire's New Political Dictionary* (New York: Random House, 1993).

From its beginnings, this emphasis on social truths has been the distinctive quality of a rhetorical perspective. What fragmentary historical records exist seem to indicate that rhetoric was first studied and taught early in the fifth century BCE by sophists or wise men in Greek city-states around the Mediterranean. These city-states began to become more democratic, and as citizens met together to decide the laws under which they would live, as they brought suits and defended themselves against charges of wrongdoing, and as they celebrated the values that gave them a sense of identity, the need to speak cogently and clearly became increasingly important. Accordingly, men such as Gorgias of Leontini, Protagoras, Isocrates, and others began to teach male citizens (only males were allowed to speak and vote) how to present their ideas more effectively and to write about what made some speeches more persuasive and some speakers more appealing than others.

## WHAT IS RHETORIC?

The oldest major treatise on the art of rhetoric that is still available to us is *On Rhetoric*, written by Aristotle in fourth-century BCE Athens. The Greek word for rhetoric comes from *rhêtorikê*, *-ikê* meaning "art or skill of," and *rhêtór*, meaning an experienced political/public speaker. Rhetoric, then, was for Aristotle the art or skill of speaking in the sorts of public forums common in ancient Athens—in the legislative assembly, in the courts, and on ceremonial occasions. The aim of such speaking was social influence, or persuasion. Thus, he defined rhetoric as "the ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion" (1355b).[5]

In *Rhetoric* and in his other works, Aristotle distinguished among kinds of truth. He believed that there were certain immutable truths of nature, which he designated as the province of metaphysics or science (*theoria*). He also recognized a different sort of truth consisting of the wisdom or social knowledge (*phronêsis*) needed to make choices about matters affecting communities or a whole society. These truths, not discoverable through science or analytic logic, he described as contingent; that is, as dependent on cultural values, the situation or immediate context, and the nature of the issue. They were the special concerns of the area of study he called *rhetoric*, the means of making decisions on issues where "there is not exact knowledge but room for doubt" (1356a).[6]

The contingent qualities of social truths can best be illustrated by looking at what it means to say that something is "a problem." Put simply, a problem is the gap that exists between what you think ought to be (value) and what is; it is the discrepancy between the ideal and the real, between goals and achievements. Problems come to exist because people can perceive and define them as such in interaction—that is, through rhetoric. As you will realize, what is a problem for one person (or group) may not be a problem for another person (or group). Some U.S. citizens, for example, perceive a problem with current income tax laws that they believe give an advantage to individuals with very high incomes at the expense of workers who earn much less. The problem, as they see it, is a matter of fairness (a value), and they urge lawmakers to raise the income tax rate for those with high incomes. Other citizens, however, view individuals with high incomes as "job creators" who stimulate economic growth through their investments. As they see it, raising taxes on high-income individuals would stifle that investment and harm the economy overall—especially for those with lower incomes.

Quite obviously, then, defining problems depends on goals and values, and these can change. In this same sense social truths—and thus rhetoric—are "subjective" and "evaluative"; rhetoric addresses issues that arise because of people's values, and these will change through time in the face of altered conditions.

Rhetoric is, of course, also concerned with data that establish what exists and with logical processes for drawing conclusions from facts and implications from principles and assumptions. Indeed, Aristotle considered rhetoric an offshoot of logic, and a rhetorical perspective is characterized not only by an emphasis on social truths but also by an emphasis on reason-giving or justification in place of coercion or violence. This distinction can be subtle. In general, rhetorical efforts seek to affect the free choices of groups or individuals, whereas coercion creates situations in which only one choice seems possible—the costs of any other option are too high, the pressure too great, the threat too terrible. Violence coerces by threatening bodily harm or death if any choice but that desired is made. Reason-giving assumes that by presenting the implications of the available options, one can persuade an audience to choose from among them freely, based on the reasons and evidence offered. Rhetoric presumes that audiences have some real freedom of choice.[7]

Of course not all of the reasons used by rhetors (those who initiate symbolic acts seeking to influence others) will make sense to logicians or scientists. Some rhetorical reasons are grounded in facts and logic, but many others are grounded in religious beliefs, history, or cultural values; in associations and metaphors; in hunger or desire, resentments, or dreams. A rhetorical perspective is eclectic and inclusive in its search for what is influential and why. In fact, rhetoric's concern with justification grows out of its focus on social truths tested by people in their roles as voters, property owners,

consumers, workers, parents, and the like. In other words, reasons are presented to the decision makers and evaluators to whom the rhetoric is addressed, the audience.

Obviously, in some situations you can say, "Do this and don't ask any questions—just trust me," but such situations are rare. Reasons can be omitted only when your relationship to those addressed is so close and strong that the relationship itself is the reason for action or belief.

In most cases, then, even those involving your nearest and dearest, you must give reasons, justify your views, explain your position. And you must do so in terms that will make sense to others. Rhetors must "socialize" or adapt their reasons to reflect shared values. It is more acceptable, for example, to explain that you run several miles every day to maintain your weight and protect your health than to say that you run for the joy of it, for the sheer physical pleasure it gives you. Socialized reasons are widely accepted, meaning they are agreed to by most people. U.S. culture is strongly pragmatic; therefore, "good" reasons tend to show that an act is useful and practical. U.S. culture is strongly capitalistic; therefore, good reasons tend to show that an act is profitable, or assume that an action should be judged by its impact on "the bottom line." Other societies and some U.S. subcultures place greater emphasis on the sensual and aesthetic; for them, good reasons affirm behavior that is pleasurable and expressive, such as precision ice skating, acrobatic skateboarding, skillful hang gliding, dancing the tango really well, losing oneself in musical sound, singing in close harmony, rapping, or savoring and preparing unusual foods, regardless of whether or not those behaviors are pragmatic of economically beneficial.

Because rhetoric is addressed to others, it is reason-giving; and because it is social and public, it uses as reasons the values accepted and affirmed by a subculture or culture. In this way, rhetoric is tied to social values, and rhetors' statements will reflect the social norms of particular groups, times, and places (see Figure 1–1).

Because it is addressed to others, providing justifications that they will understand and feel, rhetoric is a humanistic study, and as such it examines all kinds of human symbol use, even the bizarre and perverse. From the beginnings of rhetoric in classical antiquity, rhetoricians have understood that persuasion occurs through both argument and association, through the cold light of logic and the white heat of passion, through explicit values and subconscious needs and associations. Accordingly, the field of rhetoric has come to examine all of the available means by which we are influenced and by which we can influence others. Thus modern interpretations of rhetoric go far beyond Aristotle's emphasis on the art or skill of speaking in public. As we suggested earlier in

Figure 1–1
*What Is Rhetoric?*

- Rhetoric is the study of what is persuasive.
- Rhetoric is the purposive use of messages to invite assent.
- Rhetoric is the craft of producing reason-giving discourse that is grounded in social truths.

this chapter, a contemporary rhetorical perspective seeks to understand the potential for social influence in all forms of symbol use—written and spoken language; nonverbal behaviors; fine arts such as paintings, drawings, and sculptures; music; visual images such as photographs, motion pictures, or television programs; and probably more.

In summary, rhetoric is the study of what is persuasive. The issues with which it is concerned are social truths, addressed to others, justified by reasons that reflect cultural values. Rhetoric is a humanistic study that examines all the symbolic means by which influence occurs.

There are seven defining characteristics of rhetoric, each beginning with the letter *p* (see Figure 1–2). First and foremost, rhetoric is *public*; that is, it is addressed to others. It is public because it deals with issues and problems that one person alone cannot answer or solve; the issues are communal; the solutions require cooperative effort. Because rhetoric is addressed to others, it is *propositional*; developed through complete thoughts. That's the case because one person's ideas must be made intelligible and salient for others whose cooperation is needed; that's also the case because much rhetoric is argumentative, making claims and offering reasons in their support. In that sense rhetoric is not random thoughts but some kind of coherent, structured statement about an issue or concern. As you will immediately recognize, rhetoric is *purposive*, aimed at achieving a particular goal, such as selling a product or influencing thought or action. Even the most apparently expressive discourse can have some kind of instrumental or purposive goal; for example, cheering for a team expresses the feelings of fans, but it raises the morale of players and may improve their performance, helping them to win. That's closely related to rhetoric's emphasis on *problem solving*. Most rhetorical discourse arises in situations in which we as audience and rhetors experience a felt need: a desire for closure (farewell address), a desire to mark beginnings and initiate a process (inaugural address), a desire to acknowledge death and to memorialize (eulogy). In some cases, of course, the problem is more concrete: how can a fair and accurate resolution be reached about eminent domain, high-tech surveillance, and access to medical records—all issues that pit privacy rights against government safeguards? Closely related to rhetoric's purposive, problem-solving qualities is an emphasis on the *pragmatic*. The Greek word *praxis* or action is the root for "practical," meaning that it can be put into effect or enacted. Pragmatic is a synonym of practical, but it also

**Rhetoric is ...**

- public
- propositional
- purposive
- problem solving
- pragmatic
- poetic
- powerful

**Figure 1–2**
***The Seven Ps of Rhetoric***

stresses facts and actual occurrences, but with an emphasis on practical outcomes. In this sense rhetoric is material; it produces actions that affect us materially; it is active, not just contemplative.

In what may seem to be a contradiction, rhetoric is *poetic*; that is, rhetoric frequently displays ritualistic, aesthetic, dramatic, and emotive qualities. The rhetoric of the mass, of communion, and of other religious rituals reinforces belief; what is pleasing and appealing to our senses, such as metaphor and vivid description, invites our participation and assent. Dramatic narrative captures our attention and involves us with characters, dialogue, and conflict and excites us emotionally so that we care about what happens and identify with the people we encounter. Those rhetorical works we call eloquent are good examples of these qualities, illustrated here and in subsequent chapters by speeches by Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. and by essays that involve us in the lives of people whose stories teach us lessons.

Finally, because rhetoric is all of these—public, propositional, purposive, problem solving, pragmatic, and poetic—it is *powerful*, with the potential to prompt our participation, invite identification, alter our perceptions, and persuade us. Accordingly, it has the potential to help or harm us, elevate or debase ideas, and make or break careers, and thus has significant ethical dimensions.

## RHETORICAL ACTS

As we have described it, a rhetorical perspective takes note of the rhetorical or persuasive dimension in all human symbol-using behavior. Although all human actions can be considered implicitly persuasive, we do not wish to define "the rhetorical act" so broadly. The lines separating rhetorical acts from other acts are difficult to draw, however, and in this book we shall treat the concept of rhetoric in both its broad and its narrow senses.

The broadest view of rhetoric is expressed in the statement, "You can never not communicate," meaning that whatever you do or say (or don't do or say) can be observed and interpreted. For example, an unsmiling expression can be interpreted as evidence of sadness (rather than thoughtfulness), a young African American man walking home from work is perceived by some as menacing, or a woman walking home late from work is sometimes assumed to be extending a sexual invitation. Any behavior can become rhetorical when someone interprets or misinterprets it and is influenced by that interpretation, whatever the actor's intentions may have been.

In a more narrow sense, of course, many acts are intentionally rhetorical—advertisements, music videos, editorials, book and movie reviews, and films, essays, sermons, and speeches that declare a position and seek to defend it or make it attractive to others. When we address you as speakers or writers, we are speaking of rhetorical acts as intentional, deliberate attempts to influence others. When we act as critics or analysts and address you as critics and analysts, however, we comment on all possible persuasive effects, both intentional and unintentional. To understand rhetoric, you must fathom all the processes of influence, and as a rhetor you must come to terms with unintended and accidental effects—especially because some of them may work against your purpose.

In other words, defined most broadly, *rhetoric* is the study of all the processes by which people influence each other through symbols, regardless of the intent of the source.

A *rhetorical act*, however, is an intentional, created, polished attempt to overcome the challenges in a given situation with a specific audience on a given issue to achieve a particular end. A rhetorical act creates a message whose shape and form, beginning and end, are stamped on it by one or more human authors with goals for an audience. If you study all forms of influence, you will become aware of all the available resources for persuasion. Similarly, when you analyze your rhetoric and that of others, you must consider persuasive effects that may not have been fully under the control of or consciously intended by the source.

## RHETORICAL PURPOSES

Because intention and impact are so important to a rhetorical perspective, we want to consider the range of meanings included in the words *persuasion* and *influence*. From the persuader's point of view, these meanings describe a range of purposes or intentions, not simply agreement or opposition. From the point of view of a reader, listener, or viewer, they reflect processes that constantly engage us as we experience the world, try to understand it, and decide what actions, if any, would be appropriate as responses. In other words, rhetorical purposes are conscious attempts to influence processes that are occurring in us all of the time as we come in contact with the world and the people in it.

### Creating Virtual Experience

Through their use of symbols, rhetors call up ideas, pictures, and experiences in those they address. If a rhetor writes, "The burning sun beat down on the stubble in the oat field, and seen through a haze of sweat, the stalks suddenly seemed to be hair sprouting in a crew cut from the scalp of a red-haired giant," you can draw on past sensations and experiences to re-create your own mental picture. Although each reader's picture will be different, and each will reflect the reader's unique past, most will concern summer in a rural area.

Fundamentally, to act rhetorically is to communicate or to initiate an act—to express something in symbols—that someone else can translate into virtual experience. When something is virtual, it does not exist in fact; it is *as if* it existed. There is no sun, no stubble, no sweat, no scalp, no red hair, no giant on this page. But if a rhetor writes about them vividly enough, you can imagine them; it is as if you saw and heard and felt them here and now. That re-creation in your mind is virtual experience. In response to the rhetor's words, you imagine a scene, create a mental picture, and what you experience is virtual experience—experience called forth and shaped by your response to the symbols produced by someone else. Effective communication creates an image or idea in your mind that approximates the image or idea that the speaker or author wished to convey.

In other words, the fundamental rhetorical purpose, the most basic kind of influence—communicating—requires you to initiate a rhetorical act that can be translated into virtual experience by others. The most basic question in rhetoric is how to do that.

One kind of rhetorical action is intended primarily to produce virtual experience. Most works of literature, for example, are written to expand and shape our experience.

In them one sees, hears, smells, tastes, and touches vividly and concretely and feels intensely, and these sensations are shaped and formed into a satisfying and complete experience. When such works are transformed into dramas presented on stage or in film or television, the words become lived experience incarnated in actors' dialogue, movements, and feelings. In such processes, producers, directors, and actors do what all of us do each day as we translate the symbols we encounter into units of meaning based on our own experiences; the greater the range of our experiences, the greater our potential for imagining these dramas on the stages of our minds, of comprehending and identifying with the messages of others.

## Altering Perception

Literary works can also have political effects by altering our perception or understanding of situations and events. Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*[8] re-created the experiences of orphans in English poorhouses so movingly that readers demanded reform. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*[9] depicted scenes of slavery so vividly that the book became a major force for its abolition. The same sensory or aesthetic stimuli that enliven good literature are a major means of persuasion. By creating virtual experience—the more vivid the better—literature can contribute to the second rhetorical purpose we want to discuss: altering perception.

George Washington wrote, "It is among the evils, and perhaps not the smallest, of democratic governments, that the people must *feel* before they will *see*."[10] Whether or not you must experience something before you can comprehend it, it is surely true that vivid experience improves our capacity to understand.

For an example of how an author can change the meaning of an experience for an audience—that is, alter perception of that experience—consider what Corlann Gee Bush does to one's experience of a series of paintings by the famous western artist and sculptor, Charles M. Russell. In her essay "The Way We Weren't: Images of Women and Men in Cowboy Art," she writes about how cowboy art has influenced viewers to believe in "the romantic West, the West of myth and legend."[11] She is particularly concerned with how women were depicted and uses five portraits of a Keeoma woman by Russell as illustrations. In these paintings an American Indian woman is shown in either a reclining or hip-slung pose as a highly sensual and spirited person. As ordinary viewers, we are likely to assume that these are portraits of a real person and take them as indications of the character of Keeoma women in the nineteenth century. To alter such a perception, Corlann Bush tells us:

> The truth is that Russell's wife, Nancy, was the model for the paintings. To pose, she dressed in buckskin and surrounded herself with artifacts. Russell painted the objects realistically; he painted her as an Indian. In this way he was able to paint his wife as the sensual woman he knew her to be while preserving her place within the moral code of white society. . . . This repressed sexuality was transposed onto an Indian woman who did not exist but who lived, nonetheless, deep in the subconscious of white American males. (27)

Once we have this information, we see the paintings differently; they become a visual record not of a Keeoma woman of the past but of the stereotypes of American Indian women in the nineteenth century that persist in the paintings.

Our impressions of the U.S. West have also been influenced by popular culture, including the novels of Louis L'Amour, John Wayne westerns, television series such as

*Bonanza* and *Gunsmoke*, and by miniseries based on Larry McMurtry's novels. If your images of the West come from such sources, your perceptions may be altered by information provided by historians. For example, although African Americans rarely have appeared in the West of popular culture, we were surprised to learn that "George W. Saunders of the Trail Drivers Association, as valid an authority as there is, estimated that about 25 percent of all cowhands were black."[12] Although they constituted only a small percentage of western settlers, Robert Haywood explains why such a large percentage of cowhands were African Americans:

> In an age when blacks were stereotyped as either foolish or primitive and where their opportunities to advance, either socially or economically, were limited, ranch-related jobs offered more dignity and more opportunity for self-expression than any other employment available. Whites in the ranching business realized the importance of the contributions of all cowboys—black, white, or Mexican—and adjusted their prejudices accordingly. . . . The mutual interdependence left little room for arrogant displays of racial superiority or overt discrimination, no matter how ingrained. (169)

If we accept it as true, Haywood's information may alter our perceptions of the popular culture portrait of the West, and he makes his rather surprising data more plausible by explaining why African Americans tended to congregate in this somewhat unlikely occupation.

Our perception of cowboys was also altered by the provocative western film, *Brokeback Mountain*, directed by Ang Lee. The tender, tragic love story of two men challenges western mythology about tough he-men, such as those seen in cigarette advertising or in John Wayne westerns. These lonely men, one an orphan starved for affection and the other living in the shadow of his father's disapproval, find tenderness and affection in each other in their isolated jobs as sheepherders through a long summer. As we experience the movie, perceptions of cowboys in the West, isolated from civilization under brutal conditions, as we have previously experienced them in books and movies, may subtly be changed.

Perceptions of gay men also may be affected by the example of John Amaechi, the first former professional basketball player to be openly gay, who has written an autobiography, *Man in the Middle*. The six-foot, ten-inch former center for the Orlando Magic was asked if he thought we would ever see an active male player come out. He replied: "We're asking the people with the most to lose financially, emotionally, psychologically, to fall on their sword in the hope that it will change the world. . . . [I]f the image of a young boy [Matthew Shepard] without his shoes being strapped to a fence and left to die doesn't end homophobia, then a gay Shaq won't either.[13]

To recapitulate, the most minimal rhetorical purpose, the smallest effect produced, is to add to the sum of your audience's experiences. If you can frame such experiences, you may be able to influence how those virtual experiences are interpreted.

## Explaining

If we evaluated rhetorical acts by how much they altered beliefs, nearly all would be failures. Normal, healthy human beings whose physical environments are under their own control do not change their beliefs in response to a single message—whether the message lasts five minutes or five hours. If people are influenced to alter

their beliefs, they do so over weeks, months, or even years, and in response to many different messages.

The need for explanation is most strongly felt when we encounter an intense, apparently irrational experience. Let us suppose, for example, that you read or hear news reports about Trayvon Martin, an unarmed African American teenager in Sanford, Florida, who was shot and killed by an Hispanic neighborhood watch patrolman, George Zimmerman, in February 2012. In response to this highly controversial and widely publicized incident, many editorials appeared trying to explain why it happened and what it meant, often accompanied by statements about how we should respond. As the controversy swirled, family members of both men, their attorneys, and their supporters made repeated television appearances in which they offered their explanations of events leading up to and following the killing. Like these editorial writers, attorneys, and other individuals, rhetors often provide explanations for events that have disturbed those they address. Note, however, that an encounter with a disturbing event precedes the felt need for explanation. As a result, rhetors sometimes begin by creating that kind of experience through vivid language and disturbing information and then offer and justify what they believe is the most plausible explanation.

Linda A. Fairstein, former director of the Sex Crimes Prosecution Unit in the Manhattan District Attorney's Office, began prosecuting rape cases in the mid-1970s and is the author of a book called *Sexual Violence: Our War Against Rape.*[14] Much of the book describes the changes that have occurred in rape laws, which no longer require corroboration of an alleged victim's testimony, for example. Because it is partly a memoir of her career and partly a series of real-life crime stories, the book's vivid virtual experience of how the criminal justice system treats rape victims, describes the experiences of individuals with whom we can identify. This evidence is obviously intended to alter perception. However, Fairstein goes beyond the data to explain and to argue that rape is different from other violent crimes because it is so much more intimate, which emphasizes the significance of the sexual element in this crime. Her views will find a ready audience because women, particularly the millions of rape victims, have found rape to be a special kind of outrage whose impact often persists for years in nightmares and sleeplessness. Fairstein's book provides much evidence about rape and about its treatment in the criminal justice system; it documents the horrors that occur but gives hope that legal changes have made the system better able to understand the crime and to punish those who commit it.[15]

## Formulating Belief

By this time it should be apparent that rhetorical action is not a one-shot event but a process. Although there is a somewhat orderly progression from enlarging audience experience to altering perceptions, which, in turn, leads to a search for explanations, followed by efforts to determine which interpretation is most satisfactory, these are not discrete, separable processes for coming to terms with experience nor are they discrete rhetorical purposes. Virtual experience occurs within some kind of framework; new experience can alter a framework to change perception. When perceptions change, we seek explanations; sometimes we demand explanations before we consider altering our perceptual framework, perhaps even before participating in the creation of virtual experience. As these other processes overlap and intersect,

so do the processes by which we formulate a belief or discard one belief for another. Similarly, the processes by which a rhetor urges us to believe arise out of prior experience and conceptualization.

As an illustration, let us return to the nineteenth-century U.S. West. Virtual experience might be created by the autobiography of Nat Love, also known as "Deadwood Dick," one of the West's most notorious African American cowboys,[16] or by reading the memoir of Charlie Siringo, the "cowboy detective" who wrote of experiences on the trail with African American trail riders,[17] or from the biography of Print Olive, one of Dodge City's toughest ranchers, whose life was saved by James Kelly during a shootout in a saloon.[18] The experiences they provide would challenge those in most popular culture. Before prior perceptions were abandoned, however, you might seek out historical works, such as *The Negro on the American Frontier* by Kenneth W. Porter, *The Black West* by Loren Katz (both cited earlier), or *Black People Who Made the Old West* by Loren Katz[19] testing whether the experiences depicted were accurate and typical and seeking explanations of why African Americans were disproportionately represented among cowhands in the West.

Once that was completed, new questions might arise. Why haven't western novels, films, and television programs reflected this reality? At this point, you are an audience member prepared to consider the claims of a rhetor who attempts to convince you that these omissions were no accident but a result of the racism that is a legacy of the history of slavery in the United States. Such a rhetor might have gone through the process we've described to reach a point at which everything seemed to fall together and a belief emerged. Many rhetorical acts attempt to produce such a "precipitating moment" in which the audience agrees, "That's it. That's the way it is." Few rhetorical acts succeed, however, in taking members of an audience through all these stages to transform their attitudes. At best, most confirm a position already being considered (somewhere between the search for explanation and the choice of one interpretation) or reinforce an explanation the audience has pondered and considers plausible. Indeed, those who achieve such modest goals have been resounding successes as persuaders.

## Initiating Action

Let us suppose, however, that you are present at a rhetorical event that formulates the beliefs of a group about the misrepresentation of African American cowhands in the West. The pleased rhetor now urges action—but finds that most audience members are not ready to do anything about it. Those who share this belief may not write novels or produce films or television programs; indeed, they may not have the resources to do any of those things. Even if they share this attitude, they may not believe that action is needed; concern about misrepresentation may be a low priority.

As this example suggests, shared belief is not necessarily linked to a willingness or an ability to act. At such a moment, doubts arise about whether beliefs have really been formulated, and such doubts have merit. But an examination of rhetorical processes suggests that the situation is normal. Even when beliefs are formulated, action will not follow unless that belief is reinforced, rendered salient, and then channeled so that action seems appropriate, possible, and necessary. Note that these processes are the primary function of most religious discourse, which is designed to urge people to act on their faith, to put their beliefs into practice.

Although the audience in this case might not include writers or television or film producers, it may well include parents, perhaps even members of school boards. A skillful rhetor might want to urge the inclusion of more material about African American history in elementary and secondary schools and suggest that this misrepresentation is just one example of the lack of such material, an example that is particularly telling because it reflects a distortion that reduces the African American past to slavery, ignoring the diverse, positive images that all students need to encounter in order to form a more accurate picture of the nation's past.

The chances of success in initiating action would increase if other messages reinforced such proposals and suggested the importance of teaching more African American history. Television specials on racism include studies demonstrating that many African American children still have negative self-images, first identified in earlier studies by Kenneth Clark that formed part of the basis for the 1954 Supreme Court desegregation decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (347 U.S. 483 [1954]).[20] Buttressed by such reinforcing messages, a rhetor who proposed action to change curriculum and textbooks would have a better chance of succeeding.

If messages and events support each other and are publicized, beliefs will be strengthened, and concerned individuals will form or join groups to formulate plans for influencing the school board and textbook publishers. Rhetorical acts aimed at initiating action will appear. An editorial will urge that units on African American history be developed and included in the curriculum; a parent group will press the school administration to act and formulate a committee to coordinate efforts to modify textbooks.

### Maintaining Action

Then, when the intense interest generated by dramatic events lessens, rhetorical acts will be needed to ensure that the new units remain in the curriculum, that as history texts are revised they continue to include such materials, that teachers continue to use them in classes, that African American teachers and principals are hired, retained, and supported. Such rhetorical action perpetuates what has been institutionalized, as illustrated by the yearly report to the PTA on test scores and dropout rates that reaffirms the school's successes with its varied pupils; the Sunday sermon to the regular churchgoer, which urges continued support and attendance; the monthly ritual of prayer and reports of activities at the Phyllis Wheatley women's club that reinforces their motto of "lifting as we climb";[21] the singing of the national anthem before baseball games, which proclaims the patriotism of sport. In fact, ritualized rhetorical actions are especially pervasive examples of this rhetorical purpose. Convocation and commencement exercises, memorial services, retirement and anniversary celebrations, induction and award ceremonies, and engagement and wedding tributes all are events whose primary rhetorical purpose is reaffirming communal norms, or maintaining rhetorical action.

This progression reflects the rhetorical dimensions in all human behavior and links them to the purposes that emerge in rhetorical acts (see Figure 1–3). It should suggest to you as a prospective persuader that your choice of a purpose should reflect the prior experiences of your audience and should be attuned to the events taking place in your environment.

| Creating Virtual Experience | Altering Perception | Explaining | Formulating Belief | Initiating Action | Maintaining Action |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Use sensory cues to re-create an experience | Give a fresh angle on an old topic | Develop the who, what, where, why, when, and how | Prepare a one-sided case | Urge behavioral change | Rally the troops |
| Creates identification | Combats inattention | Satisfies the search for knowledge | Refines issues | Transforms convictions into deeds | Reinforces commmitment to causes |
| Film: IMAX theater experience | Bumper Sticker: Trust in God, She will provide | Book: *Kids & Guns* | Editorial: "The Problem with School Vouchers" | Website: N.O.R.M.L | Advertising: Presale savings for preferred customers |

Figure 1–3 *Range of Rhetorical Purposes*

## THE DISCIPLINE OF RHETORIC

Rhetoric is also the name of an academic discipline. A discipline is a field of study, an area of expertise, a branch of knowledge. A discipline provides theory, application, and experimentation, and criticism to test them all. *Theories* are explanations that seek to account for processes and data. Rhetorical theories seek to account for the processes in language and people that influence belief and action. *Applications* are rules for action that are developed from theory. Rhetorical applications suggest how you can use rhetorical principles to be an effective moral agent and to protect yourself—that is, to think critically and make informed judgments—as you participate in rhetorical action initiated by others. *Experimentation* seeks to isolate variables or elements in the persuasive process and to test theoretical explanations as carefully as possible. *Critical analysis* examines rhetorical acts in order to describe processes of influence and explain how they occur. Both experimentation and criticism (of theories, applications, experimental research, and rhetorical action) contribute to the modification and application of theory.[22] In the chapters that follow, we develop theory about the nature and application of rhetorical processes, which is supported by experimental research and critical analysis that qualify, refine, and illustrate these theoretical concepts.

In its theory, the discipline of rhetoric examines the symbolic dimensions of human behavior in order to offer the most complete explanations of human influence. This broad view is tested by critical analysis. Rhetorical application focuses more narrowly on rhetorical acts—written and spoken messages designed to achieve predetermined effects in an audience. Experimental studies of persuasion focus more narrowly on rhetorical acts and test the adequacy of prior explanations of them and the appropriateness of rules for application.

As a discipline, rhetoric is the study of the art of using symbols. This understanding is reflected in many well-known definitions of rhetoric: "That art or talent by which discourse is adapted to its end" (George Campbell);[23] "the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols" (Kenneth Burke);[24] as well as the definition from Aristotle that we offered earlier in

this chapter. In other words, the academic discipline of rhetoric offers theory, application, experimentation, and critical analysis. It studies the social use of words by people in groups, the political use of words to decide who shall make what kinds of decisions, and the ethical use of words to justify belief and action through cultural values. Rhetoric is related to logic and empirical validation because it uses these materials. It is different from philosophy and science because it studies all the available processes for influencing people, and it defines influence broadly. Accordingly, it considers how people use language to alter perception, to explain, to change, reinforce, and channel belief, and to initiate and maintain actions. Put in more traditional terms, it studies all the ways in which symbols can be used to teach, to delight, and to move.

This book is based on the ancient idea of the relationship between art and practice—the belief that you cannot improve a skill such as speaking or writing unless you understand the theory, the concepts, and the ideas on which it is based. Conversely, you cannot understand the theory unless you use it and test it in practice. In our view, this ancient relationship demands that those who would learn about rhetoric must take the posture of a rhetor-critic. The rhetor is an initiator of rhetorical action who tries to make the choices that will make her the most effective moral agent. As a rhetor you come to understand all the forces at work in persuasion, some of which are outside your control. The critic analyzes, describes, interprets, and evaluates rhetorical acts to understand what they are and how and for whom they work. As a critic you learn to criticize your own rhetoric to improve it, and as a critic-consumer you learn to analyze others' rhetoric in order to make decisions as intelligently as possible.

## CRITICISM IS FEEDBACK

As students of communication you already know that the communicative process is not one-sided. Rather, receivers (audiences) virtually always send return messages back to sources (rhetors). Many models of communication call those return messages "feedback." When you speak or write, the immediate audience gives you useful but limited feedback. If you speak, they look at you intently, smile in amusement, frown in puzzlement, look away in annoyance or boredom, read the paper, sleep, take a note to check out a statistic, and the like. If you write a letter to the editor or an op-ed, your piece may be rejected or printed in an altered, edited form and provoke rejoinders—more feedback. If you are in a class and your instructor has other students discuss your speech or essay, you will discover that most reactions were not evident from facial reactions or movements. You will discover that the messages you could not see or misinterpreted or were only implied by editing are very important—perhaps the most important.

Similarly, when your instructors discuss your speech or essay in class or write comments, you will discover that their observations are different—less superficial, more helpful, linked to concepts you have studied and discussed in class. Such feedback is criticism—the careful analysis and evaluation by an experienced student of rhetoric who has heard and read many rhetorical acts, pondered many critical analyses, studied available theories, and read many experimental studies. Ideally, you should aspire to be such a critic, and the aim of this book is to teach you to be one. If you understand rhetorical processes, you have the best chance of steadily improving your performance and of succeeding consistently. You will know how to evaluate your own work, and you will be prepared to consider carefully and learn from the rhetoric of others.

No one can teach you rules that will apply in all cases or even predict the occasions for rhetorical action that each of you will encounter. If you are to be an effective persuader, able to communicate your experiences, to place them in interpretive frameworks, to justify your interpretation as most plausible, and to initiate and maintain action consistent with your interpretation, you will need skills that enable you to find the words that will create virtual experience in your audience, to discover a framework that is intelligible in that particular time and place, to select justifications with salience on that specific issue, and so on. As a result, this book does not try to teach you universal rules (there are none!) but instead tries to teach you to be a critic. In each case, theory and application are related to critical analysis of rhetorical acts, with the goal of teaching you how to analyze your own and others' rhetoric. To the degree that we succeed in doing that, the process of learning that begins here can continue outside the classroom and throughout your life.

## MATERIAL FOR ANALYSIS

### The Real Heroes and Sheroes of New Orleans

by Larry Bradshaw and Lorrie Beth Slonsky[25]

1 TWO DAYS after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, the Walgreens store at the corner of Royal and Iberville Streets in the city's historic French Quarter remained locked. The dairy display case was clearly visible through the widows. It was now 48 hours without electricity, running water, plumbing, and the milk, yogurt, and cheeses were beginning to spoil in the 90-degree heat.

2 The owners and managers had locked up the food, water, pampers and prescriptions, and fled the city. Outside Walgreens' windows, residents and tourists grew increasingly thirsty and hungry. The much-promised federal, state and local aid never materialized, and the windows at Walgreens gave way to the looters.

3 There was an alternative. The cops could have broken one small window and distributed the nuts, fruit juices and bottled water in an organized and systematic manner. But they did not. Instead, they spent hours playing cat and mouse, temporarily chasing away the looters.

4 We were finally airlifted out of New Orleans two days ago and arrived home on Saturday. We have yet to see any of the TV coverage or look at a newspaper. We are willing to guess that there were no video images or front-page pictures of European or affluent white tourists looting the Walgreens in the French Quarter.

5 We also suspect the media will have been inundated with "hero" images of the National Guard, the troops and police struggling to help the "victims" of the hurricane. What you will not see, but what we witnessed, were the real heroes and sheroes of the hurricane relief effort: the working class of New Orleans.