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Ethos, Pathos, Logos:

3 Pillars of Public Speaking

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2300 years ago, Aristotle wrote down the secret to being a persuasive speaker, the secret which forms the basis for nearly every public speaking book written since then.

Do you know the secret?

If you don’t, you might be wondering what a 2300-year-old theory has to do with public speaking in the year 2010.

In a word — everything!

In this article, you’ll learn what ethos, pathos, and logos are (the secret!), and what every speaker needs to understand about these three pillars of public speaking.

***What are Ethos, Pathos, and Logos?***

So, what are ethos, pathos, and logos?

In simplest terms, they correspond to:

◾Ethos: credibility (or character) of the speaker

◾Pathos: emotional connection to the audience

◾Logos: logical argument

Together, they are the three persuasive appeals. In other words, these are the three essential qualities that your speech or presentation must have before your audience will accept your message.

Written in the 4th century B.C.E., the Greek philosopher Aristotle compiled his thoughts on the art of rhetoric into On Rhetoric, including his theory on the three persuasive appeals.

Many teachers of communication, speech, and rhetoric consider Aristotle’s On Rhetoric to be a seminal work in the field. Indeed, the editors of The Rhetoric of Western Thought: From the Mediterranean World to the Global Setting call it “the most important single work on persuasion ever written.” It is hard to argue this claim; most advice from modern books can be traced back to Aristotle’s foundations.

In The Classic Review, Sally van Noorden points to George Kennedy’s modern translation as the standard reference text for studying On Rhetoric. Kennedy’s translation is the source that I use. (At the time of this writing, it is available from amazon.com for $24.56, 18% off the list price.)

***Ethos***

Before you can convince an audience to accept anything you say, they have to accept you as credible.

There are many aspects to building your credibility:

◾Does the audience respect you?

◾Does the audience believe you are of good character?

◾Does the audience believe you are generally trustworthy?

◾Does the audience believe you are an authority on this speech topic?

Keep in mind that it isn’t enough for you to know that you are a credible source. (This isn’t about your confidence, experience, or expertise.) Your audience must know this. Ethos is your level of credibility as perceived by your audience.

***Pathos***

Pathos is the quality of a persuasive presentation which appeals to the emotions of the audience.

◾Do your words evoke feelings of … love? … sympathy? … fear?

◾Do your visuals evoke feelings of compassion? … envy?

◾Does your characterization of the competition evoke feelings of hate? contempt?

Emotional connection can be created in many ways by a speaker, perhaps most notably by stories. The goal of a story, anecdote, analogy, simile, and metaphor is often to link an aspect of our primary message with a triggered emotional response from the audience.

***Logos***

Logos is synonymous with a logical argument.

◾Does your message make sense?

◾Is your message based on facts, statistics, and evidence?

◾Will your call-to-action lead to the desired outcome that you promise?

Which is most important? Ethos? Pathos? or Logos?

Suppose two speakers give speeches about a new corporate restructuring strategy.

◾The first speaker — a grade nine student — gives a flawless speech pitching strategy A which is both logically sound and stirs emotions.

◾The second speaker — a Fortune 500 CEO — gives a boring speech pitching strategy B.

Which speech is more persuasive? Is the CEO’s speech more persuasive, simply because she has much more credibility (ethos)?

Some suggest that pathos is the most critical of the three. In You’ve Got to Be Believed to Be Heard, Bert Decker says that people buy on emotion (pathos) and justify with fact (logos). True? You decide.

Aristotle believed that logos should be the most important of the three persuasive appeals. As a philosopher and a master of logical reasoning, he believed that logos should be the only required persuasive appeal. That is, if you demonstrated logos, you should not need either ethos or pathos.

However, Aristotle stated that logos alone is not sufficient. Not only is it not sufficient on its own, but it is no more important than either of the two other pillars. He argued that all three persuasive appeals are necessary.

Is he right? What do you think?

**Arguing with Aristotle Email**

The other night, we received this rather unexpected e-mail from our 14 year old son, reprinted here with his permission:

*Subject: Sorry to send this to you in an e-mail…*

*I know re-registration for school is coming up, and I’m also aware how happy both you and Mommy are with me being there. The thing is, I have such amazing friends at the local public high school that (even though I may not show it all the time), I miss them so incredibly much, and I think about them every day wishing we had never split up. With such a perfect opportunity to continue our friendships together, it seems SO STUPID to me that we’re at different schools, when we could have all stayed together.*

*Every day that I’m sitting in class and I go off into a daydream, I think of all the fun we could be having together, all the times we’re missing, just so that I can be at a private school with a good reputation. The truth is, the local public high school offers just as good Honors classes, it just has a worse reputation because of some of the kids that go there. Sure I’ve made new friends here, but I’ve been hanging out with them every day when I could be hanging out with my best friends every single day.*

*I know you probably won’t believe me on this, but I decided to go here on a sort of an impulse, and because of the excitement of getting accepted in to such a well-spoken of school. I’ve been regretting that decision just about every day since the first day of school. I sort of feel like my friends’ and my relationships are splitting apart, just because of differences between schedules.*

*Also, don’t think that sending me to a private school is going to keep me out of drugs. I mean let’s be serious: high schools will have ample amounts of drugs no matter where I go, and I’m tired of all the racism, popularity contests, and disputes over who has more money. I’ve met at least twenty freshmen that lost their virginity in middle school, and apparently where I go to school it’s cool to do drugs, put down others for not doing so, and so on and so forth. I’ve already found out that there’s no such thing as a perfect school, and whether it be a private or public school is just based on which families have more money.*

*Now, don’t think I believe that none of this won’t happen anywhere else, because I’m not stupid. It just seems crazy for me not to go to a school with people I’ve known for so long, because these last four years are my last ones before we all split up for good.*

*I know there are grammatical errors in here, it might not flow very well, and I probably jumped around quite a lot, but I just want to say that this came from the heart, and I mean everything I said. Please just talk to each other about this. Sorry that I sent it in an e-mail rather than in person, but I just thought I could say what I wanted on here without being interrupted.*

**Arguing With Aristotle Email Handout**

**ANSWER KEY** Students’ highlighted sections should look like these. Here Ethos is blue, Pathos is red, and Logos is black.

*I know re-registration for school is coming up, and I’m also aware how happy both you and Mommy are with me being there.* **(ETHOS)** *The thing is, I have such amazing friends at the local public high school that (even though I may not show it all the time), I miss them so incredibly much, and I think about them every day wishing we had never split up. With such a perfect opportunity to continue our friendships together, it seems SO STUPID to me that we’re at different schools, when we could have all stayed together.* **(PATHOS)**

*Every day that I’m sitting in class and I go off into a daydream, I think of all the fun we could be having together, all the times we’re missing, just so that I can be at a private school with a good reputation***. (PATHOS)** *The truth is, the local public high school offers just as good Honors classes, it just has a worse reputation because of some of the kids that go there.* **(LOGOS)** *Sure I’ve made new friends here, but I’ve been hanging out with them every day when I could be hanging out with my best friends every single day.* **(PATHOS)**

*I know you probably won’t believe me on this, but I decided to go here on a sort of an impulse, and because of the excitement of getting accepted in to such a well-spoken of school.***(ETHOS)** *I’ve been regretting that decision just about every day since the first day of school. I sort of feel like my friends’ and my relationships are splitting apart, just because of differences between schedules.* **(PATHOS)**

*Also, don’t think that sending me to a private school is going to keep me out of drugs. I mean let’s be serious: high schools will have ample amounts of drugs no matter where I go,* **(LOGOS)** *and I’m tired of all the racism, popularity contests, and disputes over who has more money. I’ve met at least twenty freshmen that lost their virginity in middle school, and apparently where I go to school it’s cool to do drugs, put down others for not doing so, and so on and so forth.* **(PATHOS)** *I’ve already found out that there’s no such thing as a perfect school, and whether it be a private or public school is just based on which families have more money.* **(ETHOS, LOGOS, AND PATHOS – A PERSUASIVE TRIPLE HEADER!)**

*Now, don’t think I believe that none of this won’t happen anywhere else, because I’m not stupid.***(ETHOS)** *It just seems crazy for me not to go to a school with people I’ve known for so long, because these last four years are my last ones before we all split up for good.* **(LOGOS)**

*I know there are grammatical errors in here, it might not flow very well, and I probably jumped around quite a lot, but I just want to say that this came from the heart, and I mean everything I said. Please just talk to each other about this. Sorry that I sent it in an e-mail rather than in person, but I just thought I could say what I wanted on here without being interrupted.* **(ETHOS AND JUST A TOUCH OF GENTLE PATHOS)**

Besides causing both his mother and me to burst into tears while reading it, it also impressed us because it was such a wonderful (if completely unconscious) example of Aristotle’s three rules for persuasive argument in action – ethos, pathos, and logos. Let’s take a quick look at each one of these in turn:

**1. Ethos** Ethos is the Greek word for character, and it is used in rhetorical argument as a way of **establishing the credibility of the speaker**. Ethos can be assumed through reputation, revealed through an honest and open revelation of biases and weaknesses, and/or borrowed via quotation.

If our persuasive efforts were limited to appeals to our character, even the best amongst us would often be dismissed as “well-meaning but misguided”. This is why it is important that our persuasive arguments also include…

**2. Pathos** Pathos comes from the Greek words for both “suffering” and “experience”, and is in one sense a **purely emotional appeal.** However, it is also an appeal to the imagination of the listener, urging them to think themselves into the speaker’s shoes and in so doing, empathize with their situation in a way that will move them to decide or act in alignment with the speakers’ wishes. “If you could see it the way I see it”, pathos tells us, “you would want what I want.”

Yet powerful as an appeal to pathos may be, particularly when backed by a strong ethos, it will still break down if there is not at least some acknowledgement of…

**3. Logos** Logos comes from the Greek word for “word”, and is what most of us think of as the primary tool for persuasion – **using reason and logic to create agreement**. If ethos is an appeal to character and pathos an appeal to emotion, logos is primarily an appeal to reason. Yet as anyone with husband, wife, parent, child, boss or employee will tell you, people are consistently and at times frustratingly un-reasonable in their decisions and actions.

As with any good persuasive argument, his relatively balanced use of ethos, pathos and logos throughout allowed him to get his point across in a way that whether or not we ultimately went along with his conclusions, we could not dismiss what he had to say as either ignorant (because he clearly establishes his character throughout), unempathetic (because of his acknowledgement of both his and our likely emotional hot buttons), or illogical (because of the clarity of his reasoning and internal consistency of the logic of his argument).

Of course, the final metric of any good persuasive argument is in the result – does your argument result in the specific decision or course of action you desire? And as I know some of you will be wondering, Nina and I did speak about our son’s request at great length. Having gained agreement about the level of academic performance and ethical behavior he is committed to maintaining while there, we have decided to support him in transferring to the school of his choosing beginning in September. (And he may be the only student there sporting an “Aristotle Rules!” t-shirt on the first day of classes…

**Arguing With Aristotle Email Handout**