

To many people, the word *rhetoric* signals that trickery or deception is afoot. They assume that an advertiser is trying to manipulate a consumer, a politician wants to obscure a point, or a spin doctor is spinning. “Empty rhetoric!” is a common criticism — and at times, an indictment. Yet the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) defined **rhetoric** as “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion.”

At its best, rhetoric is a thoughtful, reflective activity leading to effective communication, including the rational exchange of differing viewpoints. In our day, as in the time of Aristotle, those who understand and can use the available means to appeal to an **audience** of one or many find themselves in a position of strength. They have the tools to resolve conflicts without confrontation, to persuade readers or listeners to support their position, or to move others to take action.

Rhetoric is not just for Roman senators in togas. You might use rhetoric to convince a friend that Prince was the greatest musician of his generation, explain to readers of your blog why *Night of the Living Dead* is the most influential horror movie of all time, or persuade your parents that they should buy you the latest model of smartphone. Rhetoric is also not just about speeches. Every essay, political cartoon, photograph, and advertisement is designed to convince you of something. To simplify, we will call all of these things **texts** because they are cultural products that can be “read,” meaning not just consumed and comprehended, but investigated. We need to be able to “read between the lines,” regardless of whether we’re reading a political ad, a political cartoon, or a political speech. The writer, speaker, or artist makes strategic decisions to appeal to an audience of a text. Even in documentary films, every decision — such as what lighting to use for an interview, what music to play, what to show and what to leave out — constitutes a rhetorical choice based on what the filmmaker thinks will be most persuasive.

And rhetoric is not just for English class. By approaching texts rhetorically in your other courses — whether you’re analyzing an environmental issue, proposing a strategy to address an economic problem, or arguing the causes of a historical event — you can apply the critical literacy skills that you develop. But there’s even a bigger picture: informed citizenship. That concept might sound distant and lofty, but democracy should not be taken for granted. Our nation’s founders may have given us the basic tools for creating a democratic society, but a government by consent of the people will always need its people to be well-informed and to engage with others in civil discourse. Otherwise, how can we hope to elect a fair government and create a just society? As informed citizens and consumers who understand how rhetoric works, we can be wary of manipulation or deceit while still appreciating effective and civil communication.