

Learning rhetoric will teach you to spot the tricks an advertiser is trying to play on you, to identify sources of misinformation and propaganda (including “fake news”), and to think critically. It’s also important to go beyond critique to produce effective arguments of your own as you develop a public identity in various communities — whether you’re at school, on social media, or out in the “real world.” So, let’s get started.

ACTIVITY

Identify an article, a speech, a video, or an advertisement that you think is manipulative or deceptive and one that is civil and effective. Use these two examples to explain what you see as the difference.

The Rhetorical Situation

Let’s begin by looking at a speech that nearly everyone has read or heard: the farewell speech that baseball player Lou Gehrig gave at an Appreciation Day held in his honor on July 4, 1939. Gehrig had recently learned that he was suffering from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), an incurable neurological disorder that has come to be known as Lou Gehrig’s disease. Although Gehrig was a reluctant speaker, the fans’ chant of “We want Lou!” brought him to the podium to deliver one of the most powerful and heartfelt speeches of all time.

Farewell Speech

LOU GEHRIG

Fans, for the past two weeks you have been reading about a bad break I got. Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth. I have been in ballparks for seventeen years and have never received anything but kindness and encouragement from you fans.

Look at these grand men. Which of you wouldn’t consider it the highlight of his career just to associate with them for even one day? Sure, I’m lucky. Who wouldn’t consider it an honor to have known Jacob Ruppert? Also, the builder of baseball’s greatest empire, Ed Barrow? To have spent six years with that wonderful little fellow, Miller Huggins? Then to have spent the next nine years with that outstanding leader, that smart student of psychology — the best manager in baseball today, Joe McCarthy? Sure, I’m lucky.

When the New York Giants, a team you would give your right arm to beat, and vice versa, sends you a gift — that’s something! When everybody down to the groundskeepers and those boys in white coats remember you with trophies — that’s something! When you have a wonderful mother-in-law who takes sides with you in squabbles against her own daughter — that’s something! When you have a father and mother who work all their lives so that you can have an education and build your body — it’s a blessing! When you have a wife who has been a tower of strength and shown more courage than you dreamed existed — that’s the finest I know!

So I close in saying that I might have been given a bad break, but I have an awful lot to live for!