

THE  
ELEMENTS  
OF  
*Rhetoric*

*How to Write and Speak  
Clearly and Persuasively*

A GUIDE FOR STUDENTS,  
TEACHERS, POLITICIANS & PREACHERS

by  
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## Introduction

IMAGINE this scenario. You have a baby. You pinch for a down payment. You spot your dream home—or what you thought would be. The kitchen looks great, but the property is on the corner of “Brown” and “Kings Crescent.” Huh? If the gals at City Hall can’t spell, are you going to trust them with your taxes? As was recently reported, Birmingham’s (not Birmingham’s) City Council has now banned apostrophes, and the township of Mid-Devon in the southwest corner of England nearly did the same. The township’s proposed legislation declared that streets should not be given names “that may be considered or construed as obscene or racist,” and further: “In order to avoid causing offence either by inclusion or exclusion, no street shall be named after any living person.” And then: “All punctuation, including apostrophes, shall be avoided.” After banning local heroes, I suppose English punctuation comes next on the list.

It takes a certain kind of *panache* to legislate that your town cannot publicly honor the great men and women who live there, especially when your town has produced the likes of the sea-explorer and vanquisher of the Spanish Armada, Sir Francis Drake; the poet Samuel Coleridge; and murder mystery empress Agatha Christie. But who needs murder mysteries when the local kids cant [sic] read them anyway?

Don’t let anyone tell you news is always bad. Here was one instance where common sense prevailed. Sadly, Birmingham’s ban remained; but only days after the council made its bid to rid confusion, the locals in Devon came out for a fight. *The Telegraph* reported the decision was to be reversed. Officials said punctuation could stay.<sup>1</sup> Thanks, Big Brother!

<sup>1</sup> “Apostrophe Ban Takes U-Turn,” *The Telegraph*, March 19, 2013.

Language is always on the move. What passed for good grammar, for elegant speech, for a persuasive style in the days of Will Shakespeare might not directly move readers in the era of Dan Brown. Still, most rules abide. We ignore them to our peril. As with a change in the Constitution, inflict a move too quickly and a lot of innocent heads will be lost.

G.K. Chesterton once remarked that while the aim of the sculptor is to convince us that he is a sculptor, the aim of the orator is "to convince us that he is not an orator." In this case what is true of the preacher is true for the politician, the professor, and his students. In fact, it holds for anyone who needs to make his case convincing.

As classically conceived, the chief aim of rhetoric is to arm the good against the assaults of the bad. Truth, of course, retains a native appeal. Yet truth unadorned is usually truth ignored. Follow these 26 rules and you'll learn how to show Lady Philosophy at her best.

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## I

### *Logos:* Rational Speech

*Master grammar—observe three precepts—  
Learn a little logic—Avoid fallacies*

#### 1. Master grammar

*Logos, pathos, and ethos* are the three means open to you to influence your listener. As teaching is your primary aim, clarity is your first obligation. *Logos* means, quite simply, articulate speech. Clarity is your first duty because without it the listener cannot even offer you that most elementary of courtesies, the honor of disagreement.

"Who did you pass on the road?" the King went on, holding his hand out to the messenger for some hay.

"Nobody," said the messenger.

"Quite right," said the King; "this young lady saw him too. So of course Nobody walks slower than you."

"I do my best," the Messenger said in a sulky tone. "I'm sure nobody walks much faster than I do!"

"He can't do that," said the King, "or else he'd have been here first..."<sup>1</sup>

The messenger intended "nobody" to mean *no person*, while the King took "nobody" to refer to a *proper name*. Alice's conversations delight because the characters take everything literally. You only catch the joke, though, if you see the difference between the univocal and equivocal use of words. Even nonsense depends upon good sense.

<sup>1</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1999), 66–67.

As the adventures of Alice illustrate, if nobody learns the rules it's hard for anybody to keep them. Apparently, employers' number one complaint about new hires these days is that they cannot read.<sup>2</sup> It's a pity, not only because of garbled office memos; I say, let the children master grammar so that they can enjoy Lewis Carroll!

Brace yourself. It's hard being a stickler for syntax and basic punctuation. Advertisers work against you. Text-messengers think you uptight. And each time you've breezed down a grocery aisle that announced "potato's 1/2 price," or heard people speak of "data," "phenomena," and "media" as though they referred to single subjects, you've seen the mischievous work of miscreant advertisers. "But," the critic retorts, "so long as we understand each other, why bother with the niceties?" Why bother, indeed?

Disrespect grammar and, in the first instance, you lose credibility. I'm not sure how many months this restaurant in Florida has been in business, but my guess is that it won't survive long. Here is a sign posted outside one of their restrooms.

Employee's  
Must wash there hands  
Before returning to work!

Credibility is one thing. Sense is another. With only a few strokes a little punctuation can make a big difference:

No cats are mean!  
No, cats are mean.

A woman, without her man, is nothing.  
A woman: without her, man is nothing.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Bradshaw and Bonnie Nichols, "Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America—Report #46" (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2004).

Reasonable speech begins with right grammar. Irony, equivocation, puns, and much of the fun of language depend, oddly enough, upon a rather strict grasp of a few stodgy conventions.

## 2. Observe three precepts

If you are starting out in your scholastic or professional career, you may wish to consider getting to know Strunk and White's classic *The Elements of Style*. After you've worked through that text, set upon your desk the following three principles of style. Observe them.

### *Precept 1: Omit needless words.*

Nearly anything you write can be improved. When preparing an essay or a speech expect to compose at least three drafts. Each time you comb through your text omit words that either are unnecessary or could be replaced by a word that is more precise. Here are common phrases that can be reduced:

She is a lady who...	She
Owing to the fact that...	Since
In spite of the fact that...	Although
There is no question that...	Certainly
No minors will be able to...	No minors can
That man, who is his father, likes...	His father likes

Fewer words are not always better words. The reader's or listener's patience, however, should not be put to the test. A paragraph is like a finely tuned bicycle. Words, phrases, and sentences should each work to contribute to your end. Omit superfluous parts.

### *Precept 2: Use the active voice.*

The passive voice works well when anonymity is desired. For many years my mother-in-law was a librarian. She knew how to give orders, like this one:

*It has been decided* that no minors will be able to rent videos at this library without parental approval.

Here the lack of a specific agent (who decided this rule?) and the roundabout description (“be able to rent”) add to the librarian’s fiat a sense of objectivity and authority. Outside of the requirements for signage and commands, however, the active voice is normally the one to be preferred.

Young writers in particular are tempted to claim a feigned objectivity. I cannot say how many papers I have read which begin like this:

In this essay the political effects of the French Revolution upon the English aristocracy *will be discussed*.

Some academic disciplines train their students to become proficient in the art of the government memo. So be it. Unless convention dictates otherwise, in nearly every case it is better to claim the essay as your own. Try instead:

In this essay I discuss the political effects of the French Revolution upon the English aristocracy.

A last problem with the passive voice is that it often requires more, that is to say needless, words.

He was hit by the ball...	The ball hit him
The red oak was made extinct...	The red oak vanished
She was awakened by the birds...	The birds woke her

*Precept 3: Use parallel structure.*

Express similar ideas in a similar form. This is one of the language’s most pleasing devices. Likeness of structure helps the

reader or listener to grasp quickly the connection between related ideas. Buddha offered this advice that is not only sage but memorable:

All that we are is defined by our thoughts: it begins where our thoughts begin, it moves where our thoughts move, and it rests where our thoughts rest.

Here is a good example from the Book of Ecclesiastes:

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:  
a time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;  
a time to kill, and a time to heal;  
a time to break down, and a time to build up...

Especially when making lists, decide upon a form and stick to it. Correlative expressions (both, and; either, or; first, second; on the one hand, on the other hand) should follow a predictable pattern. Here is Beatrix Potter’s skillful description of a naughty bunny.<sup>3</sup>

First he ate some lettuces and some French beans; and then he ate some radishes; and then, feeling rather sick, he went to look for some parsley.

Below is a melancholic recommendation to architects living during a period of economic prosperity but cultural decline:

The age of invention is gone by, and that of criticism has succeeded: it remains for us, if we cannot rival the beau-

<sup>3</sup> From *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, in *Selected Tales from Beatrix Potter* (London: Frederick Warne, 2007), 13–14.

ties of our predecessors, to avoid their defects; to apply with judgment, if we cannot invent with genius; and to follow the guidance of just system, if we cannot track the flights of imagination.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, here is a good rendering of Julius Caesar's marvelous opening to *The Gallic War*, followed by what he might have written if he hadn't been Julius Caesar. Note the differences in structure:

The whole of Gaul is divided into three parts, one of which the Belgae inhabit, the Aquitani another, and the third a people who in their own language are called "Celts," but in ours, "Gauls." They all differ among themselves in respect of language, way of life, and laws.<sup>4</sup>

The whole of Gaul is divided into three parts. One of these the Belgae inhabit. The Aquitani inhabit another part. Another part is inhabited by a people who in their own language are called "Celts," but in ours, "Gauls." They all differ among themselves in respect of language; they also differ in their way of life, and again in their laws.

### 3. Learn a little logic

Now for the fun stuff. Whereas grammar governs conventions for clear speech among men, logic is the language of God. Up until the Second World War nearly anyone who passed through a European or American university would have taken a basic course in logic structured around what is known as "the three acts of the mind." One reason why a grasp of the three acts is

<sup>3</sup> John Betjeman, *Ghastly Good Taste* (London: Century, 1986), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War*, translation by Carolyn Hammond (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.

useful is that it can help you spot the mistake that lies behind the most common logical fallacies.

The three acts refer to the three kinds of mental activity: understanding, judging, and reasoning. Each act works upon a different kind of object: terms, propositions, and syllogisms, respectively. Thinking upon those objects yields, in each case, one of two outcomes. Thus: a term can be either known or unknown; a proposition may either be true or false; a syllogism, valid or invalid.

The mind, like any other tool, can be used well or badly. Learn to use it well. Whether we like it or not, and whether we can name the rules or not, logic governs how the mind grasps truth. It's wired into us. Evidently, it is also programmed into the fabric of the universe.

Suppose you meet a friend who doubts the laws of logic. Ask them: by what faculty? Better, invite them to consider the next time they go to redeem their Super-Faithful-Flyer points for a free far-off get-away: why do I think it acceptable to fling my body 40,000 feet into the sky? Well, that's easy. Each time they step onto an airplane, they illustrate their faith in fairy dust.

Yes, that's all it is. We've built planes that float in the air because we've learned a little about the magic that binds physics to mathematics. No logic, no math; no math, no physics; no physics, no flight. Here in schematic form you see the basic building blocks of rational thinking.

Act of the Mind	Type of Object	Outcome
Understanding <i>The grasp of an essence,</i> e.g., 'rational animal'	Terms 'Man'	Known/Unknown
'three-sided figure'	'Triangle'	
Judging <i>The evaluation of the truth of a proposition</i>	Propositions 'The man is red.' 'That dog is alive.'	The True/The False

Reasoning	Syllogisms	Valid/Invalid
The acquisition of new knowledge from old.	"All men are mortal. Socrates is a man. Therefore, Socrates is mortal."	

Before we turn to the mind's mistakes, let's fill in this sketch a bit. We can move through each act in turn.

By *understanding*, logicians refer to the mind's grasp of an essence or form. *Form* is an old word, but one worth remembering. Imagine two planks of oak cut from the same tree. A carpenter leaves behind one slab of wood and begins to work on another. An hour later the second plank has become a table. What changed? In their chemistry the two slabs remain identical. That is to say, in their matter, nothing changed: from the point of view of chemistry the two things remain one thing. And yet that is only from one rather limited point of view. From every other point of view, what altered is the wood's shape or *form*. The names we give to things identify these differences between things. Hence, to name the form is to mark the essence or essential shape of a given thing. "Table," "triangle," and "man" are each terms that name the form. The mind either succeeds or fails at grasping the forms behind the names.

We can take one more step. Definitions of terms are best when they are neither too broad nor too narrow. For example, "Man is a rational animal" remains sturdy because it hits the mean. To call men merely "rational" would leave out the body. To call men "animals" would forget the mind. Since we see both, a good definition will include both.

But, you ask, what if someone gave the wrong name? True, mistakes happen all the time. Hiking out in the woods we want to know whether the creature that has just crossed the trail in front of us is a "wolf" or a "Siberian Husky." What one man calls "murder" another claims is "self-defense." Such legitimate and frequently encountered difficulties show not the obtuseness of philosophy and science but why we can't live without them.

When natures cannot be immediately grasped we must rely upon the second act of the mind, what logicians call the act of judgment.

*Judging* refers to the evaluation of the truth or falsity of a proposition. Experimentation can help form your judgments, as can the advice of others. So if you're in the woods with an experienced hunter, you're in luck. He tells you: "That animal is a dog." Such a judgment is delivered in the form of a proposition—a statement with a subject and a predicate. In the example "Man is a rational animal," "Man" is the subject (the thing), while "rational animal" stands as the predicate (the description of the thing). The *subject* denotes what you wish to speak about; the *predicate* qualifies or adds to it.

Finally, there is *reasoning*. What could be more natural? Indeed, nothing could be more natural—nothing, that is, until someone disagrees with you! The frequency, variety, and intensity of intellectual disagreements give some indication of the importance of clear thinking about the nature of arguing. From thinking about things to judging affirmations about things, the mind can turn next to infer the connection *between* things. In the act of reasoning the mind posits causal links between terms and objects. In this third act of the mind, we move beyond mere observation and verbal clarification to science.

The syllogism is the motor behind every science. Insight is required, to be sure; but it is only through drawing the correct inference that we add to our knowledge. Consider the following statements.

P1 All men are mortal.	Every A is B
P2 Socrates is a man.	Some C is A
∴ Socrates is mortal.	∴ Some C is B

Constructing a syllogism is like constructing a house. You need at least two walls before you can erect another level. The walls are the premises. To build a second story, to build on top of these sturdy walls, you have to assume the foundations of the first



story are sound. In the above example, the first two statements are *premises* and serve as the “walls” holding up your conclusion. The third statement, the *conclusion*, is the new second-story “floor” you hope to add. To argue convincingly you must move from known truths to some hitherto unknown or unobserved truth. Thus, when arguing, you ought to use premises that your listener will find compelling. Otherwise, if they reject your premises, they will disregard your conclusion. If you cannot find common ground on the lower levels, you’ll never get to enjoy the views from the top floor together.

Take the following examples. Imagine a new principal arrives at your local high school and decides to prohibit students from listening to rap music while on school property. A group of students is angry. One student might conceivably reply with an argument along the following lines:

Every teen has the right to listen to rap music.	Every A is B
Every student at this school is a teen.	Every C is A
Every student at this school has the right to listen to rap music.	Every C is B

The argument is formally valid. But is the conclusion true? To find that out, at the least, both parties would have to explore the truth of the premises.

Now imagine you’ve just arrived at college. You’re ready to encounter the wide world of debate. You overhear a discussion, after class, over whether abortion should be a legal right. One student offers the following syllogism:

Every child deserves the protections of law.	Every A is B
Every fetus is a child.	Every C is A
Every fetus deserves the protection of the law.	Every C is B

Having just come from Philosophy 101, you know how to identify this argument (logicians name the form of this argument a “Barbara”), and recognize it as formally valid, but see that this person’s debating partner, who is pro-choice, stays unconvinced. How come?

This leads to the second important distinction, between truth and validity. *Truth* is the correspondence between mind and reality and applies to propositions. *Validity* refers to the formal relationship between propositions. In the above case, if the premises are both true, then as a matter of logical necessity so will be the conclusion. How, then, can rational minds disagree? If the pro-choicer is clever, he will also see that the syllogism is valid. Where he is likely to disagree is with the second premise (“Every fetus is a child”).

I offer this piece of advice. When you arrive at an impasse, here is what you should not do. Do not simply recycle the same syllogism, tumbling it over and over like some shrinking shirt in a dryer: “Every child deserves the protections of law! . . . Every fetus. . .” Move on. Find the disputed premises; ask questions of each other, and engage. If the fetus is not a human child, what is it?

The notion of the “three acts” goes back to Aristotle. By the Middle Ages it became a stock technique for training young minds to think. Whether you are thinking or speaking about constitutional law, or economics, or the life cycle of hawks, offend logic and eventually you will lose your listener.

#### 4. Avoid six fallacies

The word *fallacy* comes from the Latin *fallo*, to fall or to deceive. A fallacy is an argument that appears to be valid but is not. Now that we’ve seen something of how the mind functions when it’s firing on all cylinders, let’s see what can go wrong under the hood.

There is no exhaustive list of mental mistakes. Aristotle named thirteen, and one modern logician has cataloged one-

hundred and twelve. We'll take the top six, showing how each is a defect of one or another of the three acts.

*Fallacies of Understanding: Amphiboly and Equivocation*

An amphiboly is when an entire phrase has more than one plausible meaning. How would you feel about reading this, for instance?

The manager reserves the right to exclude any man or woman they consider proper.

You're not sure whether to open or close the top button of your shirt. Being hustled out of your favorite restaurant is bad. The consequence of vague language in politics can be even worse. Do you remember the last round of election speeches you heard? Many politicians have been serving up rather thin broth for a few election cycles already. When politicians and journalists preach about their desire to bring "hope," to defend "rights," to protect "freedom," and to ensure "equality," do you know what they are talking about? Do you think they know what they are talking about? To *equivocate* is to conceal that you have used the same word first in one sense and then in another.

Words without definitions are like balloons without air. You can twirl them into any shape. It is instructive to recall that at the same moment the GUGB (forerunner to the KGB) was jailing priests and liquidating dissidents (some of my relatives were among the thousands who eventually fled), Stalin's 1936 *Constitution of the Soviet Union* defended both "freedom of conscience" in religion (article 124) and "freedom of speech" in the press (article 125). For the rhetorician, as for the logician, the first rule of clear speaking is that you define your terms—unless you have reason not to.

When the Fathers of the American Revolution gathered, the colonies were a series of loose allies who shared a grievance but as yet no common political identity. If the British could divide they would have surely conquered. Benjamin Franklin made this

point admirably; at the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776 he employed this equivocation:

We must all hang together, or assuredly we will all hang separately.

Here *hang* (like the term *nobody* earlier) is used twice in two different senses, and for that reason to memorable effect.

Examples from literature and everyday speech abound. Shakespeare is famous for his puns. In the opening to *Richard III*, "son" serves double duty by means of a trick on the ear:

Now is the winter of our discontent  
Made glorious summer by this son of York;  
And all the clouds that low'r'd upon our house  
In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.

It's the sort of thing that gets Christmas parties off the ground and opens wedding speeches:

What do you call Santa's helpers?  
Subordinate Clauses!

You'll be happy to discover that my nephew is like a  
horse.  
He's a stable animal.

The number of objects in the world may be infinite, but the number of words is not. According to the *Global Language Monitor*, just over 1 million English words are on the books (with one new word being added every 98 minutes). As the philosopher Martin Heidegger might have said after a few martinis, that's a lot of fish swimming in the sea of language.

Alas, few survive. The 20-volume *Oxford English Dictionary* lists 171,476 active words. And, by one estimate, the 100 most frequently used account for half of the terms in books. My point is

this: language is limited, the cosmos is vast. This is one reason why words often carry multiple meanings. To avoid equivocation, define your terms.

*Fallacies of Judging: False Cause and Post hoc ergo propter hoc*  
These two fallacies are close cousins. An error of judgment is a mistake not about terms but about *natures*. It is easy to assume connections between things, even when no connection exists. Any time we presume without justification that *x* caused *y*, we commit the fallacy of false cause.

The most common variety of the “false cause” is the *Post hoc ergo propter hoc* variety. *Post hoc ergo propter hoc* translates to “after this therefore on account of this.” Here the mistake is to mistake temporal proximity for causal connection. Sometimes it is easy to spot:

The cock crows, the sun rises.

Therefore the cock causes the sun to rise.

The error in this judgment is to mistake correlation for causation. It is in fact true that cocks sing before sunrise. Birds may rouse us. Yet the sun, one suspects, pays little attention.

Other times the mistake is trickier to see. It is quite often assumed, for instance, that if the federal government offered more money to schools, public education in America would improve. One recent poll found that American adults say that inadequate funding is a top problem facing the schools in their communities. The connection seems clear. More money would lead to better salaries, and then to better teachers, and finally to better kids. Shouldn't educational inputs (cash, computers) lead to educational outcomes (grades, graduations)? Apparently, they do not.

Each year taxpayers spend about \$12,500 per public-school student. This is an increase of more than 50% in real dollars over the last twenty-some years. And yet it's not clear that students seem to notice. The number of illiterate 17-year-olds is the same

today as it was some twenty-five years ago (about 13%). On a recent standardized science test, 15-year-old Americans ranked 23<sup>rd</sup>. Hungary, Poland and Estonia ranked higher, each without spending as much as America on their public schools.<sup>5</sup>

When it comes to success in education, money matters. But so does culture, the health of the family, and the discipline of the child. Everyone acknowledges that public education in America needs repair. Next time you hear someone say more money alone will fix it you might whisper quietly to yourself, “False cause.”

*Fallacies of Reasoning: Ad Hominem and Ad Populum*  
When we make a mistake of reasoning, we fail accurately to connect premises with conclusions. The most frequent instance of this in private speech is the *Ad hominem* (against the man); the most frequent mistake of this sort in the press is, understandably, the *Ad populum* (appeal to the people).

Here's the difference. You have stepped into a discussion between two students over theories in biology. Debate has become heated. The senior, in frustration, finally tells the freshman student, “But you're a Mormon; therefore, what can you know about science?” Congratulations! As the conclusion doesn't follow, you will have just witnessed at college your first *ad hominem*. Then, imagine that same senior continues the argument in the collegiate newspaper. His article dismisses his opponent, now concluding his essay along the lines of “evolution illustrates the non-intelligent design of the universe. . .,” with the implication that being religious (in this case a Mormon) means you couldn't also be rigorously scientific. Such an appeal is called an *ad populum*. Where lies the mistake? Well, for starters, a theory is never true simply because most people happen to believe it. And, of course, being religious (or not) has nothing strictly to do with

<sup>5</sup> See also Dan Lips, Shanea Watkins, and John Fleming, “Does Spending More on Education Improve Academic Achievement?,” in *Backgrounder* (September 8, 2008), and the U.S. Department of Education document *A Nation Accountable: Twenty-Five Years After A Nation at Risk* (Washington, DC, 2008).

being a good empirical scientist. Some scientists are atheists. Others, like Pascal, Newton, Mendel, and Pasteur, are deeply religious. In short, while character counts, it's the claims you should counter. No matter what the crowds say: evaluate the argument, not the speaker.

Good grammar, and reasonable speech, ensure you get the small stuff right. They help you say what you mean, and convince others that you mean what you say. Practice them.

## II

### *Pathos:*

## Proportionate Emotion

*Embody Proportio—Move head and heart—  
Use vivid language—Prefer the concrete*

### 5. Embody *Proportio*

*Pathos* refers to the emotional quality of your presentation. You will delight and move your hearers when you bring your listeners' emotions to match your own. One definition of public speaking is simply: "Energetic speech." Your task is, therefore, twofold. You must grasp what emotions naturally correspond to your message. Then you must communicate these convincingly to your audience. You do this by three means: appealing to head and heart, using vivid language, and preferring the concrete. We'll take up the substance of these three here, and add a few details in later chapters.

Before exploring these techniques, however, consider your psychology. Prior to every talk, ask: What emotions ought I to feel? As character is the foundation of style, so proportion—the harmonious relation between parts—is its first manifestation. You must embody *proportio*. How is this achieved?

Ever wonder why a modern city center makes you feel dizzy while a medieval city's core makes you feel cozy? In the old towns of Oxford, Rome, and Quebec, buildings are rarely above three stories high. Streets are wide enough for you to shout across, and be heard. You can walk from one end to the other in under an hour. These cities attract, in a way that Atlanta and Toronto do not, because the parts and the whole correspond to the scale of the human body, not the automobile. These cities manifest *proportio*.