



“Hey, come over here”: What Makes a Rhetorical Superhero

Manuela Delfino Perez

1. The English language can be a very interesting subject, though my time learning it in school and in the world, there weren't many things that sparked my interest. Rhetorical concepts such as *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* were different, however. I remember learning about them the first time in a Philosophy class in middle school and was amazed at the fact that there were these specific concepts that described things in speech and in writing that many times are not on purpose.
2. When first learning about these concepts, I thought about how many times people naturally use them in their day to day language and subconsciously use them in a discussion. Some people excel in that area and they can be considered “rhetorical superheroes”. First, rhetoric involved the use of language, sometimes even the use of body language and tone of voice, to persuade an audience with writing or speaking, many times the use of rhetoric will change according to the intended audience of the text, the purpose of the text, and what reaction you want the audience to have to the text.
3. A rhetorical superhero to me is someone who has the ability to use rhetorical concepts when speaking/writing, most of the time purposefully, with the goal of convincing their audience about something or transmitting some sort of feeling. These abilities can be described as appealing to the emotional side of the audience, using logic, or demonstrating why they are the right person to be speaking on the subject in question. There are many more rhetorical devices but these are the most common ones. A person being able

Keywords: audience, rhetorical superhero, effectiveness, purpose, change, evidence, language, speaking, thinking, *ethos*

Citation (modified APA)

Delfino Perez, Manuela. (2020, October 14). “Hey, come over here”: What Makes a Rhetorical Superhero. Hokies Write. <http://www.hokieswrite.com/docgallery/>

to use these concepts on purpose strengthens their title as a superhero since they are conscious about the effects their use of language can have in a conversation/discussion. When thinking about a person I would describe as a "rhetorical superhero," it took me a while to imagine who to talk about. But after some thought, I decided to talk about my dad (Figure 1).



Figure 1: A pencil sketch of a rhetorical superhero: my dad.

4. I was not thinking about talking about my dad at first, my first thoughts were of big influencers and very well known civil rights advocates, but these people weren't a part of my day-to-day directly. Even though these people are very important and clearly know how to use rhetoric, I do not have a personal connection with them. I didn't know them. I believe that the reason I did not think about my father at first is that I have become very used to the interactions we have that it simply became a daily occurrence that I wouldn't think much about. Because of my dad's work, he has to use a lot of graphs and data. Ever since COVID began and places started being shut down, my dad started to work from home and I started studying at home as well. Due to this, he would always talk to me about the things he found interesting or strange about his work. This did not only happen with his work though but many times he would also present me information in news articles or on COVID tracking websites.

5. Some rhetorical aspects that I can point out in my dad are *logos* and *ethos*. *Logos* focuses on the use of logic in arguments to prevent any logical fallacies. Using concrete evidence to sustain arguments makes it so that the point someone is trying to make is realistic and based on the truth rather than it being strictly an opinion. Although him showing evidence is the main focus of the interaction between

us, I don't believe he necessarily does it with the purpose of changing my opinion or convincing me of something. His focus is showing me the data and then building an argument around it, rather than using it as evidence to support what he is saying.

6. *Ethos* in speaking or writing highlights the credibility and knowledge of who is speaking. Although I don't remember exactly the graphs my dad has shown me before, I do remember how excited and how professional he sounded when talking about what the information entailed. It was always him seated in the chair in his office and me standing by the door paying attention to what he was explaining. I was probably on my way to do something in the kitchen and he stopped me on my way there. He is used to showing information to back his point since he has to do this at his job many times. I believe that *ethos* can be pointed out in this situation since he always spoke precisely and with the correct jargon about the subject he was trying to explain to me. This made him sound more trustworthy and knowledgeable, not only with the words that he used but also with his tone of voice. This shows how effective he was with using *ethos* since I always got the impression that the information I am receiving was correct and came from a trustworthy source.
7. Since the things he showed me almost always were a part of his work, many times I would not understand what they meant or what the trends shown entailed in the real world. Him showing me these things definitely impacted the way I use rhetorical devices and changed the way I would discuss certain topics, especially with him. It was normal for us to discuss certain political topics where our beliefs deferred from each other or I would find something interesting and wanted to show it to him. Because of his influence, I would always try and find more concrete evidence or personal recounts that would support my viewpoints.
8. When thinking about how has a rhetorical superhero's message has affected others, it is hard to pinpoint a specific answer. For some, you know that their message has affected others since people have changed their perspective on certain topics or people have become more aware of a certain situation. When thinking about how my dad's use of rhetoric has affected me, it is way more personal, it didn't change a big group of people, like the audience of a TED talk, rather it

was something that only I really experienced. As I have said before, it changed the way I discussed things I am passionate about, not really how I viewed subjects. To me, indicators that show the effectiveness of someone's message aren't very precise, especially since many times the reasoning behind someone giving that message may be different. For some people, their main goal may be to change the audience's lifestyle, for others they may only want to inspire people to pursue something.

9. Something that can be directly related to the effectiveness of a superhero's message is their weaknesses. I believe that a superhero's vulnerability is making mistakes when using their "powers", their ability to use rhetoric. When using *pathos*, one may use an example that the audience is not able to relate to. This would result in people not being emotionally invested in what the speaker is saying. A weakness in my dad's use of rhetorical devices could not even be his use of them directly. If the topic that he is talking about doesn't spark my interest, even if he uses the best evidence and sounds the most trustworthy, it can be considered that he "failed" with his message. One thing that could strengthen his message is using *pathos* in some cases. Pathos appeals to the emotional side of the audience, using it can make you relate more to a subject or make you feel more connected to it. I know many times when my dad would show me things related to his work, there weren't many things that would appeal to the emotional. Most of the things he showed were about the economies of developing countries and finances.
10. I believe that thinking about rhetorical situations and how people effectively dealt with them, what made them superheroes, not only enhances one's knowledge about rhetorical devices but it can also make them more aware of how they can use it in their everyday speech or in more formal situations. To me, thinking about someone who you consider a rhetorical superhero can help you become one.

Instructor: Derek Mueller (Associate Professor)

Author Permissions:

I grant permission to include this project/paper in the Document Gallery on HokiesWrite.com.
I grant permission for this project/paper, if selected, to be published in the program's textbook.
I grant permission for this project/paper to be shared in-class.
I grant permission for this project/paper to be used in professional development workshops and for GTA education purposes.

Note: The citation information on p. 1 follows modified APA, incorporating the writer's full name as an acknowledgement of a more fully humanistic regard for authorship.

All materials on Hokies Write (hokieswrite.com) are curated by the Virginia Tech Composition Program (within the Department of English and College of Liberal Arts & Human Sciences) and its leadership team. Inquiries should be directed to composition@vt.edu.

Overview

Our second project this semester invites you to develop an account of an especially effective *everyday* rhetor – someone who, in speech or in writing, proved persuasive in a specific situation. We will consider this effective communicator to be a "rhetorical superhero." This means that your account should examine the specific qualities, tactics, or "powers" the person put to use in changing the hearts, minds, or actions of others or in compelling assent (i.e., getting people to nod their heads in agreement).

To begin, you should begin to think about what makes a *superhero* super. Superheroes have special powers, right? They are usually able to adapt their identities in such a way that foregrounds some distinctive measure of speed, strength, magic, or energy. In *Understanding Rhetoric*, although the figure is purely fictional, **Metamorph** should begin to give you ideas about what a rhetorical superhero might do. Another source of ideas might be the **Clifton Strengths assessment** all first-year students at Virginia Tech complete. Strengths, in this context, are qualities that distinguish one person from the next and that help us make choices about how we want to develop, sometimes by keying on what we are already good at, and sometimes by finding opportunities for growth in areas we might not already be as proficient with.

As you begin to write, remember that this is a *profile* piece. It should be focused on one person in a specific situation. Once you have a specific person, place, event, and rhetorical artifact (speech or document), you have what you need to make the case for your rhetorical superhero. Your challenge is to tell readers about the person, to provide a fully developed description of the situation, and to use rhetorical terms such as *ethos*, *pathos*, *logos*, and *kairos* to account for the rhetor's effectiveness. Evidence for this work might include memory (what you remember about the event), an artifact (a copy of the effective document or a transcript of a speech), a photograph or video, an interview with the rhetor, or second-hand accounts from others who witnessed the event. Evidence for this work might include memory (what you remember about the event), a text (a copy of the effective document or a transcript of a speech), a photograph or video, an interview with the rhetor, or second-hand accounts from others who witnessed the event (people at the event or comments on the YouTube video would both work as evidence for this paper).

Selecting a suitable figure or person, and locating the moment or text through which they were distinctly effective are among the most important dimensions of this work. Consider focusing on someone whom you find to be inspirational or interesting in the way that they make their points and use rhetoric. In identifying a "rhetorical superhero" you may choose someone who has personally impacted or affected you through their speech, writing, or composition (this could include art, music, family, religion, culture, sports, etc.). As a guiding premise, I urge you to stay away from those whose speeches and language have been analyzed prolifically--prominent and well-documented or long-analyzed public figures, such as politicians and celebrities. Instead, identify someone with a lesser-known profile such that your work, your accounting for their rhetorical heroics, stands out as a distinctive perspective that is yours.

Generating Questions

- How does rhetoric work? What does a rhetorical situation involve?
- What kinds of powers or special qualities might a rhetorical superhero exhibit?
- What other tools or devices did the rhetorical superhero make use of in this case? Provide a detailed description (and/or an illustration of photo) of what those tools or devices are. How did the rhetor learn to use them? Do you think the uses were strategic and planned? Or accidental and improvised? Why?
- How did their command of rhetoric, whether they knew they were commanding it or not, affect you?
- How can you tell how the message affected others? Do you consider these reliable and telling indicators of the message's effectiveness? Why?

- What are their “superpowers” that make them so rhetorically special?
- What would be the equivalent of a rhetorical superhero's weakness or vulnerability? Is there any evidence that in this case things did not go well at any point in the lead-up , development, circulation, or reception of the message?
- How was this person involved in a rhetorical situation? What was the exigence (or occasion), who was the audience, and what were the constraints (e.g., attitudes or values held by those involved) in this situation?

Deadlines and Specifications

- A half-draft of at least 700 words is due in your Google Folder (as a Google Doc) and posted for Peer Review no later than the end of the day on **Tuesday, October 13**.
- Project Two and Invention Portfolio are due in your Google Folder no later than the end of the day on **Sunday, October 25**.
- At least five pages, typed and double-spaced (i.e., 1400 words)
- A title that adheres to the model, **Catchphrase: Description**, all the better if it has a playful, memorable turn of phrase in the first half
- Required: One image or figure incorporated with a caption (image description)

Boosts (optional)

Boosts are value-added badges, of sorts. They offer you the incentive of doing something a little extra both to level-up your writing practice and also to gain experience with some aspect of development that will enrich your work. **To claim a boost, simply add a note in your project at the location where you have applied the boost, like this [Boost One - Photographic Evidence] or [Boost Two - Social Media].** There are ~~two~~ three boosts available for Project Two. Each will also bear inflection in your project's evaluation, benefiting the project with a slight increase in credit.

Boost One - Photographic Evidence

Include a photograph of the rhetor. It's preferable if this is a personal or family photo, perhaps one you take yourself. If you use a photo taken by someone else, be sure to give credit to the photographer in the image caption.

Boost Two - Social Media

Include a tweet and/or instagram/social media caption that goes with your project. To earn this boost, you must actually post the message to social media and use the hashtags #rhetoricalsuperhero and #hokieswrite. Think of this as a promotional extension of your project .

Boost Three - Sent Reflective Letter

During Week Nine, you will develop a reflective cover letter addressed to someone who has been influential in your literacy development (a family member, a teacher, a mentor or friend). You will earn an additional boost for actually sending the letter about what have learned in Project Two by addressing the letter to them and actually sending it. To verify that the message was sent, bcc your instructor at dmueller@vt.edu.

Grading Breakdown and Rubric

Grades for Project Two will be returned to in Canvas using the rubric tool and Grades area of the course. The rubric assigns values to the following criteria:

- **Project Two - Rhetorical Superheroes**
 - **Superhero Profile** - The project presents a vivid impression of the rhetorical superhero, the situation in which they were effective, and the means by which they were rhetorically effective.
 - **Specific accounts of qualities that include rhetorical vocabulary/terminology** - The project elaborates at least three rhetorical qualities using vocabulary introduced in the readings associated with the project.

- **Balanced and purposefully arranged moments** - The descriptive accounts are balanced (approximately equal length) and arranged with purpose.
- **Overall development (inc. title and length)** - The project honors specifications concerning title, length, and any other formatting noted in class.
- **Style** - The project reflects control and consistency, which is evident in the presentation of understandable, accessible syntax (word order) and diction (word choice), regardless of multilingual and vernacular variation.
- ***Invention Portfolio*** - Evaluated based on the pattern of checks, check-plusses, and check-minuses in the collection of shorter written work.