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What Is a Rhetorical Device? Definition, List, Examples

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A rhetorical device is a linguistic tool that employs a particular type of sentence structure, sound, or pattern of meaning in order to evoke a particular reaction from an audience. Each rhetorical device is a distinct tool that can be used to construct an argument or make an existing argument more compelling.

Any time you try to inform, [persuade](https://www.thoughtco.com/elaboration-likelihood-model-4686036), or argue with someone, you’re engaging in rhetoric. If you’ve ever had an emotional reaction to a speech or changed your mind about an issue after hearing a skilled debater's rebuttal, you've experienced the power of rhetoric. By developing a basic knowledge of rhetorical devices, you can improve your ability to process and convey information while also strengthening your persuasive skills.

**Types of Rhetorical Devices**

Rhetorical devices are loosely organized into the following four categories:

1. **Logos.** Devices in this category seek to convince and persuade via logic and reason, and will usually make use of statistics, cited facts, and statements by authorities to make their point and persuade the listener.
2. **Pathos.** These rhetorical devices base their appeal in emotion. This could mean invoking sympathy or pity in the listener, or making the audience angry in the service of inspiring action or changing their mind about something.
3. **Ethos.** Ethical appeals try to convince the audience that the speaker is a credible source, that their words have weight and must be taken seriously because they are serious and have the experience and judgment necessary to decide what’s right.
4. **Kairos.** This is one of the most difficult concepts in rhetoric; devices in this category are dependent on the idea that the time has come for a particular idea or action. The very timeliness of the idea is part of the argument.

**Top Rhetorical Devices**

Since rhetoric dates back to ancient times, much of the terminology used to discuss it comes from the original Greek. Despite its ancient origins, however, rhetoric is as vital as ever. The following list contains some of the most important rhetorical devices to understand:

1. **Alliteration**, a sonic device, is the repetition of the initial sound of each word (e.g. Alan the antelope ate asparagus).
2. **Cacophony**, a sonic device, is the combination of consonant sounds to create a displeasing effect.
3. **Onomatopoeia**, a sonic device, refers to a word that emulates the real-life sound it signifies (e.g. using the word "bang" to signify an explosion).
4. **Humor** creates connection and identification with audience members, thus increasing the likelihood that they will agree with the speaker. Humor can also be used to deflate counter-arguments and make opposing points of view appear ridiculous.
5. **Anaphora** is the repetition of certain words or phrases at the beginning of sentences to increase the power of a sentiment. Perhaps the best-known example of anaphora is Martin Luther King Jr.'s repetition of the phrase "I have a dream."
6. **Meiosis** is a type of euphemism that intentionally understates the size or importance of its subject. It can be used to dismiss or diminish a debate opponent's argument.
7. **Hyperbole** is an exaggerated statement that conveys emotion and raises the bar for other speakers. Once you make a hyperbolic statement like “My idea is going to change the world," other speakers will have to respond in kind or their more measured words may seem dull and uninspiring in comparison.
8. **Apophasis** is the verbal strategy of bringing up a subject by denying that that very subject should be brought up at all.
9. [**Anacoluthon**](https://www.thoughtco.com/anacoluthon-syntactic-blend-1689087) is a sudden swerve into a seemingly unrelated idea in the middle of a sentence. It can seem like a grammatical mistake if handled poorly, but it can also put powerful stress onto the idea being expressed.
10. **Chiasmus** is a technique wherein the speaker inverts the order of a phrase in order to create a pretty and powerful sentence. The best example comes from President John F. Kennedy's inaugural address: "Ask not **what your country can do for you**— ask **what you can do for your country**."
11. **Anadiplosis** is the use of the same word at the end of one sentence and at the beginning of the subsequent sentence, forming a chain of thought that carries your audience to the point you’ve chosen.
12. **Dialogismus**refers to moments when the speaker imagines what someone else is thinking, or speaks in the voice of someone else, in order to explain and then subvert or undermine counterpoints to the original argument.
13. **Eutrepismus**, one of the most common rhetorical devices, is simply the act of stating points in the form of a numbered list. Why is it useful? First off, this devices makes information seem official and authoritative. Second, it gives speech a sense of order and clarity. And third, it helps the listener keep track of the speaker's points.
14. **Hypophora**is the trick of posing a question and then immediately supplying the answer. Do you know why hypophora is useful? It's useful because it stimulates listener interest and creates a clear transition point in the speech.
15. **Expeditio** is the trick of listing a series of possibilities and then explaining why all but one of those possibilities are non-starters. This device makes it seem as though all choices have been considered, when in fact you've been steering your audience towards the one choice you desired all along.
16. **Antiphrasis** is another word for irony. Antiphrasis refers to a statement whose actual meaning is the opposite of the literal meaning of the words within it.
17. **Asterismos.** Look, this is the technique of inserting a useless but attention-grabbing word in front of your sentence in order to grab the audience’s attention. It's useful if you think your listeners are getting a bit bored and restless.

**Examples of Rhetorical Devices**

Rhetoric isn’t just for debates and arguments. These devices are used in everyday speech, fiction and screenwriting, legal arguments, and more. Consider these famous examples and their impact on their audience.

1. “**Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.”** –*Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*.
**Rhetorical Device**: Anadiplosis. The pairs of words at the beginning and ending of each sentence give the impression that the logic invoked is unassailable and perfectly assembled.
2. “**Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.”** —President John F. Kennedy.
**Rhetorical Device**: Chiasmus. The inversion of the phrase *can do* and the word *country* creates a sense of balance in the sentence that reinforces the sense of correctness.
3. **"I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent’s youth and inexperience."** –President Ronald Reagan
**Rhetorical Device**: Apophasis. In this quip from a presidential debate, Reagan expresses mock reluctance to comment on his opponent's age, which ultimately does the job of *raising the point* of his opponent's age.
4. “**But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground.”**—Abraham Lincoln, *Gettysburg Address*.
**Rhetorical Device**: Anaphora. Lincoln’s use of repetition gives his words a sense of rhythm that emphasizes his message. This is also an example of **kairos**: Lincoln senses that the public has a need to justify the slaughter of the Civil War, and thus decides to make this statement appealing to the higher purpose of abolishing slavery.
5. “**Ladies and gentlemen, I've been to Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and I can say without hyperbole that this is a million times worse than all of them put together.”**–*The Simpsons*.
**Rhetorical Device**: Hyperbole. Here, hyperbole is used to humorous effect in order to undermine the superficial point of the sentence.

**Key Terms**

* **Rhetoric.**The discipline of discourse and persuasion via verbal argument.
* **Rhetorical Device.** A tool used in the course of rhetoric, employing specific sentence structure, sounds, and imagery to attain a desired response.
* **Logos.**The category of rhetorical devices that appeal to logic and reason.
* **Pathos.** The category of rhetorical devices that appeal to emotions.
* **Ethos.** The category of rhetorical devices that appeals to a sense of credibility.
* **Kairos.** The concept of “right place, right time” in rhetoric, wherein a specific rhetorical device becomes effective because of circumstances surrounding its use.

**Sources**

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