WHAT ARE ETHOS, PATHOS, & LOGOS?

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WHAT IS RHETORIC? The art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing, especially the use of figures of speech and other compositional techniques.

Aristotle’s Rhetorical Appeals: Many people have heard of the rhetorical concepts of logos, ethos, and pathos even if they do not necessarily know what they fully mean. These three terms, along with kairos and telos, were used by Aristotle to help explain how rhetoric functions. In ancient Greece, these terms corresponded with basic components that all rhetorical situations have.

Ethos
Ethos is frequently translated as some variation of “credibility or trustworthiness,” but it originally referred to the elements of a speech that reflected on the particular character of the speaker or the speech’s author. Today, many people may discuss ethos qualities of a text to refer to how well authors portray themselves. But ethos more closely refers to an author’s perspective more generally. In this resource, ethos means “author.”

Pathos
Pathos is frequently translated as some variation of “emotional appeal,” but it originally referred to the elements of a speech that appealed to any of an audience’s sensibilities. Today, many people may discuss pathos qualities of a text to refer to how well an author appeals to an audience’s emotions. Pathos as “emotion” is often contrasted with logos as “reason.” But this is a limited understanding of both pathos and logos; pathos more closely refers to an audience’s perspective more generally. In this resource, pathos means “audience.”

Logos
Logos is frequently translated as some variation of “logic or reasoning,” but it originally referred to the actual content of a speech and how it was organized. Today, many people may discuss the logos qualities of a text to refer to how strong the logic or reasoning of the text is. But logos more closely refers to the structure and content of the text itself. In this resource, logos means “text.”

The Bonus Rhetorical Appeals...

Telos
Telos is a term Aristotle used to explain the particular purpose or attitude of a speech. Not many people use this term today in reference to rhetorical situations; nonetheless, it is instructive to know that early rhetorical thinkers like Aristotle actually placed much emphasis on speakers having a clear telos. But audiences can also have purposes of their own that differ from a speaker’s purpose. In this resource, telos means “purpose.”

Kairos
Kairos is a term that refers to the elements of a speech that acknowledge and draw support from the particular setting, time, and place that a speech occurs. Though not as commonly known as logos, ethos, and pathos, the term kairos has been receiving wider renewed attention among teachers of composition since the mid-1980s. Although kairos may be well known among writing instructors, the term “setting” more succinctly and clearly identifies this concept for contemporary readers. In this resource, kairos means “setting.”