

Analyzing Topic Development: Using Rhetorical Appeals to Determine the Effectiveness of a Text

The English portion of the ACT will require you to apply your knowledge of **rhetoric**, the art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing, to determine why selections of text are or are not effective. In rhetoric, effectiveness is determined by how well a writer implements the tenets of rhetoric and addresses the needs of an audience for a given purpose. It is important to note that, although a text may serve multiple functions, effective persuasion requires writers and readers to identify the *most* relevant responses to specific writing **situations**, the contexts in which a need for communication occurs. In the following paragraphs, you will not only learn three methods writers use to persuade readers but also understand how they may be employed to identify and improve the effectiveness of a passage.

Rhetorical appeals are strategic ways writers attempt to persuade readers to believe an idea or perform an action. While readers are not required to be convinced entirely by the writer's claims, the reader's goal when analyzing a text is to judge the reasonableness of the writer's **argument**, chosen method of presenting their beliefs.

There are three types of reasonable appeals that writers may use to persuade: **appeals to logic (logos)**, **appeals to emotions (pathos)**, and **appeals to credibility (ethos)**.

An appeal to logos is a strategic attempt to influence someone to believe an idea or perform an action through a logical method. This appeal may appear as a writer's use of facts, figures, statistics, or common sense within a larger body of text (e.g., 16.8% of the

US population is 65 years of age and older). Appeals to pathos are characterized by an emphasis on sentimental aspects of writing. Writers may attempt to evoke readers' emotions by using descriptive language (e.g., shimmering seas, devastating storms) or presenting impactful storytelling to connect with a reader (e.g., a story about grief). Finally, writers use appeals to ethos to establish their credibility. Appeals to ethos may include a writer's decision to cite reputable sources, exclude emotional appeals, present multiple sides of an argument, and use their credentials (e.g., Judy Williams, Ph.D.).

Although experienced writers will use *multiple* rhetorical appeals to improve their ability to influence readers, some persuasive devices are more likely to appear in specific types of texts than in others. A **convention**, a tradition within a particular field or form of writing, subtly guides a writer and informs the reader as they interact with a text. Experienced writers and readers not only recognize these conventions but also expect to see them. In fact, the effectiveness of a text may be significantly improved or diminished by the types of rhetorical appeals that appear within it. Consider a research paper from the Climate Change Research Institute on reversing the effects of climate change. In this writing situation, the writer would be more likely to rely on logical appeals than emotional appeals to support their arguments. Yet, this is *not* because logical appeals are better than emotional appeals in all circumstances; rather, the writer would be more likely to use logical appeals in this situation because they better meet the needs and align with the expectations of the intended audience. For these reasons, using a logical appeal in this context would increase the effectiveness of the text. On the other hand, the rhetorical strength of a writer's short story on climate change may be

negatively affected by more appeals to logic and fewer appeals to emotions. In either case, writers and readers alike must think strategically about the relationship between the goal of the text and the persuasive devices presented to accomplish that goal to determine the effectiveness of a piece of writing.

Key Terms

Argument

A writer's chosen method of presenting their beliefs through text

Convention

A tradition within a particular field or form of writing

Rhetoric

The art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing

Rhetorical appeals

Strategic methods writers employ to persuade readers to believe an idea or perform an action

Appeals to credibility (ethos)

A strategic attempt to influence someone to believe an idea or perform an action through a use of credibility, such as citing reputable sources, excluding emotional appeals, presenting multiple sides of an argument, and using their credentials

Appeals to emotions (pathos)

A strategic attempt to influence someone to believe an idea or perform an action through a use of emotion, such as descriptive language or impactful storytelling

Appeals to logic (logos)

A strategic attempt to influence someone to believe an idea or perform an action through a use of logic, such as facts, figures, statistics, or common sense

Situation

The context in which a need for communication occurs