

# What is *rhetoric*?

Rhetoric is the study of effective speaking and writing. And the art of persuasion. And many other things.

The first thing that you need to know about rhetoric, then, is that it's all around you in conversation, in movies, in advertisements and books, in body language, and in art. We employ rhetoric whether we're conscious of it or not, but becoming conscious of how rhetoric works can transform speaking, reading, and writing, making us more successful and able communicators and more discerning audiences.

In its long and vigorous history rhetoric has enjoyed many definitions, accommodated differing purposes, and varied widely in what it included. And yet, for most of its history it has maintained its fundamental character as a discipline for 1) perceiving how language is at work orally and in writing, and 2) becoming proficient in applying the resources of language in one's own speaking and writing.

Discerning how language is working in others' or one's own writing and speaking, one must (artificially) divide form and content, *what* is being communicated through language and *how* this is communicated. Aristotle, a Greek philosopher, phrased this as the difference between *logos* (the logical content of a speech) and *lexis* (the style and delivery of a speech).

Rhetoricians divided form and content not to place content above form, but to highlight the interdependence of language and meaning, argument and ornament, thought and its expression. It means that linguistic forms are not merely instrumental, but fundamental—not only to persuasion, but to thought itself.

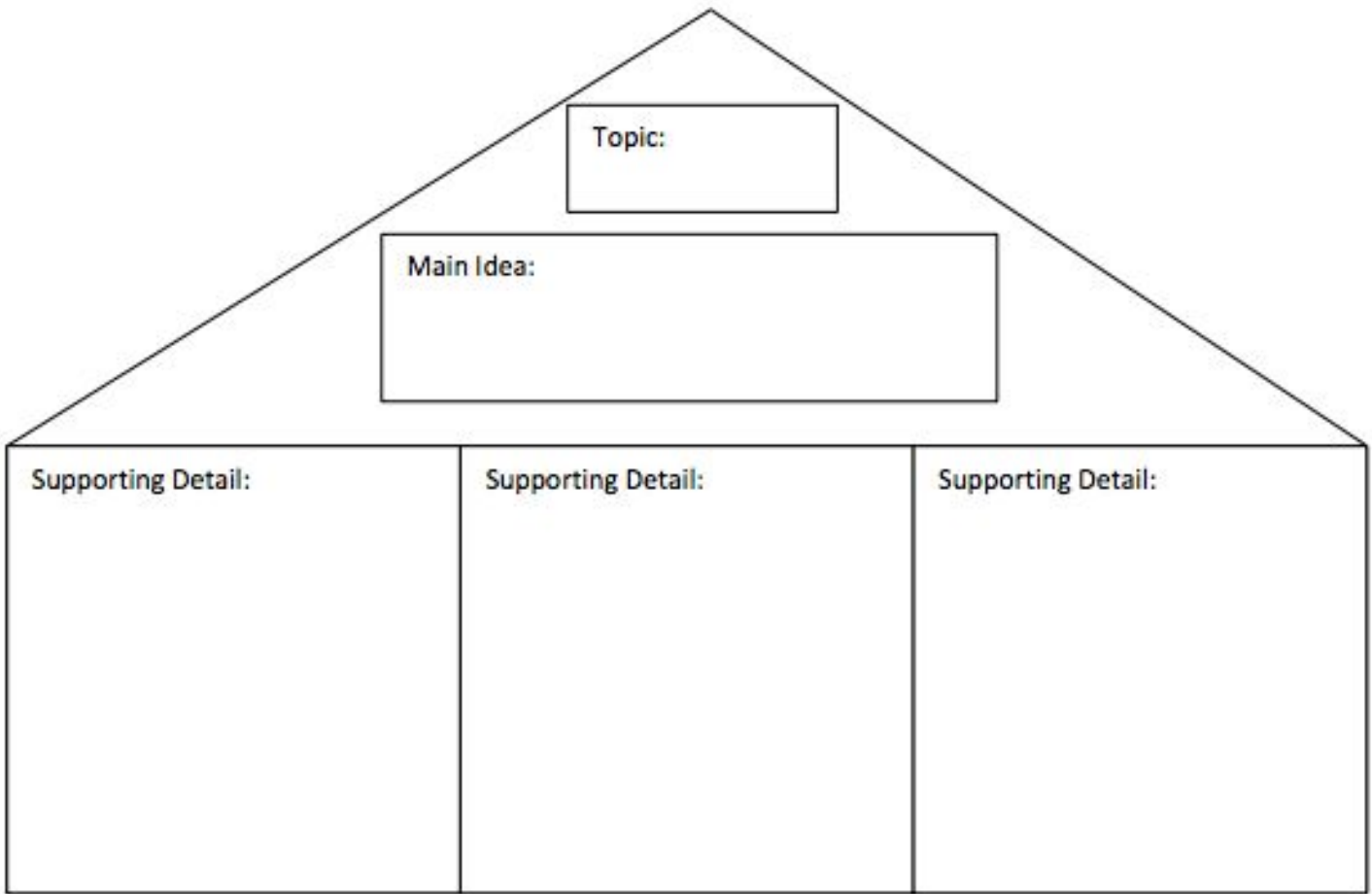
Aristotle believed that from the world around them, speakers could observe how communication happens and use that understanding to develop sound and convincing arguments. In order to do that, speakers needed to look at three elements, graphically represented by what we now call the rhetorical triangle. Aristotle said that when a speaker begins to consider how to compose a speech—that is, begins the process of invention—the speaker must take into account three elements: the subject, the audience, and the speaker. The three elements are connected and interdependent; hence, the triangle.

It's important to note that Aristotle omitted—or confronted only indirectly—two other elements of the rhetorical situation, the context in which writing or speaking occurs and the emerging aim or purpose that underlies many of the writer's decisions. Context, the situation in which writing and reading occur, and the way that an exploration of that situation, a rhetorical analysis, can lead to understanding of what underlies writers' choices is important. We can't know for sure what writers mean, but we have rhetoric to help us interpret.

Key intention or aim is critical for rhetorical effectiveness. Words and forms carry writers' intentions, but those aims can be miscommunicated. Investigating how readers perceive intentions exposes *where* and *how* communication happens or is lost. Rhetoric is the way to connect intentions with responses, the way to reconcile readers and writers. Intention is sometimes embodied in a thesis statement, but we have to remember that intention is carried out throughout a piece, and it often changes.

It's more important to recognize how figures of speech affect readers and to be able to use them effectively than it is to be able to identify them. So, keep in mind that recognizing rhetoric and being able to apply rhetoric are two vastly different things, but practice can make you a better communicator and audience.

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*Write a brief summary of “What is rhetoric?” (Use your supplementary notes and the pyramid above to help you.)*

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