

# What is Rhetoric?

By Jason Carabelli

If you enter “rhetoric” as a search term in Google, you’re likely to come up with a messy list of dictionary definitions, recent political news, course syllabi, and maybe even a few reviews of Ancient Greek manuscripts. If you’re looking for a quick definition of rhetoric because you just read it or heard it and weren’t quite sure what it meant, these Google search results might not leave you satisfied. This is because the word “rhetoric” has come to signify many different things to many different people over the last few thousand years of Western thought and popular culture. So much for getting an easy answer from our casual Google search.

Because rhetoric has such a long and complicated history, scholars are sometimes reluctant to pin down *one* definitive answer to the question “What is rhetoric?” In fact, if your writing instructor studies rhetoric, asking her this question might get you into a much longer conversation than you care to have. This article doesn’t give you one answer to the question “what is rhetoric?”—that would *not* be cool with your writing instructor—but it does give you a foothold for understanding some of its most popular uses today.

## When “Rhetoric” Was the Ancient Art of Persuasion

If rhetoric was a superhero in a comic book, it would need what comic book aficionados call an “origin story.” How did Batman become Batman? What kind of inner demons and motivations sparked a guy to dress up like a flying rodent and fight crime? If you don’t know the origin story, you don’t know the superhero, and hardcore comic book fans probably won’t take you seriously. Just like Batman, the rhetoric we know today has an origin story. As you’ve probably guessed though, it’s long and complicated, so consider this the movie version of the origin story that serious comic book fans pick apart in the YouTube comments.

In its original sense as a word referring to the ancient art of persuasion, rhetoric begins with the Greeks. The term “rhetoric” was coined by the Ancient Greeks, and they are widely considered to be the first civilization to devote a formalized, comprehensive course of study to the art of persuasion. Additionally, “rhetorician” was popularized as a term to define those that studied persuasion, and “rhetor” came to designate someone who spoke or wrote to persuade others. Young Greek men, usually politicians or businessmen, often paid copious amounts of money to be taught the art of speechmaking from professionals, and this skill was called rhetoric. The most renowned of these scholars of ancient oratory were called “sophists.” Unfortunately, they didn’t write much down, so most of their history is muddled by the political motivations of those that wrote *about* them.

The famous Greek philosopher Aristotle, on the other hand, wrote all the time about a variety of topics, and one of them was rhetoric. His book, *On Rhetoric*, is widely considered the first major treatment of the topic in Western thought. In it, Aristotle describes quite a few theoretical concepts that still form the basis of most studies of rhetoric today. For instance, you may be familiar with the terms *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. Those are Greek terms and they show up in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* as ways to describe different aspects of arguments. Aristotle did not “invent” the study of rhetoric, but he has arguably become the poster boy for the ancient study of rhetoric thanks to his writings. For comic book fans, he’s like the Adam West Batman—not the first Batman portrayed in comic books, but the first to bring him to a wider audience by portraying him onscreen.

After Aristotle, the Romans picked up the torch of making a seriously big deal about the importance of studying persuasion. They also started to make more connections between rhetoric and writing, though some of the Greeks did this too. After the fall of the Roman Empire, though, rhetoric as the ancient art of persuasion would fall in and out—mostly out—of favor in formal education, which is why many people today are unaware of its history as the formal study of how to persuade people through oral and written communication.

It's also important to know that there is a difference between talking about the study of *rhetoric*, and the study of *persuasion*. Rhetoric does usually have something to do with “persuasion,” but only for world cultures that have built their educational and philosophical history on the Ancient Greeks. These cultures are often called “Western” cultures, and the United States is one of them. Rhetoric is the way that the Greeks and their successors explained persuasion, but they were obviously not the only culture in the world to think about what it means to persuade someone else. Ancient scholars from other world cultures, for instance in Asia, did not build their cultural history of persuasion on the Greek study of rhetoric. Though the Greeks were unusual in their emphasis on the importance of learning about persuasion, they were by no means the only culture to study it.

### When “Rhetoric” is Empty Words

With our history lesson veiled by cheap comic book references finished, we can move on to what has become the most recognizable use of the term “rhetoric” today: the one with the negative connotation. If you've ever watched a presidential debate or campaign speech, you've probably heard phrases like “that's just rhetoric,” “there's nothing behind the rhetoric,” or “that's just the same old rhetoric.” In the news media, if someone says a politician's words are “just rhetoric,” he is definitely not complimenting how skillful and inspiring that politician's speech was (as an Ancient Greek might have meant). Rather, he is probably accusing the politician of using meaningless phrases and slogans to obscure the truth and deceive the public.

So what the heck happened between Aristotle and today's political pundits? Well, that whole “rhetoric fell in and out of favor” thing mentioned earlier was no joke. Many ancient scholars didn't take too kindly to what some people could do with a formal education in persuasion. In fact, philosophers like Socrates and Plato were so worried that “rhetoric” would lead people to lie and deceive just to get their way that they spent a good part of their careers turning it into a dirty word. That is why today, when someone says “rhetoric,” they are often referring to a hollow, deceptive kind of persuasion.

### When “Rhetoric” is Part of a Writing Course

This is all well and good, but if you were really searching for the word “rhetoric” in Google, it was probably because it had something to do with your college writing course. If rhetoric got such a bum rap in the last few hundred years, though, why on earth would someone decide to use it in the title of a book that's supposed to help students become better writers? Why would writing courses at many universities put rhetoric in the syllabus, or teach rhetoric courses? As you've probably guessed, it has something to do with the first history of the word rhetoric discussed above, when it was the ancient art of persuasion.

American universities care deeply about the communication skills of their graduates. They care so much, in fact, that they include writing in the list of general education requirements for all university students nationwide. These courses, sometimes called “composition” courses, usually have the goal of preparing college

students to persuasively compose their ideas for an audience. Because of this need for successful writing instruction, many scholars devote their careers to researching how to better teach writing (your instructor might be one of them). Additionally, a few decades ago many of these scholars started dusting off old copies of Greek and Roman texts on rhetoric in their search for a way to teach courses like yours. What they found was a rich history of theory and practice to aid student writers, and so more and more writing programs started to recover rhetorical theory for college writing courses.

That is why you find yourself in a writing or composition course that is using a book about rhetoric to teach writing. Your university writing program or your individual instructor decided that rhetorical theory offered a tangible answer to the question: “how can we teach writing?” The study of rhetoric hadn’t gone away completely in academia, but rather different theories of teaching writing were fashionable for a long time. In fact, there are many different ways to teach college writing skills. For instance, you may have friends in different universities who are studying classic literature or oral communication to fulfill the same requirements as your writing course.

What’s important to take away from this is not that “rhetoric” gets a bad rap and that it *really* means the study of persuasion (and look how cool we are for knowing it now. It’s like we’re in a secret club). Rather, it’s important to keep in mind that “rhetoric” can mean different things that are appropriate in different situations. Your instructor or university has decided that rhetoric is a useful way to teach writing, and this book is an invitation to you to explore what learning about rhetoric can mean for you as a student and developing writer. If you’re asking yourself “what does rhetoric have that’s so great about teaching writing?” the answer is—you guessed it—*long and complicated*. Nobody can answer that question for you, either. To know how you answer that question for yourself, then, think about how the content of this book relates to your daily life as a living, breathing, communicating rhetorician. The concepts described in this book and by your instructor are not meaningless, superficial, or exchangeable. Learning about college level writing through the study of rhetoric is different, sometimes *way* different, than writing instruction you have previously encountered. Think about what you can use from this book as a persuader—a rhetor—but also what doesn’t quite fit or seem relevant, and you’ll be well on your way to answering “what is rhetoric?” for yourself.