

## Pathos: Appeals to Emotion

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*“Let’s not forget that the little emotions are the great captains of our lives, and we obey them without realizing it.” – Vincent Van Gogh*

Remember those after-school specials that aired on TV when you were a kid? They always had some obvious moral (like “don’t drink and drive”). And they were often really emotionally driven. At the end of the show, the camera would pan out, showing the protagonist alone and suffering for the poor decisions that he or she had made. When you were a child, that sort of heavy-handed emotionalism was effective in getting a point across. Now that you’re an adult, it becomes easier to feel frustrated, and even manipulated, by an overload of emotion. Emotion, or “pathos,” is a rhetorical device that can be used in an argument to draw the audience in and to help it connect with the argument. Relying too much on pathos, though, can make your writing sound like an after-school special.

Pathos works in conjunction with logos (logic) and ethos (credibility) to help form a solid argument. However, not every argument employs all three rhetorical devices. Each writer must choose which combination of rhetorical devices will work well for his or her writing and will suit the chosen topic. Used correctly, pathos can make a bland argument come alive for the audience. Pathos offers a way for the audience to relate to the subject through commonly held emotions. However, it is important to determine when pathos will be useful and when it will only serve to muddy the argumentative waters.

Take, for instance, a student who is writing an essay on human trafficking. Human trafficking—abducting or entrapping people (usually women and children) and subjecting them to horrific working situations—should be a subject that is already fraught with emotion. However, once the student starts working on the paper, he notices that he has a collection of facts and figures from which the audience will easily be able to disconnect. What the student needs is to make the topic come alive for the reader. He needs to make the reader feel sympathy and horror. Then he comes upon a first-person account of a teenager who was trafficked into the United States. By incorporating her account into his essay (with proper citation, of course), he allows the reader to experience the teenager’s disbelief and fear. And by experiencing this emotion, the reader begins to develop his or her own emotional response: sympathy, horror, and anger. The student has helped the reader connect to his argument through the effective use of pathos.

Pathos becomes a liability in an argument when it is inappropriate for the subject matter or genre of writing being used. For instance, if you are writing a letter to Publix supermarket to express your displeasure with its corporate response to migrant farmers’ call for a living wage, then a narrative encouraging sympathy for the plight of the migrant worker might not be as effective as a straightforward statement of purpose: if Publix doesn’t change its policies, you will take your business to a supermarket that is more interested in supporting social justice.

An audience can also find an overload of pathos to be off-putting. For instance, after September 11, 2001, the majority of people in the United States experienced an overwhelming sense of anger and fear. However, when references to 9/11 were used extensively in some of the 2004 presidential campaigns, many people were outraged. Why? Because they felt as though their intense feelings about the tragedy of 9/11 were being exploited and cheapened by the candidates, and they were intentionally being made to feel fearful. They felt as though their emotions were being manipulated to obtain votes. In this case, an overload of

pathos backfired on the candidates.

Understanding pathos is important for readers and for writers. As a reader, you want to be in tune with the author's use of pathos, consciously evaluating the emotions the author tries to elicit. Then you can make informed decisions about the author's motives and writing methods. As a writer, you want to be aware of proper uses of pathos, paying close attention to both your subject matter and your audience. There is no need to sound like an after-school special, unless, of course, you are writing for one.

## Identifying Pathos

It's probably clear by now what pathos does: it evokes an emotional response from a reader by appealing to empathy, fear, humor, or some other emotion. Now let's look at a few examples of pathos that you may find in written, spoken, or visual texts:

- **Anecdotes or other narratives.** When a writer employs a narrative or anecdote, he or she is usually attempting to connect with the reader emotionally. For example, beginning an essay about human trafficking by relaying the personal story of a victim captures the attention of the audience because it humanizes the problem and draws on readers' empathy.
- **Images or other forms of media.** When a writer uses images, songs, and other types of nontextual media, he or she is often attempting to engage a reader's emotions. Songs and pictures produce emotional responses. For example, Toby Keith's post-9/11 anthem, "Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue," seems to embody the nation's anger after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. While you may not agree with the song's sense of justice, the lyrics recall a painful time in our nation's history. For many, that recollection prompts an emotional response.
- **Direct quotations.** Though quotations are used for a myriad of reasons, direct quoting from an individual who has been personally affected by an issue is usually an appeal to the emotions of a reader. For example, if I were writing an essay about breast cancer and I quoted a cancer patient, that quotation would be an attempt to humanize the topic and appeal to the sympathy of my readers.
- **Humor.** When a writer uses humor in order to illustrate a point, he or she is employing pathos. Though there is logic to satirical humor (as used on *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report*), the main appeal of such television shows is that they make viewers laugh.

## Fallacious Pathos

- **Argument by Dismissal:** Rejecting an idea without providing a reason or explanation for its dismissal. For instance, there is a tendency to cry "socialism" when faced with calls for a single-payer system in the ongoing health care debate. Such a dismissal of the single-payer system may include the observations, "This is America!," or, "You are free to live elsewhere if you prefer." While we do live in the United States and people are free to live wherever they want, neither of these observations actually addresses the argument, either for or against the single-payer system. The observer relies on the simple (and fallacious) dismissal of the opposing viewpoint.
- **Argument by Emotive Language:** Using emotional words that are not supported by evidence and/or are unconnected to the argument being made. For example, in abortion debates regarding a woman's right

to choose, the argument sometimes shifts from a discussion of medical or legal rights to a graphic description of the abortion process or extreme analogies between abortion and genocide. Most would agree that genocide should be prevented and that the destruction of a fetus is a violent procedure, but these observations distract from the conversation about a woman's medical and legal rights.

- **Appeal to Pity:** Drawing on irrelevant personal experiences or feelings in order to produce a sympathetic response. For instance, if I were writing about the necessity of universal health care and I included a personal anecdote about falling ill in Canada and being unable to receive free health care, that anecdote would be a fallacious appeal to pity. My personal experience, though interesting, does not illuminate the issue of universal health care.

- **The Slippery Slope:** Suggesting that a particular argument or course of action will lead to disastrous consequences without offering evidence. This fallacy usually produces an emotional response. A common example is the assertion that legalizing gay marriage will lead to polygamy, bestiality, and/or pedophilia.