

Why We Study Rhetoric

Or, What Freestyle Rap Teaches Us about Writing

By Kyle D. Stedman

The Web site [eHow](#) has a page on “How to Freestyle Rap” (“Difficulty: Moderately Challenging”), and I’m trying to figure out what I think about it. On one hand, it seems like it would be against the ethos of an authentic rapper to use a page like this to brush up on freestyle skills.

But on the other hand, the advice seems solid, encouraging the reader to follow an easy, 7-step model:

1. Learn the basics.
2. Just start flowing.
3. Write down some good rhymes ahead of time.
4. Work on your wordplay.
5. Practice at home in your spare time.
6. Have a rap battle.
7. Rap what you know.

(www.ehow.com/m/how_2034496_freestyle-rap.html)

The page addresses freestyle rap as an art that can be practiced effectively by anyone, as long as he or she is willing to research, take risks, spend time developing the craft, practice with a community and for an audience, and stay true to him- or herself (i.e., to “keep it real”).

And here’s the thing: I think of rhetoric the same way. That is, it’s an art that can be practiced effectively by anyone, as long as the rhetor (the person who is communicating rhetorically) is willing to research, take risks, spend time developing the craft, practice with a community and for an audience, and stay true to him- or herself.

That’s right: Rhetoric is an art. But not necessarily in the way we think of art. The ancient Greeks called art *techne*, a word they used to mean “a craft or ability to do something, a creative skill; this can be physical or mental, positive or negative, like that of metalworking or trickery” (Papillion 149). Other examples of *techne*? Ship-building, for one. [\[1\] Thanks to Dr. Debra Jacobs for pointing this out to me. on page 62](#) You’d better not muddle your way through the art of building a ship, or you’ll ruddy well sink.

Rhetoric developed as an oral art, the art of knowing how to give an effective speech—say, in a court, in a law-making session, or at a funeral. And if you muddled your way through a speech, not convincing anyone, not moving anyone, looking like a general schmuck in a toga, you’d ruddy well sink there, too.

So, rhetoric is an art. But, of what? The shortest answer: communication, whether written, spoken, painted, or streamed

Now, how do you judge when communication has *worked*—that is, when it's effective? In other words, how do you know when someone has used rhetorical skills well?

That's easy: when an *audience* says so.

- An anchor on a conservative news program makes a jab at President Obama. Conservative watchers thought the jab was well deserved and well timed; it was rhetorically effective for them. Liberal watchers thought it was a cheap shot; it was not rhetorically effective for them.

- A student writes an essay arguing that advertisements are so pervasive in the United States that he can't even go to the bathroom without seeing Coca-Cola's logo. His roommate reads it, not thinking that advertising is a big deal; he's not convinced, so it's not a rhetorically effective essay for him. But his teacher reads it and thinks it's cleverly argued and biting true. For her, it works and is rhetorically effective.

- Eminem ends a rap battle to raucous applause from most of the people in the club, but the old grandmother in the back thinks it was all a lot of noise.

Rhetoric can't be judged completely objectively. It wouldn't make sense to say that someone's rhetoric was "right" or "wrong," although we might claim it can be "good" or "bad." It all comes down to the audience.

You'll notice that the above examples describe situations in which the rhetor is being persuasive in one way or another. Another common definition of rhetoric: the art of *persuasion*. And persuasion is important—we're constantly trying to convince others, either subtly or overtly, to understand *our* points of view, and others are constantly trying to convince us to understand *their* points of view.

But I like to think of rhetoric as being about more than just persuasion. Rhetoric is also about making a connection with an audience. It's a series of techniques to help us share the way we see things with others. And depending on whom I'm sharing with, I'll use different techniques. I wouldn't communicate my views to my wife in the same way that I would to the U.S. president, or to Jay-Z.

The best rappers are surprising. Listening to them, you find yourself leaning over, laughing at unexpected wordplay. You smile, get into the groove, listen more carefully, and later remember how much you enjoyed it. The communication was effective.

I read *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* in my senior year of high school, but I didn't really get it. The author kept talking about rhetoric, and even after I looked up the definition, it didn't make any sense to me. Looking back, I think that's ironic: the beating, blood-pumping heart of rhetoric is a consideration of audience. Speaking or writing or composing something that works the way you want it to, for the audience you want it to work for. The author (Robert M. Pirsig), on the other hand, was thoroughly unrhetorical in his discussion of rhetoric.

But I don't think senior-year me was the intended audience of *Zen*. If I had been, the author was a pretty lousy rhetor, because he did not well enough explain what *rhetoric* means. After reading his book, I was neither convinced nor riveted.

However, when I read the book now, I'm moved. I understand and accept Pirsig's views. Without the text changing at all, I *became* his audience. I get it now.

So, why study rhetoric? The answer is the same as that of the question, "Why study freestyle rap?" Both are a set of skills and techniques that can be learned and improved upon by studying methods that have proven effective in the past.

"Why study painting?" Because by studying how others paint, you learn techniques that can make you a more effective painter.

"Why study business?" Because by studying how others do business, you learn techniques that can help you become a more effective businessperson.

Why study ship-building, or basket-weaving, or trickery, or any other subject that you might be able to muddle through, but which you'd be much better at in practice, with some training and technique? Isn't it obvious?

Within the realm of communication, the same theory applies to rhetoric. Why not learn some techniques that will increase the chance that your audience will think or feel the way you want them to after hearing, reading, or experiencing whatever it is that you throw at them?

And that's only thinking about you in the composer's role. What about when you're on the receiving end, hearing, reading, or experiencing ideas that have been carefully crafted so that you'll buy into them? A scary list of rhetorically effective people: politicians, advertisers, supervillains. (You want rhetoric? Just listen to the slimy words of the Emperor in *Return of the Jedi*, or the words Lord Voldemort beams into everyone's brains in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part Two*.) Studying rhetoric can also open your eyes to the ways in which others wield their communication skills, for better or worse (in the cases of the Emperor and Lord Voldemort, like evil weapons).

My wife to me, the other day: "Ugh. Carrie just wrote something inappropriate on her fiancé's Facebook wall again."

Me: "What'd she say?"

My wife: "I don't even remember. It was something all gushy and uncomfortable. I skimmed back a bit and saw she's been doing that a lot. Doesn't she know that she can write messages that go just to him and not the rest of us? She doesn't have to post that stuff on his wall!"

As I thought about this conversation, I realized that Carrie (not her real name) was in some ways exemplifying a rhetorical failure. Yes, her fiancé, whom Carrie certainly intended to be the primary recipient, probably found the message very rhetorically effective. That is, he surely felt the gushy emotions that she meant for him to feel. Her message worked. How rhetorical!

But because a Facebook wall is to some extent public, others—hundreds of people—will read Carrie's post too. What is the intended message for them? If we trust and like Carrie (and if she's lucky), then we may think, "Oh, it's sweet when people are public about their love for each other!" If we're kind of sick of Carrie, we might think, "She just plain doesn't get that we don't care about her digital smooches and hugs." And if we're mad at her, we might think, "She's publicly declaring her love to him because she wants us to

feel bad that we don't have the kind of true love that she has!" In short, after reading the message, most of us would think either (A) "That's nice!," (B) "Oh, gross!," or (C) "That hussy!"

Why study rhetoric? Because, communication is difficult, and even more difficult if we are not rhetorically aware.

We're still beating around the bush when it comes to what rhetorical skills actually look like. Up to this point, you could say, "You keep talking about these different collections of skills, but other than by freestyling, I barely have any idea how to go about being effective at this stuff."

Among others, here are some of the decisions rhetors (including you as a composition student!) must make:

- The basics (e.g., how to determine the best time and place to communicate, how to clarify what a communication is about, and how to learn about an audience)
- How to choose appropriate ideas and evidence to use for a given audience (e.g., freewriting, open-minded research, and other forms of what we call "invention")
- How to organize material presented to a given audience (e.g., as in a business report, a classical six-part speech, or a thesis-driven research essay)
- How to shape the style of a message or argument in ways that will be both understandable and exciting for an audience (e.g., using rhetorical figures to liven up sentences or varying sentence length and type)
- What medium to use when communicating to a given audience (e.g., a speech, an essay, a video, a recording, a painting, a sticky note, a letter made from words cut out of magazines)

Yes, I keep writing the word *audience* over and over again. That's because the audience is at the core of any rhetorical endeavor. Remember? All of the considerations described above can be summed up in one sentence: Thinking rhetorically means thinking about your audience. And *that* means communicating in a way that doesn't make you look stupid, mean, or confusing. And that means communicating in a way that makes you look smart, nice, and clear.

It sounds obvious, right? I think so too. But then, why are people so bad at it?

The shortcomings of a failed rhetor are those of a failed freestyle rapper, too. He gets up to start a rap battle and seems impressive at first (i.e., he has a strong ethos—a word we use a lot when analyzing communication from a rhetorical angle), but then things go badly when he gets the mic. He starts blundering around, looking like he's never done this before. (He should have followed *eHow*'s advice to "[w]rite down some good rhymes ahead of time.") In desperation, he lashes out at his opponent with attacks that seem like low blows, even for a rap battle. The audience groans; he broke an unspoken rule about how mean he can be. Rhetorical failure. He can tell that he's losing the audience, so he changes his tactics and starts blending together all kinds of words that rhyme. But he fails at this too, since nothing he says makes any sense. Eventually, he's booed off stage.

Why study rhetoric? So you can succeed in rap battles. I thought that was obvious.

Works Cited

“How to Freestyle Rap.” *eHow*. Demand Media, n.d. Web. 15 July 2011.

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[1] Thanks to Dr. Debra Jacobs for pointing this out to me.