DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 144 102 CS 203 630

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TITLE Rhetoric and Composition: An Overview.
PUB DATE 77
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (28th, Kansas City, Missouri, March 31-April 2, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication (Thought Transfer); *Composition (Literary); *English Instruction; Higher Education; *Literary Conventions; *Process Education; *Rhetoric; Secondary Education

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the significance of a rhetorical approach to composition instruction, an approach that shifts emphasis from the finished product to the process. Using the rhetorical approach, composition teachers do not prescribe which forms of discourse are the "correct" ones, always to be used, but show their students how to develop principles by which appropriate forms are chosen, forms that most effectively present the content of the discourse. (RL)

Richard M. Coe

# Rhetoric and Composition: An Overview

What does "a rhetorical approach to composition" signify?[1]

As W. Ross Winterowd, among many others, has noted, "any field is defined by the questions it asks." And those questions follow from the root metaphors (to use Burke's phrase) or standard analogies (to use Kuhn's phrase) which organize our perception of that field's subject matter. The New Critics, for example, focused on the text qua text, isolating it from its author(s), reader(s), social and historical contexts. The techniques of close textual analysis follow logically from that focus: they are appropriate to it.

The New Rhetoricians (who are no more new than the New Critics) begin with a different root metaphor. The rhetorical perspective focuses not on the text itself, but on the communicative relationships reified in (or, perhaps I should say, represented by) the text. The message or meaning is perceived not as "in" the text, but as the relationship between speaker/writer and hearer/reader which is re-presented by the text. The rhetorician, therefore, reads the text in its various contexts and operates with a significantly different definition of objectivity.[2]

Rhetoric has been defined as the study of those symbols of inducement which we use and are used by; but one of the major insights of the New Rhetoricians (and, for that matter, of cognitive psychologists and other social scientists) is the important sense in which exposition and persuasion are not finally and distinctly separable, in which all significant symbols are symbols of inducement.

Rhetoric has been defined also as the art of finding the most effective way to say anything whatsoever; for Aristotle, rhetoric was "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion." The rhetorical emphasis is, indeed, on the how, not the what, of a message. That seems to imply, and at one time perhaps did imply, amorality, an

instrumental ethic. That implication disappears, however, as soon as one considers the extent to which form and content interpenetrate. The how cannot ultimately be separated from the what: "a search for a better word is," as Gary Tate has said, "a search for a better vision." Technique (or, for that matter, technology) is not neutral: the tools and methods used in an investigation clearly constrain, and may even determine, what that investigation will discover.

Rhetoric studies the interrelation between form and content, between method and result. It is concerned with how knowledge is organized. Perceived thusly, rhetoric has to do with truth. It is not simply a techne, not just a set of amoral means for manipulating audiences. It is not a technical, but a humane subject.

The Report of the Committee on the Nature of Rhetorical Invention begins by asserting that a vital aspect of the human experience is rhetorical. Human beings, as Aristotle himself noted, are social animals: we survive and achieve humanness only through cooperation. We are not solitary individuals--as are leopards, for example, who come together only to mate. Neither, however, are we herd animals: our cooperation is achieved not by instinct, but through symbolic communications. Because we do not depend on instincts, because we use education (the production of consciousness, the learning of the symbolic patterns of our cultures), we are more flexible than other animals, can change more quickly and adapt to more varied environments. We are in an important sense, therefore, rhetorical animals.[3]

For the composition teacher, the important point of this analysis is that writing is a social process, the attempt of one individual or group to communicate with others. In one sort of odd case there may be only a single individual involved (e.g., when I make a shopping list in order to communicate with myself at a later time or when I make a journal entry in order to

clarify inchoate feelings). In another sort of case, increasingly common these days, the writer is a group attempting to represent a corporate position. But virtually any piece of writing represents a communicative process of some sort.

This process always has purposes--self-expressive, explanatory, and/or persuasive. Although writing may be judged by many standards, the only objective way to judge it is by its effects. Faulty parallelism decreases one's chances of being understood accurately (at least by readers who have been educated to expect parallelism). A shopping list organized according to the same patterns as the stores will facilitate the shopping.

The writing process begins with the discovery of something to communicate and ends (at least for one cycle) when the message reaches an audience. The writing process includes attempts to discover and clarify that message, evaluation of audience and occasion, the search for forms, modes, and structures which are appropriate to purpose, audience and occasion, the structuring of sentences and paragraphs (assuming the chosen form uses them), and revision--which is a much more significant part of the process than most fledgling writers realize. Writing ends, as it often begins, with reading.

Writing, it must quickly be added, is not usually so linear a process as this listing may imply. For better or for worse, real human beings do not ordinarily perform this process in orderly steps. We often discover our own real messages only in the process of revision (re-vision), etc. Writing, like teaching, is a learning process. Attempting to write often sends us back to the library--or to the world--for more information and/or for alternative organizing principles.

Writing differs from most oral communication in that the audience is not present, and feedback is therefore delayed (if not entirely absent).

Writing is, in this sense, very like speaking over radio or television (without a studio audience), and "writer's block" very much like "mike fright." This lack of constant and immediate feedback is one characteristic which makes writing so much more difficult than ordinary talking.

Writing is a knowing, as well as a communicative process. When we teach writing we are not teaching a body of knowledge, not even in the sense that a history or literature teacher does. But neither are we teaching a skill, at least not in the sense that a swimming or typing instructor does.

Certainly there is information a person should know in order to write effectively, a certain amount of grammar, for example. That information need not, however, be known in any conscious way: most native speakers of English ordinarily make their subjects and verbs agree even if they do not know what subjects and verbs are. Indeed, the research is counter-intuitive in this case: it indicates that the teaching of formal grammar, whatever virtues it may have, does not significantly improve writing. Similarly, information about the psychological processes underlying writing is more useful to the writing teacher (or perhaps to the person who is experiencing a writing-block and therefore not writing) than to the writer. Ideally, writers should focus their primary attention on what they are saying--and they should be able to do so precisely because they have mastered the writing process so thoroughly that it seems "natural" and need not be thought about consciously while sentences are being formed.

The realization that teaching writing is somehow different from teaching subjects which prominently emphasize a body of knowledge often leads people to conclude that writing is a skill. Would that reality were so simple! Writing, like any other communications (rhetorical) process, is intimately involved with knowing. The proper form and style for a scientific paper mirrors a scientific way of knowing: to devise that format meant to understand

science as a way of knowing; and to use that format means to accept and validate that way of knowing (which is perhaps why poems are so rarely written in that format). Our task as writing teachers would be simpler if form and content were separable, if people could think out their ideas first, choose appropriate forms second, and write it all down third.

As most English teachers will assert--at least when they are teaching what they generally know most about (i.e., literature)--form and content are not entirely or ultimately separable. Human beings cannot perceive, conceive or communicate without forms, without using something like Coleridge's active imagination to in-form the data. It might be more convenient if we first perceived, second thought and felt, and third expressed ourselves, but we do not. In the first place, the three processes overlap--we do not perform them in linear order--in fact, it is probably more accurate to think of them as three levels of one process. In the second place, some sort of knowing (in-forming, composing) process occurs at all three levels. That is why we often know something better after we have taught or written it. That is why we can often perceive something more clearly and complexly after we know about it. That is why it is important to teach writing-as-knowing, not writing as "correctness" or even writing as a skill.

This is also what makes writing a humane subject and not just a technical course (and why writing should occur in every subject area even if it is taught primarily in English classes). True, if we knew that a particular group of students were tracked for a particular type of job-slot and if we cared about preparing them only for their jobs, we could simply force them to memorize the forms and techniques which would allow them to produce the written products their employers (and some of their other teachers) will demand. Teaching people to write, however, means something more than that.

It is important that we think of the writing process, not just of the final product which emerges from it. The piece of writing is tangible: we hold the paper in our hands, correct the spelling, revise the sentences, shift the order of the paragraphs. It is easy to forget that we are not (should not be) concerned with creating a perfect text, but with creating the best possible communication. Literary texts may be to some extent an exception (because aiming for the perfect text often does optimize literary communication); in general, however, the text is clearly a means to an end. We must not let the material tangibility of the text fool us into focusing on the written product to the exclusion of the communicative process.

Although we are generally concerned with writing in academic/professional contexts and although nearly absolute generalizations can be made about what kind of writing is appropriate to that set of contexts, it is important that we teach students to conceive of writing more generally. Writers who understand the principles of rhetoric will be able to adapt their form and style to a variety of contexts, just as they ordinarily do when speaking. Moreover, the rules of contemporary professional writing (even the most "illogical") make sense when viewed in the context of what works given the existing professional purposes and audiences.

Rhetoric is a relativistic subject: it is concerned with appropriateness, effectiveness, the "fit" between text and context. Competent writers understand rhetorical principles which enable them to adapt to varying purposes, audiences and occasions. Their primary concern is that the communication succeed, that it reach its audience. A rhetorical approach, therefore, shifts the emphasis from text to relationship, from product to process, from structure to function, from formal logic to dialectics, from syntactics and semantics to the pragmatics of communication.[4]

Contemporary theories of perception, cognition and communication all

imply a highly significant role for form. Form constrains content--so it matters very much which forms are available to a culture or individual. The fact that people perceive patterns of meaning, not individual stimuli, is the basis of our freedom because it allows us to respond flexibly to meanings rather than reflexively to stimuli. But it also means that our initial observations are never "raw" data, that the forms a person knows operate to select "relevant" data, that reality is social, and that there is not in any simple sense a one-to-one relationship between our perceptions and what is materially "out there."

As composition teachers, we teach forms. We are, therefore, inevitably teaching rhetoric. A rhetorical approach means that we do so self-consciously and explicitly. It means that, rather than indoctrinating students by telling them only what the "correct" forms are, we teach them principles for choosing forms which will be appropriate to various rhetorical contexts. Many of the details of rhetorical approaches are identical with the details of standard American approaches. The difference is that students understand the rhetorical principles and contexts from which the detailed rules are derived, that they understand those rules not as "correct" but as effective in particular communicative contexts, and that they are capable of adapting to rhetorical contexts for which they have not been specifically trained.

It is this self-consciousness and understanding of the writing process which defines a rhetorical approach to composition. It is also what makes composition a potentially humanistic subject.[5]

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## NOTES

[1] This article is based on a paper presented as part of a group project at the 1977 CCCC. It was designed to provide a conceptual framework for two papers and three workshops which followed it. The entire CCCC project was a preliminary to an institute for teachings of composition held under the auspices of the NEH at the University of South Carolina in the summer of 1977. It is intended also as a preliminary to a book on the teaching of writing. This topic was assigned to me and had to represent the collective opinion of the group. It is, consequently, a significantly different type of text than one in which an individual writer addresses an audience.

[2] New Criticism is sometimes called a rhetorical criticism. The phrase "rhetorical analysis" is then usually taken to mean stylistic analysis. Style, however, is only one department of rhetoric and patently not the most important. As I am discussing them here, the New Critical and New Rhetorical perspectives are antithetical--Burke's Pentad flies in the face of the intrinsic injunction--and the approaches which follow from them are distinct and complementary.

[3] Of course, a philosopher will tell you that we are defined by our self-consciousness, an economist that we are economic animals, and so forth. That is all true. Human society is characterized by a more complex and flexible division of labor than any other. Although our interdependence is not mandated by instincts, we are decidedly maladapted for independent survival. From that contradiction (from that ecological adaptation) follows our self-consciousness, our languaging, our symbolic thought, our sometimes annoyingly flexible mode of perception, and our definition as rhetorical animals.

[4] The study of signs and languages can be divided into the three areas (established by C.W. Morris and followed by Rudolf Carnap, among others) of syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics. While the three areas are clearly interdependent and can be separated only conceptually, for the purposes of analysis, the rhetorical perspective emphasizes the pragmatic and considers syntax and lexicon as they affect pragmatic purposes. Pragmatics, like rhetoric, focuses on the writer-reader relationship mediated by the text, not on the text itself.

[5] A rhetorical approach to composition is a sufficient condition for neither salvation nor revolution. It will not even resolve the contradictions implicit in teaching freshman composition in North American universities in the late 1970s. It is, nonetheless, a progressive direction.