

Tiffany Debicki

Rhetoric and Its Power : My Sales Pitch

Res Rhetorica nr 2, 97-100

2015

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

TIFFANY DEBICKI

WRITING DEPARTMENT

LOYOLA UNIVERSITY MARYLAND

TIFFANY.DEBICKI@GMAIL.COM

Rhetoric and Its Power: My Sales Pitch

License

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Poland. The content of the license is available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/pl/>

TIFFANY DEBICKI

LOYOLA UNIVERSITY MARYLAND
TIFFANY.DEBICKI@GMAIL.COM

Rhetoric and Its Power: My Sales Pitch

At the beginning of each semester, I continuously find myself less in professor mode than in salesperson mode, selling the subject I teach—writing. Admittedly, I place this burden on myself, but after nine years of teaching writing at the college level, I find it almost as much of a necessity as the best of lesson plans. A major in writing—a major that is rare at most American universities—with its emphasis on rhetoric and the craft of effectively communicating, does not exactly promise a huge return on investment, not like its more fashionable counterparts, such as finance, engineering, or, the ever-increasing in popularity, global studies. The glamour of some of these majors is appealing not only to students but also to parents, the people usually paying for the, also ever-increasing, cost of their child's education.

I understand. I study the statistics. I see the many graphs and tables that seek to chart the most profitable majors. I see that writing is never at the top of the list and is sometimes not even on the list. But what these numbers do not show, what these statistical models do not control for, is the competitive advantage of knowing how to effectively communicate.

Fortunately, my sales pitch at the beginning of the semester is supported by my thriving department that is devoted entirely to writing. I teach at Loyola University Maryland, one of the few universities in the United States that not only has an English Department but also a Writing Department, a department that focuses on teaching the art of rhetoric and also rhetoric as it appears in different types of writing, such as professional and literary, a department whose sheer existence, in addition to its diverse and applicable course offerings, makes my sales job a little easier, semester by semester.

We are also fortunate to have efforts in the classroom anchored by the department sponsored Writing Center. The Writing Center is for those who are not just writing majors but for all students who want to improve their writing skill. The center guides students in their rhetorical endeavors at any stage of the writing process and offers help to those at any skill level. It, too, along with the department's emphasis on rhetoric, signals to students the importance of quality writing.

Since the Writing Department at Loyola does offer a writing major, we are able to have numerous course offerings, a sampling of which includes, Art of Rhetoric, Rhetoric in Professional Writing, Art of Poetry and Fiction, and Art of Nonfiction. The balance of professional and literary courses allows students to experience the power of rhetoric. Students are then exposed to a curriculum that, as our department website states, "...frames the spectrum of writing from literary to professional with the aim to help students understand the demands of each genre as a rhetorical act (a form of communication)" (www.loyola.edu/writing/academic/curriculum).

Even after all of this—the Writing Center, the writing major, the numerous course offerings—each semester I still have to establish credibility for my subject. I often imagine professors in other departments making an argument for the necessity of their subject. In some areas of study, it would be comical: "The need for calculus is three-fold" or "Fun with physics: a brief summary." It would not happen. So why is it that I feel the need to promote my topic? In trying to answer this question, I have turned to my audience: my students. Their answers are consistent: writing is something we have been doing since pre-school, they say. Everyone knows how to write, they say. It is intuitive. It is easy.

In my classes, where I teach Effective Writing to freshmen and Art of Nonfiction to mostly sophomores and juniors, I try to present a counterargument to these answers I receive from students by distinguishing between having excellent grammar skills and having excellent rhetorical skills. I emphasize the need for a high level of professionalism in writing, and I highlight that writing, with its rhetorical moves as well as its creative nuances, is essential to a successful career and to effective communication, no matter their field of study. Students seem to take notice when they hear this news.

I also try to instill in my students the ability to confidently know what rhetorical strategies work best for a research essay as well as what rhetorical strategies are best for a creative piece, so that when they leave the classroom, they are better equipped to communicate in a professional manner and become their own best self-editor. One way I try to encourage this confidence is through emphasizing revision. Through multiple revisions of an essay that they submit to me and through revisions they submit to their peer groups, they quickly learn how to edit a piece of writing not only for grammar and punctuation issues but also for clarity and for persuasiveness. It is not my job to teach them how to follow a formula and construct an essay; I am there to teach them how to assess their topic, their audience, their purpose, and proceed accordingly by using the most appropriate rhetorical strategies. Revision gives students practical experience in producing an elevated piece of writing. They see their writing transform.

While effective written communication is something I heavily stress in my classes, I also emphasize the importance of verbally using rhetorical skill to communicate. In my classroom discussions, I encourage students to engage with one another, to voice their own opinions, and to consider the best rhetorical statements to make and not worry about what others may or may not say in response. This type of classroom environment is inspired by what Joseph Harris refers to in his book, *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1976*, as an environment where he would want a "...a wrangle, even if it is somewhat formless (or perhaps because it is), that gives students a set of chances to come to their own sense of a text or issue than a dialogue whose course has been charted in advance by their teacher" (Harris 2012, 155). In an effort to avoid ideas that have been "charted in advance" I encourage students, just as I do with written means, to forgo the idea of having a formula and instead assess the rhetorical situation—their audience, their purpose, their tone. During these classroom discussions, students often seem surprised when other students take note of their statements, and they become eager to enter again into the conversation, seemingly amazed that their use of rhetoric has worked.

In addition to Joseph Harris, other experts in the field who I rely on to assist me in the classroom are Andrea Lunsford and William Zinsser. For my freshman Effective Writing course, I require Lunsford's *Easy Writer: A Pocket Reference*, as do most other professors in my department. I also utilize Zinsser and his *On Writing Well*, since it not only provides best practices for approaching professional or literary writing, but it also establishes a solid foundation from which to approach writing in any field of study.

Because the art of rhetoric is such a vibrant topic, I also continually refresh myself on its many conventions. In 2013, I went back into the classroom. I took a pedagogy class at the University of Maryland. We discussed the latest scholarship on rhetoric from scholars such as the aforementioned Joseph Harris, whose *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1976* we used as a textbook, as well as others, including Suresh Canagarajah, Erika Lindemann, and David Bartholomae, to name a few. We discussed various usages of rhetoric, different strategies for utilizing rhetoric in our own writing, and ways to teach it in a face-to-face environment as well as online. Language is malleable, it evolves. And if I seek to express its vitality to my students in the best way I can, then I, too, have to know my product as much as possible before I can sell it.

It is a powerful tool: rhetoric. It is forceful. It is nuanced. Teaching it in various forms and imparting its importance are practical ways educators have of preparing students for the dynamic and competitive marketplace they will enter after leaving the university classroom.

References

Loyola University Maryland Writing Department. Accessed May 11, 2015. <http://loyola.edu>

Harris, Joseph. 2012. *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1976*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.