

# Chapter 3

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## Establishing Credibility and Appealing to Your Audience

### *ETHOS*: ESTABLISHING CREDIBILITY

Ways of Establishing Credibility as a Writer  
Ethical Concerns

### *PATHOS*: APPEALING TO YOUR AUDIENCE

Analyzing an Audience  
Shaping an Audience

### VIRGINIA WOOLF, "PROFESSIONS FOR WOMEN"

Of the modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word there are three kinds. The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker; the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind; the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself (*Rhetoric* 1.2.1356a1-5).

**A**ristotle is describing the three kinds of rhetorical proof available to the orator, *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*, described briefly in the introduction to this section. Two thousand years later a modern rhetorician, Wayne Booth, voices the same idea in connection with writing.

The common ingredient that I find in all of the writing I admire—excluding for now novels, plays, and poems—is something that I shall reluctantly call the rhetorical stance, a stance which depends

from  
Horner, Winifred Bryan. Rhetoric in the  
Classical Tradition. New York: St.  
Martin's Press, 1908.

on discovering and maintaining in any writing situation a proper balance among the three elements that are at work in any communicative effort; the available arguments about the subject itself [*logos*], the interest and peculiarities of the audience [*pathos*], and the voice, the implied character, of the speaker [*ethos*].

The vocabulary is different but the ideas remain the same for oratory and for writing, for the fifth century B.C. and for the twentieth century.

### **ETHOS: ESTABLISHING CREDIBILITY**

In writing, as in speech, the strength of the argument rests to a great degree on the credibility that the author establishes. The author's good character adds weight to the words, provides support for the statements, and lends proof to the arguments. Establishing this character depends, in turn, on the words, examples, statements, and arguments that the writer offers.

In orations, speakers literally and physically stand behind what they say, but in writing, the author may be physically separated from the reader. In conversations, there is constant interaction—questions and interruptions—between the speaker and hearer. In writing, the reader usually cannot question the author. We read letters from friends who are thousands of miles away and all we have in this case are the words on the page. But through their writings, these persons are very real and very much present. Through the words on the page, writers establish who they are and what they believe.

Authors can establish their credibility by demonstrating three qualities through the words on the page: intelligence, virtue, and goodwill. Intelligence can be indicated by experience or special knowledge of the subject, although the best evidence may well lie in careful, well-reasoned arguments. Virtue and goodwill can be shown by identifying with the values and interests of the audience. Note the interaction between *ethos* and *pathos* here as the author's credibility depends on the audience's belief in his or her goodwill.

One of the most successful users of *ethos* was Martin Luther King, Jr. His voice and his moral stature were eloquent weapons in the fight for civil rights and integration in the 1960s. The following excerpts are from his "Letter from Birmingham Jail." The letter was in answer to a statement from eight fellow clergymen from Alabama who criticized him for his "unwise and untimely" activities in connection with his participation in a demonstration for human rights in Birmingham, for which he was subsequently jailed.

My Dear Fellow Clergymen:

While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities “unwise and untimely.” Seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would have little time for anything other than such correspondence in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.

In this opening paragraph, King establishes his *ethos*: He underscores his concern for constructive rather than destructive activities, which must always be the concern of people of character and virtue. He appeals to the goodwill of his readers by making it clear that he is answering their particular criticisms because he knows that even though they have criticized his actions as “unwise and untimely” he also understands that they are “men of genuine good will” and that their criticisms are “sincerely set forth.” His final sentence—that he will try to answer their statement in “patient and reasonable terms”—establishes him as a person of intelligence and common sense. This opening paragraph, in answer to a statement criticizing his actions, predisposes his readers to accept at the outset that he is a reasonable person writing without malice.

In the next paragraph, he gives the reasons for his being in Birmingham, since his critics had also blamed him for being an “outsider.” He carefully explains that he has organizational ties in Birmingham and had been asked by the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights to engage in a “nonviolent direct-action program if such were deemed necessary.” The third paragraph, however, outlines the real reasons for his being there:

But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their “thus saith the Lord” far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

Notice here how King places his actions in a larger moral context—a fight against injustice: “I am in Birmingham because injustice is here.”

He then compares himself to religious figures from history who carried Christianity “far beyond the boundaries of their home towns” to the “far corners” of the known world. He proclaims himself a person of virtue not only in responding to the call of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, but in maintaining that he “must constantly respond to . . . [a] call for aid.” And King speaks to the shared values of his audience, since he knows that his readers, who are themselves clergymen, understand and are particularly sympathetic to the religious commitments he cites.

He continues to establish the intellectual thrust of his argument by allusions to outside authorities such as the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, and the medieval philosopher St. Thomas Aquinas, and by a number of Biblical references. In addition, writing from what must have been an emotional viewpoint, he still maintains a reasoned and careful argument.

In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self-justification; and direct action.

Such carefully controlled steps in an emotionally packed situation mark King as a person of intelligence and common sense.

After a carefully reasoned series of arguments supporting his position, the conclusion once more reminds the audience of King’s motives and morals:

Never before have I written so long a letter. I’m afraid it is much too long to take your precious time. I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what else can one do when he is alone in a narrow jail cell, other than write long letters, think long thoughts, and pray long prayers?

If I have said anything in this letter that overstates the truth and indicates an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said anything that understates the truth and indicates my having a patience that allows me to settle for anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me.

I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil-rights leader but as a “fellow clergyman and a Christian brother.” Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of

love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood,  
Martin Luther King, Jr.

He reiterates the virtue of his cause by calling on God's forgiveness if he has settled "for anything less than brotherhood," and he emphasizes the reasonableness of his cause by asking his readers' forgiveness if he has "said anything that understates the truth." Finally, he establishes his goodwill toward his audience by hoping that his letter is not too long for their "precious time," and reminds them of their Christian brotherhood by his hope that they will meet soon as fellow clergymen. He emphasizes their common cause by repeating the word brother or brotherhood four times in the last two paragraphs. He leaves his readers with the firm impression that he is a person of intelligence, virtue, and goodwill arguing a just cause. And it is in his words, sentences, and allusions that King establishes his character.

### **Ways of Establishing Credibility as a Writer**

You can establish your good character and credibility in the same way that Martin Luther King, Jr., does. Remember that what you say and how you say it tell your audience who you are, giving them a sense of your intelligence and common sense, virtue and good character, and above all basic goodwill toward them, your readers. Following are some questions that can help you to establish your credibility systematically:

#### ***Intelligence and Common Sense***

1. Have I used arguments that sound reasonable to me?

Would the arguments that I use be convincing to me? Are they based on ideas that make sense to my audience? Do the ideas follow each other in a logical way?

2. Have I overstated my case using inappropriate exaggeration?

Have I exaggerated any of the statements that I make? Have I used words that are too strong? Have I used examples or details that are outlandish? Have I carefully qualified my assertions?

3. Have I allowed for doubts and uncertainties?

Few stands or viewpoints are unequivocally one-sided. Do I allow for doubts—my own and those of other people? Do I acknowledge and honestly talk about those doubts and uncertainties?

4. Have I acknowledged other viewpoints?

Every subject has a number of different viewpoints, some of which may be shared by members of the audience. Do I recognize those differing viewpoints as valid and worthy of discussion?

### *Virtue and Good Character*

1. Have I compared myself and my case to persons of known integrity?

If I know certain persons or situations that my audience thinks of as honest and sincere, how can I connect my ideas with those persons or situations?

2. Can I put the issue within a larger moral framework?

If I am discussing women's rights, for example, can I put that issue within the larger one of human rights, thereby adding to the significance of the question that I am discussing?

3. Have I stated my beliefs, values, and priorities in connection with this issue?

If I am discussing women's rights, for example, have I made it clear that I believe in the rights of all human beings? If I am discussing the right to vote, have I made it clear that I believe in the tenets of a democratic form of government?

### *Goodwill*

1. Have I acknowledged and given careful consideration to the audience's viewpoint?

If I am advocating a certain candidate for office do I acknowledge that the audience might have some good reason for supporting another candidate?

2. Have I reviewed our points of agreement?

If I am trying to persuade my audience to vote for a bond issue to support schools, do I point out that good education is our investment in the future, and that in a democracy equal educational opportunities should be open to all children?

3. Have I reminded my audience of our common interests and concerns?

For example, in connection with a school bond issue, have I reminded my audience that better schools will bring in new business and in many ways improve the quality of life in the community?

4. Have I demonstrated that I respect and acknowledge my audience's intelligence, sincerity, and common sense?

For example, have I made an effort to present sound arguments not based on prejudice or banalities? Have I avoided trivialities? Have I answered doubts and questions that my audience might have? Have I presented my ideas clearly and in an organized fashion? Finally, is the essay free of mechanical errors in spelling and punctuation and in a form that is easy to read and that will not offend the intelligence of my audience or detract from what I am saying?

### **Ethical Concerns**

A serious concern of rhetoricians and philosophers from ancient times to the present is that rhetoric can be misused by the unscrupulous and that the appearance of good character may in fact be only an appearance. The classical rhetoricians, and especially Quintilian, believed that an orator should not only appear to be “a good man,” but should be one. Persons skilled in the use of words can use them to their advantage for both good and evil ends. The political speaker who wins votes by sounding persuasive and appearing to be of good character may turn out to be a liar; the advertiser who makes unrealistic promises about a product may be a charlatan. But Aristotle defends rhetoric against such misuse:

And if it be objected that one who uses such power of speech unjustly might do great harm, that is a charge which may be made in common against all good things except virtue, and above all against the things that are most useful, as strength, health, wealth, generalship (*Rhetoric* 1.1.1355b1–6).

Rhetoric can always be used for evil ends; thus the true integrity of the writer or orator becomes paramount. There is no way to guard against an evil person using rhetoric for bad purposes, therefore, as readers and listeners you need to measure the person who speaks or writes as carefully as possible. Your character as the writer is an important element in what you say and you should remember that your readers will respond to the image you present of yourself.

The final question, then, for both classical orators and modern writers remains:

Have I presented myself as a person of good character?

Am I using rhetoric for a good purpose?

In Chapter 8, a review of fallacies introduces errors in reasoning as well as some of the false appeals that might be used by persons who misuse rhetoric for less than good purposes.