

21W.747 (2) Rhetoric, Assignment A1

The first essay asks you to think critically about rhetoric and its relationship to truth. You must address some debatable or controversial aspect of rhetoric's relationship to truth. Many good essays are organized around a central claim, an argument in favor of a particular position. You may choose to write such an essay, attempting to persuade your reader of the correctness of your position. But the most persuasive arguments are those that carefully consider and respond to the most compelling arguments in opposition to their position. Thus, your essay should above all explore your subject matter critically, considering the issue from all sides rather than ignoring those perspectives that conflict with your central claim.

Within the general subject matter of rhetoric and truth, you are free to choose any topic. You might consider the relationship between rhetoric and honesty. You might ask whether rhetoric has any influence over truth, or whether the influence only goes the other direction. Is a speaker who has truth on her side necessarily better off rhetorically than one who speaks against the truth? Under what circumstances is it rhetorically effective to bend the truth, and how should this be done? This short list only begins to suggest topics you could consider. If you have any questions about the legitimacy of your topic, please ask the professor.

Whatever topic you choose, it will likely be important to offer thoughtful analysis of the meanings of your central terms. In fact, Plato suggests that such definitional work is the bulk of any critical argument. Dictionary definitions are usually unhelpful; rather, you should draw upon your own intuitions and the ideas of experts to develop for your reader a sense of what, for example, truth is.

Sources: This is not primarily a research paper, and you should not devote many words to explicating the ideas or opinions of others. The most difficult aspect of this assignment is finding something worth saying, something that a reader will find challenging and engaging. Nevertheless, it is often very helpful to both reader and writer to engage with the written ideas and opinions of others who address related subject matters. On rhetoric and truth, Plato's two dialogues, *Phaedrus* and *Gorgias* are both

relevant, as is Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. Herrick's text book, required for this class, also contains useful thinking, and most any book on rhetoric will likely take up the question of rhetoric's relationship to truth. Feel free to use these sources in your essay, but bear in mind that your job is to demonstrate original thinking in your writing. Summarizing the ideas of others does not constitute a critical essay. Moreover, just because an expert has made a claim does not mean that you can take that claim's truth for granted. Even if you cite expert opinion in defense of some claim, you must still examine the bases for that claim and reveal the presuppositions made by that expert in arriving at that position.

Length: I envision these papers as being between three and five pages. For details of formatting, please refer to the syllabus for this class.

Criteria: Successful essays will offer original commentary on their chosen topic, showing that the topic is sufficiently complex as to be worth thinking about. Such essays will support their points with careful argument that elucidates a critical thought process. The various ideas in a successful essay must be tied together effectively, examining the subject matter in progressively greater depth as the essay proceeds. The conclusion will not reiterate the introduction, but will show that some intellectual distance has been traveled in the course of the essay.

Unsuccessful essays will suffer from a lack of clarity, poorly constructed prose, wordiness, or clumsiness. Potential failings related to the arguments include a lack of originality, failure to critically examine one's own arguments, overly dogmatic claims, a topic that has no inherent interest or controversy, a general lack of complexity, or claims that however logically defended are not intuitively plausible or ethically conscionable. Finally, an essay might fall short if it is poorly organized, if the ideas do not fit together coherently, or if it doesn't make any progress from start to finish.

Audience: Your **essay's ideal audience member** is a thoughtful, educated person, generally familiar with the concept of *rhetoric*, but not well versed in the particular controversy that you are interested in.

This essay will be submitted twice, first as a draft then as a revision. The draft is due at my office on Friday, February 11, at noon. The revision is due in class on Thursday, February 24. In both cases, please submit an additional copy as an attachment by e-mail on the due date. While the revision will determine the bulk of the grade for this assignment, the draft should be no less a submissible document. Both draft and revision should be properly formatted, free from typos and from grammatical and spelling errors, thorough, and complete. In short, edit.