Rhetoric and Civic Life

Taken from:
Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students, Fifth Edition
by Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee
Rhetoric and Civic Life

Contents

CHAPTER 1

How People Learn to Be Civic 1
Michael Schudson

Everyday Life 3
Structures of Attention 5
Shared Enterprise 7
Civic Infrastructure 8
NOTES TO MICHAEL SCHUDSON 11
CONTRIBUTORS 12

CHAPTER 2

The Flight From Conversation 13
Sherry Turkle

CHAPTER 3

Ancient Rhetorics: Their Differences and the Differences They Make 17
Ancient Rhetorics: The Beginnings 22
Comparing Ancient and Contemporary Rhetorics 23
Extrinsic and Intrinsic Proofs 24
That’s Just Your Opinion 30
On Ideology and the Commonplaces 34
Language as Power; Language as Action 36
Practice, Practice, Practice 39
RHETORICAL ACTIVITIES 41
ENDNOTES 43
WORKS CITED 43
# CONTENTS

## CHAPTER 4

*Kairos and the Rhetorical Situation: Seizing the Moment*  45

- Ancient Depictions of *Kairos*  46
- *Kairos, Change, and Rhetorical Situations*  48
  - *Kairos as a Means of Invention*  51
  - *How Urgent or Immediate Is the Issue?*  52
  - *Arguments and Interests*  52
  - *Power Dynamics in a Rhetorical Situation*  57
  - *A Web of Related Issues*  59

**RHETORICAL ACTIVITIES**  59

**WORKS CITED**  60

## CHAPTER 5

*Achieving Stasis by Asking the Right Questions*  61

- On Inventing: How to Proceed  62
- The Importance of Achieving Stasis  63
- Theoretical versus Practical Questions  65
- The Four Questions  68
  - *A Simple Example*  70
- Expanding the Questions  71
  - *Questions of Quality: Simple or Complex*  74
  - *Questions of Policy*  76
- Using the Stases  77

**ENDNOTES**  84

**WORKS CITED**  84

## CHAPTER 6

*Conversation and Discussion*  85

- John Gastil
- Historical Notes on Political Chatter  86
- Imagining a Deliberative Conversation  88
  - *The Ideal Speech Situation*  88
  - *Democratic Conversation*  89
  - *Gricean Maxims*  90
Informal Conversation  92
Drawing on Media and Personal Experience  92
Community Bonding Through Conversation  94
Diversity in Conversation  94
Disagreement and Persuasion  95
Moving from Conversation to Discussion  98
Cyberchatting  99
National Issues Forums  100
Dialogue and Deliberation  102
The Public Conversations Project  103
Narratives and Storytelling  104
Conclusion  106
ENDNOTES  107

CHAPTER 7
The “Nasty Effect:” Online Incivility and Risk Perceptions of Emerging Technologies  110
Ashley A. Anderson, Dominique Brossard, Dietram A. Scheufele, Michael A. Xenos, Peter Ladwig

Introduction  111
The Formation of Risk Perceptions  112
The Effects of Incivility  113
The Effects of Predispositions  114
Methods  116
Study Context  116
Participants  116
Experimental Design  116
Measurement  117
Analysis  118
Results  119
Discussion  121
Conclusion  123
NOTES  124
REFERENCES  124
ABOUT THE AUTHORS  127
Index  129

Chapters 3–5 taken from Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students, Fifth Edition by Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee.
HOW PEOPLE LEARN TO BE CIVIC

A sense of citizenship is passed on from one generation to the next, not only in formal education or through intentional efforts but indirectly or collateral in the small details of everyday life. Lecturing in London a few years ago, I illustrated this point with a homely example. I said, “Take, for instance, those moments in your own family where you assert your parental authority and declare to your children, ‘Eat your vegetables.’

‘No’.

‘Eat your vegetables, please.’

‘No’.

‘Eat your vegetables or there will be no dessert.’

‘No’.

‘Eat your vegetables or else!’

And one of those little wise guys retorts, ‘You can’t make me. It’s a free country.’”

In the United States, audiences invariably acknowledge this illustration with knowing chuckles or smiles. In London, I looked out at a roomful of blank faces—not a soul cracked a smile. They had politely puzzled expressions. Only then did it dawn on me. Only then did I realize that no British child in all of history has ever said, “You can’t make me, it’s a free country.” And suddenly I knew that democracy is

not just one thing you have more or less of; it comes in an assortment of flavors. Democratic citizenship is not just something one is more or less socialized into; there are different citizenships in different democracies, and each of them is renewed in its own subtle fashion.

What I had taken as an invariant expression of children in any democratic society is, in fact, peculiarly American. It is America, not Britain, that conceives of itself self-importantly and extravagantly and naively and tragically and wonderfully as a “free country.” America’s children pick that up early on.

But how? How is it American kids learn to say that it’s a free country and British kids learn not to? How do people acquire their sense of civic life and how does that sense become second nature? How do we learn the values we are supposed to learn as members of our national culture? I am not asking how to make people better citizens. Instead, I am asking how people learn to be the sort of citizen that society wants them to be. How do they come to know what good citizenship is?

I have no confidence that earnest efforts at teaching U.S. history or turning out the vote or getting more school children to pick up trash on the beach make us good citizens, admirable as these activities may be in their own right. Nor am I convinced that liberal education does the trick either, even though I believe in its values. Political theorist Richard Flathman writes that the greatest contribution liberal education can make to our common political life is to instill a “disposition . . . wary of politics and government.” That is not what you normally hear in circles of educators devoted to civics education. But I was reminded of it in the aftermath of September 11. One of the most noteworthy and, to my mind, admirable features of the American response in those first weeks was that many of our leaders, from the president on down, waved the flag proudly but at the same time cautioned citizens about the dangers of flag waving. The only precedent I know for this kind of chastened patriotism in other countries is contemporary Germany, where the Nazi past envelops even the most timid of patriotic demonstrations with a flood of second thoughts. In the United States, I can think of no prior expression of this kind of proud but muted patriotism, a patriotism tempered by its own self-consciousness.

If citizenship is not learned primarily in school or in get-out-the-vote drives, and if college is as likely to induce skepticism about politics as it is fervent devotion to it, where do people learn their sense of civic obligation? This is a question that civic educators themselves need to think about more clearly, deeply, and historically. What I offer here is a briefly sketched framework for doing so.

A citizen is a person who has full membership in a political community, especially a nation-state. In its common legal usage, citizenship means nationality, and its mark would be a passport, a birth certificate, or other citizenship papers. In its political usage, citizenship refers to rights of political participation, and its chief sign is that a person is eligible to vote. In its sociocultural sense, citizenship refers to emotional identification with a nation and its flag, history, and culture. Finally, citizenship has a broad moral meaning, as in the phrase “good citizen.” It may refer to a person loyal to the state, and in this sense it is related to patriotism. Even more, it suggests a person who is informed about and...
takes an active role in civic affairs. Although all of these meanings of “citizen” have some relevance to my inquiry here, the broad moral meaning of civicness is my primary concern.

“How do people become civic?” is in part the question, “How do we come to understand or accept or take for granted what counts as civic?” That is, how do people develop a particular sense of the public good, a willingness to participate in its advancement, and a view of what repertoire of acts will engender a better public life? How do we come to understand or accept or take for granted what counts as civic in our own culture? Four different areas need our attention.

First, we become civic if and when the civic penetrates into everyday life. Second we become civic by what we are called to attend to and what we are called to ignore. Third, we become civic by joining with others in common enterprise. Fourth, we become civic when a civic infrastructure allows, encourages, and supports individual civic engagement. I will say something about each of these points.

EVERYDAY LIFE

First, we become civic when civic activities become a part of everyday life. Think of the recycling bins that, in many communities today, the city or municipality provides so that each household can separate its own recyclables and get them recycled by putting them out at curbside when the city picks up the weekly trash.

Think of the Pledge of Allegiance that children say in school. More is learned in this act by ritual repetition than by the actual words. I would be skeptical that school children understand the Pledge of Allegiance. Take the word “indivisible,” for instance. Children learn to pronounce it years before they study John C. Calhoun and the doctrine of nullification, or the Lincoln-Douglas debates, or the Civil War. But the presence of the term “indivisible” in the Pledge is incomprehensible without knowing it to be a reference to the Civil War. In the end, however, that is less the point than that the school day is connected in some vague but unifying way to flag and country.

Think about what kind of education happens in the widespread “red ribbon week” of drug education in our public schools. I remember when my daughter, then in first grade, came home from Drug-Free School Day and told us happily it was Free Drug Day at school. In a personal memoir, essayist Sarah Vowell recalls watching the Mickey Mouse Club on television and singing along with the theme song—but she never quite got the words of it. When the Mousekeeteers sang, “forever let us hold our banner high,” Sarah thought they were saying, “for every little polar bear to hide.” Much more of education is like that than we would ever want to admit. Still, the ritual of something like saying the Pledge, the activity of it, the collective enterprise of it, leaves a residue.

The activity that enters into ordinary life need not be everyday activity. We learn a great deal from ritual moments that come only on rare occasion—like Christmas once a year or voting every year or two. We do not really know how
deeply these activities teach us until we imagine how they might be different. Think about what lessons eighteenth-century Virginians learned when they voted or nineteenth-century Americans, in contrast to us. An eighteenth-century Virginian, that is to say a white male who owned property, went to the polling place, spoke his vote out loud in front of the sheriff and in front of the candidates, and then went over to the candidate he had favored with his vote and shook hands. The whole activity was one of ritually reaffirming a hierarchical social order in which each person knew his place. The whole experience reinforced an understanding of citizenship as appropriate deference to community leaders. There was no campaigning, there were no issues, there were no bombastic speeches. The whole point was to invest responsibility for decision-making in trusted senior members of the community.

The nineteenth century experience of voting taught different civic lessons. In the nineteenth century, political parties controlled the elections. On election day, the parties hired tens of thousands of workers to get out the vote and to stand near the polling place to hand out the “tickets” the parties had printed. The voter approached the polling place, took a ticket from one of these “ticket peddlers” from his own party, and went up to the voting station to deposit his ticket in the ballot box. He did not need to look at it. He did not need to mark it in any way. Clearly, he did not have to be literate. He could cast his ballot free of charge, but it would not have been surprising if he received payment for his effort. In New Jersey, as many as one-third of the electorate in the 1880s expected payment for voting on election day, usually in an amount between $1 and $3.

What did a vote express? Not a strong conviction that the party offered better public policies; parties tended to be more devoted to distributing offices than to advocating policies. Party was related more to comradeship than to policy; it was more an attachment than a choice, something like a contemporary loyalty to a high school or college and its teams. Voting was not a matter of assent to ideas but a statement of affiliation with people, and the connection of voter to party ticket peddler underscored that. So did the postelection visit to the party’s favorite local tavern. Drink, dollars, and drama brought people to the polls, and other than that social connection, voting was rarely anything more elevated.

Reformers at the end of the nineteenth century saw little in the parties to recommend them. The Mugwumps sought to make elections “educational,” and the Progressives tried to insulate the independent, rational citizen from the distorting enthusiasms of party. It is to them that we owe the ideal of the informed citizen, not to the Founding Fathers. In the 1880s, political campaigns began to shift from parades to pamphlets, and so put a premium on literacy. In the 1890s, the Australian ballot swept the nation, and so for the first time in American history, literacy was required to cast a ballot. The novelty of the Australian ballot was that the state took responsibility for printing ballots that listed the candidates from all parties qualifying for the election. This meant that voters received their ballots from state election officials at the polling place, not from party workers en route to the polling place. It meant that the voter had to make a choice of candidates by marking the ballot; and it normally meant that provision was made for the voter to mark the ballot in secret. With this innovation, voting
changed from a social and public duty to a private right, from a social obligation to party enforceable by social pressure to a civic obligation or abstract loyalty, enforceable only by private conscience.

In the early 1900s, nonpartisan municipal elections, presidential primaries, and the initiative and referendum imposed more challenging cognitive tasks on prospective voters than ever before. These changes enshrined “the informed citizenry,” incidentally provided a new mechanism and a new rationale for disenfranchising African Americans and immigrants, and inaugurated an enduring tradition of hand-wringing over popular political ignorance.

Between 1880 and 1910, the most basic understandings of American politics were challenged. Reformers attacked the emotional enthusiasm of political participation, the corruption in campaign financing and campaign practices, and the role of the parties in usurping the direct connection between citizens and their government. They succeeded in inventing the language by which we still judge our politics: it stresses being informed while it dismisses or demeans parties and partisanship. To put this more pointedly, the political party, the single most important agency ever invented for mass political participation, is the institution that current civics talk and current civics education regularly abhor and that is rendered almost invisible in the way we conduct the actual act of voting. Insofar as the way we do vote is a set of enduring instructions to us about the way we should vote and the way we should think about voting, the civic lesson of election day as we have organized it for the past century recommends contempt for parties and partisanship.

We learn a standard of civic practice by practicing civics. We may not live up to it, but we know, at least implicitly and roughly speaking, what it is, what we are supposed to be held accountable for. We learn it in large part by experience—as political theorist Stephen Elkin writes, “Experience . . . must be the teacher of democratic citizens,” and this leads him to an interest in the design of local governments, not the design of school curricula. What we do not know or reflect on is that our present standard is only one of a number of possible standards. We learn it so well we do not even recognize what alternatives it excludes.

**STRUCTURES OF ATTENTION**

The second way we become civic is by what the public is called to attend to and what it is called to ignore. The media and, even more strenuously, political leaders, make the decisions about what will be on the public’s agenda. In the weeks after September 11, there were many stories in the media about stifling of dissent as the country unified behind the president’s war on terrorism. Why were we called to attend to this? How did we know, as we read these stories, that stifling dissent is a bad thing? We assuredly were expected to get that point.

Consider an important recent example of citizenship talk: “What you do is as important as anything government does. I ask you to seek a common good beyond your comfort, to defend needed reforms against easy attacks, to serve your nation, beginning with your neighbor. I ask you to be citizens. Citizens, not

At first blush, it is hard to object to the concept of citizenship George W. Bush expressed in these words in his inaugural address. Citizenship, he said, is public spirited rather than self-centered, neighborly rather than self-seeking, active and participatory rather than passive and spectator-like. And yet, President Bush advanced a subtext here: do not expect too much from your government. “Americans are generous and strong and decent, not because we believe in ourselves but because we hold beliefs beyond ourselves. When this spirit of citizenship is missing, no government program can replace it. When this spirit is present, no wrong can stand against it.” Government should not overreach, government should not overlegislate, government should not overreact. The president favors people who take care of themselves and their neighbors, not those who depend on government for aid and comfort.

Note a second subtext: people are citizens insofar as they do not seek their own comfort, insofar as they serve the nation, and insofar as they hold beliefs beyond themselves. True citizens do not ask, to paraphrase a president from a different party, what the country can do for them, but what they can do for the country. There is no place in this vision of citizenship for individuals to sue for their rights or to invoke the law on behalf of their liberties or to initiate actions for damages against tobacco companies or tire manufacturers. There is no acknowledgment that democracy has been enlarged in our lifetimes when individuals have been driven not by a desire to serve but by an effort to overcome indignities they themselves have suffered. This is important. The most important extension of citizenship in this century was produced by the civil rights movement. Not Thomas Jefferson so much as people like Thurgood Marshall and Martin Luther King Jr. made rights a household term and a household experience. The civil rights movement brought on the extraordinary wave of social movements and rights-centered litigation that has opened doors and windows for African Americans, women, gays and lesbians, people with disabilities, and many others. Why, then, do we cling rhetorically to a vision of civic education and citizenship that excludes the raw power of self-interested action? Why is citizenship reduced to service rather than linked to justice?

There is also an entirely missing text in President Bush’s inaugural address: in the idealized world he beckoned his fellow citizens to join, there are citizens, there are neighbors, there are also communities of faith, but there are no parties, and in the good citizen, no partisanship; there are no interest groups, and in the good citizen, no joining with others in organized self-interest; there are no experts, and in the good citizen, no considered judgment about when and how judgment should be delegated. Why are the organizations and individual actors that in fact are the most involved on a day-to-day basis with the operation of government omitted from his account of citizenship?

In times of national crisis, the citizen President Bush envisions is the soldier, who serves country, ignores personal discomfort, and believes in a patriotic ideal. In ordinary times, Bush’s ideal is the Rotarian, moved by a sense of neighborliness, Christian charity, and social responsibility but untouched by any sense of having a personal stake in public justice.
Is this the kind of civicness we should be instilling in our children? I don’t think so, but that is not my topic here. I am addressing only the question of how people learn to be civic. My point about the president’s speech is that it offers one model of civicness, not the only model. It is a powerful model, nonetheless, because the president is the country’s best-placed civic pedagogue. As Justice Felix Frankfurter said, “The Presidency is the most important educational system in the country.”

The president calls us to attention, but in a particular way, not in the only way.

**SHARED ENTERPRISE**

The third way we become civic is by joining with others in common enterprise, common work, common prayer, or common struggle. I will speak about this only briefly because, in this instance, the same President George W. Bush, whom I have just criticized, has offered a very shrewd analysis. In his press conference a month after September 11, he observed that his administration before September 11 was planning an initiative to be called “Communities of Character.” It was, he said, “designed to help parents develop good character in our children and to strengthen the spirit of citizenship and service in our communities.” But, he remarked, “the acts of September 11 have prompted that initiative to occur on its own, in ways far greater than I could have ever imagined.” He was right. He cited the cases of Christian and Jewish women who went shopping with Muslim neighbors when the Muslim women were afraid to leave their homes alone. There was, indeed, a rekindling of communal feelings, a reaching out to friends, neighbors, and strangers, and a joining in common enterprises of blood drives, fund raising, prayer services, and community memorials all across the country.

People can feel connections with one another and a sense of public purpose at one remove, through the Internet or through a novel, a film, or a news story. I do not know anyone who died at the World Trade Centers, but like almost all Americans, I felt intimately linked to what happened there. That lasted beyond the moment not because citizens feel an intimate acquaintance with Peter Jennings, Tom Brokaw, and Dan Rather (although they may) but because the information and images the media conveyed in this case touched everyone who has ever visited New York or knows someone there, everyone who has ever traveled by air or who has loved ones who travel by air, everyone who has ever been in a high-rise office building. And the horror and anxiety the news evoked in those millions of people were reaffirmed and reinforced in almost every conversation and in almost every glance from person to person, family member to family member, and coworker to coworker in subsequent weeks and months. The experience of September 11 was a national Durkheimian moment, that is, a collective experience where a sense of both power and meaning beyond the personal emerged from face-to-face contact and collective work—collective action embodied, not at a distance.

There is a great deal of attention to that generation, now rapidly aging and dying, that fought World War II, and it has been lionized in the title of Tom
Brokaw’s book, as “the greatest generation.” Brokaw is not modest about his claims for his parents’ generation: “I think this is the greatest generation any society has ever produced.” I am not going to quibble over rankings here; surely this generation accomplished a great deal. And, as Robert Putnam has assiduously documented, this same generation continued to be doggedly civic by voting in large numbers, attending community meetings, getting to know neighbors, maintaining church membership and attendance, exceeding the marks of the generation before them and the generations that followed them. All of this I acknowledge. What I do not accept is the implication that this generation was unusually endowed with moral virtue or community fervor. What it was endowed with was the Great Depression and World War II, great collective experiences that forged a generational spirit.

This is not to suggest that the experience of World War II was a spontaneous emotional upheaval undirected by government leadership and institutional transformation. On the contrary, the Roosevelt administration mobilized the power of the state in the national defense to—literally—enlist the nation in the war effort. If September 11 seems to be a fading memory already for many Americans, it may be because the federal government chose in the end not to take advantage of the emotional effervescence of the moment to call on Americans for sacrifice or service. An opportunity was lost to enlarge national service programs like AmeriCorps—or even to call attention to them.

Fourth, we cannot become civic if there is no infrastructure of civicness for people to enroll in. Civic life requires maintenance: it requires staff, investment, access. Democracy does not come cheap. Elections cost money, effective service programs cost money, and courts cost money. Justice requires dollars. This is not very dramatic stuff. In fact, it is invisible to most of us most of the time. I saw some of it, however, in the 2000 election, as I watched the mounting of the electoral machinery in my home of San Diego, California. Let me just give you a little sense of it.

On November 7, in one sixteen-hour period, 100 million people broke from their daily routine and voted. It is a mammoth exercise. In California, there were about 100,000 volunteers spending fifteen-hour days manning the polling places. In San Diego County, running the election cost $3.5 million in taxpayer dollars to produce 552 separate ballots and 552 separate voter information guides mailed out to registered voters to prepare them to act as informed citizens. There were 100 training sessions for 6,000 poll workers at 1,500 polling places, 300 of which had special provision for Spanish-speaking voters and all of which were designed to be accessible for the disabled. This is a massive activity, and a great deal of meaning is still to be found in it, what Walt Whitman called this “ballot-shower from East to West, America’s choosing day.”

There are 552 different ballots because there are 120 political jurisdictions in San Diego County—hospital districts, water districts, community college...
districts, school districts, congressional districts, assembly and state senate districts, and so on. There were some 800 candidates on the ballot in November. Mikel Haas, then the registrar of voters, told me, “It’s like a watch: there are a whole lot of moving parts. Any one of them can trip you up.” The registrar’s core staff of forty-eight employees was supplemented in the election season by about 300 temporary workers, not to mention the 6,000 poll workers on election day.

Several weeks before the election, I attended what the registrar’s office had entitled “Midnight Madness.” On the last day to register to vote in San Diego County, the registrar’s office stays open till midnight for “drive-through” registration. I came by around 8 p.m. to take a look. In the dark and the drizzle, cars were lined up for most of a long block and then in a single-file line through half the length of the county building. The whole area, though, was lit by a set of four floodlights, illuminating not only the building and the proceedings outside it but also a newly anchored “Uncle Sam” roughly forty feet high—a vast, cheery, red-white-and-blue inflated Uncle Sam. Registrar of Voters Haas had seen it displayed at a Chevrolet dealer. He had driven by and thought, “I have to have that,” and he worked out a rental deal to use the inflatable for Midnight Madness.

There must have been between fifteen and twenty registrar personnel in yellow slickers at Midnight Madness. A number of them were directing traffic. In three lines, three people handed registration affidavits on clip boards to the driver-voters in their cars, SUVs, and pick-ups. The drivers were then directed to park while they filled out the form. When completed, they started up their cars again and another yellow-slickered official would come over to the car, take the affidavit, check it to see that it was filled out properly, and then send the new registrant on his or her way.

One senior civil servant I spoke to began her career with court reporting school, then worked in the district attorney’s office, then took the test for the position of registrar of voters senior clerk and assumed the job in 1977 at age 26. In 1980 she left and went to work with one of the vendors who mail the sample ballots. “But I missed it . . . I missed the excitement.” “Not many people leave here. No one will quit.” It is not just this office—from email with her counterparts in other counties, “it sounds the same way.” There is a lot of stress in the job, but people love it. She is married to a political consultant who is as interested in politics as she is. “When our child was born,” she told me, “our birth announcement said ‘height’ and ‘weight’ and ‘eligible to vote in 2007.’”

Despite the high morale of workers at the registrar’s office, not everyone loves every part of it. One of the least popular sections is candidate services, dealing with candidates and would-be candidates as they learn how to file their papers, as they write up their statements for the voter information guides that in California are sent out to all registered voters, as they submit required campaign finance disclosure forms. “The candidates . . .” my informant began, and then rolled her eyes. She talked about the people who walk in and say, “Here’s where I live. What can I run for?” “Who are these people?” she asked. When someone wants to file who has no chance at all, who has never even turned up at a meeting of the body they are running for, the personnel in candidate services try to
act on behalf of democracy without entering improperly into the process: “We try to politely, well, not talk them out of it, but explain what’s involved.”

I attended some training sessions for the poll workers, as well as the training session for the trainers. Registrar staff plus a motivational speaker ran this session. There was a strong emphasis on getting people to participate and have a good time in the training. As one of the trainers said, “Adult learning really can be fun, it doesn’t have to be toothpicks-in-the-eyelid time.”

The training sessions for the poll workers were centered on a “railroad” theme, and the trainers were equipped with train engineers’ hats, red bandannas, a loud train whistle, and a small flashing light that mimicked the lights at a railroad crossing. The trainers I observed—two vigorous women in their sixties—blew their train whistles together to start the session, and then they sang a song they themselves had written: “We’ve been working on the election all the live long day. We’ve been working on the election, so the voters have their say.” Trained to get people talking and involved from the beginning, they asked people to talk among themselves about why they were volunteering their time. After a few minutes, they blew the train whistles again and asked people to tell the whole group what they had found out. Some people talked about the free tacos poll workers would get from a local fast food chain; many others spoke of wanting to do their civic duty. Many volunteered election after election and spoke of it as a kind of addiction—“Once you do it, you’re hooked.”

Multiply these stories of one registrar’s office in one county of one state by the seventy California counties; multiply it again by the fifty states. Multiply it by the journalists who write about politics, the teachers who teach history and civics, the preschool teachers and kindergarten teachers who instruct children about sharing, the counselors, clergy, clerks of court, and others who are all civics teachers on a full-time basis, and you can see that the possibility of civicness for individuals may have less to do with individual virtue than with social investment and collective maintenance.

Civicness requires both volunteers and professionals, both ordinary citizens and experts. The kind of populism one finds in universities that is distrustful of expertise, to the point of self-hatred; that prefers participatory democracy over representation or delegation, to the point of having nothing at all to say about the latter; and that prefers John Dewey to Walter Lippmann or, more generally, romantics to realists, to a degree that refuses engagement with the actual messiness of democratic politics, lies somewhere between dreaminess and irresponsibility.

In thinking through the matter of civic education, I look more to structures, contexts, and institutions within which and through which education happens than to specific psychological processes that succeed or fail to attach individuals to the messages about civic engagement they hear. There are multiple meanings of citizenship afloat in the land, and practices of civic life have changed more rapidly and more radically than our public rhetoric has yet figured out. Many people still learn to participate in politics through community-based, faith-based experience, as was so often the case with the civil rights movement, but many others today come to politics (as is often the case in the environmentalist
movement) through what sociologist Paul Lichterman calls “personalist” motivation. Some opportunities for civic engagement fade—like political party rallies—but others arise without social analysts even noticing: if there is a study of the proliferation of charity runs and charity walks, I have not yet seen it. Or consider the enormous changes in women’s lives and the movement toward gender equality in the past fifty years, and how the feminization of political and civic life, if you will, has altered civic practices—and should have altered what counts as citizenship and civic engagement. Along with the civil rights movement and the many other rights-oriented struggles that borrowed from it, feminism has extended norms of equality and indignation over injustice into the home, the club, the workplace, and other domains once far removed from political consciousness.

Citizens learn citizenship in everyday life and especially in participating in common civic exercises; in structures of attention shaped by political leaders, the media, the schools, and other voices of authority; in experiences of community solidarity that forge attachments to people beyond us (it is a familiar observation that soldiers fight not so much for their flag as for their comrades); and in structures and institutions that are cultivated and cared for by full-time staff whose work is required to make citizenship possible. Meanwhile, the realm of the civic shifts and expands as the legitimate demands of once-excluded groups enter into play and reshape the basic understandings of civic life.

NOTES TO MICHAEL SCHUDSON


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At home, families sit together, texting and reading e-mail. At work executives text during board meetings. We text (and shop and go on Facebook) during classes and when we’re on dates. My students tell me about an important new skill: it involves maintaining eye contact with someone while you text someone else; it’s hard, but it can be done.

Over the past 15 years, I’ve studied technologies of mobile connection and talked to hundreds of people of all ages and circumstances about their plugged-in lives. I’ve learned that the little devices most of us carry around are so powerful that they change not only what we do, but also who we are.

We’ve become accustomed to a new way of being “alone together.” Technology-enabled, we are able to be with one another, and also elsewhere, connected to wherever we want to be. We want to customize our lives. We want to move in and out of where we are because the thing we value most is control over where we focus our attention. We have gotten used to the idea of being in a tribe of one, loyal to our own party.

Our colleagues want to go to that board meeting but pay attention only to what interests them. To
some this seems like a good idea, but we can end up hiding from one another, even as we are constantly connected to one another.

A businessman laments that he no longer has colleagues at work. He doesn’t stop by to talk; he doesn’t call. He says that he doesn’t want to interrupt them. He says they’re “too busy on their e-mail.” But then he pauses and corrects himself. “I’m not telling the truth. I’m the one who doesn’t want to be interrupted. I think I should. But I’d rather just do things on my BlackBerry.”

A 16-year-old boy who relies on texting for almost everything says almost wistfully, “Someday, someday, but certainly not now, I’d like to learn how to have a conversation.”

In today’s workplace, young people who have grown up fearing conversation show up on the job wearing earphones. Walking through a college library or the campus of a high-tech start-up, one sees the same thing: we are together, but each of us is in our own bubble, furiously connected to keyboards and tiny touch screens. A senior partner at a Boston law firm describes a scene in his office. Young associates lay out their suite of technologies: laptops, iPods and multiple phones. And then they put their earphones on. “Big ones. Like pilots. They turn their desks into cockpits.” With the young lawyers in their cockpits, the office is quiet, a quiet that does not ask to be broken.

In the silence of connection, people are comforted by being in touch with a lot of people—carefully kept at bay. We can’t get enough of one another if we can use technology to keep one another at distances we can control: not too close, not too far, just right. I think of it as a Goldilocks effect.

Texting and e-mail and posting let us present the self we want to be. This means we can edit. And if we wish to, we can delete. Or retouch: the voice, the flesh, the face, the body. Not too much, not too little—just right.

Human relationships are rich; they’re messy and demanding. We have learned the habit of cleaning them up with technology. And the move from conversation to connection is part of this. But it’s a process in which we short-change ourselves. Worse, it seems that over time we stop caring, we forget that there is a difference.

We are tempted to think that our little “sips” of online connection add up to a big gulp of real conversation. But they don’t. E-mail, Twitter, Facebook, all of these have their places—in politics, commerce, romance and friendship. But no matter how valuable, they do not substitute for conversation.

Connecting in sips may work for gathering discrete bits of information or for saying, “I am thinking about you.” Or even for saying, “I love you.” But connecting in sips doesn’t work as well when it comes to understanding and knowing one another. In conversation we tend to one another. (The word itself is kinetic; it’s derived from words that mean to move, together.) We can attend to tone and nuance. In conversation, we are called upon to see things from another’s point of view.

FACE-TO-FACE conversation unfolds slowly. It teaches patience. When we communicate on our digital devices, we learn different habits. As we ramp up the volume and velocity of online connections, we start to expect faster answers. To get these, we ask one another simpler questions; we dumb down
our communications, even on the most important matters. It is as though we have all put ourselves on cable news. Shakespeare might have said, “We are consum’d with that which we were nourish’d by.”

And we use conversation with others to learn to converse with ourselves. So our flight from conversation can mean diminished chances to learn skills of self-reflection. These days, social media continually asks us what’s “on our mind,” but we have little motivation to say something truly self-reflective. Self-reflection in conversation requires trust. It’s hard to do anything with 3,000 Facebook friends except connect.

As we get used to being shortchanged on conversation and to getting by with less, we seem almost willing to dispense with people altogether. Serious people muse about the future of computer programs as psychiatrists. A high school sophomore confides to me that he wishes he could talk to an artificial intelligence program instead of his dad about dating; he says the A.I. would have so much more in its database. Indeed, many people tell me they hope that as Siri, the digital assistant on Apple’s iPhone, becomes more advanced, “she” will be more and more like a best friend—one who will listen when others won’t.

During the years I have spent researching people and their relationships with technology, I have often heard the sentiment “No one is listening to me.” I believe this feeling helps explain why it is so appealing to have a Facebook page or a Twitter feed—each provides so many automatic listeners. And it helps explain why—against all reason—so many of us are willing to talk to machines that seem to care about us. Researchers around the world are busy inventing sociable robots, designed to be companions to the elderly, to children, to all of us. One of the most haunting experiences during my research came when I brought one of these robots, designed in the shape of a baby seal, to an elder-care facility, and an older woman began to talk to it about the loss of her child. The robot seemed to be looking into her eyes. It seemed to be following the conversation. The woman was comforted.

And so many people found this amazing. Like the sophomore who wants advice about dating from artificial intelligence and those who look forward to computer psychiatry, this enthusiasm speaks to how much we have confused conversation with connection and collectively seem to have embraced a new kind of delusion that accepts the simulation of compassion as sufficient unto the day. And why would we want to talk about love and loss with a machine that has no experience of the arc of human life? Have we so lost confidence that we will be there for one another?

WE expect more from technology and less from one another and seem increasingly drawn to technologies that provide the illusion of companionship without the demands of relationship. Always-on/always-on-you devices provide three powerful fantasies: that we will always be heard; that we can put our attention wherever we want it to be; and that we never have to be alone. Indeed our new devices have turned being alone into a problem that can be solved.

When people are alone, even for a few moments, they fidget and reach for a device. Here connection works like a symptom, not a cure, and our constant, reflexive impulse to connect shapes a new way of being.
Think of it as “I share, therefore I am.” We use technology to define ourselves by sharing our thoughts and feelings as we’re having them. We used to think, “I have a feeling; I want to make a call.” Now our impulse is, “I want to have a feeling; I need to send a text.”

So, in order to feel more, and to feel more like ourselves, we connect. But in our rush to connect, we flee from solitude, our ability to be separate and gather ourselves. Lacking the capacity for solitude, we turn to other people but don’t experience them as they are. It is as though we use them, need them as spare parts to support our increasingly fragile selves.

We think constant connection will make us feel less lonely. The opposite is true. If we are unable to be alone, we are far more likely to be lonely. If we don’t teach our children to be alone, they will know only how to be lonely.

I am a partisan for conversation. To make room for it, I see some first, deliberate steps. At home, we can create sacred spaces: the kitchen, the dining room. We can make our cars “device-free zones.” We can demonstrate the value of conversation to our children. And we can do the same thing at work. There we are so busy communicating that we often don’t have time to talk to one another about what really matters. Employees asked for casual Fridays; perhaps managers should introduce conversational Thursdays. Most of all, we need to remember—in between texts and e-mails and Facebook posts—to listen to one another, even to the boring bits, because it is often in unedited moments, moments in which we hesitate and stutter and go silent, that we reveal ourselves to one another.

I spend the summers at a cottage on Cape Cod, and for decades I walked the same dunes that Thoreau once walked. Not too long ago, people walked with their heads up, looking at the water, the sky, the sand and at one another, talking. Now they often walk with their heads down, typing. Even when they are with friends, partners, children, everyone is on their own devices.

So I say, look up, look at one another, and let’s start the conversation.

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Ancient Rhetorics: Their Differences and the Differences They Make

When Americans hear the word rhetoric, they tend to think of politicians’ attempts to deceive them. Rhetoric is characterized as “empty words” or as fancy language used to distort the truth or to tell lies. Television newscasters often say something like, “There was more rhetoric from the White House today,” and editorialists write that politicians need to “stop using rhetoric and do something” as though words had no connection to action. Many people blame rhetoric for our apparent inability to communicate and to get things done.

But that isn’t the way rhetoricians defined their art in ancient Athens and Rome. In ancient times, people used rhetoric to make decisions, resolve disputes, and deliberate publicly about important issues. Aristotle, an ancient philosopher and teacher of rhetoric, defined rhetoric as the power of finding the available arguments suited to a given situation. For teachers like Aristotle or practitioners like the Roman orator Cicero, rhetoric helped people to choose the best course of action when they disagreed about important political, religious, or social issues. In fact, the study of rhetoric was equivalent to the study of citizenship. Under the best ancient teachers, Greek and Roman students composed discourse about moral and political questions that daily confronted their communities.
Ancient teachers of rhetoric thought that disagreement among human beings was inevitable because individuals perceive the world differently from one another. They also assumed that because people communicate their perceptions through language—which is an entirely different medium than thoughts or perceptions—there was no guarantee that anyone’s perceptions would be accurately conveyed to others. Even more important, the ancient teachers knew that people differ in their opinions about how the world works, so it was often hard to tell whose opinion was the best. They invented rhetoric so that they would have means to judge whose opinion was most accurate, useful, or valuable.

If people didn’t disagree, rhetoric wouldn’t be necessary. But they do, and it is. Two rhetoricians named Chaim Perelman and Lucia Olbrechts-Tyteca remarked that “The use of argumentation implies that one has renounced resorting to force alone” (55). So the fact that rhetoric originates in disagreement is ultimately a good thing because its use allows people to make important choices without resorting to less palatable means of persuasion—coercion or violence. People who have talked their way out of any potentially violent confrontation know how useful rhetoric can be.

On a larger scale, the usefulness of rhetoric is even more apparent. If, for some reason, the people who negotiate international relations were to stop using rhetoric to resolve their disagreements about limits on the use of nuclear weapons, there might not be a future to deliberate about. That’s why we should be glad when we read or hear that diplomats are disagreeing about the allowable number of warheads per country or the number of inspections of nuclear stockpiles per year. At least they’re talking to each other. As Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca observed, wars are the result of a choice to use force instead of rhetoric, an agreement to disagree. But before people of good will agree to disagree, they try out hundreds of ways of reaching agreement. The possibility that one set of participants will resort to coercion or violence is always a threat, of course. But even in the context of impending war, the threat of war can itself operate as a rhetorical strategy that keeps people of good will talking to each other.

Given that argument can deter violence and coercion, the authors of this book are disturbed by the contemporary tendency to see disagreement as somehow impolite or even undesirable. We certainly understand how disagreement has earned its bad name, given the caricature of argument that daily appears on talk television. Thanks to talk shows, argument has become a form of entertainment rather than a means of working through differences or discovering new resolutions. We are apparently not the only ones who feel this way. In October of 2004—three weeks before the 2004 presidential election—Jon Stewart, the host of Comedy Central’s The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, appeared live on CNN’s political show Crossfire to register his disappointment with the state of argument in America. In what has now become a famous plea (thanks to viral video on the Internet), Stewart asked then-Crossfire hosts Paul Begala and Tucker Carlson to “Stop, stop, stop, stop hurting America.” How, exactly, does Stewart think that Crossfire is hurting America? The Cable News Network requested an exorbitant sum for us to reprint part of the transcript here, so we urge you to watch the segment on YouTube to see exactly what Stewart, Begala, and Carlson said. In the segment, Stewart disapproves of the hosts’ use of the term “debate show”
to describe *Crossfire*. In what would become a very heated exchange, Stewart has this to say: “To do a debate would be great. But that’s like saying pro wrestling is a show about athletic competition.”

Stewart’s **analogy**, in which professional wrestling is to athletic competition as *Crossfire* is to debate, is worth dwelling on in part because the move from engaged performance of sports or debate to the sheer entertainment and antics of World Wrestling Entertainment (formerly the World Wrestling Federation) is a move from “real” to “mere.” In other words, what could become earnest rhetorical engagement becomes instead a staged spat, “mere” theater. **Theater**, in fact, is the word that Stewart settles on to describe *Crossfire* later in his appearance.

That a current WWE show called *Smackdown* has a title that could well be mistaken for a cable “debate” show helps underscore Stewart’s point: like WWE, shows like *Crossfire* seem to exist to dramatize conflict solely for entertainment purposes. In doing so, the so-called debate shows effectively distance argument further from the American public, placing it on the brightly lit set of a television show, making it seem as if “argument” has distinct winners and losers and playing up the embarrassment of “losing.” It is interesting to note that after Stewart’s appearance on *Crossfire*, CNN canceled the show altogether, but they did not replace it with what Stewart—or we—would consider a debate show.

We wholeheartedly agree with Stewart’s criticism. Shows like *Crossfire* perpetuate rhetoric’s bad name because the hosts and guests don’t actually argue; rather, they shout **commonplaces** at one another. Neither listens to each other or to the guest, who is rarely allowed to speak, and then only intermittently. If you watched the video of the *Crossfire* exchange, you probably noticed how difficult it was for Stewart to maintain a point with the hosts’ frequent interruptions. Shouting over one another is an extremely unproductive model of argument because doing so rarely involves listening or responding and seldom stimulates anyone to change his or her mind.

Engaging in productive argument is much different from shouting tired slogans. For one thing, rhetorical engagement is hard intellectual work, and for another, it requires that all parties to an argument listen to positions stated by others. Despite its difficulty, people who live in democracies must undertake productive argument with one another because failure to do so can have serious consequences ranging from inaction on important issues such as global warming, to taking serious actions, such as going to war. Consider this *Fox News* account of an incident that took place during a presidential address to Congress:

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**CONGRESSMAN YELLS “YOU LIE” AT OBAMA DURING SPEECH**

WASHINGTON—In an extraordinary breach of congressional decorum, a Republican lawmaker shouted “You lie” at President Barack Obama during his speech to Congress Wednesday.

The incident came directly after Obama said, “There are also those who claim that our reform effort will insure illegal immigrants. This, too, is false. The reforms I’m proposing would not apply to those who are here illegally.”
Rather than taking the time to listen to the president’s argument, Congressman Wilson shouted down a point he disagreed with. In doing so, he took the easier, showier route. But something interesting occurred in the responses to Wilson both in the moment and afterwards in news reports of the incident. Many of the accounts followed the pattern in the news story excerpted here, pointing out the “breach of decorum” and noting that the outburst drew “immediate condemnation from both sides of the aisle.” The incident was therefore framed as a rude gesture that violated the unspoken rules of behavior in the halls of Congress.

In other words, Congressman Wilson was roundly criticized for exhibiting bad manners rather than for his unwillingness to engage productively with the president’s speech—first of all, by listening to it.

In this case, the congressional code of conduct exists to curb behavior such as that displayed by Representative Wilson. But he might not have shouted out of turn at all had not Americans begun to lose sight of the importance of rhetorical engagement in recent years. Joe Wilson was portrayed by the media as a boor because he failed to engage the president’s speech rhetorically—first by listening, and then by responding thoughtfully at the appropriate moment in the appropriate setting. Like Jon Stewart, we prefer listening, considering, and responding to shouting, ignoring, or insulting.

“You lie!” Rep. Joe Wilson, R-S.C., shouted from his seat on the Republican side of the chamber.

Wilson’s shout drew immediate condemnation from both sides of the aisle, ultimately leading him to apologize. Wilson tried to call Obama to apologize in person, but ended up speaking to White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel. The contrite congressman “expressed his apologies” to Emanuel, not to the president at whom he had shouted a few hours earlier, Wilson’s office said. (FoxNews.com)
The authors of this book are concerned that if Americans continue to ignore the reality that people disagree with one another all the time, or if we pretend to ignore it in the interests of preserving good manners, we risk undermining the principles on which our democratic community is based. People who are afraid of airing their differences tend to keep silent when those with whom they disagree are speaking, or worse, they shout down the speaker without listening. People who are not inclined to air differences tend to associate only with those who agree with them. In such a balkanized public sphere, both our commonalities and our differences go unexamined. In a democracy, people must call into question the opinions of others, must bring them into the light for examination and negotiation, and they must listen to each other. In communities where citizens are not coerced, important decisions must be made by means of public deliberation. When the quality of public deliberation diminishes, so does the quality of democracy.

Ancient teachers called the process of examining positions held by others “invention,” which Aristotle defined as finding and displaying the available arguments on any issue. Invention is central to the rhetorical process. What often passes for rhetoric in our own time—repeatedly shouting one’s beliefs to browbeat an “opponent” into submission—is not rhetoric. From a rhetorician’s point of view, shouts and screams forestall invention. Participation in rhetoric entails that every party to the discussion be aware that beliefs may change during the exchange and discussion of points of view. All parties to a rhetorical transaction must be willing to be persuaded by good arguments. Otherwise, decisions will be made for bad reasons, or for interested reasons, or no reason at all.

Sometimes, of course, there are good reasons for remaining silent. Power is distributed unequally in our culture, and power inequities may force wise people to remain silent on some occasions. We believe that in contemporary American culture, people who enjoy high socioeconomic status have more power than those who have fewer resources and less access to others in power. We also hold that men have more power than women and that white people have more power than people of color (and yes, we are aware that there are exceptions to all these generalizations). We do not believe, though, that these inequities are a natural or necessary state of things. We do believe that rhetoric is among the best ways available to us for rectifying power inequities among citizens.

The people who taught and practiced rhetoric in Athens and Rome during ancient times would have found the contemporary unwillingness to engage in public disagreement very strange indeed. Their way of using disagreement to reach solutions was taught to students in Western schools for over two thousand years and is still available to us in translations of their textbooks, speeches, lecture notes, and treatises on rhetoric.

Within limits, the ancients’ way of looking at disagreement can still be useful to us. The students who worked with ancient teachers of rhetoric were members of privileged classes for the most part because Athens and Rome both maintained socioeconomic systems that were manifestly unjust to many of the people who lived and worked within them. The same charge can be leveled at our own system, of course. Today the United States is home not only to its native peoples but also to people from all over the world. Its nonnative citizens arrived here
under vastly different circumstances, ranging from colonization to immigration to enslavement, and their lives have been shaped by these circumstances, as well as by their genders and class affiliations. Not all—perhaps not even a majority—have enjoyed the equal opportunities that are promised by the Constitution. But unfair social and economic realities only underscore the need for principled public discussion among concerned citizens. Knowledge of rhetoric can help citizens deliberate about these grim realities and determine how to change them for the better.

Knowledge of rhetoric also allows people to discern when rhetors are making bad arguments or are asking them to make inappropriate choices. Because rhetoric confers the gift of greater facility with language, it can also teach those who study it to evaluate anyone’s rhetoric; thus the critical capacity conferred by rhetoric can make its students more aware of others’ manipulative rhetoric. When knowledge about rhetoric is available only to a few people, the power inherent in persuasive discourse is disproportionately shared. Unfortunately, throughout history rhetorical knowledge has usually been shared only among those who can exert economic, social, or political power as well. But ordinary citizens can learn to deploy rhetorical power, and if they have a chance and the courage to deploy it skillfully and often, it’s possible that they may change other features of our society as well. In this book, then, we aim to help our readers become more skilled speakers and writers. But we also aim to help them become better citizens.

Sometimes the differences between ancient and contemporary attitudes toward rhetoric and argument are difficult to overcome, but they are crucial to bear in mind as you read this book and learn about the central rhetorical concepts and practices that the ancients espoused. Getting past the widespread negative associations with rhetoric allows us to see that ancient rhetoric is as compatible with prevailing views about language as it is useful for contemporary citizens-in-training. For example, contemporary scholars who think about language now believe that language is a form of action rather than a mere reflection of reality, as had previously been thought. This perspective, that language does stuff—that language makes decisions, forms identities, moves people and things around—returns us full circle to the beliefs held by many of the ancients. Before explaining in more detail what we see as the most important differences—and some similarities—between ancient and contemporary beliefs about language and rhetoric, we return briefly to rhetoric’s beginnings.

ANCIENT RHETORICS: THE BEGINNINGS

Something quite remarkable happened in the small Greek city of Athens during the sixth, fifth, and fourth centuries BCE. During this period, the citizens of that community evolved a form of government they called demokratia (from demos [people], and kratos [political power]). Any Athenian who was defined as a citizen played a direct role in making important decisions that affected the entire community: whether or not to go to war, to send ambassadors to neighboring
countries, to raise or lower taxes, to build bridges or walls, or to convict or acquit people accused of crimes against the state or other citizens.

In the Athenian political system, citizenship was determined by birthright, and thus citizenship was awarded to any adult male who could establish his Athenian heritage, whether he was wealthy or not, aristocratic or not. These were very inclusive requirements for the time, even though they excluded the bulk of the population who were women, foreign-born men, or slaves. Because of this, classical Athens can hardly be said to have been a democracy in our more inclusive terms, although we remind readers that for almost half of its history, the United States limited suffrage to white males. Nor was Athens a representative democracy, as ours is said to be, because the few hundred people who were defined as Athenian citizens participated directly in making political and judicial decisions rather than acting through elected representatives.

The citizens met in the Assembly to make political decisions and acted as jurors at trials. Athenian men apparently took their civic responsibilities seriously. Despite the difficulties entailed in meeting this responsibility—leaving work undone for several days, travel to the city from outlying farms—as many as five hundred or more citizens could be expected to attend and vote in the Assembly when it was in session.

Sometime during the fifth century BCE, all citizens earned the right to speak in the Assembly. This right was called isegoria ("equality in the agora" or assembly-place). Most likely, very few citizens exercised their right to speak. When five hundred Athenians met to deliberate on important issues, not everyone could speak at once, nor was everyone sufficiently informed about the issue at hand to speak effectively. The task of filling in the details and of arguing for a course of action fell to people who were trained in speaking, who had sufficient education to understand the issues, and who had the leisure to study the issues at hand. These were the professional rhetores. In the fifth century, the term rhetor referred to someone who introduced a resolution into the Assembly, but by the fourth century BCE the term meant something like "an expert on politics." Later it came to mean "one skilled in public speaking" as well. In this book, we refer to people who practice rhetoric as rhetors. We refer to people who teach it or theorize about it as rhetoricians.¹

**COMPARING ANCIENT AND CONTEMPORARY RHETORICS**

The great age of ancient rhetorics dictates that there will be differences between them and current thinking about rhetoric. Whereas over the past two decades, scholars of language and rhetoric have begun to think about language in similar ways to the ancients, some persistent values and habits in our culture are less hospitable to ancient rhetorics, such as the habit of equating opinion with identity and the resulting view that disagreement is somehow rude.

There were other things that the ancients saw differently as well, like the status of facts. Ancient rhetoricians did not value factual proof as much as other means of argument, whereas facts and testimony are valued very highly in
U.S. culture (see the chapter on extrinsic proofs). Ancient teachers preferred to use arguments that they generated from language itself and from community beliefs during an intellectual process they called invention. They invented and named many such arguments, among them commonplaces, examples, conjectures, maxims, and enthymemes (see the chapters on stasis, commonplaces, and on rhetorical reasoning). Another difference is that ancient rhetoricians valued opinions as a communal source of knowledge, whereas nowadays opinions are often dismissed as unimportant or held only by individuals. This difference has to do with another assumption that the ancients made, which was that a person’s character and her opinions were constituted by the community in which she lived. And because the ancients believed that communities were the source and reason for rhetoric, opinions were for them the very stuff of argument.

Apart from their differing assumptions about facts and opinions, contemporary rhetoricians agree with their ancient counterparts on many points. The first of these is that rhetoric is a situational art. As we will discuss further in the chapter on kairos and rhetorical situations, the Sophist Gorgias was most famous for acknowledging the importance of timing and circumstance for creating rhetorical arguments. That is, rhetoric equips people to respond to particular situations in particular places at particular times, and its processes and outcomes depend on these circumstances. This is why our book is full of contemporary examples of issues and arguments. Although each one works to illustrate a rhetorical concept, cumulatively they show how knowledge about rhetoric hinges on careful consideration of rhetorical situations. Second, as we noted earlier, contemporary rhetoricians tend to agree with the ancients that language does stuff. It makes things happen; it alters the way the world works by affecting belief and effecting change. The sophists were key proponents of this view of language as action. The sophist Gorgias called speech or language “a powerful lord that with the smallest and most invisible body accomplishes the most godlike works” (“Encomium” 8). When you convince a friend to become a registered voter, you have effected a discernible change, and you have done it through language. When your Facebook friend clicks “like” on her favorite TV show and you do the same, the two of you are acknowledging one another—this is doing something (even though critics of Facebook might counter that it’s not doing a whole lot). Cicero, who was an extremely skilled and influential speaker in the days of the Roman Republic, asserted that the ends of language use are to teach, to give pleasure, and to move. But the point of instructing or delighting audiences is, finally, to move them to accept or reject some thought or action. Contemporary and ancient rhetoricians are therefore in agreement on these points: rhetoric is situational, and language is action.

Extrinsic and Intrinsic Proofs

From an ancient perspective, one of the most naïve assumptions about the nature of argument goes like this: if the facts are on your side, you can’t be wrong, and you can’t be refuted. Facts are statements that somebody has substantiated through experience or proven through research. Or they are events that
really happened, events that somebody will attest to as factual. In the naïve scenario, facts have a “you were there” quality—if the arguer doesn’t have personal knowledge of the facts, she is pretty sure that some expert on the subject does know them, and all she has to do in that case is to look them up in a book. Here are some examples of factual statements:

1. Water freezes at 32 degrees Fahrenheit.
2. The moon orbits the earth.

These are facts because they can be verified through experience or by means of testimony. Individuals can test the accuracy of the first statement for themselves, and all three statements can be confirmed by checking relevant and reliable sources.

But the factual status of facty-sounding statements is not always so straightforward. In contemporary politics, for example, partisans brandish facty-sounding statements as though they are validated or true: “Obama is a socialist” (or a Nazi, or a Muslim, or wasn’t born in America). These are beliefs, rather than facts, even though they look like statements of facts. How can an uninformed observer distinguish between facts and what writer Norman Mailer called “factoids”? If a statement of fact seems suspicious, look for verification, either from supporting data or a trustworthy source (see the chapter on extrinsic proofs).

Perceptions, and thus testimony about them, can be influenced by an observer’s perspective. Over the years during which we have been writing and revising this book, the National Football League has changed its policy on the use of instant replay several times. In instant replay, the referees watch video recordings of a controversial play taken from several different angles to decide what penalties to assess, if any. Even though professional referees are trained observers of the game, sometimes they simply cannot see whether a player’s knee hit the ground before or after he fumbled or whether a receiver managed to keep his feet within bounds while he caught the ball. The problem with instant replay, though, is that sometimes television cameras are not well positioned to see a contested play either. In terms used in this book, the supposedly factual or empirical account yielded by instant replay is often no better at resolving disagreements about violations than is the testimony given by referees. Currently the NFL uses a rather complicated combination of taped replays and referee judgments to make decisions about contested plays. In other words, the NFL has opted to combine facts and testimony as evidence for opinions rendered about close calls. This example interests us because fans seem to trust referees’ judgments less than they do that of the television camera operators. Indeed, fans often accuse referees of having an interest in one outcome or another, assuming that this interest influences their perception of events. This suggests in turn that football fans may trust machines rather more than they trust human experts, even though the machines are, after all, constructed and operated by human beings. One seldom hears complaints that Fox or CBS placed their cameras in
positions that might serve their own interests, at least in the context of football games.

This example highlights the even more interesting observation that the facts of the physical world don’t mean much to anybody unless they are involved in some larger network of interpretation. In football the relevant network of interpretation is the rules of the game. Without these rules, the exact placement of a player’s arm or the exact point at which his feet touched the ground pretty much lose their relevance. (Sometimes football players and fans suddenly switch to a network of interpretation that allows them to read an arm in the face as an act of aggression. If referees think this is the case, they have to assess more penalties until the game’s more usual network of interpretation can be restored).

Facts are not very interesting or persuasive unless they are read within a network of interpretation. Consider this advertisement by Cordaid, a Dutch nonprofit organization with a mission of eradicating world poverty:

![Image of a woman holding a handbag, posed in the attitude of a high fashion magazine advertisement](source.png)

*Source: Saatchi & Saatchi, Amstelveen, The Netherlands*

The facts presented in this advertisement, taken separately, are not all that compelling. It is easy enough to confirm the price of the handbag featured in the image. But when that price is paired with the weekly cost of food for one person in a developing country, the fact begins to take on a whole new set of meanings. What is more, the woman in the advertisement is posed in the attitude of a high fashion magazine advertisement—the pose is one of luxury and privilege. A viewer of this image might expect the woman to be reclined on
a velvet couch. Instead, though, she is lying on rough, graveled ground. The photograph adds visual layers to the argument that would not be possible if one only compared the prices. The visual references made in this ad also work as networks of interpretation.

Facts often need to be read within their networks of interpretation, and rhetors ought to consider underlying (and competing) networks of interpretation when offering empirical evidence in an argument. For instance, the factoid that claims President Obama is a socialist emerges from a network of interpretation in which subscription to socialism is held to be little short of treasonous. The belief that the president is not an American may hinge on a perhaps unconscious assumption that Hawaii (where Obama was born) is not a state. In short, rhetors must pay attention to the ideological interests served by statements of facts and testimony before employing them uncritically.

The ancients believed that facts and testimony lay outside the bounds of rhetoric. Aristotle labeled them atechnoi—“without art or skill”—and hence extrinsic to, or outside, rhetoric. Aristotle defined an extrinsic proof as “those [proofs] that are not provided by ‘us’ [i.e., the speaker] but are preexisting” (Rhetoric I ii 1356a). Such proofs are extrinsic to rhetoric, then, because, as Aristotle figured it, one must use rather than invent them (1356a). A rhetor needs only choose the relevant facts or testimony and present them to an audience.

Because facts are relatively uninteresting in the absence of a relevant network of interpretation, rhetors seldom argue from a simple list of facts. Today, practicing rhetoricians invent and use a wide variety of nonfactual arguments with great effectiveness. Take a trivial illustration: many video game advertisements are arguments from example. Advertisers for a dance-based video game show a group of young adults dancing energetically to a popular song about dancing, while watching images of themselves captured by the game and shown on the television screen. They are having a great time, smiling, laughing, and trying out new dance moves. Advertisers assume that the example will make people reason as follows: “That group of people plays a particular video game, and look at how they move, and how much fun they are having. If I buy that kind of game, I’ll be a smiling, dancing, fun-having person too, and all my friends will want to come over to my house for a dance party.” The ad writers hope that viewers will generalize from the fictional example to their own lives and draw the conclusion that they should buy the video game. There are no facts in this argument—indeed it is a fiction, a studio set constructed by scriptwriters, graphic designers, directors, and others—and yet it is apparently persuasive.

Rhetors who rely only on facts and testimony, then, place very serious limits on their persuasive potential because many other kinds of rhetorical argument are employed daily in the media and in ordinary conversation. These arguments are invented or discovered by rhetors, using the art of rhetoric. Aristotle described invented arguments as entechnoi—“embodied in the art” of rhetoric. This class of proofs is intrinsic to rhetoric because they are generated from its principles.

In rhetoric, intrinsic proofs are found or discovered by rhetors. Invention is the division of rhetoric that investigates the possible means by which proofs
can be discovered; it supplies speakers and writers with sets of instructions that
help them to find and compose arguments that are appropriate for a given rhe-
torical situation. The word *invenire* meant “to find” or “to come upon” in Latin. 
The Greek equivalent, *heuriskein*, also meant “to find out” or “discover.” Vari-
ants of both words persist in English. For instance, the exclamation “Eureka!”
(derived from *heuriskein*) means “I have found it!” This word was so popular
during the nineteenth-century Gold Rush that a town in California was named “Eureka.” The Greek word has also given us *heuristic*, which means “an aid to
discovery,” and we refer to anyone who has new ideas as an “inventor,” from the
Latin *invenire*.

A *proposition* (Latin *proponere*, “to put forth”) is any arguable statement put forward for discussion by a rhetor. A *proof* is any statement or statements used to persuade an audience to accept a proposition. Proofs are bits of language that are supposed to be persuasive. Ancient rhetoricians developed and catalogued a wide range of intrinsic rhetorical proofs, most of which relied on rhetors’ knowledge of a community’s history and beliefs. The Older Sophists contributed the notions of commonplaces and *probabilities*. Aristotle contributed *enthymemes*, *examples*, *signs*, and *maxims*, and Hermagoras of Temnos is credited with the invention of *stasis theory*.

Aristotle discriminated three kinds of intrinsic rhetorical proofs: *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. These kinds of proofs translate into English as ethical, pathetic and logical proofs. Ethical proofs depend on the rhetor’s *character*; pathetic proofs appeal to the emotions of the audience; and logical proofs derive from arguments found in the *issue* itself. Our words *logic* and *logical* are derived from the Greek *logos*, which meant “voice” or “speech,” to early Greek rhetoricians. Later, *logos* also became associated with reason.

Here is an example of how the kinds of proofs can help one invent argu-
ments. In late 2009, the mayor of Pittsburgh proposed to make up for the city’s budget shortfall by taxing the tuition paid by students attending any of the city’s seven colleges and universities. In making his case, the mayor pointed out that the students used the city’s services essentially for free and that the city could no longer afford to subsidize college students. The responses to the proposal came quickly and furiously. Given this situation, let’s say a University of Pittsburgh student named Julia Jackson wanted to argue against the tax proposal at a city council meeting. She has a number of different arguments available. She might establish a credible *ethos* by pointing out that she is an economics major who has made the dean’s list and has lived in Pittsburgh all her life, first as part of a taxpaying family, and now as a student in one of Pitt’s high-rise dormitories. She might also note that she has organized volunteer groups to work the city’s soup kitchens. Doing so would both establish Julia’s ethos as a caring member of the community even as it functions as a *refutation* of the mayor’s *premise* that students do not give back to the city. She might also make an emotional appeal by describing her austere life, how even with her low-wage work–study position, she can barely keep up with the rising cost of books and supplies. In addition, there are a good many logical proofs available to Julia in the issue itself. She can reason from *cause to effect*: Pittsburgh already has a problem of losing
its young people to places with better economies, Julia might argue; this tax on students will further encourage them to leave as soon as they get their degrees, if not transfer to another, more affordable school. Or she can reason from parallel case: “The city of Philadelphia has a large number of universities and colleges, and it has managed to maintain a budget without placing a tax burden on students. Pittsburgh should follow suit.” She could also reason from opposing cases: “The city has a steep ‘sin’ tax; so why would it tax those who are trying to better themselves by getting an education?” Such a logical turn, packed as it is with commonplace values and (in this case) moral arguments, cuts to the heart of the matter and is an example of an enthymeme.

As the tax issue escalated to the point of student protest, Rich Lord of the Pittsburgh newspaper, the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, weighed in:

**COLLEGE STUDENTS JAM COUNCIL MEETING TO PROTEST TUITION TAX**

Some 150 students, bearing petitions that they said bore 10,150 signatures in opposition to the proposed 1 percent tuition tax, filled Pittsburgh Council Chamber this morning, forming a ring around a council that is expected to vote on the levy next month.

Before the council’s 10 a.m. public hearing on the tuition tax, students from most of the city’s schools of higher education presented petitions and challenged any impression that they contribute little to the city and demand much in services.

“We really, really need to dispel this myth that students are a burden to the city,” said Rotimi M. Abimbola, student president at Carnegie Mellon University. Mackenzie Farone, a Point Park University graduate student who also works for that school, said she was “outraged at the light with which college students were portrayed” during the debate on the tuition tax. She said students rent houses for which property taxes are paid, and work, generating wage taxes. “Let’s face it, we are the ones that pay the drink tax,” she said, to laughs, referring to Allegheny County’s 7 percent tax on served alcohol. “Just being honest.” Students “work hard, we learn, and we strive to better ourselves,” she said.

The students quoted in this article have located the underlying logic of the proposal to tax students—students are a burden to the city—and have set about refuting that logic. There are a number of ways to respond to such an assumption, and Mackenzie Farone, the student quoted in the article, has chosen to refute it by pointing out that students in fact do pay certain kinds of taxes, especially, she notes with candor, the “sin tax” on alcohol. Such an argument can be found within the rhetorical situation; hence it is an intrinsic proof.

Ancient students of rhetoric practiced inventing a wide variety of intrinsic proofs while they were in school. By the time they finished their education, invention strategies were second nature to them, so that whenever they were called on to compose a speech or piece of written discourse, they could mentally review invention processes. This review helped them to determine which proofs would be useful in arguing about whatever issue confronted them. The means of
inventing rhetorical proofs can still provide rhetors with a menu of general arguments they can consult whenever they need to compose. Anyone who becomes familiar with all of them and practices using them in particular situations should never be at a loss for words.

To become adept at invention is not easy, though. Invention requires systematic thought, practice, and, above all, thoroughness. But careful attention to the ancient strategies for discovering arguments will amply repay anyone who undertakes their study and use. Hermogenes of Tarsus wrote that “Nothing good can be produced easily, and I should be surprised if there were anything better for humankind, since we are logical animals, than fine and noble logoi and every kind of them” (On Style I 214). In other words, to invent arguments is essentially human. But invention also has a less lofty, more practical aim than fulfilling our species’ potential: rhetors who practice the ancient means of invention will soon find themselves supplied with more arguments than they can possibly use.

That’s Just Your Opinion

There is another category in popular notions about argument that deserves our attention. This is the category called “opinion.” People can put a stop to conversation simply by saying: “Well, that’s just your opinion.” When someone does this, he implies that opinions aren’t very important. They aren’t facts, after all, and furthermore, opinions belong to individuals whereas facts belong to everybody. Another implication is this: because opinions are intimately tied up with individual identities, there’s not much hope of changing them unless the person changes her identity. To put this another way, the implication of “Well, that’s your opinion” is that Jane Doe’s opinion about, say, sustainable living, is tied up with who she is. If she thinks that driving an SUV while slurping a corn syrup-laden drink from a giant Styrofoam cup is morally wrong, well, that’s her opinion, and there’s not much we can do about changing her belief or her practice.

The belief that opinions belong to individuals may explain why Americans seem reluctant to challenge one another’s opinions. To challenge a person’s opinion is to denigrate his character, to imply that if he holds an unexamined or stupid or silly opinion, he is an unthinking or stupid or silly person. This belief may also explain why reporters and other commentators were so shocked by Representative Joe Wilson’s shouted comment during the president’s State of the Union address; they took it to be a comment on Obama’s character, rather than an assessment of his policies.

Wilson seems to buy into this faulty equation because his apology blames his outburst on his out-of-control emotions. This implies that his disagreement with the president was personal rather than what it was: an ideological difference over public policy. This may explain why he shouted, “You lie!” rather than, “I don’t agree!” (although that, too, would have constituted a serious breach of congressional decorum). People who misrepresent facts are generally known as liars; people who disagree about policy have an opportunity to engage in
rhetoric and perhaps to change one another’s minds. When individuals express their emotional responses to the rhetoric of others, however, personal insult and hand-waving dismissal are all that is likely to occur.

Take another example: if someone we know is a devout Catholic, we are often reluctant to share with her any negative views we have about Catholicism, fearing that she might take our views as a personal attack rather than as an invitation to discuss differences. This habit of tying beliefs to an identity also has the unfortunate effect of allowing people who hold a distinctive set of beliefs to belittle or mistreat people who do not share those beliefs. The intellectual habit that assumes religious and political choices are tied up with a person’s identity, with her “self,” also makes it seem as though people never change their minds about things like religion and politics. But as we all know, people do change their minds about these matters; people convert from one religious faith to another, and they sometimes change their political affiliation from year to year, perhaps voting across party lines in one election and voting a party line in the next.

Ancient teachers of rhetoric would find fault with the equation of opinion and personality on three grounds. First, they would object that there is no such thing as “just your opinion.” Second, they would object to the assumption that opinions aren’t important. Third, they would argue that opinions can be changed. The point of rhetoric, after all, is to change opinions.

Ancient rhetoricians taught their students that opinions are shared by many members of a community. The Greek word for common or popular opinion was doxa, which is the root of English words like orthodoxy (“straight opinion”) and paradox (“opinions alongside one another”). Opinions develop because people live in communities. A person living alone on an island needs a great many skills and physical resources, but she has no need for political, moral, or social opinions until she meets up with another person or an animal because politics, morality, and sociality depend on our relations with beings that think and feel. Let’s return to the example of sustainable living to illustrate this point. Here is an excerpt from an article written by New York Times reporter Sara Rimer, entitled “How Green Is the College? Time the Showers.”

OBERLIN, Ohio—Lucas Brown, a junior at Oberlin College here, was still wet from the shower the other morning as he entered his score on the neon green message board next to the bathroom sink: Three minutes, according to the plastic hourglass timer inside the shower. Two minutes faster than the morning before. One minute faster than two of his housemates.

Mr. Brown, a 21-year-old economics major, recalled the marathon runner who lived in the house last semester, saying: “He came out of the shower one morning and yelled out: ‘Two minutes 18 seconds. Beat that, Lucas!’ ” . . .

So it goes at Oberlin’s new sustainability house—SEED, for Student Experiment in Ecological Design—a microcosm of a growing sustainability movement on campuses nationwide, from small liberal arts colleges like Oberlin and Middlebury, in Vermont, to Lansing Community College in Michigan, to Morehouse in Atlanta, to public universities like the University of New Hampshire.
While previous generations focused on recycling and cleaning up rivers, these students want to combat global warming by figuring out ways to reduce carbon emissions in their own lives, starting with their own colleges. They also view the environment as broadly connected with social and economic issues, and their concerns include the displacement of low-income families after Hurricane Katrina and the creation of “green collar” jobs in places like the South Bronx.

The mission is serious and yet, like life at the Oberlin house, it blends idealism, hands-on practicality, laid-back community and fun.

“It’s not about telling people, ‘You have to do this, you have to do that,’” Mr. Brown said. “It’s about fitting sustainability into our own lives.” And hoping, he added, “that a friend will come over, recognize that it’s fun, start doing it, and then a friend of theirs will start doing it.”

“This is a generation that is watching the world come undone,” said David Orr, a professor of environmental studies at Oberlin. Projects like the Oberlin house, he said, are “helping them understand how to stitch the world together again.”

Dr. Orr’s course in ecological design became the incubator for the house when Mr. Brown and the two other founders of SEED, Kathleen Keating and Amanda Medress, enrolled in it last spring. They had done research on sustainability houses at Middlebury, Brown and Tufts, and had persuaded the college to turn over an aging, drafty two-story house. But before they could move in, they needed to make the house energy efficient.

The class studied water and energy use, insulation, heating and cooling, and financing. Nathan Engstrom, Oberlin’s sustainability coordinator—an essential position on many campuses these days—gave advice. John Petersen, the college’s environmental studies director, checked out the house’s wiring.
Equipped with the notion of shared opinion, we can see that Lucas Brown’s opinion about sustainable living is not “just his.” Rather, he shares it with other people like former vice-president Al Gore, a proponent of sustainable living, and Laurie David and Bill McKibben, two well-known environmental activists. He shares it with the other students living in his house, and a host of students on campus, who are part of Oberlin’s sustainability efforts, as well. He also shares his opinion with thousands of people whom he has never met—with everyone who believes, as he does, that it is wrong to continue excessive use of resources such as water and energy with little regard for global warming. Oberlin, where Mr. Brown goes to school, is particularly hospitable to environmental concerns and has taken a leadership position among colleges and universities. (It might be easier for Mr. Brown and his housemates to care about global warming in a college town as opposed to, say, in a community in a state such as Texas, where the oil industry has a stronghold.) And if his opinion is not just his, it follows that, should he wish to, Mr. Brown can change his opinion without changing his identity.

This is not to deny that changing one’s opinion, particularly about deeply held political or even religious beliefs, is very hard work. But it can be done, and it can be done by means of a systematic examination of the available positions on an issue. Sustainable living is an interesting example in this regard because it was until recently a minority belief and practice. Arguments supporting minority beliefs and practices must actively be sought out; often they are not available in venues that convey more dominant opinions, such as mainstream media. As few as five years ago, it took work to find arguments against the wastefulness of American lifestyles, and proponents of sustainable living could only become so after rejecting a more dominant view. Opinions and practices that are dominant, on the other hand, can be accepted without much thought or investigation. Most Americans born after the Second World War grew up believing in the infinite availability of water, gasoline, and electricity, often driving long distances on vacations and idling at drive-thrus waiting for food that was shipped to the restaurant. That individuals and major corporations have very recently
felt the need to examine their “carbon footprints”—and that the phrase “carbon neutral” has entered into the mainstream—indicates that previous practices have met with a rhetorical challenge significant enough to threaten their status as a commonplace, that is, as a dominant, mainstream belief that used to “go without saying” (see the chapter on commonplaces).

If we locate opinions outside individuals and within communities, they assume more importance. If a significant number of individuals within a community share an opinion, it becomes difficult to dismiss that opinion as unimportant, no matter how much we like or detest it. Nor can we continue to see opinions as unchangeable. If Lucas Brown got his opinion about sustainable living from somebody he knows, something he read, or a film he saw, he can modify his opinion when he hears or reads or sees a different opinion from somebody else. For example, perhaps his economics professor may caution that the American economy will take a nosedive if legions of Americans suddenly begin to pay attention to carbon footprints. Communication researchers have discovered that people generally adopt the opinions of people they know and respect. Lucas Brown is aware of this phenomenon, as evidenced when he hopes that “a friend will come over, recognize that it’s fun, start doing it, and then a friend of theirs will start doing it.” Opinions are likely to change when we lose respect for the people who hold them, or when we meet new people whom we like and respect and who have different opinions. Opinions, that is, can be contagious.

Ancient teachers of rhetoric believed that rhetorical reasoning, which is used in politics, journalism, religious argument, literature, philosophy, history, and law—to name just a few of its arenas—is fully as legitimate as that used in any other field. And even though it uses appeals to community opinion and to emotions, if it is done responsibly, rhetorical reasoning is no more or less valid than the reasoning used in science.

ON IDEOLOGY AND THE COMMONPLACES

We suggested earlier that networks of interpretation—the way people interpret and use facts—have persuasive potential, whereas facts by themselves do not. Contemporary rhetoricians use the term ideology to name networks of interpretation, and that is the term we use for it in the rest of this book.

An ideology is a coherent set of beliefs that people use to understand events and the behavior of other people; they are also used to predict events and behaviors. Ideologies exist in language, but they are worked out in practices. They are sets of statements that tell us how to understand ourselves and others, and how to understand nature and our relation to it as well. Furthermore, ideologies help us to decide how to value what we know—they tell us what is thought to be true, or right, or good, or beautiful in a community.

Each of us is immersed in the ideologies that circulate in our communities once we begin to understand and use language. Hence ideologies actually produce “selves”; the picture you have of yourself has been formed by your experiences, to be sure, but it has also been constructed by the beliefs that circulate
among your family, friends, the media, and other communities that you inhabit. You may think of yourself as a Christian, or a Jew, or a Muslim, or as secular. In each case, you adopted a set of beliefs about the way the world works from some relevant community (in the last case, you may have reacted against dominant ideologies). Even though identities are shaped by ideologies, they are never stable because we can question or reject ideological belief. As we have suggested, people do this all the time: they undergo religious conversion; they adopt a politics; they decide that UFOs do not exist; they shorten the length of time they spend in the shower; they take up exercise because they have become convinced it is good for them. Often, it is rhetoric that has brought about this ideological change. Ideology is the stuff with which rhetors work.

We mean no disrespect when we say that religious beliefs and political leanings are ideological. Quite the contrary: human beings need ideologies to make sense of their experiences in the world. Powerful ideologies such as religions and political beliefs help people to understand who they are and what their relation is to the world and to other beings.

Sometimes people make small changes because the ideological bias of a customary practice has been called into question by the community with which they identify. For example, the first edition of this book used a BC/AD dating system. This nomenclature is ideological because it is Christian (BC stands for “before Christ,” whereas AD abbreviates the Latin anno Domini, “in the year of the Lord,” and is used to designate the years after the birth of Christ). In the second edition, we adopted a new and increasingly customary dating system BCE/CE, which stand for “before the common era” and “common era,” respectively. We realize, as one of our critics has pointed out to us, that changing the naming system still does not alter the calendar itself. The year “zero” is still associated with the birth of Christ. But in changing from BC/AD to BCE/CE, we made an ideological choice to use secular terminology. In doing so, we follow our own beliefs as well as scholarly convention—the common practice in a broad community of scholars. (If this were a book about the history of Christianity, we might have made a different choice.)

Ideologies are made up of the statements that ancient rhetoricians called commonplaces. The distinguishing characteristic of a commonplace is that it is commonly believed by members of a community. These beliefs are “common” not because they are cheap or trivial but because they are shared “in common” by many people. Commonplaces need not be true or accurate (although they may be true, and they are certainly thought to be so within the communities that hold them). Some commonplaces are so thoroughly embedded in a community’s assumptions about how the world works that they are seldom examined rhetorically. Here are some examples of commonplaces that circulate in American discourse:

Anyone can become president of the United States.
All men are created equal.
Everyone has a right to express their beliefs because free speech is protected by the Constitution.
Please note that even though these statements are widely accepted in American discourse, they are not necessarily true for all Americans. In other words, outside the communities that subscribe to them, commonplaces may be controversial. If you disagreed with us earlier when we asserted that “men have more power than women,” your disagreement should alert you to the presence of a commonplace that is accepted in some community to which we belong but not in the communities with which you identify. In a case like this, the commonplace is contested. Contested commonplaces are called issues in rhetoric, and it is the point of rhetoric to help people examine and perhaps to achieve agreement about issues.

Most people probably subscribe to commonplaces drawn from many and diverse ideologies at any given time. Because of this, and because our subscription to many of our beliefs is only partially conscious, our ideological beliefs may contradict one another. For instance, if John believes on religious grounds that people ought to help support the poor, he may find that belief to be in conflict with his conservative politics, which teach that people ought to keep the vast majority of wealth they have earned. Thus John’s ideology contains a potential contradiction. This is not unusual because ideology is seldom consistent with itself. In fact, it may be full of contradictions, and it may (and often does) contradict empirical states of affairs as well. For example, the commonplace that affirms that “Anyone can become president of the United States” overlooks the reality that all presidents to date have been men.

Ideology and commonplaces are crucial for rhetoric; they help shape the issues we deliberate. Such issues—matters about which there was some disagreement or dispute—greatly interested ancient rhetoricians. Nothing can become an issue unless someone disagrees with someone else about its truth or falsity or applicability or worth. Furthermore, issues do not exist in isolation from the people who speak or write about them. For the ancients, these issues grew out of life in a community. Young people studied rhetoric precisely because they wanted to be involved in decisions that affected the lives of their family, friends, and neighbors. Students of ancient rhetoric did engage in a good deal of practice with artificial rhetorical situations taken from history or literature or law (the rhetorical exercises were called progymnasmata and declamation). However, this practice was aimed at teaching them something about the community they would later serve, as well as about rhetoric. In other words, they did not study rhetoric only to learn its rules. Instead, their study was preparation for a life of active citizenship.

LANGUAGE AS POWER; LANGUAGE AS ACTION

Ancient rhetoricians were aware that language is a powerful force for moving people to action. They also knew that communicating by means of language or gesture constitutes its own form of action. The Older Sophist Gorgias went so far as to say that language could work on a person’s spirit as powerfully as drugs worked on the body. As he said, language can “stop fear and banish grief and create joy and nurture pity” (“Encomium to Helen,” 8). Gorgias taught his students that language could bewitch people, could jolt them out of their everyday
awareness into a new awareness from which they could see things differently. Hence its persuasive force. If you doubt this, think about the last time you went to a movie that made you cry, or saw a commercial that convinced you to buy something, or heard a sermon or lecture that scared you into changing your behavior.

Isocrates argued that language was the ground of community because it enabled people to live together and to found cultures (“Nicocles” 5–9). Communication was the mutual exchange of convictions, and communities could be defined as groups of human beings who operate with a system of roughly similar convictions. For Isocrates, language was the *hegemon* (prince, guide) of all thought and action. He pointed out that language makes it possible for people to conceive of differences and to make distinctions like man/woman or good/bad. It also allows them to conceive of abstractions like justice or reality. The contemporary rhetorician Wayne Booth put forward an Isocratean view of rhetoric in his book, *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric*, when he asserted that “the quality of our lives, especially the ethical and communal quality depends to an astonishing degree on the quality of our rhetoric” (xii).

Ancient teachers never assumed that there is only one way to read or interpret a discourse. Audiences inevitably bring their ideologies, their linguistic abilities, and their understandings of local rhetorical contexts to any reading or listening they do. Contexts such as readers’ or listeners’ experiences and education or even time of day inevitably influence their interpretation of any discourse. This is particularly true of written discourse, which, to ancient ways of thinking, was set adrift by authors into the community, where people could and would read it in as many ways as there were readers (Plato, *Phaedrus* 275). Today, however, people sometimes think that the sole purpose of reading is to glean information from a text, and this belief is reinforced in school when students are expected to take tests or answer a set of questions about their reading to prove that they comprehended the assignment.

But people do many things when they read a text for the first time, and determining what it says is only one of these things. When you read any text, especially a difficult one, you simply can’t find out what it says once and for all on your first trip through it. You can’t consume written words the way you consume a cheeseburger and fries. When written words are banged up against one another, they tend to set off sparks and combinations of meanings that their writers never anticipated. Unfortunately, writers are ordinarily not present to tell readers what they intended to communicate.

Sometimes unintended meanings happen because written letters and punctuation marks are ambiguous. A popular Facebook page called “‘Let’s Eat Grandma’ or ‘Let’s Eat, Grandma!’: Punctuation Saves Lives” comically illustrates the misunderstandings that can result from a simple omitted comma. There are only twenty-six letters in the English alphabet, after all, and just a few marks of punctuation in the writing system. So most of these letters and marks must be able to carry several meanings. For example, quotation marks can signify quoted material:

“‘Get lost,’ he said.”
But they can also be used for emphasis:

“We don’t ‘cash’ checks.”

Or they can be used to set off a term whose use a writer wants to question:

“This is not a ‘liberal’ interpretation.”

The last two uses are called “scare quotes.” In speaking, the work done by punctuation is conveyed by voice and gesture, but writers do not have the luxury of conveying meaning through their bodies; instead they must rely on stylistic and other indicators to negotiate meaning in their writing (see the chapter on delivery).

The meanings of words differ, too, from person to person and from context to context. Indeed, the meanings of words are affected by the contexts in which they appear. In current political discourse, for example, words such as patriotism, freedom, and justice can mean very different things to the people who use them, depending on whether they subscribe to conservative or liberal ideologies. The slogan “support our troops” has been used by those in favor of the military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as those who oppose it. Because people are different from one another, they have different responses to the same discourse.

When we listen to someone speaking, we have several contextual advantages that readers do not have. If we misunderstand a speaker, we can ask her to repeat herself or to slow down. This is why press conferences, lectures, and class presentations often feature a question-and-answer session. Our chances of misunderstanding spoken language are also decreased by the fact that we can see and hear the person who is speaking, and we can interact with her as well. Thus we can support our interpretation of the meanings of her words with our interpretations of her facial and bodily gestures and the loudness and pitch of her voice. Too, we are often acquainted with people who speak to us, whereas often we do not know writers personally. And even if we don’t know a speaker well, we do understand our relationship to her. If a speaker is your mother rather than your teacher or boss or fitness instructor, you can rapidly narrow down the range of possible meanings she might convey when she commands you to “Shape up!” All these kinds of contexts—physical and social—help us to interpret a speaker’s meaning.

But these contexts are not available in any writing, which is composed for an audience of people who are not known to the writer. So writers have to guess about the contexts that readers will bring to their reading. Usually those contexts will be very different from the writer’s, especially in the case of a book like this one that introduces readers to a new field of study. Our experience as teachers has taught us that our familiarity with rhetoric and its terminology often causes us to take some of its fundamental points for granted. When we do this in a classroom students can ask questions until they are satisfied that they understand. But readers cannot do this. So even though we have tried very hard to make the contexts of ancient rhetorics clear in this book, people are bound to understand
our text differently from each other and perhaps differently from what we tried to convey. Ancient rhetorics were invented by cultures that have long since disappeared, and that is one potential source of differential understanding in this particular text. But writers always fail to match their contexts with those of readers, and this kind of differential understanding is universal. It arises simply because writers can only imagine readers—who they are, what they know.

To put all of this another way: writers and speakers always fail to put themselves precisely in their readers’ and listeners’ shoes. This potential for differential understanding is not a curse, but rather it is what allows knowledge to grow and change. The ancients understood this, and that’s why they celebrated copiousness—many arguments, many understandings.

Because ancient rhetoricians believed that language was a powerful force for persuasion, they urged their students to develop copia in all parts of their art. Copia can be loosely translated from Latin to mean an abundant and ready supply of language—something appropriate to say or write whenever the occasion arises. Ancient teaching about rhetoric is everywhere infused with the notions of expansiveness, amplification, and abundance. Ancient teachers gave their students more advice about the divisions or canons of rhetoric—invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery—than they could ever use. They did so because they knew that practice in these rhetorical arts alerted rhetors to the multitude of communicative and persuasive possibilities that exist in language.

This leads us to another important feature of ancient rhetoric: the belief that messing around with language is fun. Composition need not be undertaken with the deadly seriousness that is sometimes brought to it today. Contemporary students often want to “get it right” the first time and forget about it. Ancient peoples, on the other hand, fooled around with language all the time. The Greeks sponsored poetry contests and gave prizes for the most daring or entertaining elaborations on a well-known theme. Romans who lived during the first centuries CE held rhetorical contests called declamations, the object of which was to compose a complicated and innovative discourse about some hackneyed situation involving pirates or angry fathers. The winner was the person who could compose the most unusual arguments or who could devise the most elaborate amplifications and ornamentations of an old theme.

**PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE**

To return to the positive side of Jon Stewart’s analogy equating competitive athletics with real debate—or, in this book’s terms, with rhetorical engagement—it is interesting to note that many teachers of rhetoric in ancient Athens and Rome found it useful to think of rhetorical training and performance as roughly analogous to athletic competition. As one of us argues in another book, the ancients deemed the struggle of competition (agonism) to be productive and beneficial, and in the context of rhetoric, they believed hard work paid off. Many ancients devoted themselves to devising conceptual tools and training methods that would help their fellow citizens become strong rhetors—active citizens equipped
to think about issues of the day. All the ancient rhetors and rhetoricians men-
tioned in this book believed that rhetoric is a complex and flexible art that can
nevertheless be learned and taught. And although there was much disagreement
among the ancients about the best way to learn rhetoric, most of them agreed on
three points: practice, practice, and practice.

Too often contemporary classrooms treat practice-based activities and exer-
cises as “busywork,” something to fill time between “real” assignments. We
believe this is because of a heavy emphasis in today’s classrooms on writing-
as-product. In case it isn’t clear by now, the ancients placed less emphasis on
the product—the finalized speech or the finished piece of writing—and more
emphasis on learning and shaping rhetorical skills through constant activity and
practice. The best comparison for the ancient model of rhetorical education is
the immersion technique of foreign language learning, wherein students speak
only the language being learned. Likewise, these activities and exercises encour-
age you to see rhetoric all around you, to engage it analytically, and to practice
improving your use of rhetoric when you speak and write.

Aelius Theon, one of the early developers of *progymnasmata*, or rhetorical
exercises, had strong faith in their effectiveness:

> It is quite evident that these exercises are altogether beneficial to those who take
up the art of rhetoric. For those who have recited a *narration* and a *fable* well
and with versatility will also compose a history well. . . . Training through the *chreia*
not only produces a certain power of discourse but also a good and useful charac-
ter since we are being trained in the aphorisms of wise persons. Both the so-called
*commonplace* and *description* have benefit that is conspicuous since the ancients
have used them everywhere.

(Aelius Theon, *Progymnasmata* Preface 1)

Ancient rhetoric teachers believed their students would become competent
rhetors if they combined study of rhetorical principles with lots of practice com-
posing. This book is designed to strike that same balance.

The *progymnasmata* brought to the students’ attention patterns in language.
The regular and varied practice at composing often has the surprising effect of
making people enjoy writing and speaking just by making them more familiar
as activities. *Progymnasmata*, as the classicist Ruth Webb argued, did not key
to the “end result” but rather sought to cultivate rhetorical sensibility through
constant—and constantly changing—rhetorical activity (300).

The *progymnasmata* and, later on, the imitation exercises we recommend
might feel strange to contemporary students. When asked to imitate a passage
written by an author you admire, you might feel as if you are violating some
sort of rule about copying. Beliefs about rhetorical style have, in many ways,
emulated popular thinking about opinions and argument: style has become an
“individual,” ineffable thing.

We disagree. And so would the ancients. We would never encourage stu-
dents to violate copyright laws or university policies concerning plagiarism,
but we also believe that imitation has nothing to do with stealing. Imitation
exercises, if practiced in the way that the ancients practiced them, can lead you to a more finely tuned rhetorical method of reading and listening. That is, when reading and listening rhetorically, we read and listen as much for how a writer or speaker builds an argument with words, sentences, paragraphs, and sections as for what the writer or speaker is arguing. And what is more, although plagiarizing (copying work from someone else) is easy (that’s why people do it), imitation exercises can be extremely difficult. This is because imitation exercises ask you to try new approaches and to innovate within those approaches. Imitation exercises can be as challenging as they are fun.

Professional rhetors know that much more work is produced during invention than is actually presented to audiences. That is, not everything that is composed actually ends up in a finished piece. Some ancient exercises are for practice, whereas others draw attention to style. Still others increase understanding of rhetorical principles. Practice is never wasted effort, though, because everything a rhetor composes increases copiousness—a handy supply of arguments, available for use on any occasion.

**RHETORICAL ACTIVITIES**

1. Look around you and listen. Where do you find people practicing rhetoric? Watch television and read popular newspapers or magazines with this question in mind. Jot down one or two of the rhetorical arguments you hear or see people making. Presidents and members of Congress are good sources, but so are journalists and parents and attorneys and clergy and teachers. Do such people try to support these arguments with facts? Or do they use other means of convincing people to accept their arguments?

2. Consider Jon Stewart’s point about the state of argument in America today. Have you encountered any examples recently of argument—that’s-not-really-argument? How can you tell the theatrical sort of argument from the rhetorically engaged?

3. Think about a time when you tried to convince someone to change his or her mind. How did you go about it? Were you successful? Now think about a time when someone tried to get you to change your mind. What arguments did the person use? Was he or she successful?

4. Try to answer this question: What counts as persuasion in your community? Here are some questions to start from: Think of a time when you changed your mind about something. How did it happen? Did somebody talk you into it, or did events cause you to change the way you think? How do the people you know go about changing their minds? How does religious conversion happen, for example? What convinces people to stop smoking or to go on a diet? How do people get to be racists, or become convinced they ought to stop being racist? How does a president convince a people that they ought to support a war? Make a list of arguments that seem convincing in each of these cases.
5. The Roman teacher Quintilian underscored the importance of rhetorical situations to composing when he suggested that students should consider what there is to say; before whom, in whose defense, against whom, at what time and place, under what circumstances; what is the popular opinion on the subject; and what the prepossessions of the judge are likely to be; and finally of what we should express our deprecation or desire (Institutes IV 1 52–53).

If you are at a loss for something to say or write, you can use Quintilian’s list as a heuristic, or means of discovery. Begin by thinking about the communities of which you are a part, and make a list of these: your families, relatives, and friends; your house or dormitory, your street, barrio, town, city, or reservation; your workplace; your school, college, or university; groups you belong to; your state, country or nation, and the world. What positions do you take on issues that are currently contested in your communities? This exercise should help you to articulate what you think about such issues.

a. Start with this question: what are the hotly contested issues in the communities you live in (the street, the barrio, your hometown, your school, your workplace, the reservation, the state, the nation?) Make a list of these issues. (If you don’t know what these issues are, ask someone—a parent, teacher, friend—or read the editorial and front pages of a daily newspaper or watch the local and national news on television or access news sources on the Internet.)

b. Pick one or two issues and write out your positions on them. Write as fast as you can without stopping or worrying about grammar and spelling. Use a computer or mobile device if you have access to one and are fast on a keyboard, or write by hand if that is more comfortable for you. At this point you are composing for your use only. So don’t worry about neatness or completeness or correctness; write to discover what you think about these issues. Write for as long as you want to, but write about each issue for at least fifteen minutes without stopping. Remember that thinking is exercise, just like running or bicycling, so don’t be surprised if you tire after a few minutes of doing this work.

c. These writings should give you a clearer view of what you think about one or two urgent issues. Let them sit for a while—an hour is good but a couple of days is better. Then read them again. Now use Quintilian’s questions to find out your positions on community issues. What is the popular opinion on each issue? What is the position taken by people in authority? What is your position on the issue? Are there policies or practices you advocate or reject? With which members of your communities do you agree? Disagree? On what issues? What positions are taken by people who disagree with you? How will the community respond to your propositions?

d. Now you should have an idea about which issue interests you most. Be sure to select an issue that you can comfortably discuss with other people. Write about it again for a while—say fifteen minutes.
e. Give what you’ve written to someone you trust; ask him or her to tell you what else they want to know about what you think. Listen carefully, and take notes on the reader’s suggestions. Don’t talk or ask questions until the reader finishes talking. Then discuss your views on the issue further, if your reader is willing to do so. If your reader said anything that modifies your views, revise your writing to take these changes into account.

f. Keep these compositions as well as your original list of issues. You can repeat this exercise whenever you wish to write about an issue or when you are asked to write for a class.

6. Begin recording in a journal or notebook the arguments that you commonly hear or read.

**ENDNOTES**

1. We encourage readers who are interested in the history of ancient rhetorics to consult the appendix to this book. You might also want to consult some of the histories cited in the bibliography. The bibliography also lists modern editions of the major works of the most influential ancient rhetors and rhetoricians. If you are interested in reading the works of the ancient rhetors and rhetoricians themselves, cheap editions of many of these can be found in the classics or literature sections of many bookstores, and they are available in libraries, too.

2. Recital of the facts connected with an argument does reinforce a rhetor’s ethos, or persuasive character (see the chapter on ethos). If a writer or speaker demonstrates that she knows the facts of a case, her listeners or readers will increase their respect for her and her argument.

**WORKS CITED**


