# Composition, Rhetoric, and the Job of Citizen

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The United States has and has had an ambivalent attitude toward composition and rhetoric. During the 1992 election former President Bush charged that then-candidate Clinton gave the impression that America was in a state of decline, but Bush urged voters to "look beneath the rhetoric and look at the facts" ("Bush, Clinton," A4). Bush wasn't alone in conjuring up an image of a menacing rhetoric. Clinton said that what he offered was "a partnership—not rhetoric, not hot speeches, not cheap thirty-second television ads, but a true partnership ("MSU" A1). From both of these quotations rhetoric appears is clearly assumed to be deceitful. According to Bush, it is the antithesis of "facts"; to Clinton it is the equivalent of "hot speeches" and "cheap ... ads." He offers truth, a "true partnership."

And yet the language of politics is replete with the vocabulary of classical rhetoric. David Broder recently quoted Richard Lamm as stating that Clinton is "demagoguing the Medicare issue." Broder also suggests that the presence of Ross Perot in the coming election makes it difficult for Dole to "attack ... Clinton's character" (E2). Aristotle couldn't have said it better. The crass emotional appeal represented by the "demagogue" is heaped upon the assault on Clinton's ethical appeal. Both criticisms suggest that Clinton's message should be disregarded because of its reliance on pure emotion and on Clinton's poor character.

Into this discussion we also have the fact that composition or oratory, the heirs of classical rhetoric, have been mandatory courses of study for incoming American university students for one-hundred years at least. Albert Kitzhaber traces the beginnings of composition to Harvard University during the 1860s and 70s and notes that it is codified in Harvard's catalogue in 1874 and requires students to write "a short

English Composition, correct in spelling, grammar, and expression..." (qtd. in Kitzhaber 35). Scholars at Harvard thought that incoming students were deficient in writing skills, and in 1891 a committee undertook to study the "composition and rhetoric problem" (qtd. in Kitzhaber 44). In fact, this committee blamed the underpreparation of students on primary and secondary schools, advocating that these institutions focus on composition. However, the committee's suggestion was one that continues to embroil composition scholars: that these schools focus on teaching the rigors of good grammar, proper style, and mechanical correctness, thus allowing Harvard to engage in its "true purpose—advanced education"—in Kitzhaber's words (45).

Fred Newton Scott at the University of Michigan thought that the report with its insistence on language correctness was misguided, and suggested that it aimed to raise the standard of composition "by the hair of the head" (qtd. in Kitzhaber 47). This conflict, then, leads to the central problem of composition and rhetoric in schools: whether its role is to inculcate proper and correct language or whether its role is something else, something more. Scott gives a concise view of his view, at least, of the role of composition. Writing in 1909 in an article called "What the West Wants in Preparatory English" (remember that Michigan was considered the West then) Scott notes that

> It is of course necessary that our young people should spell and punctuate properly, should make the verb agree with its subject, use words in their dictionary senses, and write sentences that can be read aloud without causing unnecessary pain to the mandibles... But these matters ... are subsidiary
> ... a means to an end... The main purpose of training in composition is free speech, direct and sincere communion with our fellows, that swift and untrammeled exchange of opinion, feeling, and experience which is the working instrument of the social instinct, and the motive power of our civilization.
>
> (qtd. in Stewart 39)

What Scott is talking about here is the job of citizen, and much of what we as educators do is train students for that job. Historian Paul Gagnon has a similar view in his essay "Why Study History." He argues that history helps inculcate powers of "judgement" in individuals in a democratic society for what he calls "the profession of citizen, which like it or not, exercise it or not, we are born into" (43). Now, the term "democracy" is always a tricky one, and tends to be defined in cliches or

in political terms. For the present I would like to adapt a definition used by Daniel Boorstin, which is a system "governed by a spirit of equality and dominated by the desire ... to give everything to everybody" (153). To that definition I would add a system that believes in publicly providing all ideas and data to all citizens. And that our jobs as educators is often to impart to students the means by which they can manage and use the conflicting ideas and information that they face. The job of citizen is demanding, requiring us to actively undertake our right and obligation to participate in public discourse, which should not be defined simply as political dialogue. Public discourse is in an ongoing conversation, both oral and written, between citizens about public issues: social, political, cultural, academic, commercial, scientific. Composition and rhetoric give students the tools to participate, to undertake their new profession, and to actively analyze and create the arguments—the use of specific evidence to support disputable positions—and information that characterize public life.

Composition and rhetoric in this citizen-building sense has a long history. Textbooks show that rhetoric developed in Greece of the fifth Century BC in Sicily and that it developed out of individual citizens' needs to personally litigate property disputes. In fact, by the time of Aristotle's Rhetoric, the three main arenas of a citizen's public discourse are identified: law courts, politics, and ceremonies. Representatives were not "hired" to plead citizens' cases, argue their votes, or eulogize their passing ancestors. Citizens had no choice but participation. This is not to yearn for some Golden Age. We have to remember that citizenship then was not universal; that women were not citizens; that "foreigners" were not afforded any rights of citizenship; and that even Aristotle takes care to discuss the merits of using torture for the testimony of slaves (I,1376b ff). However, we can adopt some principles, the chief one of which is that truth is not universal. It is probable. Aristotle forthrightly admits that a probability is not the truth, but rather "what happens for the most part ... among things that can be other than they are" (I, 1357a. 16). We can only imagine those citizens arguing their property rights without deeds, or court registers, or bills of sale, or land surveys.

The importance of probability Aristotle's Rhetoric is underscored by James Kinneavy who notes that

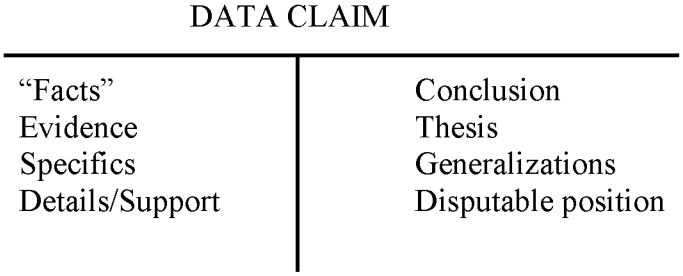
> the human sciences ... involve the contingent, the variable, that changeable, *and therefore the free*... Politics, ethics, [and] rhetoric ...

> enable us to change some aspect of our life and therefore we can deliberate about the ways we may choose to effect the change. (76)

The implication for the task of citizen is clear. We have access to large amounts of data, some of which is true, or accurate, some of which is not true. Some information is biased from its source or exists only in remnants (remember Clinton's mention of "cheap thirty-second television ads"). Nevertheless, citizens have to engage that information, find patterns in it, assess its truth or usefulness, create informed arguments that explain that information, and then work publicly to persuade other citizens to accept that interpretation—in the face of many competing interpretations. The end, of course, is action—casting a vote, signing a contract, making a manifesto, arguing one's way out of a traffic citation, or—particularly in the case of students—getting a grade.

Of course, students don't ask about Aristotle's position on probable truth very often, and yet the capacity to analyze and craft arguments is necessary, particularly when viewing two or more disparate arguments that are based on the same or similar data. It's too simplistic to state that if one citizen holds a position different from ours, then that person must be wrong-headed, misguided, immoral, or mentally inept. This presents a good question: How can two individuals, using the same evidence, which we have already said is largely based on probabilities, come to completely different points of view? Stephen Tuolmin in The Uses of Argument provides an effective model. He suggests—and what follows is an abbreviated version of his complete model—that we develop our claims (or what he calls "conclusions") based on data that is bound together in the face of "warrants" that act as "bridges [that] authorise the sort of step to which our particular argument commits us" (98). Tuolmin further discusses the nature of both data and warrants by stating the "data are appealed to explicitly, warrants implicitly ... warrants are general ... and have accordingly to be established in quite a different way from the facts [that] we produce as data" (100). Tuolmin depicts this relationship in the following diagram:

**Tuolmin's Argumentation Scheme**




Another way of looking at warrants is to view them as assumptions that we hold, assumptions that we adopt from a number of sources: culture, political background, personal history, gender, family, religion, etc. These assumptions are responsible for different claims, even when working with the same data. For example, it was recently reported (Grand Rapids Press) that people living in the Himalayas have developed hearts that qualitatively process oxygen differently from those of people who live in less lofty altitudes, their hearts, in fact, burning glucose rather than fatty acids. This seems to me to qualify as a fact. However, two distinct claims may be made for these data. A group of scientists or anthropologists who make their livings by tracing the events of evolution may make the claim evolution works. However, a group of fundamentalist Christians, for instance, who specifically have a creationist view of human development and who forthrightly reject evolution would probably reject this claim, perhaps citing the data as showing biological "adaptation." Evolution is not just a scientific theory. Whether they understand it completely or not, individuals have definite views on the subject; it is a topic of public policy in schools as well as churches. And as citizens, we need to understand how warrants work to create the arguments of public life.

Someone might ask "Why composition?" "Why writing?" "Can't we discuss the work of citizens in other classes such as history?" "And can't we teach the formation of arguments in speech classes?" Certainly such disciplines undertake the task of educating citizens, and taught well, they often depend on students' command of written discourse. However,

the study of composition, of writing down our data and claims, of using the former to develop the latter, makes our positions plain, allows us to refine those positions, and frees us—after having made an artifact of our argument—to speculate on the assumptions that are responsible for our public thoughts. Composition is a deliberate act. We have to choose our words, aiming at particular purposes and audiences, contemplating the acceptance or rejection of our views, meeting notions already held by an audience, and meeting objections, determining the most effective order for our thoughts. Of course, we also have to pay attention to matters of grammar, spelling, sentence structure, style, and all of the other details of linguistic correctness. Peter Elbow suggests that by writing, we free our minds for more thinking. He writes that thoughts and feelings "play round in our heads and continue play round and round" (288). Once on paper or on a computer screen, though, those thoughts "have a place ... they evolve into another thought or even fade away. Writing is a way to get what is inside one's head outside, on paper, so there's room for more" (288). If composition can help us as citizens accomplish the task of refining our visions and allowing us to have more, or alternate, visions, then it performs a powerful role in free societies by becoming, as Elbow suggests, a kind of "cognitive savagery" (290).

The previous discussion should not be construed as meaning that composition and rhetoric are without critics. The Late James Berlin, for example, notes in Rhetoric and Reality that "every rhetorical system is based on epistemological *assumptions* (my italics) about the nature of reality, the nature of the knower, and the rules governing the discovery and communication of the known" (4). In other words, any rhetorical system is loaded with its own idealogy ("Ideology" 477). Berlin is particularly concerned with what he calls "Current Traditional" rhetoric that assumes that reality is "objective" and is "located in the material world"; this rhetoric is found in classrooms that emphasize mechanical correctness and linguistic precision. He claims that this model was developed by universities in the late nineteenth century as a means of servicing an emerging managerial class, which had "a naive faith ... that [their] economical and political interests ... were ... inherent features of the universe" (Reality 37). Berlin further claims that this class uses its rhetoric and the language in which it is couched as a means of preserving its "privileged status" (37). Before his death, Berlin favored a "social-epistemic" rhetoric, one that is based on an interaction of individuals within a discourse community, one in which new truths and realities are

developed in this free interchange. Such a model "views knowledge as an arena of ideological conflict: there are no arguments from transcendent truth since all arguments arise in ideology" ("Ideology" 489).

Such a view of composition and rhetoric does not reject the notion of using precise language. (Berlin was masterful in his writing—and mechanically very correct.) But it does foster a view of free individuals grappling with important issues under uncertain, probablistic circumstances, searching for a workable truth. In other words, individuals working as citizens.

Richard Rodriguez explains that as a young boy he was forced to learn English and his parents made to use English in their home even though Spanish was their language. Spanish represented for him the private, home world, and English represented the open and public life that he entered as a result of his graduate education. He notes that his new public language in his new (and largely academic) world "allow[ed] those of us from other cultures to deal with each other in a mass society" and thus had "a profound political impact" (404).

Rodriguez's experience is not atypical. Education may be considered a process by which the individual becomes a public person, taking on the rights and obligations of participating in public discourse. Composition and rhetoric, viewed as tools in helping us become citizens, help in this process. Chaim Perelman suggests the following the role for rhetoric:

> ... let us recast our philosophy in terms of a vision in which people and human societies are in interaction and are solely responsible for their cultures, their institutions, and their future—a vision in which people try hard to elaborate reasonable systems, imperfect but perfectible. (Realm 160)

In our times we have all seen systems in which citizens have had no or very little opportunity to participate in their legitimate public discourses. When citizens do not, cannot, or will not participate in a system such as the one envisioned by Perelman, they lose the rights and obligations of citizens—with all the imperfection that that implies. Rather than deciding for themselves the courses of their lives, the public things of their lives are either done for them or to them.

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