

Chapter 2: The Role of Rhetoric in Communication

Overview

Chapter two provides a lot of the necessary rhetorical vocabulary used throughout the remainder of the text. Chapter two is also the most eclectic chapter covering everything from ethical principles and codes (including groupthink), to memo writing and figures of speech. The approach taken in the text, “a rhetorical approach,” tries to help students develop an appreciation for language and writing that goes beyond mere skill acquisition. Although a news release used to be a just a news release, the changes that have happened in news release writing since news releases stopped being documents sent to the media and instead became documents posted to Web sites is a rhetorical change. Different things can be done in an electronic news release placed on a Web site for anyone to read, than a printed release sent to a reporter. Besides the obvious ability to include images and sound, the tone is often different because the audience is different. Chapter two starts trying to make students aware of the various ethical issues facing communication professionals and to make them more sensitive to the rhetorical issues that are part of all effective writing.

Teaching Objectives

- To make students sensitive to rhetorical issues.
- To make students aware of ethical issues.
- To make students aware of figures of speech and to get them to begin looking for them in the writing of others.
- To make students aware of the various ethical positions guiding professional activities.
- To help students understand groupthink and how rhetoric can impact decision-making.
- To help students understand how to write memos.
- To help students understand how to write value statements.

Key Terms

Situational Publics: Individuals and organizations construct messages because of situational constraints and social conventions (Bitzer, 1968). We communicate and respond to issues because we have to. What the situational models tells us, is that the importance of well-crafted, rhetorical, public relations content should not be ignored. As public relations professionals, you are not just writing a news release or a blog entry, you are positioning your organization or client within a wider world of issues, publics, and constraints (pp. 23–24).

PRSA Code of Ethics: The Public Relations Society of America Code of Professional Ethics is like most other codes in that it tries to prescribe correct action. The list of principles contained in the text is a summary of a number of lengthy clauses and descriptions. The actual code is not literally broken down into “Clause 1...Clause 2...” etc. The code is not as explicit as Kent has made it. Maureen Taylor put together the list Kent uses in the textbook from PRSA Code many years ago and Kent clarified a few points about five years ago. We give our students a copy of the PRSA code (summary) in their syllabus in the beginning of the semester (pp. 24–25).

Groupthink: The theory of Groupthink was developed in the 1970s by Irving Janis (1982) to help explain why small groups of experts and professionals often make bad decisions. Groupthink has been applied to big decisions like Kennedy’s “Bay of Pigs” fiasco and the Nazi regime, and dozens of other less important but still consequential decisions that also failed. Groupthink explains why highly cohesive groups—whether experts or novices—make bad decisions. The essence of groupthink has to do with the fact that highly cohesive groups, and groups with high power distance (Hofstede, 1997), are often closed-minded and fail to ask questions and explore alternatives (p. 26).

Audience Adaptation: Public relations is about audience adaptation. As an organizational representative, you will be expected to communicate with an assortment of publics. What you say to them should not be pandering or “mere cookery” (as Plato suggested) but thoughtful, honest, and

should not be pandering or “mere cookery” (as Plato suggested) but thoughtful, honest, and compelling messages (p. 29).

Figures of Speech: Figures of speech are rhetorical tools for making prose more compelling. A figure of speech is simply a rhetorical (or language) strategy. There are dozens of figures of speech including metaphor, metonymy, and repetition (p. 35).

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to take a rhetorical approach to public relations?

- A rhetorical approach takes into account unique situational features when constructing messages: knowledge of key publics, communication and public relations theory, persuasion.
- Well-crafted prose, or “rhetoric,” does not happen by accident. When you hear a persuasive speech given by a politician, or read a compelling argument made by a CEO in a newspaper’s letter to the editor, you are often hearing or reading the work of a public relations professional. Skilled communicators craft memorable and effective messages by understanding language and how to use it well (p. 23).

2. Have you ever experienced groupthink in any of your group projects in school?

- This is a trick question. Groupthink only happens to highly cohesive groups. A group that has worked together for only a few weeks or months cannot be called highly cohesive. Additionally, the stakes are quite low in school so the group members cannot be thought to be conforming in order to serve some greater good.
- A follow-up questions might ask “what kinds of errors might you have had if it was not group think?” But students really should take a small group communication class at some point and learn about small group process.

3. What is the difference between mission and vision statements?

- A mission statement refers to descriptive statements about what an organization does or tries to do, its unique purpose while a vision statement is a statement about how an organization will accomplish its mission—what guides the mission statement
- The mission is what you believe in while the vision is how you do it.

4. According to Plato, Socrates concludes that it is better to suffer injustice than to cause it. Most professionals are in agreement with Plato and Socrates on this point. And yet, many organizations don’t act on such principles as the many oil spills like the most recent BP disaster attest. Why is that?

- Obviously there is no right answer. The intent is just to get the students to start thinking about ethical behaviors. What is also important is for students to understand that while they work for an organization, if all they do is what they are asked or told to do, they are not living up to their ethical professional obligations.

Demonstrations/VAs

1. *Vital Speeches of the Day* offers a sample copy of the publication on its Web site (www.vsotd.com). Students can either open it in class, or with a bit of prep., you can have the file (a PDF) ready to go during class yourself. The various speeches are great ways of showing how figures of speech are used every day in messages from all types of individuals and groups.

Lecture/Chapter Outline

Rhetoric refers to artful and compelling writing and speaking.

- Two functions: persuasion and argument (p. 22).
- Rhetoric is not only about great speeches. All language is rhetorical.

How can we describe rhetoric? (p. 23)

- Classical theories of rhetoric—Aristotle:
 1. Ethos
 2. Logos
 3. Pathos
 4. Syllogisms
- Rhetorical techniques—devices used to “create” good rhetoric.
 1. Metaphors.
 2. Ideographs.
 3. Logical fallacies.
- Rhetorical theories that help to create compelling messages.
 1. Narrative theory.
 2. Symbolic convergence theory.
 3. Apologia.

Constructing meaning: Situational publics and “managing issues” (p. 23).

- Public relations creates messages because of situations. Organizations must respond and interact with their environment.
- “Messages are created because something or someone in the environment creates a problem (existence) that can only be solved by communicating with others (audiences)” (p. 23).
- It is better to be proactive about managing issues and problem solving—to plan ahead. It is not desirable to wait around for problems to happen and then attempt to solve them. Public relations should attempt to be proactive not reactive.

Ethical Principles (p. 24).

- Display PRSA code of ethics and discuss each article.

Going beyond codes of ethics (p. 25).

- Rhetoric can help to eliminate groupthink (p. 26).
- Helps to explain how small groups of people make bad decisions. Highly cohesive (or like-minded) groups tend to come to the same conclusions and not ask questions or think critically.

Several types of symptoms in groupthink:

- Overestimation of the group’s power and morality:

1. We are invulnerable!
 2. We are moral—we can't make bad decisions!
- Close-mindedness:
 1. Tend to rationalize actions and discount warnings
 2. Stereotyping others as incapable of reasoned action
 - Pressures towards uniformity:
 1. Self-censorship—everyone should think and act alike!
 2. Thinking that everyone in the group shares the same opinion.
 3. Pressuring those that disagree to change their views.
 4. Emergence of people who protect the group from information that contradicts the majority view.

Public relations can help to deter groupthink by serving as the “devil’s advocate” the group. Question the actions of leaders and bring up minority opinions that may be valid.

Decisions should be decided by what is right (p. 27)

- Don't do what your boss wants you to do if it's wrong. Convince him/her otherwise.
- Public relations is the moral conscience, the “thinking heart” of an organization.
- Making sure the organization behaves in an ethical manner is your responsibility.

Ethics and audience adaptation (p. 29).

- Public relations should serve the public interest as well as the organization's interest.
- Entails convincing leaders that organizational actions may be poorly received by the public.
- Tailors communication to publics—you adapt to the needs and motivations of your stakeholders.
- People can only be convinced when they trust the source and believe information to be credible.

DQ: Are internal audiences are different than external audiences?

- Internal audiences have different levels of knowledge and trust.
- Tactics are different to reach internal v. external audiences.

DQ: Why and how is thoughtful rhetoric useful in talking to media?

- You are not writing for media representatives, but for their publics.
- Media have great power, they serve as information gatekeepers.
- You must build a relationship with them in order to get information to broader publics.

Writing value statements (p. 30).

Intended to guide organizations to make ethical decisions that will benefit the organization. A “road map” for how the organization should behave and what it hopes to accomplish.

Mission statements:

- Descriptive statement about what the organization does—what is it's purpose?