

# Understanding Rhetoric

When you see an advertisement for McDonald's, it probably shows slim, attractive customers eating high-quality burgers and enjoying it, smiling happily like it's the tastiest food they've ever had.

If you eat at McDonald's, you'll probably receive a slightly squashed burger made of questionable ingredients, and it might not be healthy or tasty, but at least it was quick and only cost a few dollars.

The difference between the ad and the reality probably doesn't surprise you. McDonald's uses ads to sell their food, after all—they have to make it seem as appealing as possible. It's natural for ads to be a little bit untrustworthy, because the goal isn't to provide accurate information, it's to earn money.

This kind of thinking is called Rhetoric.

## Wait, what exactly is rhetoric?

In classical terms, Rhetoric is the art of persuasion. This means, rhetoric is all the methods that someone or something (a piece of writing, an advertisement, etc.) uses to communicate something.

When you analyze rhetoric, you're considering three things:

1. The message – what is the reader, listener, or viewer told?
2. The author – who has generated the message?
3. The audience – what type of reader, listener, or viewer is the message for?

This is called the Rhetorical Situation, and it all feeds into the main questions that rhetoric aims to answer:

What is being communicated? For what purpose? And how is it done?

## What is being communicated?

The first step to understanding any communication, whether it's an image, a video, a piece of writing, or a spoken conversation, is to discern what message the creator is trying to get across.

In a McDonald's ad, the message is that McDonald's food is wonderful and you should buy some.

In a conversation with a friend, the message might be that she thinks your haircut looks nice.

In an academic article, the message might be that nuclear power is a much safer alternative than popular belief might suggest (Richard A. Muller's "Nuclear Waste," 2008).

## For what purpose?

McDonald's ad: to convince you to buy a burger, while following regulations prohibiting false advertising. Within those parameters, they'll probably bend the truth as much as they can to make their product look as good as possible.

Your friend: to make you feel good about yourself and your haircut. She may or may not be truthful about it; her goal is to make you happy, not to be totally, brutally honest.

Muller's "Nuclear Waste" article: to convince you that nuclear power is a safer alternative than anti-nuclear propaganda suggests. Considering his education, the strength of his evidence, the neutrality of his goal, and his fair treatment of the opposing point of view, probably quite reliable.

## How it's done:

You've probably heard of the classical Rhetorical Appeals:

- Ethos – convincing you that the speaker/author can be trusted
- Pathos – tapping into your emotions
- Logos – using facts, numbers, and logical reasoning to prove a point

Understanding what methods the speaker/author uses to make a point gives you enough information to then assess how reliable their message is.

Most of us already think critically like this about EVERY PIECE OF COMMUNICATION we encounter! It would be irresponsible to take all information at face value—you're always asking yourself how trustworthy statements are. This kind of critical thinking is Rhetoric.