

Ethos, Pathos, Logos: 3 Pillars of Public Speaking

Updated: Sep 2nd, 2013

2300 years ago, Aristotle wrote down the **secret to being a persuasive speaker**, the secret which forms the basis for nearly every public speaking book written since then.

Do you know the secret?

If you don't, you might be wondering what a 2300-year-old theory has to do with public speaking in the year 2010.

In a word — everything!

In this article, you'll learn what ethos, pathos, and logos are (the secret!), and what every speaker needs to understand about these three pillars of public speaking.

What are Ethos, Pathos, and Logos?

So, what are ethos, pathos, and logos?

In simplest terms, they correspond to:



- **Ethos:** credibility (or character) of the speaker
- **Pathos:** emotional connection to the audience
- **Logos:** logical argument

Together, they are the three *persuasive appeals*. In other words, these are the three essential qualities that your speech or presentation must have before your audience will accept your message.

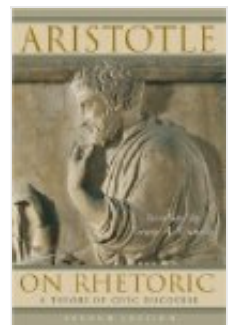
Origins of Ethos, Pathos, Logos — *On Rhetoric* by Aristotle

Written in the 4th century B.C.E., the Greek philosopher Aristotle compiled his thoughts on the art of rhetoric into *On Rhetoric*, including his theory on the three persuasive appeals.

Three Pillars of Public Speaking

Many teachers of communication, speech, and rhetoric consider Aristotle's *On Rhetoric* to be a seminal work in the field. Indeed, the editors of *The Rhetoric of Western Thought: From the Mediterranean World to the Global Setting* call it "the most important single work on persuasion ever written." It is hard to argue this claim; most advice from modern books can be traced back to Aristotle's foundations.

In *The Classic Review*, Sally van Noorden points to George Kennedy's modern translation as the standard reference text for studying *On Rhetoric*. **Kennedy's translation is the source that I use.** (At the time of this writing, it is [available from amazon.com for \\$24.56](#), 18% off the list price.)



Ethos

Before you can convince an audience to accept anything you say, they have to accept you as *credible*.

There are many aspects to building your credibility:

- Does the audience respect you?
- Does the audience believe you are of good character?
- Does the audience believe you are generally trustworthy?
- Does the audience believe you are an authority on this speech topic?

Keep in mind that it isn't enough for *you* to know that you are a credible source. (This isn't about *your* confidence, experience, or expertise.) Your audience must know this. Ethos is your level of credibility as perceived by your audience.

We will [define ethos in greater detail](#), and we will study [examples of how to establish and build ethos](#).

Pathos

Pathos is the quality of a persuasive presentation which appeals to the emotions of the audience.

- Do your words evoke feelings of ... love? ... sympathy? ... fear?
- Do your visuals evoke feelings of compassion? ... envy?
- Does your characterization of the competition evoke feelings of hate? contempt?

Emotional connection can be created in many ways by a speaker, perhaps most notably by *stories*. The goal of a story, anecdote, analogy, simile, and metaphor is often to link an aspect of our primary message with a triggered emotional response from the audience.

We will [study pathos in greater detail](#), and look at [how to build pathos](#) by tapping into different audience emotions.

Logos

Logos is synonymous with a logical argument.

- Does your message make sense?
- Is your message based on facts, statistics, and evidence?
- Will your call-to-action lead to the desired outcome that you promise?

We will see [why logos is critical to your success](#), and examine [ways to construct a logical, reasoned argument](#).

Which is most important? Ethos? Pathos? or Logos?

Suppose two speakers give speeches about a new corporate restructuring strategy.

- The first speaker — a grade nine student — gives a flawless speech pitching strategy A which is both logically sound and stirs emotions.
- The second speaker — a Fortune 500 CEO — gives a boring speech pitching strategy B.

Which speech is more persuasive? Is the CEO's speech more persuasive,

simply because she has much more credibility (ethos)?

Some suggest that pathos is the most critical of the three. In *You've Got to Be Believed to Be Heard*, Bert Decker says that people buy on emotion (pathos) and justify with fact (logos). True? You decide.

Aristotle believed that logos *should be* the most important of the three persuasive appeals. As a philosopher and a master of logical reasoning, he believed that logos *should be* the only required persuasive appeal. That is, if you demonstrated logos, you *should not* need either ethos or pathos.

However, Aristotle stated that logos *alone* is not sufficient. Not only is it not sufficient on its own, but it is no more important than either of the two other pillars. He argued that all three persuasive appeals are necessary.

Is he right? What do you think?

Next in this Series...

In the next article of this series, we [examine ethos in greater detail](#).