

# What is rhetoric?

**Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg:**

Rhetoric has a **number of overlapping meanings**: the practice of oratory; the study of the **strategies of effective oratory**; **the use of language, written or spoken, to inform or persuade**; the study of the **persuasive effects** of language; the study of the **relation between language and knowledge**; the classification and use of tropes and figures; and, of course, the use of empty promises and half-truths as a form of **propaganda**. Nor does this list exhaust the definitions that might be given. Rhetoric is a complex discipline with a long history: **It is less helpful to try to define it once and for all than to look at the many definitions it has accumulated over the years and to attempt to understand how each arose and how each still inhabits and shapes the field.**

**Aristotle:** "The art [or mental ability] of observing in any given situation the available means of persuasion."

**Sappho:** "**Persuasion is Aphrodite's daughter**: it is she who beguiles our mortal hearts."

**Quintilian:** "A good man [person] speaking well."

**I. A. Richards:** Rhetoric is the **study of misunderstandings and their remedies**.

**Richard Weaver:** Rhetoric is that "which creates an informed appetite for the good."

**Jacques Derrida:** "There is nothing outside of the text."

**Lloyd Bitzer:** "...rhetoric is **a mode of altering reality**, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action."

**Kenneth Burke:** "the use of words by human agents **to form attitudes or to introduce in other human agents**." Rhetoric is "rooted in an essential function of language itself . . . **the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation** in beings that by nature respond to symbols."

**Helene Cixous:** "And why don't you write? Write! **Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it**. I know why you haven't written. (And why I didn't write before the age of twenty-seven.) Because writing is at once too high, too great for you, it's reserved for the great-that is for "great men"; and it's "silly."

**Audre Lorde:** "Poetry is the way we help **give name to the nameless so it can be thought**" and "The fact that we are here and that I speak these words is **an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us**, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken."

**Adrienne Rich:** "Language is power... Language can be used as a means of changing reality."

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**Giambattista Vico:** "What is eloquence, in effect, but wisdom, ornately and copiously delivered in words appropriate to the common opinion of mankind?"

**Mikhail Bakhtin:** "The actual reality of language-speech is not the abstract system of linguistic forms, not the isolated monologic utterance, and not the psychophysiological act of its implementation, but **the social event of verbal interaction implemented in an utterance or utterances.**"

**Toni Morrison:** "Make up a story... For our sake and yours forget your name in the street; tell us what the world has been to you in the dark places and in the light. Don't tell us what to believe, what to fear. Show us **belief's wide skirt and the stitch that unravels fear's caul.**"

**Gloria E. Anzaldúa:** "Why am I compelled to write? ... **Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me.** By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetites and anger... To become more intimate with myself and you. **To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy.** To dispel the myths that I am a mad prophet or a poor suffering soul. To convince myself that I am worthy and that what I have to say is not a pile of shit... Finally I write because I'm scared of writing, but I'm more scared of not writing."