

# Rhetorical Literacy: Strengthening Our Voice for Families

SUE L.T. MCGREGOR

Riddell's (2020) article *The Power of Rhetoric* inspired this position paper. She used the neologism "rhetorical literacy" describing it as "one of the most powerful tools [we] can wield" (p. 44) to navigate today's complexity. "The need for rhetoric comes not from the weakness of audiences but from the complexity . . . of the world" (Garver, 1994, p. 109). In that spirit, some people have framed rhetoric as "intellectual equipment for living [so people can] cope with the complexities of multilayered messages" in a world rife with misunderstandings, fake news, and conflictual interactions (Zaleska, 2019, para. 1).

**FCS professionals must learn and practice rhetorical literacy so they can bring their ideas about individual and family well-being and quality of life to governments, businesses, civil society, citizens, and fellow FCS practitioners and have these ideas heard and heeded.**

Family and consumer sciences (FCS) practitioners (a.k.a., home economics, human ecology, home sciences, consumer sciences, human

sciences, family studies) must become proficient and successful orators who can speak on behalf of individuals and families in the midst of this complexity. FCS professionals must learn and practice rhetorical literacy so they can bring their ideas about individual and family well-being and quality of life to governments, businesses, civil society, citizens, and fellow FCS practitioners and have these ideas heard and heeded.

Etymologically (i.e., the root meaning of words), *rhetor* means orator, speaker, or communicator. *Rhetoric* refers to the art of persuasive communication (oral, written, visual, often in combination). For clarification, visual rhetoric refers to the use of visuals and images rather than words to make or support an argument (e.g., graphics, photographs, cartoons, art, flow charts, graphs) (Danesi, 2017). *Persuadere* is Latin for, "to bring over by talking" (Harper, 2020; Muhlhauser, 2014). In short, persuasive rhetoric involves using sound reasoning and logical arguments to get someone to believe in or do something (Anderson, 2014). Rhetoric is, in fact, "language-in-action" (Pankl & Ryan, 2008, p. 854). Riddell (2020) ardently believed that individuals need training in rhetoric to become effective orators and persuaders. It does not come naturally to everyone. She said, "rhetoric is the instrument of reason" (p. 44). To wield this instrument, people need to be *rhetorically literate*.

## Rhetorical Literacy

Rhetorical literacy is the ability to both (a) use rhetoric proactively and responsibly and (b) consciously

**Sue L. T. McGregor, PhD, IPHE** ([sue.mcgregor@msvu.ca](mailto:sue.mcgregor@msvu.ca)), McGregor Consulting Group, is Professor Emerita, Mount Saint Vincent University, and an independent scholar, researcher, policy analyst, and educator. She is in Seabright, Nova Scotia, Canada.

recognize when one is being rhetorically abused and push back (Yokota, 2018). If people are rhetorically literate, they possess the ability to understand and use “language on a sophisticated level” (Pankl & Ryan, 2008, p. 854). But they also understand the means by which others use rhetoric to try to persuade them (Malmelin, 2010; Zaleska, 2019). Those who are rhetorically literate also (a) accept the responsibility of metacognition, which means they are aware of their own thinking; (b) understand their obligation to critically analyze societal discourse; (c) respect the need for deep reflection and appreciate that this takes time; and (d) acknowledge the need to practice using rhetorical forms and methods (Schnarr, 2018).

### Forms of Rhetorical Appeal

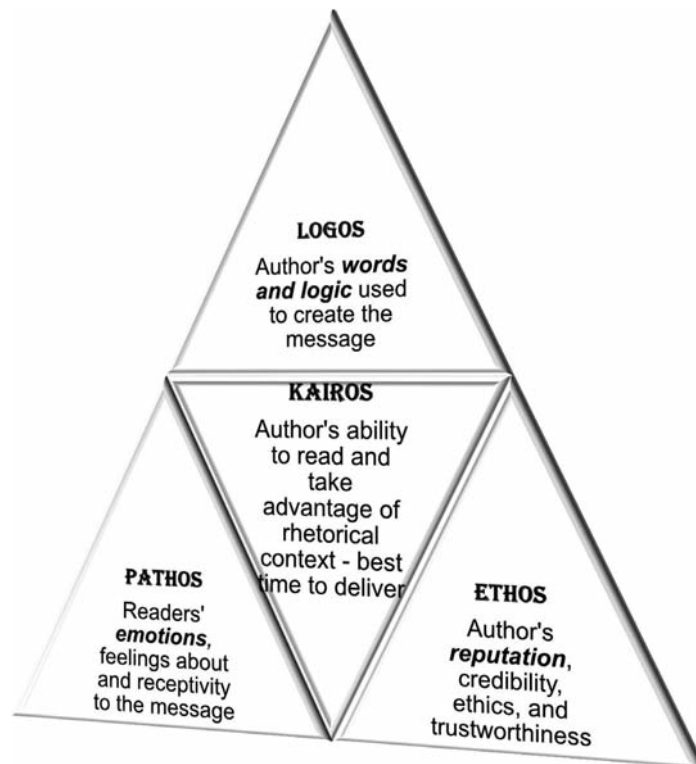
In rhetoric, two parties are involved: (a) the author and his or her character, ability to apply logic, and see an opportune moment; and (b) the audience and its receptiveness to the message. All must work in synch in order for FCS practitioners to effectively sway people to their perspective of and position on an issue. Skillful orators normally draw on

Aristotle’s four rhetorical forms or methods (i.e., ways to appeal to people): (a) *ethos*—a speaker’s credibility and reputation (Greek for character and ethical), (b) *pathos*—the audience’s emotions (Greek for experience), (c) *logos*—a well-reasoned argument (Greek for word), and (d) *kairos*—the ability to read and take advantage of a situation (Greek for proper or opportune time for action) (Garver, 1994; Harper, 2020; Kinneavy & Eskin, 2000).

These forms of rhetorical appeal can be used alone or in combination because when used in combination, they create more balanced and persuasive arguments (Guilford, 2015). Indeed, the first three elements of rhetorical appeal are interconnected and often represented in the rhetorical triangle (Garver, 1994; Hanson, 2011). In this paper, the oft-neglected fourth appeal, *kairos*, is added to the triangle (see Figure 1). Each is described with illustrative examples about homelessness, a pressing but contentious well-being and quality-of-life issue.

### Ethos (Character)

If FCS practitioners were to draw on ethos to persuade people to their argument, they would



**Figure 1.** Four Forms of Rhetorical Appeal

convince listeners and readers that their professional reputation is sound, and they can be considered a trustworthy source of information and insight about the issue. If FCS professionals can convince people that they have the authority to speak on this issue and are respected in their field, people will be more inclined to trust them and their message (Guilford, 2015; Hanson, 2011). In short, the message will be judged as trustworthy *if* the speaker is perceived as trustworthy. “Rhetorical argument needs ethos because it depends on trust” (Garver, 1994, p. 176).

To better ensure reception of the message, FCS practitioners should respect multiple viewpoints, cite their sources, and be conscious of the tone of the communication (i.e., which feeling or mood is conveyed with special attention to modal verbs such as *should, must, might*). Ethos can be established by asserting the speaker’s credibility, fame, reputation, stature, respect, and status (Guilford, 2015; Hanson, 2011). Here is an example of a statement that establishes ethos: “I bring to this discussion 25 years of research and on-the-ground experience with people living without homes.”

### **Pathos (Emotions)**

Pathos is subordinate to ethos but is still important. Actually, FCS practitioners will be seen to have character (ethos) if they can stimulate the audience’s emotions (pathos) to their side (Garver, 1994). Using pathos, the FCS practitioner persuades others by appealing to their emotions. By anticipating and respecting the audience’s feelings about the issue, the FCS professional can place them in a better mood to receive the arguments and positions on the issue. The FCS professional would strive to discern the audience’s values, beliefs, attitudes, and expectations as well as their knowledge of, experience with, and disposition toward the issue (Hanson, 2011).

In short, FCS practitioners would try to evoke an emotional response from their audience by getting them to identify with both the topic and the FCS professional’s thoughts about it. The FCS professional needs people to self-identify with the FCS take on the issue and convince them that it is in their self-interest to do so. Pathos can be achieved by telling a convincing and compelling

story or using an impassioned plea (Guilford, 2015; Hanson, 2011). The following is an example of such a plea: “Imagine the negative impact on well-being and health that will ensue if policies do not change to reflect the pressing needs of people without homes.”

### **Logos (Logic and Reasoning)**

Instead of focusing on the FCS practitioner’s character and reputation (ethos) or the audience’s feelings (pathos), logos evokes reason. The FCS practitioner would appeal to people’s need for rationality and tangible evidence, facts, and truth. They would assume that their audience is quite capable of using their logical mental powers (habits of mind) to form conclusions and judgments about and draw inferences from the message. The audience will be more receptive to the FCS practitioners’ messages if the latter’s arguments are based on valid and sound (deductive) or cogent and strong (inductive) logic and free of faulty reasoning and fallacies (Guilford, 2015; Hanson, 2011; Scott, 1998). From the FCS practitioner’s use of logos, people infer ethos (i.e., their character) (Garver, 1994). Logos is achieved via proof, facts, statistics, evidence, testimony and the use of reason (explanations, justifications), and logic (habits of mind). The following is an example using statistics: “Just within the last five years, national statistics have confirmed that the homeless rate has increased 200% rising from 50,000 to 150,000 people.”

### **Kairos (Opportune Timing)**

Bringing kairos into the mix enables FCS practitioners to appreciate that the message must be delivered at a certain time for it to be most effective. The ancient Greeks had two notions of time: (a) chronological (sequential and specific) (*chronos*) and (b) proper or opportune time for taking action (*kairos*). If the message is not presented at the right moment, it will not have the intended impact. Aristotle believed that each rhetorical situation is different thereby requiring FCS practitioners to give serious consideration to kairos or the best way to thread their way through each of logos, pathos, and ethos in specific contexts (Drabinski, 2014; Kinneavy & Eskin, 2000).

Kairos involves the art of capturing, in opportune moments, that which is appropriate and possible and then acting on it decisively: *seize the moment* (Poulakos, 1983). Kairos is actualized by “reading” the situation and capitalizing on opportunities to push through gaps of resistance to, or emergent acceptance of, the message. “Your faces (pathos) tell me that you do not agree with my interpretation. That’s ok (ethos). Perhaps the perspective of community members living beside

people living without a home would be helpful. A recent survey showed that neighbors believe (logos) . . .”

### Application of Rhetorical Literacy

In summary, in order to get the message across, a rhetorically literate FCS practitioner would (a) rely on their personal character (trustworthy and ethical); (b) put the audience in a particular mood or frame of mind reflective of the audience’s feelings

**Situation: Recounting the hypothetical experience of using rhetorical literacy to prepare a policy brief to sway government officials to the family and consumer sciences perspective of an issue.**

**Ethos (character):** Dr. Annette T. Rattray, a seasoned family and consumer sciences (FCS) practitioner (more than 25 years), decided to begin her policy brief by unpretentiously explaining that she is a full professor at a prestigious FCS higher education program in Washington, DC. She is a world-renowned FCS professional having delivered keynotes on the topic of the brief in five countries on three continents. She explained this, because it spoke to her credibility, reputation, and status in the field. She also made sure that she clearly articulated the mission and vision of the FCS profession, so her policy audience was on the same page. Dr. Rattray was careful to avoid bragging and boasting, focusing instead on convincing others of her legitimacy to have a voice on this policy issue.

**Pathos (emotions):** Dr. Rattray made a concerted effort to determine which particular government officials would be most likely to vet her brief and who had the power and authority to take internal action should they be persuaded to do so. She discerned that Mr. Garrison and Dr. Granger were the people she should try to reach with her message. One was fully in favor of the policy direction she was proposing, and the other tended to lean in another direction. She needed to get one person on board and persuade the other to remain engaged with her ideas. She had to present her argument (words and graphics) in such a way that she balanced receptiveness and resistance. This involved self-respect for the way her own mind worked (metacognition) and how she reacted when she encountered push-back to her ideas.

**Logos (logic and reasoning):** Accustomed to writing academic journal articles and internal university position papers, Dr. Rattray drew on her years of experience preparing argumentative essays (which depend on using rhetoric to sway others) as well as empirical and qualitative research reports. She made sure she prepared her brief in such a way that an argumentative red thread wove its way through the document, drawing people in and bringing them through and to the end of her persuasive rhetoric (free of fallacies). She made sure the tone (modal verbs) was respectful of both Dr. Granger’s anticipated receptiveness and Mr. Garrison’s resistance paying special attention to providing statistics, evidence, and facts to support her logic. She was also aware of the real possibility that these same bureaucrats would use their own logos (especially statistics, facts, and funded evidence) and bore this in mind when developing her arguments and anticipating counterarguments.

**Kairos (timing):** Thanks to having her ear to the ground in the policy arena and her network around this issue, Dr. Rattray instinctively knew when it was time to promote her message; also, the government had mandated a specific submission date. A public consultation process was unfolding, and she knew that the FCS voice was just one of many. When she attended a symposium on the topic, and serendipitously encountered both government officials at the event, she gave them her card (ethos) and informed them that she would be submitting an FCS-informed brief for their consideration; that is, she seized the moment to cement herself and FCS in their memory so both would be at the forefront of their minds when they actually received the official brief. She even reworked part of her argument using informal feedback she received from them at the symposium (attending to pathos and logos).

**Figure 2.** Application of Rhetorical Literacy

about the issue; (c) provide proof of the points being made (i.e., facts, evidence, reasoned argument); and (d) strive to gauge the best moment for delivering the message. Figure 2 shares a hypothetical example of an FCS practitioner using rhetorical literacy to prepare a policy brief. As a caveat, rhetoric is not a step-by-step task. Movement among the four forms of rhetoric (see Figure 1) is iterative and processual. The subheadings in Figure 2 serve only to identify which form is being applied.

### Conclusion

To conclude, the intent of rhetoric is to persuade people to your side. Regarding the outcome of the policy brief preparation scenario (see Figure 2), Dr. Rattray knew the decision about whether to value the FCS perspective over others was at the government officials' discretion, but she was confident the profession had a good chance of at least being vetted. She had taken into account both her character and perceived reputation and other people's ability to use logic. She had discerned and accommodated her audience's frame of mind, and she had tried to choose an opportune moment to promote her message.

Members of the FCS profession are encouraged to learn more about what is involved in rhetorical literacy and the key role it can play in their practice. To help with this cause, readers are directed to McGregor's (2018) detailed discussion of argumentative essays, rhetorical forms and processes (thesis, antithesis, and synthesis), deductive and inductive reasoning, and logical fallacies. FCS professionals can use rhetorical literacy to develop their own arguments and interpret and judge those of others.

Rhetorical literacy should be useful for prospective FCS practitioners (i.e., students) and less experienced practitioners who need to bolster their influence in local arenas, and it may serve to validate what seasoned FCS professionals have been doing for years. Successful application of ethos, pathos, logos, and kairos bodes well for key stakeholders to heed our messages, which in turn serves individuals and families. The 21st century demands rhetorical literacy, which is considered intellectual equipment for living with and

successfully navigating complexity so that families can survive and thrive.

### References

- Anderson, S. (Ed.). (2014). *Collins English dictionary* (12th ed.). Harper Collins.
- Danesi, M. (2017, May 24). Visual rhetoric and semiotic. In J. F. Nussbaum (Ed.), *Oxford research encyclopedia of communication* [online]. doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.43
- Drabinski, E. (2014). Toward a Kairos of library instruction. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 40(5), 480–485. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2014.06.002>
- Garver, E. (1994). *Aristotle's rhetoric*. Chicago University Press.
- Guilford, C. (2015). *Occasions for argumentative essays*. Paradigm Online Writing Assistant. <http://www.powa.org/convince/occasions-for-argumentative-essays>
- Hanson, R. (2011). *What is rhetoric?* [www.softchalkcloud.com/lesson/files/e5yoZPA2mfGr3n/Rhetorical\\_Triangle\\_print.html](http://www.softchalkcloud.com/lesson/files/e5yoZPA2mfGr3n/Rhetorical_Triangle_print.html)
- Harper, D. (2020). *Online etymology dictionary*. <http://www.etymonline.com>
- Kinneavy, J., & Eskin, C. (2000). Kairos in Aristotle's rhetoric. *Written Communication*, 17(3), 432–444. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741088300017003005>
- Malmelin, N. (2010). What is advertising literacy? Exploring the dimensions of advertising literacy. *Journal of Visual Literacy*, 29(2), 129–142. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23796529.2010.11674677>
- McGregor, S. L. T. (2018). *Understanding and evaluating research*. Sage.
- Muhlhauser, P. (2014). [Lecture notes on rhetorical literacy]. English Department, McDaniel Community College. <https://www.paulmuhlhauser.org/eng3319/lectures/troping-it.pdf>
- Pankl, E., & Ryan, J. (2008). Creating rhetorical situations and enacting Habermasian ideals in the academic library. In S. Kelsey & K. St. Amant (Eds.), *Handbook of research on computer mediated communication* (pp. 845–854). IGI Global.
- Poulakos, J. (1983). Toward a Sophistic definition of rhetoric. *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 16(1), 35–48. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40237348>
- Riddell, J. (2020, January/February). The power of rhetoric. *University Affairs*, 44.
- Schnarr, A. (2018). *Rhetorical literacy and first year composition*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of California Riverside]. <https://escholarship.org/content/qt8cn6g42t/qt8cn6g42t.pdf?t=pexwyk>
- Scott, J. H. (1998). *The principles of argumentation*. California State University, Northridge. <http://www.csun.edu/~hcpas003/argument.html>
- Yokota, G. (2018, March 3–4). *Integration and the power of rhetorical literacy* [Paper presentation]. Japan in the World, the World in Japan Symposium, Osaka, Japan.
- Zaleska, M. (2019, January 22). *Rhetorical literacy in a quarrelling society* [Guest lecture]. University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy.