

Critical Voter Lesson Plan – Rhetorical Devices

Political and other forms of persuasive communication can be “dressed up” using rhetorical devices designed to make communication more lively, engaging and effective. Some of these devices are linguistic, including literary devices like alliteration, metaphor and simile which can make either written or spoken communication sound more interesting (just as they liven up poetry, prose and song lyrics). But there are also linguistic devices used primarily in spoken communication, including devices which intentionally repeat a word or phrase (such as Lincoln’s “of the people, by the people and for the people”).

In addition to these linguistic devices, there are also strategic devices that can be used to move a discussion one way vs. another. These strategic devices include techniques for anticipating objections or criticisms in advance, highlighting the weakness of your opponent or his or her arguments without seeming to directly attack them, or using other means to draw attention to certain parts of your presentation.

Unlike literary devices which are just used to make communication read or sound more interesting, strategic devices present ethical concerns regarding whether they are used to support an argument that is already strong vs. using them to obscure a bad argument through manipulative language.

Terminology

Important vocabulary terms used in this lesson include:

- Rhetorical devices
- Figures of speech
- Schemes
- Tropes
- Literary linguistic devices (including alliteration, metaphor and simile)
- Spoken linguistic devices (including anaphora and chiasmus)
- Strategic devices (including procatalepsis)
- Cliche
- Aphorism

Goals

The goal if this lesson is to give students an understanding of:

- Rhetorical devices used to enliven a presentation or control an argument
- How to identify different types of rhetorical devices when used in a persuasive presentation (like a political speech)
- How to understand the purpose behind the use of different rhetorical devices
- How to tell when rhetorical devices are used to strengthen a strong argument vs. obscure a weak one

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Primary Resources

The following resources are available at the www.criticalvoter.com web site to support this lesson:

- **Critical Voter Podcast 005 – Rhetorical Devices:** A 30 minute audio lesson covering linguistic and strategic rhetorical devices
- **Quiz** – A short quiz designed to determine if someone has listened to and understood the podcast.
- **Blog Entries** – The Critical Voter blog contains multiple blog entries dealing with the issues covered in the podcast (look for entries the week of September 2, 2012 or use the categories menu to look for stories in the category of Rhetorical Devices).

Additional Resources

Links to lists of rhetorical devices can be found on the [Critical Voter Resources page](#).

Suggested Activities

| Activity | Notes on this activity |
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| Have students listen to the podcast and answer the quiz questions to ensure they have listened and understood the concepts covered in the lesson. | The podcast can be played in class or assigned as homework. The quiz is made up of four questions which were designed to be easily answerable by anyone who has listened to the podcast lesson in its entirety. |
| Provide students with a political speech (such as the stump speech of one of the Presidential candidates) as well as one or more colored markers. Ask them to highlight every rhetorical device they can find in the text. | You can ask students to just identify the figures of speech discussed in the podcast, or provide them access to one of the longer lists of rhetorical devices linked at the Critical Voter resources page. This exercise can be presented as a contest, giving the same speech (or different speeches) to groups of students and see which group can identify the most rhetorical devices in a single speech. |
| Work together with students to highlight different types of figures of speech (linguist/literary, linguistic/spoken and strategic) found in a single persuasive argument (such as a political speech or newspaper editorial). | Ask student to identify figures of speech that are appropriate for different types of communication (such as anaphora, which is most useful in spoken presentations). Students can also discuss what they perceive to be the purpose behind a speaker or writer’s use of a particular rhetorical device. |

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| Using the same persuasive speech or article used in the exercise above, identify the most prominent strategic devices and discuss whether those devices are used to strengthen an already strong argument or obscure a weak one. | For this exercise, you may need to start by determining if the overall argument is strong or weak using the tools discussed in previous podcasts (including whether the argument is based on a strong foundation of logic; strikes the right balance of logos, pathos and ethos; and uses the right verb tense for the type of argument being made - forensic, demonstrative or deliberative). |
| Either using the same persuasive speech or article used in the previous two exercises, or an argument constructed by the students themselves, have students “boil down” the original argument into an “elevator pitch” – the essence of their argument described in the fewest words possible. | Talk about the importance of being able to spell out your argument briefly and accurately before it can be expanded to a longer presentation. Talk about ways to use the “elevator speech” as a base which can then be built upon using the rhetorical devices discussed during the lesson. |