
8 | Rhetorical Devices

When high-school history textbooks talk about Prohibition—the 1919 amendment to the US constitution that made it illegal to manufacture, sell, or purchase liquor anywhere in the United States, which was repealed in 1933—they often fail to mention that several states kept their own version of prohibition going for several decades afterwards.

One of these states was Mississippi, which didn't legalize the sale of whiskey until 1966. During the three decades between the national end of prohibition and its final fall in Mississippi, whiskey was a perennially contentious issue in the Magnolia state, with those running for office continually being asked where they stood on the matter.

One of the office-seekers who had to confront the subject was the fabulously named (and nicknamed) Noah S. “Soggy” Sweat, Jr., who, in answer to a question regarding where he stood on the whisky controversy, achieved immortality with the following statement (I'll leave it to your imagination to add the Senator Claghorn accent):

“My friends, I had not intended to discuss this controversial subject at this particular time. However, I want you to know that I do not shun controversy. On the contrary, I will take a stand on any issue at any time, regardless of how fraught with controversy it

might be. You have asked me how I feel about whiskey. All right, here is how I feel about whiskey:

If when you say whiskey you mean the devil's brew, the poison scourge, the bloody monster, that defiles innocence, dethrones reason, destroys the home, creates misery and poverty, yea, literally takes the bread from the mouths of little children; if you mean the evil drink that topples the Christian man and woman from the pinnacle of righteous, gracious living into the bottomless pit of degradation, and despair, and shame and helplessness, and hopelessness, then certainly I am against it!

But, if when you say whiskey you mean the oil of conversation, the philosophic wine, the ale that is consumed when good fellows get together, that puts a song in their hearts and laughter on their lips, and the warm glow of contentment in their eyes; if you mean Christmas cheer; if you mean the stimulating drink that puts the spring in the old gentleman's step on a frosty, crispy morning; if you mean the drink which enables a man to magnify his joy, and his happiness, and to forget, if only for a little while, life's great tragedies, and heartaches, and sorrows; if you mean that drink, the sale of which pours into our treasuries untold millions of dollars, which are used to provide tender care for our little crippled children, our blind, our deaf, our dumb, our pitiful aged and infirm; to build highways and hospitals and schools, then certainly I am for it!

This is my stand. I will not retreat from it. I will not compromise."

This speech was branded by political writer and language-lover William Safire as the "if-by-whiskey fallacy." While I guess it could be considered some kind of relativist "all-things-to-all-people" fallacy, rhetorically speaking Soggy's response was really more an example of someone filling the room with a cloud of flowery rhetoric to avoid having to give a direct answer to a direct question, the kind of thing that tends to give rhetoric a bad name.

Perhaps it is due to examples like this one that people talk about “rhetoric” dismissively as “mere rhetoric” rather than as a subject once understood to be a cornerstone of proper education. In this case, the phrase “mere rhetoric” implies that any use of crafted language represents nothing more than a trick or gimmick designed to confuse and obscure rather than clarify and convince.

This distrustful attitude towards even the word “rhetoric” fits a wider modern belief that if we can only rid ourselves of stodgy and dishonest rhetoric, we can enter (or perhaps re-enter) a world where communication consists of nothing but honest and sincere discourse.

But is this realistic? Or are we more likely to create a world where those (such as advertisers and politicians) who have not chosen to ignore the study of rhetorical techniques will be able to use those skills as they like with the rest of us no longer possessing the skill or even the vocabulary to defend ourselves?

In this chapter, we’re going to do a little re-learning of that vocabulary with a discussion of rhetorical devices, that is, those choices in wording, phrasing, or verbal organization that, for whatever reason, tend to make persuasive speeches moving, memorable, and, most importantly, effective.

You’ll notice that I didn’t include “great” in that list. That’s because the techniques we’ll be discussing, while enormously useful and even powerful, cannot turn a bad argument into a good one.

You may recall from what you have read so far that a strong argument has certain components: sound logic; the right balance of logic (logos), emotion (pathos), and connection to the audience (ethos); and the correct use of verb tense reflecting what kind of argument you are making (forensic, demonstrative, or deliberative).

Now if based on these foundations your argument is strong, then adding effective rhetorical styling can turn a good argument into a powerful one. But juicing up a poor argument with such

verbal pyrotechnics might, at best, help obscure how bad the case you are making actually is. More often than not, however, it makes you come off as untrustworthy. Or if you're really unlucky, like Noah S. Soggy Sweat, such verbal extravagance can leave you remembered decades later as little more than the butt of a historian's or rhetorician's joke.

So think of these rhetorical techniques as similar to garnishes or decorations rather than as the core of rhetoric and argumentation. Depending on the uses they are put to, they can either be icing on a cake or lipstick on a pig.

By the way, those last two phrases were *clichés*, which we'll get back to later.

Just to get a little vocabulary out of the way, rhetorical devices called *figures of speech* have traditionally been divided into the categories of schemes and tropes.

Schemes involve the way words are organized (usually signifying using words in a nonstandard order in order to gain attention). Tropes, on other hand, involve your selection of words, specifically using words in unexpected ways, also to gain attention.

While I'll highlight which figures of speech fall into which category, a more practical set of categories for understanding rhetorical devices include linguistic vs. strategic devices.

Linguistic devices include word sequencing (*schemes*) and word choice (*tropes*) designed to make your communication more interesting to the listener.

Some of these are literacy devices, the same ones you learned about when you were first introduced to poetry and creative writing in elementary or middle school.

For instance, one of the most familiar literary devices is *alliteration*, which is the repeating of a consonant sound at the beginning of a set of words (such as former Vice President Spiro Agnew's condemnation of critics as “nattering nabobs of negativism”). You can also repeat a consonant sound at the end of words (this is called *consonance*, e.g., “we cannot back track”),

repeat a vowel sound (called *assonance*, e.g., “there isn’t a quick fix”), or just jump right in and rhyme your words (as in “I like like”).

These vowel/consonant repetition devices are pretty standard for most political speech makers and writers and you can hear them used by George W. Bush (who built his campaign around “compassionate conservatism,” repeating C’s), Barack Obama (who talked about a “basic bargain that built this country,” repeating B’s), and nearly every other skilled speech maker, political or otherwise.

Another familiar pair of literary devices includes *metaphor* and its skinnier cousin *simile*. Metaphors create a connection between two seemingly unrelated things by saying one thing *is* another (as in Ronald Reagan’s “America is a shining city on a hill”). Similes do something similar but use “like” or “as” to make sure the audience knows you are not supposed to take the comparison literally (as in political satirist P. J. O’Rourke’s “the government is like a baby, making a loud noise at one end with no sense of responsibility at the other.”)

It’s no accident that the same devices that make stories, poems, and song lyrics (whether written, spoken, or sung) memorable and moving also work in persuasive communication like political speeches. The fact that they are so widely used is simply a choice by persuaders to not make their communication dry and boring.

While alliteration and the like are common in both written and verbal communications, other linguistic devices are primarily useful in spoken presentations like political speeches, sermons, or classroom lectures.

These include the purposeful repeating of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive phrases (a scheme I mentioned earlier called *anaphora*). An example of this can be found in George Bush’s 9/11 speech in which he claimed that our enemies “hate our freedoms, our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.”

You can also do this repeating trick at the end of a set of phrases or list (that's called *epistrophe*), the canonical example being Abraham Lincoln's "of the people, by the people, and for the people."

I say these are primarily techniques for spoken oratory or presentation because an anaphora such as President Obama claiming that children should get the chance to do better "no matter who you are, or where you come from, or what you look like, or what your last name is" would probably not feature all those extra "or's" if the president were expressing that same sentiment in a newspaper editorial. But when spoken, this repetition seems to make a talk more lively and engaging, which is why these schemes are so widely used in political speech and debate.

That last example I just used is unusual since the president included four items in his list vs. a more typical three. For some reason, sets of three are particularly effective in speech, possibly because our brains seem to love discovering patterns and three items seems to be the threshold for a pattern to be established while going beyond that number can tire out a listener.

You read about this earlier in the discussion of why jokes of the "three guys walk into a bar" type are funny: because they start off setting up a pattern that gets broken by the behavior of that third guy. But in persuasive speeches, you normally want to confirm rather than confound a pattern using devices such as the ever-popular *tricolon*, capping part of a speech with a group of three words or phrases, as in Hillary Clinton's appeal to "my supporters, my champions...my sisterhood!").

Before leaving the topic of linguistic devices, I need to highlight the most powerful scheme of them all: *chiasmus*, which repeats but switches word order, usually within the same sentence. The canonical example of this scheme comes from the inaugural address of President John F. Kennedy, which included this still-remembered request: "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."

When done well, this scheme is so effective at blowing away an audience that people go to great lengths to try to build a chiasmus into their speeches, even if they don't have the talent to pull it off. At best, such failed efforts can create something that sounds contrived, but at worst they leave the speaker sounding like a deranged version of Yoda.

One of my favorite parodies of this phenomenon comes not from politics but from the movies, specifically a guilty-pleasure film called *Mystery Men* about a band of wannabe superheroes who fall under the sway of an enigmatic hero called The Sphinx.

At first, Sphinx impresses the team with his wisdom by speaking entirely in nonsensical chiasmuses like “to learn my teachings I must first teach you how to learn” or “he who questions training only trains himself in asking questions.” This finally ended with the following exchange between Sphinx and the original leader of the team, Mr. Furious (played by Ben Stiller):

Sphinx: *Your temper is very quick, my friend. But until you learn to master your rage...*

Mr. Furious: *...your rage will become your master? That's what you were going to say! Right? Right?*

Sphinx: *Not necessarily.*

As that example highlights, it is not only campaign material that makes use of figures of speech. In fact, figures of speech are constantly being used by everyone, all around us, every day. When your mom screams that she “spends half her life cleaning up after you,” she is engaging in *hyperbole* or intentional exaggeration for effect. The class clown who walks up to two kids necking at a party and asks “Have you two been introduced?” is engaging in the opposite technique: *litotes* (purposeful understatement).

Those last examples should illustrate that, far from making communication seem artificial, speech figures of these sorts can make communication not just more interesting but more genuine.

For example, you could tell someone special in your life that “I think about you all day long.” It’s a nice sentiment, and I’m sure the person you say it to will appreciate it. But with some careful use of that anaphora device mentioned earlier, this same sentiment can be expressed as “I went to bed last night thinking about you, and when I woke up I realized I was thinking about you too. In fact, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you since we met!”

I hope this last example shows that the use of figures of speech does not have to drain your words of passion or authenticity. In fact, I’d say that the second sentiment, the one with the anaphora, comes off as more sincere, warm, and natural than the original ungarnished statement.

Sources for information on additional linguistic devices (and there are a lot more of them) can be found in the resources section at the end of this book. But now I’d like to turn from linguistic devices to more strategic devices used not to just enliven but to actually control debate.

And what situations can you think of where you might want to control debate in one way or another?

Well, let’s look at a familiar political scenario: someone is running for office and they would rather have the debate focus solely on issues that are strengths for them while ignoring issues where they are weak or vulnerable.

Sometimes such issues are unquestionably central to a political campaign and thus cannot be avoided. But candidates can choose how to talk about them.

For example, when the economy is doing poorly, an incumbent will most likely want to talk about other matters (like foreign policy) while his or her rival will want to zero in on bad economic news. But candidates can also battle over what evidence will be used to illustrate an issue. For instance, in the 2012 presidential election President Obama wanted discussion of his foreign policy to begin and end with the killing of Osama bin Laden, while his rival Mitt Romney tried to bring the focus back to the president’s

perceived foreign policy failings before and after bin Laden's death.

Beyond matters of war, peace, and the economy (which are central in every presidential race), you also have issues that are of questionable relevance to the campaign, such as dark spots in a candidate's personal or professional life. Such matters (often described as "character issues," especially when partisans bring them up to cast those they don't like in a bad light) are sometimes relevant, sometimes not, and candidates can choose different methods to try to take issues they don't want discussed off the table.

For example, they could simply not mention those issues themselves and hope that no one else brings them up either. As you might guess, this is generally a losing strategy, especially in our media-saturated age when no one has full control over which stories become news. But you'd be surprised how many times politicians go down the route of wishful thinking.

For example, when John Kerry ran for president in 2004 and used his war record in Vietnam as a major campaign theme, it didn't seem to occur to him that a group called Swift Boat Veterans for Truth (a group of Vietnam vets who had been haunting Kerry for years with accusations that he dishonestly portrayed his war record) would do everything in their power to make the candidate's life miserable.

I'm bringing this up not to discuss the accuracy of the "Swift Boater's" charges but rather to point out the perils of wishful thinking on a candidate's part (in this case, wishful thinking by Kerry that if he ignored his accusers, his opponents and the media would ignore them as well). You saw something similar in the 2008 election where Republican candidate John McCain seems to have hoped that the lack of experience of his running mate, Alaska governor Sarah Palin, would not have a major impact on the race.

A variation on the wishful thinking approach is for a candidate to ignore controversies but openly state that this is what they are

doing. This technique usually involves saying things along the lines of “I will not dignify the matter by answering your question on such a non-issue” or “I am here to talk about the issues, not to descend into mindless mudslinging.”

While better than pretending problematical issues don’t exist, this method is also pretty poor, often making a candidate look like he or she has something to hide. As with wishful thinking, this approach ignores the fact that a candidate cannot realistically expect to control what stories the opposition or news media choose to focus on. And if a candidate is finally forced to answer questions he previously announced he would ignore, he comes off as looking vacillating and weak.

One last variation on this theme takes advantage of the story-loving nature of that fast process you learned about in an earlier chapter on the brain and bias. For instance, if a candidate wants to stop a story that could harm his or her campaign from gaining traction, he or she could try to get a different story lodged into people’s brains before the damaging one takes hold.

This technique is being used as I write this chapter by Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton who, after months of struggling over what to do about controversy generated by her use of a personal e-mail server for government business, started focusing on a new story that portrayed the entire brouhaha as a faux scandal cooked up by cadre of right-wing witch hunters. Unsurprisingly, that story is playing better with Democrats than Republicans during the primary season. But even if it succeeds well enough to secure Clinton the nomination, she runs the risk that crucial independent voters might see the candidate’s story-based strategy as a means to avoid taking responsibility for bad judgement and behavior, leading to that telltale sign of ethos failure: distrust.

Rather than choosing a rhetorical strategy designed to avoid difficult issues, better that you bring up those issues yourself—but only on your own terms.

For example, a candidate can openly admit his awareness that different sides of an issue exist, thus demonstrating fair-mindedness. For instance, when discussing a decision to go to war, a president can openly state that he knows this decision will be controversial but that he is ready to let history decide whether his choice was right or disastrous.

While letting history decide is a noble sentiment, in today's media age voters are rarely patient enough to wait so long to pass judgment. In which case, a better and far more frequently used technique is *procatalepsis*, a technique in which the candidate acknowledges an opponent's position but only in order to anticipate and counter it in advance.

Statements such as “my opponent claims that I have been too eager to engage in war when peaceful alternatives were available. To which I would respond, what alternatives are open to us when the nation is attacked?” or “critics will say my spending plans are wasteful and irresponsible. But who is acting irresponsibly, someone trying to move the economy forward or someone saying ‘No’ to every proposal that would put people back to work?” are both examples of *procatalepsis*.

The power of this rhetorical tool is that it allows you to define your opponent's arguments in your own terms and to provide a rebuttal that your opponent must react to when he or she would have preferred an attack that put you on the defensive. And even if that opponent manages to successfully reframe the point and respond effectively, he or she has still lost the benefit of surprise and novelty inherent in being first to present a line of criticism.

Now let's look at the flip side of trying to get around your own weakness: rhetorical devices that highlight the weakness of your opponent.

On the surface this should seem simple: just state your opponent's shortcomings and failings and force him to defend himself.

The problem is that if a candidate spends too much time directly criticizing an opponent, she or he can come off as negative or whiney. For example, presidential candidate Bob Dole permanently branded himself as “mean” when he shrilly asked an opposing campaign to “stop lying about my record.” Since then, candidates have generally avoided accusing one another of lying to avoid a similar fate.

Now one can always use surrogates to do the dirty work. But another method is to accuse your opponent of something indirectly rather than directly.

You can do this by asking a *rhetorical question*, which is a question where the way you want the audience to respond is obvious, such as “what has this administration been doing to solve the longest-running period of unemployment since the Great Depression?” Alternatively, you can make your accusations using *innuendo*, along the lines of “I applaud a free market that has allowed my opponent to amass such a fortune and only ask that he and others fortunate enough to achieve staggering wealth be ready to share the same tax burden as the rest of us.”

While such indirect attacks run the risk of branding their user as insincere, if done well they allow you to inject issues you want into the conversation while avoiding the pitfalls of directly and personally “going negative.”

These are instances of a broader set of techniques designed to highlight points you want your audience to focus on by intentionally underplaying them. When candidates say something like “it’s not important that you...” or “the last thing on my mind is...” you should assume they are drawing big red arrows to the key points they want you to take away from their presentation.

In writing, this same effect is achieved using informal asides or statements placed in parentheses (a device I use all the time, including right now). Usually such parenthetical statements are meant to include less relevant, but still interesting points. But in written persuasive arguments, this *parentheses* device is used to

flag sentiments you want your audience to zero in on (which they will, just as people tend to read the PS of a letter or e-mail even if they ignore the bulk of the rest of the note).

As with linguistic devices, there are dozens of additional strategic devices and you can find resources for learning more about them in the resources section at the end of this book. But before leaving the subject, I'd like to include one last device that I've not found a name for but have noticed growing in popularity over the last several decades.

This technique involves using the support of members of your opponent's group (be they political, national, or ethnic) to bolster your own cause. I first encountered this in the 1980s in the form of a bumper sticker that read "Another Democrat for Reagan" and since that time crossovers from the opposing party taking center stage have become a standard fixture at party conventions.

This technique sends out several powerful messages:

- That one's opponent and his or her ideas are so far outside the mainstream that even his own party/group does not support them.
- That you, while officially representing your own group or party, actually represent everyone (or almost everyone).
- That your broad acceptability (and your opponent's lack thereof) is so obvious that even people who should oppose you are instead attracted to your banner.

If linguistic devices like alliteration and anaphora are fairly innocent, by now you can probably see how the strategic rhetorical devices I've just outlined can be easily abused.

For example, let's say you are going to present your opponent's position (either to acknowledge it or to anticipate and counter it in advance using that procatalepsis device you just read about). But you've got a choice. You can present their positions accurately

before you counter them or you can present an oversimplified, distorted, and inaccurate version of your opponent's real positions and attack this parody rather than the real thing.

Similarly, let's say you are going to make the case that people who would normally support your opponent really support you (the old "Another Democrat for Reagan" device). This can't be done (honestly, anyway) by inflating the importance of small numbers of dissidents or trying to present an unrepresentative fringe as mainstream.

We are now getting to a point where people new to rhetoric might start to feel uncomfortable with language tools that can be used to push people one way or another through techniques that, even if they're used with integrity, can come off as insincere.

For example, if you're going to use procatleipsis to anticipate and counter an opponent's arguments in advance, the principle of charity requires you to present your opponent's position accurately and honestly. But you are not necessarily obliged to present every one of his or her positions or to accept his or her framing of an issue at your expense.

Might this be unfair? Well as I noted in the introduction to this book, fairness (and sincerity as well) are not always virtues when it comes to persuasive speech.

This conundrum has caused problems for centuries for people who make their living off persuasive speech. Today, we like to sneer at lawyers who use their skill with language to make a weak case seem better than it is. But this is the same criticism the citizens of ancient Athens used against a group called the Sophists, traveling teachers who taught the rhetorical skills we've been discussing in this chapter to the ambitious and wealthy. And the same jokes and accusations today targeted at attorneys were used in ancient times to mock the Sophists for using their word skills to make a weaker argument seem the stronger.

The problem with such value judgments is that in the real world you often have to move a conversation one way or another for reasons other than trickery.

For example, if you are one of those aforementioned attorneys, you owe your client the best defense possible. So if the facts are not on your side, it's perfectly reasonable to appeal to something else, by making an emotional appeal to pity or justice, for example.

Is this cynical and manipulative? Well, the facts weren't on Martin Luther King's side when he was hauled into court for breaking the law for he was actually breaking the law of his day. But by appealing to something other than the facts (in this case to justice), using exquisitely crafted rhetoric, he was able to move audiences, move lawmakers to act, and ultimately move the world. (I just used anaphora, by the way.)

To cite a less lofty example, let's say you are selling the most expensive product in a category and you are talking to a potential customer who tells you his or her top priority is price. At that point, you can either accept what the person is telling you and walk away from the deal or drop your price to meet the customer's demand. Or you can try to control the conversation by getting the individual to think about something else, like features, quality, or service, all of which might be your strengths. Or you can *redefine* price as the total cost of buying, implementing, and using a product over time, which might also be to your advantage if your solution is cheaper to maintain once implemented.

As already mentioned, rhetorical tools cannot turn a weak argument into a strong one, even if they can mask those weaknesses or distract an audience from what they should be thinking about. But if you have a strong argument *and* have also mastered the rhetorical techniques we've been talking about, you can easily nullify an opponent's ability to manipulate an audience into accepting a position weaker than your own.

So persuaders have an ethical obligation to hitch these rhetorical devices to strong arguments, ideally ones that are also moral and

honest. As for audiences for persuasive arguments (including presidential campaign speeches and television ads), we have an obligation to know what persuaders are trying to do when they use these rhetorical devices to try to push us one way or another.

As those thoughts settle in, I'd like to wrap up this discussion of rhetorical devices by getting back to the subject of clichés.

Most writing instructors will say that you should avoid them like the plague since sentences with clichés, such as “avoid like the plague,” are a sign of lazy writing. But persuasive arguments can sometimes be streamlined through the careful use of clichés that allow you to communicate a fair amount of information using a simple, well-known phrase.

For example, a president can go on for several paragraphs explaining how her administration takes responsibility for both the good and bad things that happened on her watch. Or she can simply reach for the Harry Truman quote that summarizes this sentiment in four powerful words: “The buck stops here.”

Clichés that have withstood the test of time because of their ability to deliver what is commonly called “folk wisdom” (like “a penny saved is a penny earned”) are called *aphorisms* and they can be used effectively in persuasive rhetoric as long as they are used sparingly.

Or you can take a page from Jay Heinrichs' *Thank You for Arguing* and have fun with clichés by taking them literally or by creating a scheme that plays with a familiar phrase. (I saw this years ago on a campaign bumper sticker declaring a particular office was “The Right Job for the Man.”)

But the real problem with clichés is not with these self-contained, time-tested, well-meaning aphorisms. Rather the problem comes from the overuse of shorter, tired phrases used to make written or spoken arguments seem better thought out than they actually are.

Most of you are probably familiar with George Orwell through his famous novels *1984* and *Animal Farm*. But in addition to

writing these immortal titles and other important but lesser-read works, Orwell was one of the greatest—some would say the greatest—political essayists of the twentieth century.

One of his most famous essays, called “Politics and the English Language,” talked about the corrupting influence lazy, clichéd language can have not just on politics but on thought itself. In this essay, Orwell was railing not against folksy aphorisms but against the modern tendency to dress up speech in strips of prefabricated phrases and tired metaphors chosen to give the appearance of weight and thoughtfulness, regardless of how weak, thoughtless, or even immoral the argument.

One of the most famous quotes from that essay is Orwell’s translation of an honest (if hideous) political sentiment into contemporary, immoral doublespeak:

“Consider for instance some comfortable English professor defending Russian totalitarianism. He cannot say outright, ‘I believe in killing off your opponents when you can get good results by doing so.’ Probably, therefore, he will say something like this:

“While freely conceding that the Soviet regime exhibits certain features which the humanitarian may be inclined to deplore, we must, I think, agree that certain curtailment of the rights to political opposition is an unavoidable concomitant of transitional periods, and that the rigors which the Russian people have been called upon to undergo have been amply justified in the sphere of concrete achievement.”

One doesn’t need to go this far to see this stringing together of reasonable-sounding but utterly vacuous language as a substitute for serious thought and honest communication. You see it whenever a presidential spokesperson or corporate memo is larded with dying metaphors (such as “play into the hands of,” “grist for

the mill,” or “anytime soon...”), verbal false limbs (like “render inoperative,” “be subjected to,” “exhibit a tendency towards...”), or pretentious diction (including words such as “categorical,” “virtual,” “ameliorate,” “extraneous,” or “synergy”).

We should also be on the lookout for use of the passive voice such as “mistakes were made” or “conditions rendered previous estimates inaccurate” vs. the far more accurate “we screwed up” or “our original predictions were absurdly optimistic.”

Orwell suggests a way out of this language trap: begin our thinking about an argument not by selecting language that seems convincing, but rather by determining the fewest words needed to make our case. After that is done, if ornamentation seems necessary it should be done only using vivid and original images and metaphors rather than tired clichés.

Now this may seem to fly in the face of what you’ve read in this chapter (“fly in the face” is another cliché, by the way). But really, Orwell’s advice is just one more step you should take to create a strong argument before you start dressing it up with persuasive rhetorical baubles.

Does your argument already possess the right balance of logos, pathos, and ethos to be effective? Are you using the right verb tense and is your argument built on a strong foundation of accurate facts? In that case, your next step should be to determine the fewest words necessary to deliver your message.

Once you’ve got your argument boiled down to its essence, then and only then should you start reaching for rhetorical devices that will allow you to expand this “elevator pitch” into a fully articulated spoken or written presentation where rhetorical devices can turn your strong argument into a crowd-pleasing triumph.

But before you get ready to blow away your next audience, there is one last element of persuasive speech and argumentation we need to cover, which we will explore in the next chapter: the subject of how an argument should be organized.