

# Rhetoric & Media Studies

## Sample Comprehensive Examination Question

### Theory

*When researching *The New Rhetoric*, Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca said they felt like they had rediscovered Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. Were they right? What similarities do you see between Aristotle's approach to rhetoric and that of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca? What additional contributions did Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca make to our understanding of rhetorical argument that go beyond Aristotle's?*

When Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca wrote *The New Rhetoric*, they collected example upon example of arguments made in real life situations, wrote them down, and then sorted them into categories to come up with their vast list of techniques of argument. So the story goes. And reading through Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, probably his greatest contribution to the field of classical rhetoric, one gets the feeling that he must have gone through a similar process to write his treatise. Both Aristotle and Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca focus on the persuasive aspect of rhetoric and create large taxonomies to explain how one might go about the business of persuading, but Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca go beyond Aristotle's contribution in three main ways: by deeply exploring the roots of practical argument in formal logic, by incorporating the audience as a major part of the invention process, and by considering how argumentation functions on a psychological or cognitive level.

Aristotle defines rhetoric as the ability, in a given situation, to find all the available means of persuasion. Although, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca seek to deal specifically with argumentation and not the whole of rhetoric, their domain of study is roughly equated to Aristotle's by their broad conception of argument. Their definition becomes garbled and

awkward in the translation from French, but overall, it is concerned with the means by which a rhetor may secure or increase assent to a given thesis or idea. In other words, the scholars are all concerned with the logistical tools of persuasion—what techniques one may employ when seeking to convince another symbolically through discourse.

Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's *The New Rhetoric* are similar in design. Both are thick inventories of rhetorical tactics, but Aristotle's is written more as a handbook of suggestions—what is proper and what is not. The classical scholar gives advice about things like what constitutes good style (clarity, appropriateness to occasion, etc.) and how one ought to use metaphors to make them effective (not too grand or too obvious, etc.). Writing in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca do not offer much advice specific to individual tactics or effectiveness. Instead, they offer broad conclusions like arguments acceptable to the universal audience are the strongest and values are specific to audiences, so one had better start with values common to his or her auditors if one expects to do any convincing.

Of the classical canons of rhetoric (invention, arrangement, style, delivery, and memory) both modern and classical theorists focus on invention. Aristotle discusses ethos, logos, and pathos. Much of his focus is on logical proof via the techniques he catalogs and the topics (topoi) he suggests, but he also considers the emotions of the audience and, to some degree, the credibility of the speaker. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca do not divide their discussion in the classical manner, although they do address some of the same concerns. They similarly catalog a range of tools for logical proof from argument by example, to the device of stages, to use of metaphor and simile. In fact, some of the techniques they mention are named and discussed by the classical rhetorician as well. Their version of pathos, is not

concerned with the emotions of the audience per se, but rather the values. To them, values (and the hierarchies and loci into which these values fall) are part of the proof. They fall in to category of starting points of argument and are on the same level, in terms of function in persuasion, as facts and truths.

Both books present a vision of how persuasion was manifested in the real world at the time they were written. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca are able to offer a longer historical view because they are writing from a modern viewpoint, rather than from a time close to the birth of rhetoric, but the overall effect is similar. Both offer a listing of techniques for persuasion in practical argument and social interactions of the time.

However, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's vision of argumentation extends beyond what Aristotle offered. First, the 20<sup>th</sup> century version, offers an in depth consideration of the roots of practical argumentation used by people to persuade one another. It was borne out of the traditions of formal deductive logic (called demonstration). However, formal logic reasoning can only prove things that are already present in the premises of an argument and concludes with an absolute statement that cannot be questioned. Practical argumentation can conclude things that are not in the premises, but its conclusions are not as strong. They are based on probability and can be questioned. None-the-less, as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca point out, practical argumentation that appears similar to demonstration, is more likely to be accepted by an audience. In fact, a major category of technique laid out in *The New Rhetoric*, is called quasi-logical arguments—those arguments which look like logical arguments in form (an incompatibility, for example, looks like a logical contradiction and thus appears unquestionable). This recognition of the roots of practical argumentation allows us to understand not just what techniques and arguments are affective, but also *why*

they are powerful. In their consideration of argumentation's formal roots, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca go long way towards answering one of Plato's main concerns with the way rhetoric was practiced and taught in classical Greece. He worried that anyone could learn rhetoric by example or by handbook and exert a power over the masses, and thus over politics, that was poorly understood and dangerous. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca help expose where the power of argumentation comes from and that its conclusions are questionable.

The second major extension the modern theorists make on Aristotle's treatise is a lengthy discussion of the value of the audience as both a tool of invention and a measurement of an argument's value. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca are adamant about considering the audience when building an argument. They assert that the starting place of an argument, which has to be accepted by the audience at the outset, can be found either in the structure of reality (facts, truths and presumptions) or can be based on the preferences of the audience (values, hierarchies, loci). Those starting points stemming from the preferable are not universal. People hold different values and order them differently. Use of these starting points requires a consideration of the audience when undertaking the invention process. The modern scholars recognize this fact. Additionally, the concept of the universal audience—made up of all rational humans—is important here. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca believe that an argument can be judged by the number of people it can appeal to and convince. The stronger an argument, the more people will accept it. Thus the strongest arguments are those that would be accepted by the universal audience. Aristotle's lack of such a concept reflects the time period in which he wrote and practiced rhetoric. Rhetoric was taught as a necessary discipline in classical Greece. It was often taught from handbooks

or by use of the pre-prescribed exercises of the Progymnasmata. It was viewed as a skill that had a certain protocol to it, which could be taught. Looking to the audience as a tool of invention in Aristotle's time would have been akin to asking a math class to come up with the rules by which to solve an equation.

Finally, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca add to the discussion of persuasion, a model of argument that looks at the cognitive level. They present a map of the anatomy of an argument: it begins with starting point that must be accepted by the audience and uses techniques of argument to get to the thesis. This model exposes the function of argument in the mind. Since practical argument, unlike formally logical argument, calls for the audience to accept something (the thesis) which is not given in the premises (the facts, values, etc with which the argument starts), it is insightful to understand how the rhetor and his or her audience get from the starting points to the thesis. Therein lies the function of rhetoric, of argumentation, of the techniques cataloged by both the classical and the modern scholars. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca expose this with their examination of argumentation. Aristotle does not. He is fascinated with rhetoric and believes it is a tool that, through agon or conflict of ideas, can help one find the truth, but he does not explain how his techniques function in this manner—what they do in the minds of the audience. This, in my opinion, is Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca greatest contribution to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*.

In conclusion, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca did find the modern version of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, and they had expanded upon it by considering, not just the inventive and stylistic techniques that could be used, but also the roots of those techniques and their power, importance of the audience, and the cognitive process of an argument for the

audience. In short, they exposed the inner-workings of the argument and of the mechanism of persuasion.