HISTORY OF RHETORIC

The Greeks

The history of classical rhetoric spans about 2,500 years, from the 5th century B.C. until now. It was first formulated, in Sicily, by Corax of Syracuse.
During most of that time, rhetoric was a prominent, if not the dominant, discipline in schools. Some of the most famous people in history were involved in either the teaching or the practice of rhetoric.

Evidence can be found in Greek literature that rhetoric, conceived of as persuasive oratory, figured prominently in Greek society hundreds of years before the first handbook of rhetorical principles was compiled.

The “art” that Corax formulated was designed to help ordinary citizens plead their claims in court. Since no documentary evidence was available to prove their claims, they had to rely on reasoning and probability to establish their proprietary rights.

In the history of rhetoric, Gorgias is notable for having stirred up interest in oratorical theory and practice among the Athenians. He placed great emphasis on the value of figures of speech, especially thesis/antithesis (“against position,” “counter proposition”—think pro/con, for/against, point/counterpoint) and parallelism.

Isocrates competes with Aristotle for the title of the most influential of the Greek rhetoricians. Judging from the length of his reign as a renowned teacher of rhetoric (he lived to be 98) and from the number of skillful orators who emerged from his school, it would probably be safe to say that Isocrates was the most influential Greek rhetorician among his contemporaries.

There are hints in some of the early histories of rhetoric that Isocrates may have studied under Gorgias and Socrates. One of his major contributions to rhetoric was his development of an artistic prose style. He took the rather artificial style of Gorgias, tempered it, refined it, and made it an elegant vehicle for both written and spoken discourse.

While Gorgias was more interested in the structural units of antithesis and parallelism, Isocrates, with his great interest in the rhythm of prose, centered his
attention on the **sonority (sound)** of the periodic sentence—certainly one of Cicero’s debts to him.

He preached the **whole man must be brought to bear in the persuasive process**. The aspiring orator would benefit from being:

1. broadly trained in the liberal arts
2. securely grounded in good **moral** habits

He stressed the Greek ideals of freedom and autonomy, particularly the value of the supreme Greek virtue, self-control.

Despite the high ideals that Isocrates set for his pupils and the exemplary eloquence of his discourses, he did not succeed in allaying **Plato’s suspicions of rhetoric**.

Fun fact: in the very act of depreciating rhetoric, Plato shows himself to be a masterful rhetorician.

**Aristotle**, with his more philosophical treatise on rhetoric, wins the title for **long-range influence**.
These “Sophists” (*sophós* means “wise man”) set up small private schools and charged their pupils a fee for what amounted in many cases to tutoring.

The schools of rhetoric during this period had two curricula; the “sophistic,” which designated the academic study of rhetoric as an art; and the “political,” which was concerned with the practical application of the art.

These schools eventually proved to be so lucrative that they attracted a number of charlatans into the teaching profession, and it was men like these who eventually gave Sophists an unsavory reputation and made “sophistry” a synonym for deceitful reasoning. They abused their privileged office and adulterated their discipline. The object of the Sophists was to amaze an audience rather than persuade it.

JSH 1:9 My mind at times was greatly excited, the cry and tumult were so great and incessant. The Presbyterians were most decided against the Baptists and Methodists, and used all the powers of both reason and *sophistry* to prove their errors, or, at least, to make the people think they were in error. On the other hand, the Baptists and Methodists in their turn were equally zealous in endeavoring to establish their own tenets and disprove all others.

BTW: the term *sophomore* is a compound of the Greek *sophos*, “wise” + *moros*, “foolish, dull.”

It should be remembered that men like Isocrates were highly ethical, with noble ideals and unimpeachable standards of intellectual integrity.
Plato’s beef: rhetoricians were more interested in opinions, in appearances, even in lies, than in the transcendental truth that the philosophers sought. Rhetoric—to bring it down to its lowest terms—was a form of flattery, a cosmetic.

Plato conceded the possibility of a true art of rhetoric. But it could be a true art only if the speaker made an effort to learn the truth about the subject he was going to talk about.

Certainly one of Aristotle’s purposes in composing his Rhetoric was to counteract his former teacher’s low estimate of the persuasive art. Aristotle’s Rhetoric treatise was published sometime around 333 B.C.

Aristotle was not as much interested in style as he was invention of arguments.

By abstracting first principles from the practice of oratory, he hoped to show that rhetoric was a true art, a teachable and systematic discipline that could guide people in adapting means to an end. With his philosophical treatise, Rhetoric, he became the fountainhead of all later rhetorical theory.

Orators often based their arguments on opinions, on what people believed to be true rather than on what was demonstrably and universally true.

Discoverable, verifiable truth fell within the province of science or logic. But in dealing with human affairs, people soon learned that universal truths were neither discoverable nor verifiable.

Belief, Aristotle perceived, is often the highest degree of certainty to which we can attain in dealing with the everyday affairs of human beings.
The recognition of probability as the essence of the persuasive art lies behind most of Aristotle’s contributions to rhetorical theory:

- the **three modes of proof**
  - the appeal to reason (logos)
  - the appeal to emotion (pâthos)
  - the ethical appeal (éthos)
- the calculated use of effective **examples**
- the **topics** as a system of discovering available arguments
- emphasis on the **audience** as the chief informing principle in persuasive discourse

Another Greek rhetorical treatise that deserves mention: *On Style.* (The date and authorship of this work are uncertain.) Whereas most later rhetorics discussed only three styles (the elevated/high style, the elegant/middle style, and the plain/low style), the author of this text discusses a fourth type, the forcible style.

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**The Romans**

The *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, (86-82 B.C.) has the distinction of being the earliest extant (surviving) Latin work on rhetoric and the earliest treatment of prose style in Latin. It suggested that in a standard format for argument (widely followed today in any five-part essay) there were six steps: exordium, narratio, divisio, confirmatio, refutatio, conclusio.

It enjoyed wide currency in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, serving as the basic elementary text in the English grammar-school curriculum when rhetoric had its greatest revival during the Tudor Age (1485-1603, mainly Henry VIII and Elizabeth I).

Unlike Aristotle, who held that rhetoric had no proper subject matter, **Cicero** felt that the perfect orator had to be **conversant with many subjects**. In order to invent arguments, the perfect orator must have a command of a wide **range of knowledge**.
Accordingly, under the Ciceronian system the study of rhetoric really became a liberal-arts course.

Arguably the most famous Ciceronian oration in English literature

A later rhetorician whose name is invariably coupled with Cicero’s is Quintilian, a successful pleader in the law courts. In time he acquired such a great reputation that Vespasian established a chair of rhetoric for him at Rome. The prestige of this imperial endowment made him the supreme authority on rhetoric even after his death, about A.D. 96. He retired from teaching to write his great work on the training of the orator, the *Institutio Oratoria*. Books III-VII treat of oratory itself, with emphasis on the finding (*inventio*) and arranging (*disposition*) of material. Books VIII-X treat of style (*elocutio*). Book XI deals with memory (*memoria*) and delivery (*pronuntiatio*). Collectively, these are known as "the five canons of rhetoric."
It was their insistence on the intellectual and moral training of the aspiring orator that made Cicero and Quintilian the two most potent classical influences on rhetorical education in England and America.

**Dionysius** treated only one aspect of rhetorical style, the order of words. Although he realized that eloquent expression involves a due regard for arrangement and choice of words, he decided to confine himself to a study of arrangement because he felt that other rhetoricians had adequately dealt with the choice of words. Dionysius' particular contribution is that he made aspiring rhetoricians aware of the inherent beauty of words and of the possibility of producing **pleasing effects even with ordinary words** if they were skillfully arranged.
These texts were clearly in the tradition of formulary rhetoric—the kind of rhetoric taught by models.

The Middle Ages

Rhetoric in the Middle Ages ceased to be pursued primarily as a practical art and became rather a scholastic exercise. Grammar, logic, and rhetoric constituted the trivium, the four-year undergraduate course of studies leading to the degree of bachelor of arts. Music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy made up the quadrivium, the three-year graduate course that led to the degree of master of arts.

After his conversion, Augustine made a significant contribution to rhetoric in the fourth book of his De Doctrina Christian (A.D. 426-427). Augustine was interested in rhetoric as a means of persuading Christians to lead a holy life. By rejecting the Sophists’ preoccupation with style and the other elements of display and by returning to the more comprehensive rhetoric of Cicero, he extended the province of rhetoric once again. He concentrated on biblical texts, especially on the epistles of Paul. Augustine’s analyses of these texts, however, were concerned not so much with the “message” as with the rhetorical craftsmanship.
Augustine’s rhetoric laid the groundwork for the rhetoric of the sermon, the branch of study known today as homiletics—a science that was to command a great deal of attention during, and for many years after, the Renaissance and the Reformation.

The most influential Middle-Aged rhetorician was Erasmus. Although this illustrious scholar spent only five years in England (1509-1514), he set the pattern for the English grammar-school curriculum and for rhetorical training in the schools. It is highly probable that Shakespeare was exposed to Erasmus’ texts in grammar school.
The Renaissance

It was not long before rhetoric became the dominant discipline in the Tudor grammar schools and universities.

It is common to classify the vernacular rhetorics produced during the English Renaissance into three main groups:

1. The Traditionalists—those who taught a full-fledged rhetoric, with attention given to the five parts: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery
2. The Ramists—those who assigned invention and arrangement to the province of logic and allocated only style and delivery to rhetoric
3. The Figurists—those whose primary, if not exclusive, interest centered on the study of the schemes and tropes

Leonard Cox, a schoolmaster, has the distinction of having written the first rhetoric textbook in English, *Arte of Crafte of Rhetoryke* (1530).

In 1550, Richard Sherry, a headmaster at Magdalen College School, published *A Tribute of Schemes and Tropes*, which has sometimes been called “the second book on rhetoric in English.”

Don’t confuse the two.
George Puttenham's *The Art of English Poesie* (1589) made two contributions to English rhetoric: he invented vernacular names for the Greek and Latin figures, and seeking a more rational basis for the classification of the figures, he decided to classify them according to the nature of their appeal.

About this time a revolution in rhetorical studies was effected by the French scholar, Peter Ramus. Dissatisfied with the repetitiveness and vagueness that prevailed in the teaching of the subjects of the trivium, Ramus distributed the traditional parts of rhetoric between logic and rhetoric. *Inventio* (discovery of matter) and *dipositio* (arrangement of matter) he assigned to the province of logic. Rhetoric had a franchise only on *elocutio* (style) and *pronuntiatio* (delivery). The fifth element of rhetoric, *memoria*—memorization of the speech—Ramus simply ignored.

The effect of this Ramistic dichotomy was that henceforth such processes as discovery, arrangement, and judgment tended to be assigned exclusively to the intellect, while the “dress” or “ornament” that style gave to matter fell to the lot of the imagination.

### The 17th Century

Besides the growing preoccupation with the rules, the 17th century exhibits some concern for the development of a simple, utilitarian style.

“Senecan style” is characterized by the

1. relative brevity of sentences
2. looseness of structure
3. succinctness and concision of phrasing
4. jerkiness of rhythm

The growing interest in the “plain style” resulted in a diminishing concern for the schemes and tropes.
Although Francis Bacon wrote no systematic work on rhetoric, there are scattered throughout his writings remarks and discourses that throw light on the direction that rhetorical theory was to take in the 17th century. Bacon says,

“Rhetoric is subservient to the imagination, as logic is to the understanding; and the duty and office of rhetoric, if it be deeply looked into, is no other than to apply and recommend the dictates of reason to imagination, in order to excite the appetite and will.”

Bacon admonished that the style should be so catered to the audience that “if a man should speak of the same thing to several persons, he should nevertheless use different words to each of them.”

John Dryden believed that the language and style must fit “the occasion, the subject, and the persons.” His advocacy of native words and his encouragement of the use of vernacular, rather than Latinate, syntax are part of his program to refine the language and to attain more naturalness, more ease, more spontaneity in writing.

The 18th Century

The most popular and probably the most representative of Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s printed works was Lectures on Elocution, a compilation of seven of his public lectures dealing with problems of delivery—articulation, pronunciation, accent, emphasis, tone, pause, pitch, voice control, and gesture.

Another noted Scottish rhetorician was George Campbell (1709-1796), whose The Philosophy of Rhetoric has been called “the most important treatise on the New Rhetoric that the 18th century produced.” Campbell says that a speech may have any one of four ends:

1. to enlighten the understanding
2. to please the imagination
3. to move the passions
4. to influence the will

This is reminiscent of Cicero's notion of the tripartite function of rhetoric:

1. to teach (*docere*)
2. to persuade (*movere*)
3. to delight (*delectare*)

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**The 19th Century**

It was in the newly formed United States of America, that the most important rhetorical ideas of the 19th century were conceived and developed.

Advances in literacy during the 18th century, the rise of interest in literature, and American democratic culture acted together to build an educational system in the United States after the Revolutionary War that allowed nearly every child access to reading and writing.

Note, for example, that the U.S. went from seven colleges in 1776 to over four hundred by 1850. (Today, it's nearly 4,150.)

In *The Teacher's Assistant*, John Walker divided compositions into two general sorts, which he called “themes” (this seems to be the first use of this term in vernacular composition rather than translation) and “regular subjects.” “Themes” were argumentative—“the proving of some truth”—and were set up around a claim or maxim like “courage wins the day” using a modified version of classical *disputatio*. Whatever was not argumentative fell into the category of a “regular subject,” and regular-subject assignments were usually only a single word: education, government, peace, war, etc.
Samuel Newman published his textbook, *A Practical System of Rhetoric*, in 1827, and it was the most widely used rhetoric written in America between 1820 and 1860. What we see in Newman’s rhetoric is the modal formula of narrative, descriptive, expository, and argumentative discourses.

Fun fact: Nathaniel Hawthorne later told of conferences he had over his themes at Bowdoin with Newman, with whose family Hawthorne roomed for years while at college.

The multimodal rhetoric of Henry Day was organized around what he called the “four objects of discourse”:

1. “The process by which a new conception is produced, is by Explanation
2. that by which a new judgment is produced, is by Conviction
3. a change in the sensibilities is effected by the process of Excitation
4. and in the will, by that of Persuasion.”
In place of older rhetorical treatments of style, **Adams Hill** offered a piece on “Choice and Use of Words.” This was the first important sign of a diminution of style in the old sense—its demotion from a distinct canon into lower-level emphases on words and sentences—the “words” and “sentence structure” chapters that would come to be seen more frequently in textbooks. Hill may be best known as the **inventor of the first-year college writing requirement**, an institutional mandate deeply related to rhetoric’s transformation into exercises in formal correctness. It was not until 1885 that such a basic freshman course was offered.

> “Those of us who have been doomed to read manuscripts written in an examination room—whether at a grammar school, a high school, or a college—have found the work of even good scholars disfigured by bad spelling, confusing punctuation, ungrammatical, obscure, ambiguous, or inelegant expressions. Everyone who has had much to do with the graduating classes of our best colleges, has known men who could not write a letter describing their own commencement without making blunders which would disgrace a boy twelve years old.” —Hill

### The 20th Century

**Fred Scott** was the greatest figure in rhetorical reform between 1885 and 1925. On the campus of the University of Michigan, Scott used his growing influence to buck the national trend: he **broke rhetoric out from English into separate and equal departmental status**. His Department of Rhetoric, begun in 1903, did not last long after Scott’s retirement in 1927, but during the thirty-two years from 1898 through 1930, Scott produced 149 master’s degrees and twenty-three Ph.D.s in rhetoric. He created an entire rhetoric curriculum at the doctoral level and produced the first American rhetoric doctorate—Gertrude Buck—in 1898. His students would include famed journalists, essayists, fiction writers, even poets, as well as the composition and rhetoric scholars whose influence would be felt through the entire first half of the century.

Scott was one of the founders of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) in 1911, which came to be a prime mover behind the attacks on college tests, correctness-only standards, grammatical purism, and prescriptivism.

**National Council of Teachers of English**

A Professional Association of Educators in English Studies, Literacy, and Language Arts

With the *Handbook of Composition*, **Edwin C. Woolley** began the handbook era, initiating a new sort of writing text that would quickly come to be at the heart of most college writing courses.
It was the Speech Department at Cornell University that fostered the resuscitation of classical rhetoric in our time.

The renewed interest in classical rhetoric was given another boost by the vogue of Mortimer Adler's *How to Read a Book* and by the post-war popularity of the New Criticism, as both Adler and the New Critics were applying rhetorical techniques to the reading process. Think formalism.

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**Other Rhetorics**

We must further explore all those manifestations of non-verbal rhetoric or “body-rhetoric,” as Frank Haiman terms it—marches, demonstrations, sit-ins in the political arena; music, the film, light-shows in the cultural sphere. We are beginning
to speak now of gendered rhetorics and the rhetorics of race as new and distinctive styles of persuasive discourse.

One of the reasons for the absence of women’s names in the histories of rhetoric is that for most of the 2500-year history of rhetoric in the Western world, there have been very few, if any, women who could be called rhetoricians, either as theorists or as practitioners. And the reason for the lack of women rhetoricians is that for most of that 2500-year span, women were denied access to formal education and to the public arena. Rhetoric is one of the most patriarchal of all the academic disciplines.

In Conclusion

Throughout its long history, rhetoric has risen and fallen periodically in public prominence, both in the political realm and in the academic arena. But even when it has been singularly inactive for a long period of time, it always stages a comeback. What once was so vital cannot be, even with the passage of time and the creation of a new world, entirely irrelevant and ineffectual. As long as human beings are permitted to utter or to write words, they will continue to act rhetorically.
"I just think it undermines our organization's fiery rhetoric when you close your Internet postings with a smiley face."