Some Definitions of Rhetoric

**Plato:** Rhetoric is "the art of winning the soul by discourse."

**Aristotle:** Rhetoric is "the faculty of discovering in any particular case all of the available means of persuasion."

**Cicero:** "Rhetoric is one great art comprised of five lesser arts: inventio, dispositio, elocutio, memoria, and pronunciatio." Rhetoric is "speech designed to persuade."

**Quintillian:** "Rhetoric is the art of speaking well."

**Francis Bacon:** Rhetoric is the application of reason to imagination "for the better moving of the will."

**George Campbell:** [Rhetoric] is that art or talent by which discourse is adapted to its end. The four ends of discourse are to enlighten the understanding, please the imagination, move the passion, and influence the will.

**A. Richards:** Rhetoric is the study of misunderstandings and their remedies.

**Kenneth Burke:** "Rhetoric is rooted in an essential function of language itself, a function that is wholly realistic and continually born anew: the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols."
"Wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric, and wherever there is rhetoric, there is meaning."

**Richard Weaver:** Rhetoric is that "which creates an informed appetition for the good."

**Erika Lindemann:** "Rhetoric is a form of reasoning about probabilities, based on Assumptions people share as members of a commununity."

**Andrea Lunsford:** "Rhetoric is the art, practice, and study of human communication."

**Francis Christensen:** "Grammar maps out the possible; rhetoric narrows the possible down to the desirable or effective."
"The key question for rhetoric is how to know what is desirable."

**Sonja and Karen Foss:** "Rhetoric is an action human beings perform when they use symbols for the purpose of communicating with one another . . ., [and it] is a perspective humans take that involves focusing on symbolic processes."

1. **Boethius:** *Confessions* (Howell's translation)
Rhetoric treats of and discourses upon hypotheses, that is, questions with a multitude of surroundings in time and place, and if at any time it brings up a thesis, it uses it in connection with its hyposthesis. These are its surroundings: Who? What? Where? By whose help? Why? In what manner? At what time?

2. **James J. Murphy:** "One Thousand Neglected Authors"
A rhetorician is someone who provides his fellows with useful precepts or directions for organizing and presenting his ideas or feeling to them. (20)

3. **Marc Fumaroli:** "Rhetoric, Politics and Society"
Rhetoric appears as the connective tissue peculiar to civil society and to its proper finalities, happiness and political peace *hic et nunc.* (253-4)

4. **Kenneth Burke:** *A Rhetoric of Motives*
The most characteristic concern of rhetoric [is] the manipulation of men's beliefs for political ends....the basic function of rhetoric [is] the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents. (41)

From [http://campus.northpark.edu/english/rhetdef.htm]:

Rhetoric is primarily a verbal, situationally contingent, epistemic art that is both philosophical and practical and gives rise to potentially active texts.
7. **George Kennedy**: "A Hoot in the Dark" (1992)
Rhetoric in the most general sense may perhaps be identified with the energy inherent in communication: the emotional energy that impels the speaker to speak, the physical energy expanded in the utterance, the energy level coded in the message, and the energy experienced by the recipient in decoding the message.

From [http://english.ttu.edu/smith/rhetoric/definitions.asp](http://english.ttu.edu/smith/rhetoric/definitions.asp):

8. **Francis Bacon (1561-1626)**: *Advancement of Learning*

The duty and office of rhetoric is to apply reason to imagination for the better moving of the will.

10. **Lloyd Bitzer**: "The Rhetorical Situation" (1968)

In short, rhetoric is a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action.

11. **Edward T. Channing**: *Lectures Read to the Seniors at Harvard College* (c. 1856)

[Rhetoric is] a body of rules derived from experience and observation, extending to all communication by language and designed to make it efficient. It does not ask whether a man is to be a speaker or writer, --a poet, philosopher, or debater; but simply,--is it his wish to be put in the right way of communicating his mind with power to others, by words spoken or written. If so, rhetoric undertakes to show him rules or principles which will help to make the expression of his thoughts effective.

12. **Douglas Ehninger** (1972):

[Rhetoric is] that discipline which studies all of the ways in which men may influence each other’s thinking and behavior through the strategic use of symbols.


Rhetoric is an instrumental use of language. One person engages another person in an exchange of symbols to accomplish some goal. It is not communication for communication’s sake. Rhetoric is communication that attempts to coordinate social action. For this reason, rhetorical communication is explicitly pragmatic. Its goal is to influence human choices on specific matters that require immediate attention.


...rhetoric is the process of using language to organize experience and communicate it to others. It is also the study of how people use language to organize and communicate experience. The word denotes...both distinctive human activity and the "science" concerned with understanding that activity.

15. **John Locke**: *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690)

[Rhetoric,] that powerful instrument of error and deceit.

16. **McCloskey**: ...merely speech with designs on the reader.

From [http://www.gsu.edu/~wwwrnc/rhetdef.htm](http://www.gsu.edu/~wwwrnc/rhetdef.htm):

17. **Anonymous**:
Rhetoric is the science which refreshes the hungry, renders the mute articulate, makes the blind to see, and teaches one to avoid every lingual ineptitude.


19. **Sappho**: Persuasion is Aphrodite’s daughter: it is she who beguiles our mortal hearts (frg 90).