

4. Soften Them Up



CHARACTER, LOGIC, EMOTION

The strangely triumphant art of agreeability

Audi partem alteram. *Hear the other side.*

—ST. AUGUSTINE

At the age of seven, my son, George, insisted on wearing shorts to school in the middle of winter. We live in icy New Hampshire, where playground snow has all the fluffy goodness of ground glass. My wife launched the argument in the classic family manner: “You talk to him,” she said.

So I talked to him. Being a student of rhetoric, I employed Aristotle’s three most powerful tools of persuasion:

Argument by character

Argument by logic

Argument by emotion

In this chapter you will see how each of these tools works, and you’ll gain some techniques—the persuasive use of decorum, argument jujitsu, tactical sympathy—that will put you well on the way to becoming an argument adept.

The first thing I used on George was argument by character: I gave him my stern father act.

ME: You have to wear pants, and that’s final.

GEORGE: Why?

ME: Because I told you to, that’s why.

But he just looked at me with tears in his eyes. Next, I tried reasoning with him, using argument by logic.

ME: Pants will keep your legs from chapping. You’ll feel a lot better.

GEORGE: But I want to wear *shorts*.

So I resorted to manipulating his emotions. Following Cicero, who claimed that humor was one of the most persuasive of all rhetorical passions, I hiked up my pant legs and pranced around.

ME: Doh-de-doh, look at me, here I go off to work wearing shorts . . . Don’t I look stupid?

GEORGE: Yes. [*Continues to pull shorts on.*]

ME: So why do you insist on wearing shorts yourself?

GEORGE: Because I don’t look stupid. And they’re my legs. I don’t mind if they get chaffed.

ME: Chapped.

Superior vocabulary and all, I seemed to be losing my case. Besides, George was making his first genuine attempt to argue instead of cry. So I decided to let him win this one.

ME: All right. You can wear shorts in school if your mother and I can clear it with the authorities. But you have to put your snow pants on when you go outside. Deal?

GEORGE: Deal.

He happily fetched his snow pants, and I called the school. A few weeks later the principal declared George’s birthday Shorts Day; she even showed up in culottes herself. It was mid-February. Was that a good idea? For the sake of argument, and agreement, I believe it was.

Aristotle’s Big Three

I used my best arguments by character, logic, and emotion. So, how did George still manage to beat me? By using the same tools. I did it on purpose, and he did it instinctively. Aristotle called them *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*, and so will I, because the meanings of the Greek versions are richer than those of the English versions. Together they form the three basic tools of rhetoric.

Logos is **argument by logic**. If arguments were children, *logos* would be the brainy one, the big

► Useful Figure

These two sentences (“Good idea? I believe it was”) form a figure of speech called a *hypophora*, which asks a rhetorical question and then immediately answers it. The hypophora allows you to anticipate the audience’s skepticism and nip it in the bud. For some reason, the word means “carrying below” in Greek.

► **Argument Tool**
LOGOS: Argument by logic.

sister who gets top grades in high school. *Logos* isn't just about following rules of logic; it's a set of techniques that use what the audience is thinking.

Ethos, or **argument by character**, employs the persuader's personality, reputation, and ability to look trustworthy. (While *logos* sweats over its GPA, *ethos* gets elected class president.) In rhetoric, a sterling reputation is more than just good; it's persuasive. I taught my children that lying isn't just wrong, it's *unpersuasive*. An audience is more likely to believe a trustworthy persuader, and to accept his argument. "A person's life per-

► **Argument Tool**
ETHOS: Argument by character.

suades better than his word," said one of Aristotle's contemporaries. This remains true today. Rhetoric shows how to shine a flattering light on your life.

Then you have *pathos*, or **argument by emotion**, the sibling the others disrespect but who gets away with everything. Logicians and language snobs hate *pathos*, but Aristotle himself—the man who *invented* logic—recognized its usefulness. You can persuade someone logically, but as we saw in Chapter 3, getting him out of his chair to act on it takes something more combustible.

► **Argument Tool**
PATHOS: Argument by emotion. A successful persuader must learn how to read the audience's emotions.

Logos, *ethos*, and *pathos* appeal to the brain, gut, and heart of your audience. While our brain tries to sort the facts, our gut tells us whether we

can trust the other person, and our heart makes us want to do something about it. They form the essence of effective persuasion.

George instinctively used all three to counter my own arguments. His *ethos* put mine in check:

ME: You have to wear pants because I told you to.

GEORGE: They're my legs.

His *logos* also canceled mine out, even if his medical terminology didn't:

ME: Pants will make your legs feel better.

GEORGE: I don't mind if they get chaffed.

Finally, I found his *pathos* irresistible. When he was little, the kid would actually stick his lower lip

TRY THIS BEFORE AN IMPORTANT MEETING

If you want to get a commitment out of the meeting, take stock of your proposal's *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*: Do my points make logical sense? Will the people in the room trust what I say? How can I get them fired up for my proposal at the end?

out when he tried not to cry. Cicero loved this technique—not the lip part, but the appearance of struggling for self-control. It serves to amplify the mood in the room. Cicero also said a genuine emotion persuades more than a faked one, and George's tears certainly were genuine. Trying not to cry just made his eyes well up more.

I wish I could say my *pathos* was as effective, but George failed to think it funny when I hiked my pants up. He just agreed that I looked stupid. I had been studying rhetoric pretty intensively at that point, and to be thrown to the mat by a seven-year-old was humiliating. So was facing my wife afterward.

DOROTHY SR.: So did you talk to him?

ME: Yeah, I handled it.

George picked that moment to walk into the room with his shorts on.

DOROTHY SR.: Then why is he wearing shorts?

GEORGE: We made a deal!

DOROTHY SR.: A *deal*. Which somehow allows him to wear shorts to school.

ME: I told you, I handled it.

So what if his legs looked like stalks of rhubarb when he came home? While I was moderately concerned about the state of his skin, and more apprehensive about living up to Dorothy's expectations, neither had much to do with my personal goal: to raise persuasive children. If George was willing to put all he had into an argument, I was willing to concede. That time, I like to think, we both won. (In high school he expressed his individuality in the opposite way: he wore ties to school, and even pants.)

Logos, *pathos*, and *ethos* usually work together to win an argument, debates with argumentative seven-year-olds excepted. By using your opponent's logic and your audience's emotion, you can win over your audience with greater ease. You make them happy to let you control the argument.

Logos: Use the Logic in the Room

Later on, we'll get into rhetoric's more dramatic logical tactics and show how to bowl your audience over with your eloquence. First, though, let's master the most powerful *logos* tool of all: concession. It seems more Jedi

knight than Rambo, involving more self-mastery than brute force, but it lies closer to the power center of *logos* than rhetoric's more grandiloquent methods. Even the most aggressive maneuvers allow room for the opponent's ideas and the audience's preconceptions. To persuade people—to make them desire your choice and commit to the action you want—you need all the assets in the room, and one of the best resources comes straight from your opponent's mouth.

In the comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*, Calvin concedes effectively when his dad tries to teach him to ride a bike:

DAD: Look, Calvin. You've got to relax a little. Your balance will be better if you're loose.

CALVIN: I can't help it! Imminent death makes me tense! I admit it!

Clever boy. Perched atop a homicidal bike, he still manages to gain control of the argument. By agreeing that he's tense, he shifts the issue from nerves to peril, where he has a better argument.

Salespeople love to use concession to sell you stuff. I once had a boss who came from a sales background. He proved that old habits die hard. The guy never disagreed with me, yet half the time he got me to do the opposite of what I proposed.

ME: Our research shows that readers love beautiful covers without a lot of type.

BOSS: Beautiful covers. Sure.

ME: I know that clean covers violate the usual rules for selling magazines on the newsstand, but we should test dual covers: half of them will be crammed with the usual headlines, and half of them with a big, bold image—very little type.

BOSS: Clean covers. Great idea. How'll that affect your budget?

ME: It'll cost a lot. I'm gambling on selling more magazines.

BOSS: So you haven't budgeted for it.

TRY THIS AT HOME

Aristotle said that every point has its flip side. That's the trick to concession. When a spouse says, "We hardly ever go out anymore," the wise mate does not spew examples of recent dates; he says, "That's because I want you all to myself." This response will at least buy him time to think up a credible change in tense: "But as a matter of fact, I was going to ask if you wanted to go to that new Korean restaurant."

ME: Uh, no. But I tell you, boss, I'm pretty confident about this.

BOSS: Sure. I know you are. Well, it's a great idea. Let's circle back to it at budget time.

ME: But that's nine months from—

BOSS: So what else is on your agenda?

My covers never got tested. If a circle in hell is reserved for this kind of salesman, it's a pretty darn pleasant one. And despite myself, I never stopped liking the guy. Arguments with him never felt like arguments; I would leave his office in a good mood after losing every point, and he was the one who did all the conceding.

You'll find much the same technique if you take a class in improv. Your teachers will almost certainly school you in the practice of "Yes, and . . ." This entails accepting what the other person says and building on it. Imagine yourself onstage with a partner. She starts.

PARTNER: Look, the penguins are taking off from our roof!

YOU: So how do you respond? Sensibly?

YOU: They can't be penguins. Penguins can't fly. Plus we live in Florida. Did you mean pelicans?

You can just hear the brakes squealing on that little dialogue. Let's try a "Yes, and . . ." instead.

YOU: Yes, and it makes me so glad we built that catapult on top of our igloo.

The cool thing about this improvisational method is that it lets you nudge the conversation in a direction you want. Suppose you disagree that penguins are flying off your roof. Instead of pointing out that penguins don't fly, simply assume a catapult.

Aren't we being agreeable? While your conversations probably won't take such avian flights of fancy, the same approach can work in a political

argument. Politics makes an excellent test of concession, in part because the tactic is so refreshing. See if you can go through an entire discussion without overtly disagreeing with your opponent.

SHE: I'm willing to give up a little privacy so the government can keep me safe.

YOU: Safety's important.

SHE: Not that they're going to tap *my* phone.

YOU: No, you'd never rock the boat.

SHE: Of course, I'll speak up if I disagree with what's going on.

YOU: I know you will. And *let* the government keep a file on you.

You may see a little smoke come out of your friend's ears at this point. Do not be alarmed; it's simply a natural sign of mental gears being thrown in reverse. The Greeks loved concession for this very reason: it lets opponents talk their way right into your corner.

But there's something bigger to concession. It's essential to what I call *agreeability*. By arguing without appearing to argue, agreeability takes anger out of confrontation. And it helps change a fight into an argument. Agreeability requires getting inside your opponent's head. You may find that argumentative brain a pretty messy place. But every head has its attractive parts. Which is the greatest thing about concession and agreeability: ultimately, it's an act of sympathy.

Pathos: Start with the Audience's Mood

Sympathize—align yourself with your listener's *pathos*. Don't contradict or deny the mood; instead, rhetorical sympathy shows its concern, proving, as President George H. W. Bush put it, "I care." So when you face that angry man, look stern and concerned; do not shout, "Whoa, decaf!" When a little girl looks sad, sympathy means looking sad, too; it does not mean chirping, "Cheer up!"

This reaction to the audience's feelings can serve as a baseline, letting them see your own

► **Argument Tool**
SYMPATHY: Share your listeners' mood.

emotions change as you make your point. Cicero hinted that the great orator transforms himself into an emotional role model, showing the audience how it should feel.

LITTLE GIRL: I lost my balloon!

YOU: Awww, did you?

[*Little girl cries louder.*]

YOU (*still trying to look sad while yelling over the crying*): What's that you're holding?

LITTLE GIRL: My mom gave me a dinosaur.

YOU (*cheering up*): A dinosaur!

Being a naturally sympathetic type, my wife is especially good at conceding moods. She has a way of playing my emotion back so intensely that I'm embarrassed I felt that way. I once returned home from work angry that my employer had done nothing to recognize an award my magazine had won.

DOROTHY SR.: Not a thing? Not even a group email congratulating you?

ME: No . . .

DOROTHY SR.: They have no idea what a good thing they have in you.

ME: Well . . .

DOROTHY SR.: An email wouldn't be enough! They should give you a bonus.

ME: It wasn't *that* big an award.

She agreed with me so much that I found myself siding with my lousy employer. I believe her sympathy was genuine, but its effect was the same as if she had applied all her rhetorical skill to make me feel better. And I did feel better, if a bit sheepish.

And then there's the concession side of *ethos*, called *decorum*. This is the most important jujitsu of all, which is why the whole next chapter is devoted to it.

TRY THIS AT WORK
Oversympathizing makes someone's mood seem ridiculous without actually ridiculing it. When a staffer complains about his workspace, say, "Let's take this straight to the top." Watch his mood change from whiny to nervous. Of course, you could have an *Alice's Restaurant*-style backfire. Arlo Guthrie yelled, "I wanna kill! Kill!" when he registered for the draft, and they pinned a medal on him. You'll see more of this technique, called the "backfire," later on.

The Tools

“Thus use your frog,” Izaak Walton says in *The Compleat Angler*. “Put your hook through his mouth, and out at his gills . . . and in so doing use him as though you loved him.” That pretty much sums up this chapter, which teaches you to use your audience as though you loved it. All of these tools require understanding your opponent and sympathizing with your audience.

- *Logos*. Argument by *logic*. The first logical tactic we covered was **concession**, using the opponent’s argument to your own advantage.
- *Pathos*. Argument by *emotion*. The most important pathetic tactic is **sympathy**, registering concern for your audience’s emotions and then changing the mood to suit your argument.
- *Ethos*. Argument by *character*. Aristotle called this the most important appeal of all—even more than *logos*.

Logic, emotion, and character are the megatools of rhetoric. You’re about to learn specific ways to wield each one. Read on.