

Brief History of Argumentation

The following connects to Chapter 16 of *Acting on Words*.

As taught since the Middle Ages in Europe and other parts of the world, rhetoric draws upon teachings and practice of Ancient Greece and Rome. We have defined the word rhetoric today as denoting the art of composition; it comes, however, from a Greek word meaning orator or teacher. Plato is said to have been the first to apply it to teachers and practitioners of oral address. Indeed, today's principles of written composition grew from spoken examples. Speeches in classical times (approximately 500 BCE – 400 CE) were primarily argumentative and geared to formal occasions in court or political assembly. Rhetoric, along with another liberal art, dialectic, focused largely on methods of civic persuasion. Young men of the privileged classes, educated in rhetoric, were not so much prepared for future jobs as for good citizenship, the ability to persuade being considered vital to public health.

Taking a few strides forward in time and westward in space—to twentieth century Britain and America—we find two nations tied (at least to some extent) to the classical past in valuing of persuasive skills. As a rising new power, the United States wanted lofty achievements equalling those of antiquity; it declared itself a land of democracy and therefore prized strong independent minds. With its commitment to the entrepreneurial spirit, it needed to prepare citizens for the aggressive world of business, as British schools had been doing. British and American rhetoricians interpreted and sometimes disagreed about the principles and practices of Gorgias (483- 375 BCE), Isoccrates (436- 338 BCE), Plato (428-348 BCE), Aristotle (384-322 BCE), and Cicero (106– 43 BCE).

Modern teachers have embraced the five classical canons of *invention* (finding of ideas and proofs), *disposition* (arrangement of ideas and arguments), *style* (finding of language suitable to the subject, audience, and occasion), *memory* (a firm grasp of attitudes

surrounding one's subject, an important aspect of ethos), and *delivery* (refinement and actualization of the finished composition). As *Acting on Words* suggests, today we continue to purvey—at least to some degree-- an ancient stress upon the syllogism, dialectic dialogue, and logic (see Chapter 3). Whether we have entirely understood or captured the ancients, we have adapted from history in the interests of disseminating proven, standard principles of composition. At the same time, British and American teachers of rhetoric, among others, have introduced various innovations on classical structures, aiming to clarify principles and suit them to the needs of today's college and university students.