

Let's Make Hypocrites!

Reclaim five misunderstood words to build better citizens

By Jay Heinrichs

As a devoted hypocrite, I'd like to make a pathetic plea for rhetoric. Although I respect your right to be an idiot, I'm counting on your candid attention.

Those words—*hypocrite*, *pathetic*, *rhetoric*, *idiot*, and *candid*—would say something very different to someone born two hundred years ago than they do to us today (assuming the words make sense to you at all). If we want to get young people fully engaged in the issues that face this country, we need to rescue these five terms and to restore them to their former glory.

I learned the stories of these words while researching my book on rhetoric, *Thank You for Arguing*. My newfound understanding changed the way I teach writing. Instead of stressing self-expression, I now reveal to students the magic and power of sympathetic expression.

Before we get to that subject, however, I suppose I should lead you through the sordid tales of these words and their origins. Early in American history, these five terms broke loose from their etymological moorings and wound up saying almost the opposite of what they originally meant.

Hypocrite now means an individual who says one thing but does the opposite. The ancient Greeks, who came up with the word, used it instead to refer to the person who delivered a speech.

What could have a more pathetic meaning than *pathetic*? This word has made a strange odyssey from its original intent: the skillful use of an audience's emotions through rhetoric.

Rhetoric, for its part, now rarely shows up without "empty," implied or otherwise, in front of it. In our common usage, it means useless or manipulative talk. Back before the nineteenth century, however, rhetoric had a much grander sense: It was one of the original liberal arts, the art of persuasion.

Idiot took on its current, mentally handicapped designation only after we forgot the nature of its use by the Greeks: An *idiotes* was an individualist who had no use for society.

Finally, there's *candid*, close cousin to the word candidate. Both of these words (as well as the word candy) derive from the Latin word *candere*, meaning "white and glistening" or "pure." Candidates in ancient Rome would wrap their sweet selves in white togas when they gave orations. It made them seem pure, if not glistening.

Let's look at each term in greater detail and see how each might be used in your teaching.

Hypocrite

To dig beneath this word for its original meaning, we need an extra word: *crisis*. *Krisis* in ancient Greek referred to an audience's decision. A crisis, in other words, was the act of coming to a consensus. Funny, isn't it, that crisis now means something more disastrous? So *hypocrisy*—the hypo-crisis—is what comes before the audience's decision. There we have it: A hypocrite is someone who delivers a speech, an individual who acts before the crisis.

We consider hypocrites to be liars. That's because those who are absorbed in self-expression—sticking to their guns, marching to the beat of a different drummer—rarely manage to persuade an audience. To do that, a speaker needs to stand in the audience's shoes, to make the audience believe that the speaker is one of them and is capable of leading them. A good hypocrite may have to swallow some of her own opinions to gain the audience's trust and approval. Is this fakery? Well, yes, I suppose it is. Call it *benign* fakery, much like leaving out of a résumé the time the student cut class to see a movie. Good hypocrisy leads to decisions. Self-expression rarely does.

Exercise: Have Student A interview Student B about what she believes or values—global warming, Harry Potter, tacos, whatever. Which of these things does Student A disagree with the most or value the least? Suppose they choose NASCAR as their subject. Have Student A express intense interest in the sport. ("Tell me more about positive tire camber!") Challenge him to use what he has

learned to talk her into something else. (“Have they tried alternative fuels in those cars? What if NASCAR helped solve global warming!”) Let other students suggest tactics. That’s hypocrisy at its best.

Pathetic

When students write essays or speak to a class, we normally expect them to stick to logical argument. The philosopher Aristotle might not have approved. For informal arguments, he would have added emotion, or *pathos*, to grease the argumentative wheels. You can certainly persuade someone with logic alone, but it’s hard to get someone out of his chair actually to do something without making him desire to act. Pathos is where desire enters the situation.

Pathos lies at the roots of several English words, including *pathetic*, *sympathy*, and, interestingly, *pathology*. (Some Greeks believed that emotions came from pain or from the absence of pain. And a fun bunch they were, too.)

Persuasive pathos requires sympathy. You cannot manipulate someone’s emotions without first understanding him or her. Out of the worst motives, therefore, rhetoric forces people to think beyond themselves. What a great art!

Exercise: Have your students write a short persuasive essay, employing a device that the great Roman orator Marcus Tullius Cicero recommended: Get a little emotional at the end. Urge your students to keep a particular person or group of people in mind as they write. What emotion will be most persuasive?

Rhetoric

The ancients considered rhetoric the essential skill of leadership, a type of knowledge so important that they placed it at the center of higher education. Rhetoric taught students how to speak and write persuasively, how to produce something to say on every occasion, and how to make people like them when they spoke.

Aristotle defined rhetoric as the art of “finding the available means of persuasion.” Notice that he didn’t define it as “the art of winning an argument in three seconds” or “the art of having your way.” With rhetoric, you don’t so much think up your argument as gather it; you pluck it from cultural traditions and from the audience’s beliefs and opinions. This highly social attitude, this ability to

find inspiration outside oneself, is different from our own culture's approach, isn't it? That is exactly why we need to teach rhetoric at all levels. Our republic depends on it.

Exercise: I'm offering speakerphone conferences with classes that use Thank You for Arguing. Students go nuts over discussions of rhetoric. You can almost see the light bulbs go on over their heads. For the first time in their lives, they understand that words aren't just for self-expression. Words can actually do things. They can make other people do things. How cool is that?

Author's note: If you have adopted my book and are interested in setting up a conference call, please email me at figaro@wildblue.net.

Idiot Aristotle said, "He who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient unto himself, must be either a beast or a god." I doubt that Aristotle would find us very godlike. Would he consider us beastly? No matter how individualistic we try to be, though, humans remain a tribal species. It's in our genes. When we don't work in common as a society—when we lose our faith in the possibility of consensus—we form tribes.

That's another bonus word, by the way. *Tribes* (pronounced TREE-bays in Latin) were family-based factions in ancient Rome. Tribal factions destroyed the Roman Republic and gave rise to a charming, charismatic dictator named Julius Caesar. If your students think ancient Rome has nothing to do with modern America, have them read an article written by Bill Bishop that appeared in the *Austin American-Statesman* on April 4, 2004. Bishop reported that the number of "landslide counties" (counties in which more than sixty percent of residents voted for one party in presidential elections) had doubled since 1976. A majority of Americans now occupy these ideological bubbles.

Idiots form tribes. That's exactly what we're doing. So what is the cure for national idiocy? A public willing to be candid (which just happens to be our next word).

Exercise: Have your students debate this question: When does individualism turn into idiocy?

Candid Candid once meant being open to possibilities. Now it means being closed to all but your own truth: saying what's on your mind and ignoring what's on everyone else's mind. Getting your facts straight is important in any argument, of course. Deliberative rhetoric (the kind that leads to consensual decisions) nevertheless works best in the future tense, because decisions lie in the future. The problem with facts is that they'll take you only so far into the future.

Universal truths, which we call "values," also have a problem with deliberative argument. A permanent "truth" might not fit the circumstances of the moment. Conditions change. When your horse collapses in midstream, for example, it might be a very good idea to change horses. A candid student, in the original sense of the word, is open to the possibility that he or she just may be wrong.

Exercise: Have two volunteers argue about a choice: where to go on a class field trip, what to eat for lunch, whatever. Before they begin, though, have the volunteers leave the room for a moment. While they're away, tell your class to write down the verb tenses the volunteer students use in their arguments. Deliberative argument, which was Aristotle's favorite rhetoric, uses the future tense. It's the language of politics and choices. When does the students' debate get a little uncomfortable? What verb tense is being used at that point? Now have the students evaluate the websites and web-posted videos of the presidential candidates. Which candidate most often employs the future tense? Does one party use the future tense more than the other? What tenses do attack ads use most frequently?

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Bright students love to learn what etymology reveals about our society. Such knowledge improves their writing, and they enjoy the added benefit of annoying their parents by replying "Thank you" every time a parent says that the student's room looks pathetic. In addition, teaching students to express themselves more outwardly promises a still grander payoff: They become full participants in our republic.

As an example, here's a bonus exercise: the *ethopoeia*. This technique

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has been entertaining students for some 2,500 years, and it works in this way: Participants play the roles of prominent people, plucking characters out of different eras as they debate each other. For example, one student pretending to be Achilles debates another student who is playing Julius Caesar. I'd like to see a student playing Eleanor Roosevelt as she debates the role of workers' unions with a student who has assumed the persona of Ronald Reagan. Alternatively, we could stick to the present: Have a virtual Osama Bin Laden argue with Quentin Tarantino about violence in the media.

Exercises like the ethopoeia get participants used to talking on their feet and to delivering orations without notes while learning to enjoy debate. These exercises focus not on self-expression but on expressing the audience's beliefs and desires—endowing their purposes, as Shakespeare put it, with words that make them known. Students become *hypocrites* who employ their *pathetic rhetoric* in the *candid* pursuit of consensus.

In other words, they move beyond being *idiots*. They become good citizens.

About the Writer

Jay Heinrichs *is the author of* Thank You for Arguing: What Aristotle, Lincoln and Homer Simpson Can Teach Us About the Art of Persuasion. *A magazine executive consultant, he frequently lectures on rhetoric to high school and college classes.*

SPECIAL NOTE: *The author is available for speakerphone conferences with classes that adopt Thank You for Arguing. He can be reached at email: Figaro@wildblue.net. And check out his fun website, Figarospeech.com or www.thankyoufroarguing.com for video demonstrations, author information, and more.*
