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Finding the Right Words: An Application of Rhetorical Concepts to Grant Writing

T he purpose of this report is to explore rhetorical theories, and how a writer can apply them to grant writing projects. Grant proposal judges come from widely varied backgrounds. Being aware of who they are writing for, as well as the best methods of approach, will help grant writers be more successful, increasing their rates of acceptance.

To facilitate this purpose, this report will cover some of the basic background information about rhetoric, including some of Aristotle's theories, and theories of other expert rhetoricians. The report will then explore the differences between scientific and business audiences, how they should be approached, and how they are affected by the current economic downturn. Connections will be made between rhetorical theories and grant proposal approaches. Conclusions will be drawn about the value of rhetorical expertise in the field of grant writing.

The background information in this report was found in books and articles about rhetoric and other related topics, and books about grant writing. This information was viewed according to how it applies to grant writing.

Background on Rhetorical Theories

Like many genres of professional writing, grant writing can be difficult. Once a funding opportunity is chosen, it can be hard to choose the best approach for trying to win the award. A solid knowledge of rhetoric can help provide direction. One theorist shares an insight on the practical application of rhetoric:

> Because rhetoric is the "faculty of finding, in any subject, all the available means of persuasion," [in theory,] the rhetorician is "a sort of diagnostician, and leaves it to others to be the practitioners; the rhetorician is the strategist of persuasion, and other men execute his plans and do the fighting. In practice, however, and in any study of the subject, this distinction can hardly be maintained, since the person who determines the available means of persuasion…must also be, in most cases, the one to apply those means in persuasive speech and writing" (Kuypers, 75).

In practice, expert rhetoricians are often the right people to apply rhetorical models. The reverse of this concept is true, too. Those who use rhetoric (such as grant writers) cannot simply follow the instructions for execution left by the "diagnosticians." They should become expert rhetoricians themselves. They should understand rhetorical theory well enough to apply it and to come up with their own theories for application. The following information provides a good background for writers who want to take a rhetorical viewpoint on grant writing.

Aristotle and His Foundational Theories

One of the earliest rhetoricians was Aristotle. He

developed some of the first theories on how to intelligently approach an audience when the purpose is to convince its members to view your agenda favorably. He encourages aspiring rhetoricians to consider three different concepts for appealing to an audience. These concepts are *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* ("Rhetoric").

Modern writers could refer to *ethos* as establishing credibility. When attempting to establish *ethos*, a writer tries to convince the reader that he or she is a good person, a knowledgeable expert, and someone to be trusted. For instance, if a grant proposal writer wants to appeal to *ethos*, he or she should do enough background research to know what he or she is talking about. The writer should research the grantor organization and its goals. He or she should also understand the technical aspects of the proposed project well enough to write intelligently about it. Doing background research shows the grantor organization that the proposal writer cares about its goals, that the applicant knows enough about the topic to help reach those goals, and that the applicant is worth the organization's attention. Establishing *ethos* is the step that opens the door; once it is instituted, the judges will be open to reading about the proposed project.

Aristotle's *pathos* is a direct appeal to emotion. One good example of an appeal to *pathos* is the series of television commercials asking people to sponsor a child in a third-world country. The dialogue begs the viewer to provide money for basic needs such as food, clean water, and rudimentary education. At the same time, videos of filthy but adorable children are shown. Viewers feel bad and want to help. This same appeal is mentioned regularly in books about grant writing. In fact, *Grant Writing for Dummies* has a chapter called "Conveying a Hopeless Situation and a Need for Funds." The introduction says, "You must get your point across in the most effective, attention-drawing, memorable way…by writing from your heart (where your emotional center lies) and by telling the story of how bad things really are for your target population" (Browning, 183). Appealing to emotion is a strong tactic, when it is supported by other tactics.

In fact, the best way to support an emotional

appeal is with Aristotle's *logos. Logos* is the logical argument. It shows the reader why the writer's idea makes the most sense. Good grant writers also employ *logos* extensively, outlining rational project plans, sound budgets, and valuable end project deliverables. A well-executed appeal to *logos* shows the grantor that the project is well-though-out and likely to work smoothly.

Knowing how to effectively combine these three concepts is valuable to anyone taking a rhetorical approach to grant writing. If a writer does not take the time to establish *ethos*, it is unlikely that the judges will take his or her proposal seriously. Once *ethos* is established, *pathos* and *logos* provide a persuasive combination as powerful as possible. If these three concepts are used, and the project is appropriate for the grant, the likelihood of success is high.

Aristotle also placed rhetorical strategies into three different applications: deliberative, epideictic, and forensic. These three applications are respectively appropriate for different types of venues. ("Rhetoric").

The purpose of deliberative rhetoric is to convince the audience of what is good, right, or best for society by explaining truths in a logical manner. He applied this to the political arena of his day. This kind of rhetoric, which seems to highlight *logos* as the most essential component, could be applied to grant writing. Many projects for which grant funds are requested are for the benefit of society. For instance, sometimes funds are requested for scientific research into possible cures for cancer. If a grant writer applies a deliberative method to this topic, he or she will show the judges why this is really the best, most beneficial choice for the award.

Epideictic rhetoric is "to be used to praise or blame" ("Epideictic"). Often used during ceremonies in Aristotle's day, this type of rhetoric either points out the virtue, nobility, and praiseworthiness, or points out the vice, shame, and dishonor of an idea or event. Because these concepts are intangible and have strong emotional connotations, this kind of rhetoric seems to focus the most on *pathos*. It can also apply to grant writing. A problem can be pointed out by using the negative half of epideictic rhetoric, and the solution

can be outlined using the positive half.

The third type of rhetoric, forensic, was applied to courts of law in Aristotle's time. Evidence was examined to determine details about a crime, which would then be presented to help resolve a case and assign a judgment. Aristotle felt that this genre of rhetoric was not appropriate for many situations, because it was possible to draw a variety of unproven conclusions from a piece of evidence, and lawyers could twist the facts to their advantage. In a way, this type of rhetoric could be applied to grant writing, but not to the benefit of the writer. It is possible to twist facts that could be somewhat open to interpretation to make a grant proposal sound better. It may also be possible to try to force-fit a proposal to a funding opportunity to which it is not perfectly suited. The problem with this is that award judges will probably be able to tell that the proposal is a stretch, so they will be less likely to award funding. It seems that forensics may be best left to courts of law, where proven facts may not be available, so the next best thing (an educated guess) will have to do.

A foundational education in Aristotle's rhetorical theories would be greatly beneficial to any grant writer. A writer may have a natural inclination to use an instinct-driven version one of these tactics; however, understanding them and using them on purpose will create more powerful, convincing writing for applications.

Other Relevant Theories
Campbell

More useful background information on rhetoric has been provided by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, in her article entitled, "The Ontological Foundations of Rhetorical Theory." This article explores different ideas on why people are affected by rhetoric. It would be useful for a grant writer to know why rhetoric works, rather than just how to apply it. This understanding would help the writer utilize rhetorical tactics with almost artistic precision.

In her article, Campbell describes three theories as to why rhetoric works. They are explained as follows: "Traditional theory explains than man is rhetorical because he is rational; behavioristic theory explains that he is rhetorical because he has certain basic, unlearned drives; theories of symbolic behavior explain that he is rhetorical because he is the symbol-using or signifying animal" (Campbell, 97). These theories work together to a certain level with some of Aristotle's thoughts, and they make sense when thinking of grant writing.

Traditional theory states that rhetoric is effective because people can think sensibly and follow a train of logic. A person gets satisfaction from being able to decode another person's message and see it in his or her own mind. This theory seems to work well with Aristotle's appeal to *logos*, and his deliberative rhetoric. Campbell says of traditional theory, "Consequently, 'true' or 'genuine' rhetoric becomes the art by which men are induced to act in obedience to reason in contrast to 'false' or 'sophistic' rhetoric which uses any and all means to produce acquiescence" (Campbell, 98). It is important to be aware of this theory when writing grant applications. The judges are rational beings. If a writer concentrates on providing as much detail on the truth and logic of the project as possible, it is more likely that the judges will see it as true and logical.

Behavioristic theory says that people are affected by rhetoric because they have natural, inborn drives and desires, which they strive to fulfill. This fits well with Aristotle's *pathos* and epideictic rhetoric. For example, many people possess an instinct to protect children. A grant writer may make an emotional appeal in a proposal to buy much-needed security equipment at an under-funded inner-city daycare. This proposal may have a stronger effect on some judges than a proposal for lab equipment for a non-profit research institution. It is one of many aspects to consider when defining the audience for which a grant application is being written.

Of the three theories, symbolic theory seems to be the most complete, and the most applicable to grant writing. It states that people are affected by rhetoric because they are capable of interacting with the information presented. Campbell explains

that in symbolic theory , "…the receiver is an active contributor to the persuasive process, who detects, identifies, and interprets the symbolic stimuli which are the message, participating in and creating its meanings which, in turn, become the most significant element in his future behavior" (Campbell, 103). It makes sense that grant proposal judges will interact with rhetoric this way. They are highly intelligent people and experts in their fields. They are used to (and can recognize) all the different tactics used by proposal writers. Because of this theory, grant writers should approach communicate with the judges under the assumption that the judges will analyze not only the logistical information and the emotional appeal, but also the tactics. They should also be aware that judges will apply their own meanings or conclusions to the information they receive. A grant proposal should be an interaction with the judge, not an attempt to manipulate him or her like a puppet.

Being aware of these theories on why rhetoric works is useful to grant writers. It will help them better understand the minds of the judges. This will allow them to choose more intelligently how to approach their audiences.

Toulmin

Another modern rhetorician is Stephen Toulmin. He has established a model for presenting an argument that has become canonical in this field. The model divides an argument into six essential components ("Stephen Toulmin"). Relating his model to grant writing can help the writer understand the place and importance of each part of the application.

The first component is a claim. This most basic part of an argument states the conclusion that must be supported with the other components of the argument. In grant writing, the claim would be the summary of the project goals and how it fits the funding opportunity.

After a claim is made, it must be supported with evidence. Evidence for the claim of a grant proposal could be the description of the plan and how it will achieve the project's goals. A good plan shows grantors

how the claim is valid—how it will help them achieve the purpose for which grant money is set aside.

The third component of an argument, the warrant, helps bridge any gap between the claim and the evidence. If it is not clear from a description of the plans how a project will accomplish the purposes of a funding opportunity, more information can be shared to explain how the plans and final purpose are related. These first three components make up the most basic argument and are always needed. The last three are not always needed for every type of argument, so they can be considered optional.

The first optional component is the backing, which could also be called credentials. The backing could come in many forms for grant writing. The principle investigator's CV could be backing, because it shows that he or she knows the field of study. A letter of support could also be backing, because it shows that an outside expert shows faith in the plan and intents to provide his or her help during the course of the project. Although this component is considered optional in the argument model, it could be considered very important in a grant application. The examples of backing are usually optional in a grant application, but they give so much of an advantage that writers should probably consider them necessary whenever they apply.

The last two optional components may not always fit for grant writing. They are the rebuttal and the qualifier. The rebuttal often uses the word "unless," as in, "This claim is true unless…." In a grant proposal, this would highlight instances in which the project plan would not work. It may sometimes be useful to utilize this component, showing that consideration has been given to potential problems, and then explaining a plan for overcoming those problems. However, the rebuttal should only be used if the plan for overcoming problem is strong. The writer needs to be cautious about making the plan proposal sound too unstable. The qualifier presents a similar problem, because it shows that an argument only works in certain circumstances. It may be best to leave this out of a grant application, since the goal is to make the project look as viable as possible.

Whether or not the optional components of Toulmin's argument model are used, it is helpful to consider a grant application an argument, and to keep Toulmin's components in mind. It provides a more solid strategy for presenting the project in the best way.

Conclusive Ideals for Grant Writing

The rhetorical concepts of Aristotle, Campbell, and Toulmin provide just a small amount of background information on the art of persuasive argument, but they offer plenty of useful information for grant writers. Considering this information, there are a few things grant writers should keep in mind.

First, it is of vital importance to know the audience. Each rhetorical tactic requires a thorough understanding of the people who will be reading the grant application. Writers should take a sufficient amount of time to understand not only the stated information about the audience from the program announcement, but also any other information he or she can find from indirect sources, such as the organizations website or previous applicants.

Second, it is to the writer's advantage to be as honest as possible. Aristotle's theories show that it would not help a writer to twist the facts to try to obtain a grant. It would be most useful to carefully select a grant that fits the project, and then use plenty of honest, straightforward evidence to show the judges why the project is the most logical, emotionally satisfying choice for the award. If a client comes to a grant writer with a funding opportunity that would be a real stretch, it is the responsibility of the writer to advise the client that it might be best to choose a different approach.

Third, grant writers should not consider the judges people to be manipulated, but should consider them intelligent experts who will interact with the information presented to them. Writers should realize that judges will see writing tactics and assign their own intelligent interpretations to the proposal. Of course,

proposals should be written in the most convincing way, utilizing *ethos*, *pathos,* and *logos*; however, the writer should understand that the reader will not always sit back and take everything the proposal tells him or her as absolute fact.

Finally, a grant writer should use this information to recognize which contracts to turn down. Occasionally, a client may insist on applying for a grant for which their project is ill-suited, or may want the writer to include information that is not honest, or may offer some other situation that is undesirable. One article says of Egyptian rhetoric that "knowing when not to speak was essential, and very respected, rhetorical knowledge. Their approach to rhetoric was thus a balance between eloquence and wise silence" ("Rhetoric"). Grant writers would benefit from recognizing when "wise silence" is the best choice.

These ideals will give a grant writer a solid foundation for his or her work. They can be applied to any funding opportunity, whether it is for a business audience, a scientific audience, or any other person or group of people.

Approaching a Business Audience

Almost all funding opportunities can be placed into one of two categories: federal and foundational. Foundational opportunities come from organizations related to wealthy philanthropists or successful corporations. Either way, foundations are run like businesses, so judges are most often part of the business community. Understanding the characteristics of this audience can help grant writers as they apply rhetorical strategies to writing an application.

General Characteristics of This Audience
Motivation

One major motivating factor for members of this audience is the desire to provide tax deductions for their parent organizations. Wealthy individuals and

families, as well as lucrative corporations, are required to pay quite a lot in taxes. Tax laws, which allow certain charitable contributions to be tax-deductible for the givers, have been set in place, to the benefit of most involved parties. Many foundations have been organized for the specific purpose of giving money to worthy causes and claiming tax deductions.

In order for a foundation to claim these deductions, they must give to an organization that has a special standing with the IRS. This standing is called 501 (c) (3) charitable status. Organizations have to meet certain criteria to earn this status, including being non-profit, refraining from lobbying activities, and applying with the right paperwork. If a client is interested in applying for a foundational grant, it is important for the grant writer to see if the foundation requires its applicants to have this status, because this is almost always the case. If it is a requirement, the grant writer should check to make sure that the client has this status, and the letter to prove it. (A copy of this letter is often a part of the application package.) These organizations give generously, but if they can get a tax deduction from it, they usually will. Most of the time, applicants without 501 (c) (3) status will not even be considered.

Another motivating factor for this audience is publicity. Most foundation administrators choose which kind of good cause they want to support based on how they want the public to view the organization. A principle investigator may have a noble, promising plan for discovering a cure for aids, but if he or she applies for a foundation that supports only renewable energy projects, he or she will not succeed. There is a staggering number of foundational funding opportunities out there; if a grant seeker recognizes foundations' publicity strategies and looks carefully, he or she can usually find an opportunity that is well-suited to the project.

Education

Most business audience members are well educated. Almost all have at least bachelor's degrees, many have master's degrees, and some even hold doctorates.

Writers should assume that these judges are intelligent. Thorough explanations of technical programs should be provided, but writers should never "talk down" to this audience, or over-explain a concept.

In addition to formal education, many of these audience members have learned a lot about the field or fields the foundation supports. As mentioned before, some foundations are fairly specific as to which kinds of projects they fund. Panel members can be expected to have had at least a basic understanding of the topic in question. Also, a judge who has worked with an organization for a long time has probably read many technical texts that relate to the organization's field of choice.

Professional Background

Members of grant judging panels generally have a strong professional background. Judges must have years of extensive experience to guide them to select the best awardees. Because of this, most members of the business audience have held impressive corporate positions. Many even have experience starting and leading their own companies.

How to Apply Rhetorical Theories

Considering the backgrounds of these audience members, it would benefit grant writers to reflect on the symbolic theory on why rhetoric works, as presented by Campbell. The education and professional background of this type of judges prepares them well to interact dynamically with a proposal text. They will not be easily manipulated, but will draw their own understandings from the information provided.

In this situation, Aristotle's *ethos, logos,* and *pathos* can and should be used, but they should not be considered tools for sly manipulation. Instead, they should be used for a guileless presentation of the project, presented in the best light possible. Using these tools as a way to interact with the reader will produce the best results.

Overcoming Effects of a Poor Economy
In an article written during the smaller economic

downturn of the nineties, Jeffrey Mervis explained some of the ways funding was re-prioritized at that time. He says that fund were cut for new buildings and other major facilities, while the money that was still available was used on projects that involved collaborations and involvement with students were given greater priority (Mervis, 329). This makes sense, because cooperation among organizations and training for students are two of the most beneficial effects of funded projects. In this economy, then, grant writers should emphasize any portion of the project that involves collaboration or students, unless the specific funding opportunity cannot logically include these aspects. It would not hurt to express this concept to the principle investigator, so he or she and the writer can work together to make sure the project accurately includes these advantages.

Approaching a Scientific Audience

Although there are all kinds of federal funding opportunities, many of them are created for scientific research. It is safe to say that a sound understanding of a scientific audience would be beneficial to a grant writer. There are some similarities between a business audience and a scientific audience, but there are also many differences.

General Characteristics of this Audience
Motivation

Audience members of this group are motivated by innovative advances, but these advances must be well-founded. Scientists are used to following proven systems for running experiments, tracking data, and analyzing results. Although new and exciting ideas are highly motivating for this group, they will need to be assured that the ideas are based on reliable methods.

Education

Scientific audience members are usually seasoned experts in their respective fields. Scientists today stand on the shoulders of many giants, so to speak. There is a great amount of established scientific information out there, and most modern scientists have to spend years studying it to provide a solid foundation for their work. As a result, almost all professional scientists hold doctorate degrees. They are used to technical jargon and math. When explaining the technical aspect of a project, grant writers should be very careful not to oversimplify concepts.

Professional Background

Like the business audience, most members of scientific grant judging panels have quite a bit of experience in their fields. Experience is even more important for judging this type of grant, because of the technically difficult nature of scientific research projects. The judges must have enough experience to recognize viable proposals, and to value greatly innovative ideas.

Most members of this audience will have completed many of their own grant-funded research projects. Nearly all will have published academic papers and established credibility among their peers.

How to Apply Rhetorical Theories

Not surprisingly, the symbolic theory of understanding rhetoric applies to this audience, too. In fact, with the higher level of education and contact with the academic world, members of this audience may generally be even more likely to interact mentally with a proposal than business audience members.

Again, *ethos, logos*, and *pathos* should be utilized when writing for this audience. It is always best to present a project as well as possible. However, writers should consider the readers to be mentally agile, and should avoid using these three tools dishonestly.

Overcoming Effects of a Poor Economy

The same concept that applies to the business audience applies to the scientific audience. In times of economic stress, projects for building facilities or buying equipment may be pushed to the side, so projects

that foster collaboration and real-world research experience for students can be given higher priority. Writers should emphasize the aspects of the project that involves collaboration or students, if that is part of the requirement for the specific grant. Knowing the right part to emphasize, with the economy in mind, can help give the application an edge.

Conclusions

Surprisingly, writing for a business audience and writing for a scientific audience should not be that different. Members of both are well-educated and experienced enough to take information from a proposal and assign their own meanings and value to it. Although other theories concerning the reasons people are affected by rhetoric may apply to some groups, judges of grant applications can generally be considered part of the symbolic group.

Grant writers should keep this in mind. Although they should command respect by using writing tactics to create *ethos*, they should consider it a mutual respect between writer and reader. They should show that respect in the words they choose. Although writers should utilize *logos* to express the sound logic within the proposed plan, they should not become patronizing; they should write in a way that shows trust in the reader's intelligence. Also, they should be certain to be complete in their line of logic; they should think of objections the reader may pose, and try to address them. Although writers should employ the power of *pathos* in an attempt to involve the reader emotionally, they should never imagine that the reader will not know exactly what they are doing. Because of that awareness, writers should employ pathos in a controlled, forthright way.

Over the centuries, rhetoricians have established many useful theories on the best ways to persuasively express ideas to other people. They apply to grant writing as much as to any other field of discourse. Understanding them will help the professional grant writer become more competitive as they develop their abilities to find the right words.

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