

## The Importance of Pathos in Persuasive Appeals

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From the point of view of a scholar of persuasion, the role of pathos is of prime importance. Admittedly, there are many instances throughout the history of mankind where individuals have used emotional appeals for objectionable purposes, but the thing misused is not itself to be condemned. As in many other human transactions, efforts at persuasion can be honest—or dishonest. In modern society, for instance, fund raising has become a growth industry, and in some cases unscrupulous solicitors have used pathos in their appeals to persuade naive people to part with their worldly goods. But the fact that opportunists use pathos in their unworthy appeals does not diminish its use as a valuable component in the art of persuasion.

In addressing the issue of pathos in persuasion, Woodrow Wilson pointed out a fundamental truth about the significant role of emotions—and added a word of caution. “We speak of this as an age in which the mind is monarch,” he wrote, “but I take it for granted that, if this is true, mind is one of those modern monarchs who reign but do not govern. As a matter of fact, the world is governed in every generation by a great House of Commons made up of the passions; and we can only be careful to see to it that the handsome passions are in the majority.”

This statement by Woodrow Wilson can be used to arouse the interest of students and to create discussion when considering the role that emotions play in the persuasive process. Students should recognize that emotional appeals are sometimes used for objectionable purposes, but that this use does not diminish its function as a valuable persuasive tool. Indeed, most persuasive messages—in particular, solicitation messages—are more likely to achieve their goal if the receiver’s emotions are aroused.

Consider, for example, the following letter, one of millions sent each year to solicit funds. Mailed to members of an alumni association, it relies heavily on pathos to get the reader’s mind running in the direction of the action to be taken.

Have you ever tried to envision how different your life might have been had you not attended The University of —?

Think for a moment about the life-long friendships you made . . . the career opportunities that came your way . . . and putting together the mental pieces of a nostalgic time is an interesting exercise in recall for each of us in our own way.

As beneficiaries of these invaluable experiences, we now have an obligation—working for those who are yet to come after us, insuring that they have the same opportunity for quality education at The University of — as we did.

You can do your part by completing the enclosed membership application form along with your check. Send it to us in the envelope we’ve provided, today.

We’ll keep you in touch with the University throughout your membership year as you receive the award-winning ALUMNI NEWS.

To fully appreciate the impact that pathos has in setting the tone of a message, consider the next letter which is lacking in pathos. It, too, was sent to members of an alumni association.

I am sure you are wondering why the University of —, a publicly assisted university, is seeking private financial support.

First, the state funding, which accounts for about fifty percent of the University’s income, enables the University to carry out its mission of basic education, research and extension. Too often, however, the funds are not sufficient to finance new and challenging courses of study, library collections, research, cultural programs, student assistance, and other priority needs.

Please join the — Alumni Association by sending your gift of support today! Be as generous as you can be! We as individuals and the University of — will benefit from your investment.

Clearly, it is the former letter that arouses the emotions of the receiver. And, if the emotions aroused are pleased and friendly, as they are likely to be, then the receiver may be inclined to make a generous contribution.

To illustrate this idea, teachers can transfer letters such as these to transparencies and ask students to comment on the extent to which pathos has been used by the writer, and the effect that this may have on the receiver. In the unlikely event that a teacher is not on a solicitor’s mailing list, a collection of “letters to the Editor” which appear in most newspapers and magazines can be used. For example, the writer of the following letter uses pathos to good advantage in his appeal to gain acceptance of an idea.

I am a mature, responsible, middle-aged resident of —, and yet twice, in less than three months, I have almost killed another human being with a lethal weapon.

Both times my near-victims have been jogging along narrow, winding, unlit streets well after nightfall, dressed from head to foot in dark clothing. When, as it happened to me, an oncoming car’s headlights are glaring in one’s eyes, it is impossible to see someone dressed in this fashion jogging along the roadside after dark.

Surely these joggers have families—parents, mates or children who would be devastated to learn they have been killed or rendered helpless, mindless vegetables by the impact of a car going 35 mph. If not for themselves, then for their loved ones, they could at least invest the few dollars necessary for a white sweat shirt, or better yet, a reflecting vest.

If any joggers read this and recognize themselves, please invest in light-colored or reflective clothing. You will save yourself, your loved ones, and an innocent stranger a lot of grief.

Even though the writer in this instance used “fear appeal” in his effort to persuade, it is one of the “handsome passions” that he has attempted to motivate. Moreover, he has used pathos in getting the reader’s attention and in offering evidence as to why his point of view should be adopted.

In addition to analyzing the use of pathos in selected persuasive letters, the human relations aspect of each letter can be discussed—that is, if the letter will be likely to accomplish its purpose, or if it will alienate the very people the writer is trying to reach. Furthermore, it is important for students to recognize that emotional appeals should be blended with logical ones so that the two reinforce one another, and that some settings justify a level of emotional appeal that other settings may not permit.

By relying mainly on an inductive approach in classroom discussions, students can arrive at their own generalizations, and this may help them develop constructive attitudes toward the roles they can have in shaping their business and personal environments.

The process of persuasion is integral to much of our communication for it is a form of communication in which every individual who ventures forth into the company of others must participate. Accordingly, students should learn that the use of pathos in persuasive messages is not only necessary for those persons specializing in promotional activities, but requisite for all who produce and use persuasion in daily life. Moreover, they need to understand that it is not necessary to substitute emotion for reason—both can be employed in an ethical manner. In any event, when the techniques of persuasion are considered in the classroom, emphasis should be placed on the persuasive process as a whole, with pathos being one part of it.

## Quotations That Liven a Business Communication Course

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For a number of years now I have been urging my students to keep a card file of the books they read. On 3 x 5 cards there is room for author’s name, book title, date of completing the reading, and a quotation or two which means something to the reader. Over the years, one collects quite a few cards, and it’s fascinating to skim through them from time to time and revive memories of enjoyable hours between the pages. As a rule, we don’t finish reading books we find indigestible. A card file is therefore a source of genuine pleasure and, in my case, a source of sometimes apt quotations for livening a session on business communication. The quotations may spark a degree of interest in the sources quoted and, if nothing else, they give the student a bit of insight to the instructor’s world.

After all, what makes a course in business communication something more than a textbook and a number of exercises in writing and speaking is the perspective of the instructor—a perspective shaped as much by reading as by consulting, researching, and teaching. I have long since given up hope that more than one or two of the 30 to 40 young people filling the chairs in my classroom will recognize a Biblical allusion. The empty stares which greet a reference to “the patience of Job” give me pause. But I nonetheless persist in drawing on my bank of quotations, Biblical or extra-Biblical as the situation may require, and I

supply an explanatory note when the empty stares prove me to be too sanguine. You see, I keep hoping against hope that the love of liberal learning—perhaps I should say *liberating* learning—is still strong enough in a few students to warrant catering to *them*, regardless of the rank and file.

### QUOTATIONS FAIRLY SERIOUS

#### On the Business of Learning

“A university anywhere can aim no higher than to be as British as possible for the sake of the undergraduates, as German as possible for the sake of the graduates and the research personnel, as American as possible for the sake of the public at large—and as confused as possible for the sake of the preservation of the whole uneasy balance.

—Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University*

“A classic is a book that is contemporary in every age.”

—Robert Maynard Hutchins,  
*The Higher Learning in America*

“The American professor deals with his students according to his lights. It is his business to chase them along over a prescribed ground at a prescribed pace like a flock of