

Rhetorical language and Debating Techniques

Your lecturer might ask you to run a debate for the purpose of assessment. What does this mean? A debate is an oral exercise held in class where a specific claim/statement is considered and discussed. In a formal debate two teams are elected from the student group to argue for or against the proposition (“For” and “Against” teams typically consist of three speakers on each side). A Chairperson is elected to conduct the debate. A debate is conducted under strict rules and each speaker for each team has a specific job to do (for further details see the **Formal Debating** helpsheet).

Uniquely, in formal debating **rhetorical language** and **debating techniques** are used. These are **never** used in other academic tasks (*especially* writing tasks). They can be used in journalism and fiction—but these are rarely undertaken at university.

Rhetorical language

- **Alliteration:** the recurrence of consonant sounds. This is often used for effect:
 - ‘Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation’ (A. Lincoln)
- **Allusion:** a reference to an event, literary work or person:
 - *Who does he think he is? Mohammed Ali?; it’s a catch-22; the climategate crisis; 15 minutes of fame.*
- **Amplification** (or tripling): repeats a word or expression for emphasis (three times is very effective in speeches):
 - *We cannot, should not, will not, let people smugglers ply their terrible trade.*
 - *The time for freedom, the time for justice, the time for equality, is now.*
 - *.... a good and decent man, who saw wrong and tried to right it, saw suffering and tried to heal it, saw war and tried to stop it* (E. Kennedy)
- **Analogy:** Two different things that have (purportedly) similar characteristics, often for the purposes of insult:
 - *Malcolm Turnbull ... fundamentally a cherry on top of a compost heap* (P. Keating)
- **Anaphora** - repeats a word or phrase in successive phrases:
 - *Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President.* (LBJ)
- **Antanagoge:** places a criticism and compliment together to lessen the impact, but sometimes to enhance the effectiveness of the criticism:
 - *Kim Beasley is a terrific opposition leader, but he doesn’t have the ticker to be PM’*
 - *The house is not small, it’s compact—you have less to clean.*
- **Antimetabole** - repeats words or phrases, often in reverse order:
 - *‘And so my fellow Americans: Ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country’.* (J. F. Kennedy)
- **Antiphrasis:** use of a word or phrase with an opposite meaning for purposes of sarcasm or irony:
 - *Ladies and Gentlemen, this giant of the stage and screen, will now speak to you.*
- **Antithesis:** makes a connection between two things:
 - *‘That’s one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind’* (Neil Armstrong)
- **Appositive:** places a noun or phrase next to another noun for descriptive purposes:
 - *‘Bob Dylan, a genius, the greatest living songwriter in the second half of the 20th century’.*
- **Enumeratio:** makes a point with details (can be used with metaphor):
 - *‘[W]hen we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city’* (M. L. King)
- **Epanalepsis:** repeats something from the beginning of a sentence at the end:
 - *Too blind to see it / Too blind to see what you were doing* (K. Sims)
- **Epithet:** using an adjective or adjective phrase to describe: *overwhelming evidence, outstanding reviews.*
- **Epizeuxis:** repeats one word or a phrase for emphasis:
 - *yes we can ... yes we can ... yes we can* (B. Obama)
 - *Some men see things as they are and say why. I dream things that never were and say why not* (RFK)
- **Hyperbole:** an exaggeration:
 - *My firm belief is that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself* (F. D. Roosevelt)



- **Litotes** (the “kissing cousin” of understatement, and the antonym of hyperbole): makes an understatement by denying the opposite of a word that may have been used:
 - *He did no small thing by volunteering [here one puts emphasis by denying it being ‘small’]*
- **Metanoia**: corrects or qualifies a statement by weakening or strengthening it:
 - *It is the people’s will. I am their leader; I must follow them* (J. Hacker in *Yes, Minister*)
- **Metaphor**: an often subtle comparison of two unlike things (often used in poetry, often used for effect):
 - *‘Costello is all tip and no iceberg’* (P. Keating)
- **Metonymy**: a metaphor where a word is used to substitute or stand for something else:
 - *The pen is mightier than the sword.* (E. B. Lytton) [Here “pen” stands for written word; “sword” for aggression]
- **Onomatopoeia**: words that imitate the sound they describe: “BANG!”, “THUD!”
- **Oxymoron**: a two word paradox used for effect – *fun run; great depression; clearly confused; deafening silence.*
- **Parallelism**: uses words or phrases with a similar structure for effect allowing a message to be deduced:
 - *The truth has legs and ran away; the lie has no legs and must stay.* (Yiddish proverb)
- **Simile** - compares one object to another (similar to metaphor but explicitly uses the words “like” and “as”):
 - *He smokes like a chimney; she is as sweet as honey.*
 - *He’s like a bull in a China shop.*
 - *His performance is like being flogged with a warm lettuce* (P. Keating)
- **Understatement**: makes an idea less important than it really is, often to draw attention to the absurdity of something:
 - *Newton was a pretty good physicist.*
- **Invective**: Deliberately insulting/abusive language that is not welcome in formal debating, but it is rhetorically effective! For examples see Christopher Hitchens (famous for the “Hitchslap”) and ‘The Paul Keating’s Insults’.

From: <http://examples.yourdictionary.com/examples-of-rhetorical-devices.html#rHKIZh690y8YIzYj.99>

Debating techniques

There are many techniques that can be used in addition to rhetorical language:

- **Rhetorical questions**: Asking a question and then answering it yourself for effect:
 - *So what do the opposition say about this? The truth is, they have nothing to say...*
 - *What does the data show? Well, as you can see there has been a dramatic increase in...*
- **Tone of voice**: A good speaker will try to be colourful in the delivery of their presentation. Tone of voice consists of pauses, emphasis, voice modulation, rate of speech (see below).
- **Emotion**: A good speaker will play upon the emotions of the audience to provoke outrage, fear, amusement or hesitation. Think of how you can do this with your presentations. Using stories, vivid language, captivating examples, dramatic statistics, will help. Weaving some first person narrative into your speech helps too: “I asked people and this is what they told me: Thomas, for example, said: ...”
- **Audibility**: A good speaker will use clear diction and be sufficiently loud and clear that everyone in a crowded room can hear them without the use of artificial volume enhancers (microphones or megaphones). This takes practise.
- **Voice modulation**: Great speakers of the past varied their speech patterns and raised and lowered their pitch. Hitler, for example, went from being quiet to almost screaming with rage within minutes.
- **Rate of speech**: Picking up the speed of your delivery is critical to a good speech. Quickly going through a lot of similar examples gives the impression that evidence for something is overwhelming. Pausing to let complex arguments sink in is vital. It helps to promote excitement: ‘Firstly (pause) and most importantly (pause)...’
Important: do not race nervously through a speech. The pace and rate of speech has to be carefully monitored.
- **Gesture**: A good speaker will gesture regularly. The experts in public speaking suggest gesturing twice in every sentence when practising a speech so that these movements seem natural in performance. Do not point at the audience aggressively though. Do not put your hands in your pockets either!
- **Body language/posture**: Pointing your torso in different directions promotes audience engagement. So does a gentle walking around, and walking closer to the audience. Never remain rigid and unmoving.



- Eye contact: Find three different places in the audience that are far apart and range your eyes between them when speaking. It is important you never stare at individual people, but you must look at the audience frequently or they will lose interest.
- *Conviction*: This is hard to define. It means that you must present ideas *as though you really believe them*.