

1.2. The Ethical Appeal (Ethos)

An ethical appeal establishes a writer's credibility. It's hard to convince someone to believe in you or in an issue you believe in if your credibility is in question. Therefore, writers and speakers often work hard to develop *ethos*, an ethical appeal, as a conscious strategy to show that they are knowledgeable and reasonable. In the process of developing a strong ethical appeal, they create a persona which is trustworthy and, consequently, worth listening to on important issues. Credibility is established through

- (1) Reasonable Tone
- (2) Common Ground
- (3) Knowledge of Subject Matter
- (4) Outside Authority

Reasonable Tone: As we are all aware, people who rant and rave over an issue or promise too much do not elicit our trust. We dislike their attitude and question their integrity. Although the emotional attitude of the writer may shift, blowing hot or cold during an argument, the relationship between the writer and the subject matter should not include words and examples that cross some undefined but understood line beyond which the writer is no longer thought creditable. With good reason, audiences tend to be leery of too many highly charged words and extreme examples.

For example, calling someone who defiles a public trust a "rapist," goes beyond what seems reasonable. Similarly, to call a highly respected individual a "fool," tends to make thoughtful people wonder who the fool really is. Likewise, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Queen Gertrude states, "The lady doth protest too much, me thinks." In this case, the promises made by the lady in question are thought to be beyond what is possible and therefore without credibility.

Questions of reasonableness may be aimed at a very strong emotional appeal where highly charged negative and positive words, although clever and even fun, can undermine the speaker's credibility. Just as the sensitive Queen Gertrude in *Hamlet* knows when there is too much, the reader and writer of appeals must carefully respect the invisible, but ever present, line of what is or is not acceptable and/or believable.

Common Ground: A very effective way to gain sympathy is to accommodate an audience or an opponent. Although most writers attempt to find areas where they and an audience agree, for example, the value of freedom of speech or of our right to protect home and property, the writer who uses credibility as a strategy to convince will often strive to find agreement with its opposition. When a writer finds a way to acknowledge some aspect of the opposition's stance or values as acceptable, it might also be referred to as a concession or an accommodation because one side concedes something to or accommodates the opposition.

For example, in an argument on how to fund Social Security, both Democrats and Republicans would agree that the elderly should have a source of income after they retire. Similarly, an advocate of euthanasia (assisted suicide of the terminally ill) may seek to establish common ground with the Catholic Church, which has taken a firm stand against mercy killings, by opposing suicide by healthy individuals.

It should be pointed out that in most arguments, common ground is possible and relatively easy to grant. Although the conclusions of an opponent may be impossible to agree with, one or more of the facts, assumptions, or reasons used to support an argument may be.

Conversely, in some issues, such as racism or sexism, common ground may be impossible to grant; consequently, although important, the presence or absence of common ground will not determine solely the success or failure of an ethical appeal.

However, if appropriate, establishing common ground with the opposition can greatly enhance credibility. The speaker willing to grant it is perceived by an audience to be much more reasonable than someone who does not.

Knowledge of Subject Matter: The bedrock upon which most ethical appeals stand is the writer's or speaker's knowledge of subject matter. How does one show knowledge? Many ways exist, including the use of

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| * facts | * statistics |
| * surveys | * shared beliefs |
| * examples | * general knowledge |
| * others' experiences | * our own experiences |

By showing that a subject is understood in great depth, a writer instantly gains an audience's respect. We listen to people who know what they are talking about, even if we might not agree with them, and we know that someone is knowledgeable when he or she is very specific and uses concrete language to make points. In Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail," he knows that a lot of whites will not take him seriously unless he establishes credibility; to do so, he constantly uses the specific names of individuals such as Birmingham Mayor Albert Boutwell and the Commissioner of Public safety, Eugene "Bill" Conner, citing their roles in the struggle which lead to the march and sit-in in Birmingham.

He also alludes throughout the letter to his and others' experiences, giving specific anecdotes and examples, such as a reference to Rosa Park's refusal to ride in the back of a bus in Montgomery and her words: "My feet is tired, but my soul is at rest." Such specifics persuade. Vague generalities and abstractions do not. In fact, they make us suspect the writer or speaker. We ask, "Why aren't there specifics?" "What is he hiding?" "Hasn't she done her homework?" As noted in the King essay, specific facts, experiences, history, etc., demonstrate knowledge, allowing an audience to listen closely to the nuances of an argument and believe they are reading something of value. Ironically, even if an audience is opposed to a position, it will respect the writer or speaker who has done his or her homework and knows how to use specific evidence to support points. King's essay is a case in point. It was published in every newspaper in the country.

To gain credibility, evidence, such as King gives, is crucial. Anyone can make an assertion on a given subject, but not everyone can support a claim with evidence to prove it. In courts, judges and juries determine if witnesses are creditable and if enough evidence has been shown to convict or acquit. As readers, we are in a similar position. Is the writer creditable? Does he use specific evidence to support his claims? Does she ramble on, speaking in abstractions and generalities without giving hard evidence? As writers, when attempting to establish credibility before an audience, we must give it as much hard evidence as possible so that it will judge us favorably. Our assertions must not only make sense, but be backed up by relevant, specific, sufficient evidence.

Outside Authority: In the pursuit of respect, in the development of an ethical appeal, a writer or a speaker is thought to be all the more creditable if he or she is supported by an

authority or authorities that an audience holds in the highest regard. Such authority can be classified in two major categories:

- (1) Authoritative Documents
- (2) Authoritative Experts

Documents, which people believe in, such as the U.S. Constitution and the Bible, are often referred to as an authority to help establish the credibility of a claim. For example, neo-nazi hate groups often cite the First Amendment as the legal basis for their right to say whatever they want to about minorities, non-Christians, and opposition groups. The position has more credibility because freedom of speech is guaranteed in the Constitution; since U.S. citizens believe in the Constitution as the law of the land, such arguments must be taken more seriously than if such guarantees were not in the Constitution. In another example, King's letter is in response to a letter written by eight Alabama clergymen, and although he does not quote chapter and verse, he constantly alludes to Biblical figures and their plights comparing them to his and his people's. Again, the strategy is effective. King's position gains credibility from the comparison to Biblical figures that men—and in particular his original audience, the eight white clergymen—hold in esteem.

Documents can be more humble and still carry weight. A Last Will And Testament is the authority in dividing up an estate, just as a traffic law is the authority in determining if a motorist caught driving 80 mph in a 70 mph zone should receive a ticket. Similarly, one of Shakespeare's scripts, say the tragedy of *Hamlet*, is authoritative in any dispute on the play's dialogue.

Experts, referred to in support of a claim, also give credibility. In King's classic essay, he not only references Biblical figures, laws, and Supreme Court decisions, but directly and indirectly quotes philosophers such as Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, and Reinhold Niebuhr, political extremists such as John Bunyan, Abraham Lincoln, and Thomas Jefferson, and even poets such as T.S. Eliot. The effect is extraordinary. Although these men were not speaking directly about King's situation in Birmingham, by using their ideas in support of his own, King marshals their support ideologically. They believed what he believes; therefore, the reader who believes in these figures' ideas must, logically, believe in King's ideas.

Note that a quote from an outside authority is not evidence, unless the authority is an actual witness to a specific incident. However, such testimonies shore up a claim, a contention, or an assertion by speaking about the same issue in a supportive manner. This shows that the proponent of an issue is not alone in his beliefs. Others whom we respect also believe in his or her ideas; consequently, the writer and the argument are held in higher esteem. Also note that the more specific the reference to authority, the more effective it is. General references to scholars or historians or philosophers carry little or no weight. The thoughtful reader wants to know who the authority is and what, specifically, he or she says or believes before granting any additional credibility to a claim.

To make an ethical appeal, a combination of some or all of the above categories is necessary. Again, although common ground may not be possible, an ethical appeal is effective if a reasonable tone and outside authorities support a demonstrated knowledge of subject matter. It should be noted that before all but a highly supportive audience, an ethical appeal is expected. In a world of fast talkers, audiences want to know who is creditable.