CONFUSION IN THE CLASSROOM:
DOES LOGOS MEAN LOGIC?

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ABSTRACT
The redefinition of *logos* as an appeal to logic is a mistaken association found all too often in the technical communication classroom. Logic inheres in all three proofs of persuasion; moreover, Aristotle used *logos* within the context of classical rhetoric to refer to the argument or speech itself. In this light, the proofs of persuasion represent the set of all logical means whereby the speaker can lead a “right-thinking” audience to infer *something*. If that *something* is an emotion, the appeal is to *pathos*; if it is about the character of the speaker, the appeal is to *ethos*; and if it is about the argument or speech itself, the appeal is to *logos*. This interpretation reinstates all three proofs of persuasion as legitimate, logical means to different proximate ends and provides a coherent definition of *logos*, consonant with Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, to the next generation of technical communicators.

INTRODUCTION
Technical communication enjoys a 2,300 year history through its roots in classical rhetoric. Many teachers of technical communication welcome this rich history because it enables them to draw from such intellectual giants as Aristotle and Cicero as they guide their students through the maze of theory and practice that constitutes their field. However, with this interdisciplinarity also comes the unfortunate tendency to distort the analytic tools of antiquity by viewing them solely through the lens of modernity. Nowhere is this tendency more destructive than in the redefinition of Aristotle’s *pistis of logos* as an appeal to logic, a mistaken association found all too often in the technical communication classroom.
The etiology of this problem is not a mystery. In their textbook on technical communication, not only do Lay et al. equate *logos* with logic, they also claim that the two terms are etymologically intertwined: “*Logos* refers to the logic of what you communicate; in fact, *logos* is the root of our modern word *logic*” [1, p. 137]. Likewise, Spurgin lists the three rhetorical dimensions of an argument as the logical appeal, the emotional appeal, and the ethical appeal [2, p. 12], while Ramage and Bean [3, p. 81] remark, “The impact of *logos* on an audience is sometimes called the argument’s *logical appeal*.” (That Spurgin mistakenly confounds *ethos* and ethics is another matter altogether.) The list could go on. But whatever the reason for equating *logos* with logic, one fact remains: it propagates a fundamentally flawed understanding of the proofs of persuasion to the next generation of technical communicators.

In this article, I briefly trace *logos* from the ninth to the fourth century B.C. to distinguish between its general meaning and its technical definition within classical rhetoric. I then define Aristotle’s *pistis* of *logos* based on his master text, *The Art of Rhetoric*. I show that the *pistis* of *logos* refers not to logic or rationality but to the argument or speech itself, which eliminates the mistaken association between *logos* and logic and reinstates all three proofs of persuasion as legitimate, logical means to different proximate ends.

UNTying THE LOGOS-LOGIC KNOT

For ninth century B.C. Greeks, *logos* meant devious or seductive speech, the last resort when plainspeaking didn’t work [4, p. 8]. This pejorative usage is especially clear in Hesiod’s account of Pandora in *Works and Days* [4, p. 8]:

In her breast, Hermes shaped
Falsehoods, seductive *logoi*, and a thievish character,
According to the plans of deep-thundering Zeus.
And now, the herald of the gods
Put a voice in her, and he named that woman
Pan-dora (“All-gifts”), because all who dwell on Olympus
Gave her a gift, and they gave her as trouble for men.

But with the transformation of Greek thought circa the sixth century B.C. came a revised definition of *logos*, one in which the new currency of the day—rationality—replaced the earlier, pejorative sense of the word. Kahn defines the *logos* of Heraclitus’s time (540-480 B.C.) as “not simply language but rational discussion, calculation, and choice: rationality as expressed in speech, in thought, and in action” [5, p. 102].

Such was the setting for Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), who, like Heraclitus, frequently used *logos* in the general sense to refer to reason or rationality [6, pp. 23, 117, 147, 293, 375]. This explains why some teachers of technical
communication have associated the *pistis* of *logos* with logic: they have confused its general meaning with its technical definition. Unfortunately, the consequences are grave: for if the *pistis* of *logos* is the sole logical appeal, then *pathos* and *ethos* must be relegated to nonlogical or illogical status. Of course, Aristotle held no such contempt for emotion or character. On the contrary, in his *Ethics* he unveils a theory of emotion founded upon logical judgment, telling us that appropriate action, for a Greek audience, includes creating emotions in accordance with a rational principle [7, pp. 101-102]. Aristotle defines anger, for example, as “a longing, accompanied by pain, for a real or apparent revenge for a real or apparent slight, affecting a man himself or one of his friends, when such a slight is undeserved” [6, p. 173]. Not only do these conditions justify anger, they necessitate it, for “the man who gets angry at the right things and with the right people, and also in the right way and at the right time and for the right length of time, is commended” [7, p. 160].

The important point here is that the *logos* of Heraclitus’s time—that is, *logos* as rationality—inheres in all three proofs of persuasion in classical rhetoric. Not only *logos* but also *ethos* and *pathos* are logical appeals, for all three involve choice, and choice, for Aristotle, involves rational thought [7, p. 117].

**DEFINING LOGOS**

If logic is common to all three proofs of persuasion, then what is unique to the *pistis* of *logos*? Based on the *Rhetoric*, the answer is clear: *Logos* refers to the argument or speech itself [6, pp. 3, 13, 17, 19, 21, 41, 89, 105, 159, 167, 169, 263, 279, 327, 343]. Aristotle supports this view in his earliest explanation of the proofs of persuasion [6, p. 17]:

> Now the proofs furnished by speech are of three kinds. The first depends upon the moral character of the speaker, the second upon putting the hearer into a certain frame of mind, the third upon the speech itself [*logos*], in so far as it proves or seems to prove.

This view is also consonant with Kennedy’s [8, p. 37] translation of *logos* in this passage as “argument itself” and Ross’s [9, p. 281] definition of *logos* as “those [means] which produce proof or its appearance by sheer force of argument.” Returning later in the *Rhetoric* to the interrelation of the proofs of persuasion, Aristotle again uses *logos* in this manner [6, p. 169]:

> it is not only necessary to consider how to make the speech itself [*logon*] demonstrative and convincing, but also that the speaker should show himself to be of a certain character and should know how to put the judge into a certain frame of mind.
Logos, then, is distinct from *pathos* and *ethos* in its concern with the subject matter at hand; in Aristotle’s words, with “establish[ing] the true or apparently true from the means of persuasion applicable to each individual subject” [6, p. 17]. Such truths are established deductively using the enthymeme or inductively using the example and always for the sake of persuasion.

In this light, the proofs of persuasion represent the set of all logical means whereby the speaker can lead a “right-thinking” audience to infer something. If that something is an emotion, the appeal is to *pathos*; if it is about the character of the speaker, the appeal is to *ethos*; and if it is about the argument or speech itself, the appeal is to *logos*. This endeavor to persuade is never accomplished by rote. Instead, just as painters approach their canvases so too must we approach our work of finding the available means of persuasion in a given case, and therein lies the art of classical rhetoric and its relevance to technical communication.

**CONCLUSION**

However pedagogically attractive the *logos*-logic association may be, it represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the proofs of persuasion, one found far too often in the technical communication classroom. As this article shows, the *pistis* of *logos* refers to the argument or speech itself. It was not logical argument that Aristotle had in mind for this term, but logical *argument*: establishing truths from the subject matter at hand. This interpretation reinstates all three proofs of persuasion as legitimate, logical means to different proximate ends and provides a coherent definition of *logos*, consonant with Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, to the next generation of technical communicators.

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**REFERENCES**


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