Pathos

DEFINITION

What is pathos? Here's a quick and simple definition:

> *Pathos*, along with *logos* and *ethos*, is one of the three "modes of persuasion" in rhetoric (the art of effective speaking or writing). *Pathos* is an argument that appeals to an audience's emotions. When a speaker tells a personal story, presents an audience with a powerful visual image, or appeals to an audience's sense of duty or purpose in order to influence listeners' emotions in favor of adopting the speaker's point of view, he or she is using *pathos* .

Some additional key details about pathos:

- You may also hear the word "pathos" used to mean "a quality that invokes sadness or pity," as in the statement, "The actor's performance was full of pathos." However, this guide focuses specifically on *the rhetorical technique of pathos* used in literature and public speaking to persuade readers and listeners through an appeal to emotion.
- The three "modes of persuasion"—*pathos*, *logos*, and *ethos*—were originally defined by Aristotle.
- In contrast to *pathos,* which appeals to the listener's emotions, *logos* appeals to the audience's sense of reason, while *ethos* appeals to the audience based on the speaker's authority.
- Although Aristotle developed the concept of *pathos* in the context of oratory and speechmaking, authors, poets, and advertisers also use *pathos* frequently.

Pathos Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce *pathos*: **pay**-thos

Pathos in Depth

Aristotle (the ancient Greek philosopher and scientist) first defined *pathos*, along with *logos* and *ethos*, in his treatise on rhetoric, *Ars Rhetorica.* Together, he referred to *pathos*, *logos*, and *ethos* as the three modes of persuasion, or sometimes simply as "the appeals." Aristotle defined *pathos* as "putting the audience in a certain frame of mind," and argued that to achieve this task a speaker must truly know and understand his or her audience. For instance, in *Ars Rhetorica,* Aristotle describes the information a speaker needs to rile up a feeling of anger in his or her audience:

> Take, for instance, the emotion of anger: here we must discover (1) what the state of mind of angry people is, (2) who the people are with whom they usually get angry, and (3) on what grounds they get angry with them. It is not enough to know one or even two of these points; unless we know all three, we shall be unable to arouse anger in any one.

Here, Aristotle articulates that it's not enough to know the dominant emotions that move one's listeners: you also need to have a deeper understanding of the listeners' values, and how these values motivate their emotional responses to specific individuals and behaviors.

Pathos vs *Logos* and *Ethos*

Pathos is often criticized as being the least substantial or legitimate of the three persuasive modest. Arguments using *logos* appeal to listeners' sense of reason through the presentation of facts and a well-structured argument. Meanwhile, arguments using *ethos* generally try to achieve credibility by relying on the speaker's credentials and reputation. Therefore, both *logos* and *ethos* may seem more concrete—in the sense of being more evidence-based—than *pathos,* which "merely" appeals to listeners' emotions. But people often forget that facts, statistics, credentials, and personal history can be easily manipulated or fabricated in order to win the confidence of an audience, while people at the same time underestimate the power and importance of being able to expertly direct the emotional current of an audience to win their allegiance or sympathy.

EXAMPLES

Pathos in Literature

Characters in literature often use *pathos* to convince one another, or themselves, of a certain viewpoint. It's important to remember that *pathos*, perhaps more than the other modes of persuasion, relies not only on the *content* of what is said, but also on the tone and expressiveness of the *delivery*. For that reason, depictions of characters using *pathos* can be dramatic and revealing of character.

Pathos in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

In this example from Chapter 16 of *Pride and Prejudice*, George Wickham describes the history of his relationship with Mr. Darcy to Elizabeth Bennet—or at least, he describes *his* version of their shared history. Wickham's goal is to endear himself to Elizabeth, turn her against Mr. Darcy, and cover up the truth. (Wickham actually squanders his inheritance from Mr. Darcy's father and, out of laziness, turns down Darcy Senior's offer help him obtain a "living" as a clergyman.)

> "The church *ought* to have been my profession...had it pleased [Mr. Darcy]... Yes—the late Mr. Darcy bequeathed me the next presentation of the best living in his gift. He was my

> godfather, and excessively attached to me. I cannot do justice to his kindness. He meant to provide for me amply, and thought he had done it; but when the living fell it was given elsewhere...There was just such an informality in the terms of the bequest as to give me no hope from law. A man of honor could not have doubted the intention, but Mr. Darcy chose to doubt it—or to treat it as a merely conditional recommendation, and to assert that I had forfeited all claim to it by extravagance, imprudence, in short any thing or nothing. Certain it is, that the living became vacant two years ago, exactly as I was of an age to hold it, and that it was given to another man; and no less certain is it, that I cannot accuse myself of having really done anything to deserve to lose it. I have a warm, unguarded temper, and I may perhaps have sometimes spoken my opinion *of* him, and *to* him, too freely. I can recall nothing worse. But the fact is, that we are very different sort of men, and that he hates me."
>
> "This is quite shocking!—he deserves to be publicly disgraced."
>
> "Some time or other he *will* be—but it shall not be by *me*. Till I can forget his father, I can never defy or expose *him*."
>
> Elizabeth honored him for such feelings, and thought him handsomer than ever as he expressed them.

Here, Wickham claims that Darcy robbed him of his intended profession out of greed, and that he, Wickham, is too virtuous to reveal Mr. Darcy's "true" nature with respect to this issue. By doing so, Wickham successfully uses *pathos* in the form of a personal story, inspiring Elizabeth to feel sympathy, admiration, and romantic interest towards him. In this example, Wickham's use of *pathos* indicates a shifty, manipulative character and lack of substance.

Pathos in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne tells the story of Hester Prynne, a young woman living in seventeenth-century Boston. As punishment for committing the sin of adultery, she is sentenced to public humiliation on the scaffold, and forced to wear the scarlet letter "A" on her clothing for the rest of her life. Even though Hester's punishment exposes her before the community, she refuses to reveal the identity of the man she slept with. In the following passage from Chapter 3, two reverends—first, Arthur Dimmesdale and then John Wilson—urge her to reveal the name of her partner:

> "What can thy silence do for him, except it tempt him—yea, compel him, as it were—to add hypocrisy to sin? Heaven hath granted thee an open ignominy, that thereby thou mayest work out an open triumph over the evil within thee and the sorrow without. Take heed how thou deniest to him—who, perchance, hath not the courage to grasp it for himself—the bitter, but wholesome, cup that is now presented to thy lips!'
>
> The young pastor's voice was tremulously sweet, rich, deep, and broken. The feeling that it so evidently manifested, rather than the direct purport of the words, caused it to vibrate within all hearts, and brought the listeners into one accord of sympathy. Even the poor baby at Hester's bosom was affected by the same influence, for it directed its hitherto vacant gaze towards Mr. Dimmesdale, and held up its little arms with a half-pleased, half-plaintive murmur...
>
> "Woman, transgress not beyond the limits of Heaven's mercy!' cried the Reverend Mr. Wilson, more harshly than before. 'That little babe hath been gifted with a voice, to second and confirm the counsel which thou hast heard. Speak out the name! That, and thy repentance, may avail to take the scarlet letter off thy breast."

The reverends call upon Hester's love for the father of her child—the same love they are condemning—to convince her to reveal his identity. Their attempts to move her by appealing to her sense of duty, compassion and morality are examples of *pathos*. Once again, this example of *pathos* reveals a lack of moral fiber in the reverends who are attempting to manipulate Hester by appealing to her emotions, particularly since (spoiler alert!) Reverend Dimmesdale *is* in fact the father.

Pathos in Dylan Thomas' "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night"

In "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," Thomas urges his dying father to cling to life and his love of it. The poem is a villanelle, a specific form of verse that originated as a ballad or "country song" and is known for its repetition. Thomas' selection of the repetitive villanelle form contributes to the *pathos* of his insistent message to his father—his appeal to his father's inner strength:

> Do not go gentle into that good night,
> Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
> Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
>
> Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
> Because their words had forked no lightning they
> Do not go gentle into that good night.
>
> Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
> Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
> Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
>
> Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
> And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
> Do not go gentle into that good night.
>
> Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
> Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
> Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

It's worth noting that, in this poem, *pathos* is not in any way connected to a lack of morals or inner strength. Quite the opposite, the appeal to emotion is connected to a profound love—the poet's own love for his father.

Pathos in Political Speeches

Politicians understand the power of emotion, and successful politicians are adept at harnessing people's emotions to curry favor for themselves, as well as their policies and ideologies.

Pathos in Barack Obama's 2013 *Address to the Nation on Syria*

In August 2013, the Syrian government, led by Bashar al-Assad, used chemical weapons against Syrians who opposed his regime, causing several countries—including the United States—to consider military intervention in the conflict. Obama's tragic descriptions of civilians who died as a result of the attack are an example of *pathos*: they provoke an emotional response and help him mobilize American sentiment in favor of U.S. intervention.

> Over the past two years, what began as a series of peaceful protests against the oppressive regime of Bashar al-Assad has turned into a brutal civil war. Over 100,000 people have been killed. Millions have fled the country...The situation profoundly changed, though, on August 21st, when Assad's government gassed to death over 1,000 people, including hundreds of children. The images from this massacre are sickening: men, women, children lying in rows, killed by poison gas, others foaming at the mouth, gasping for breath, a father clutching his dead children, imploring them to get up and walk.

Pathos in Ronald Reagan's 1987 "*Tear Down This Wall!*" Speech

In 1987, the Berlin Wall divided Communist East Berlin from Democratic West Berlin. The Wall was a symbol of the divide between the communist Soviet Union, or Eastern Bloc, and the Western Bloc which included the United States, NATO and its allies. The wall also split Berlin in two, obstructing one of Berlin's most famous landmarks: the Brandenburg Gate.

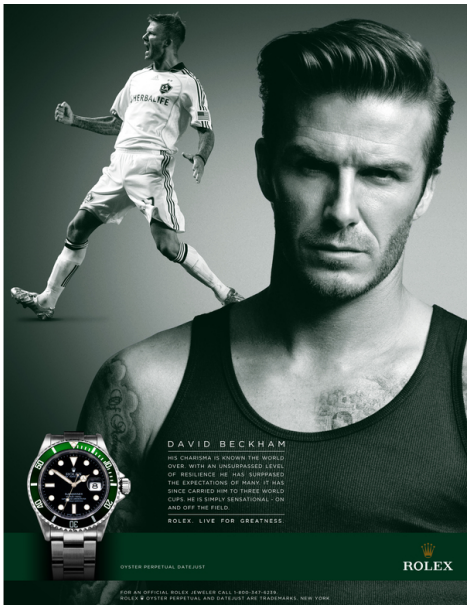
Reagan's speech, delivered to a crowd in front of the Brandenburg Gate, contains many examples of *pathos:*

> Behind me stands a wall that encircles the free sectors of this city, part of a vast system of barriers that divides the entire continent of Europe...Yet it is here in Berlin where the wall emerges most clearly...Every man is a Berliner, forced to look upon a scar...
>
> General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization: Come here to this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!

Reagan moves his listeners to feel outrage at the Wall's existence by calling it a "scar." He assures Germans that the world is invested in the city's problems by telling the crowd that "Every man is a Berliner." Finally, he excites and invigorates the listener by boldly daring Gorbachev, president of the Soviet Union, to "tear down this wall!"

Pathos in Advertising

Few appreciate the complexity of pathos better than advertisers. Consider all the ads you've seen in the past week. Whether you're thinking of billboards, magazine ads, or TV commercials, its almost a guarantee that the ones you remember contained very little specific information about the product, and were instead designed to create an emotional association with the brand. Advertisers spend incredible amounts of money trying to understand exactly what Aristotle describes as the building blocks of *pathos:* the emotional "who, what, and why" of their target audience. Take a look at this advertisement for the watch company, Rolex, featuring David Beckham:



Notice that the ad doesn't convey anything specific about the watch itself to make someone think it's a high quality or useful product. Instead, the ad caters to Rolex's target audience of successful male professionals by causing them to associate the Rolex brand with soccer player David Beckham, a celebrity who embodies the values of the advertisement's target audience: physical fitness and attractiveness, style, charisma, and good hair.

WHY WRITERS USE IT

The philosopher and psychologist William James once said, "The emotions aren't always immediately subject to reason, but they are always immediately subject to action." *Pathos* is a powerful tool, enabling speakers to galvanize their listeners into action, or persuade them to support a desired cause. Speechwriters, politicians, and

advertisers use *pathos* for precisely this reason: to influence their audience to a desired belief or action.

The use of *pathos* in literature is often different than in public speeches, since it's less common for authors to try to directly influence their readers in the way politicians might try to influence their audiences. Rather, authors often employ *pathos* by having a character make use of it in their own speech. In doing so, the author may be giving the reader some insight into a character's values, motives, or their perception of another character.

Consider the above example from *The Scarlet Letter.* The clergymen in Hester's town punish her by publicly humiliating her in front of the community and holding her up as an example of sin for conceiving a child outside of marriage. The reverends make an effort to get Hester to tell them the name of her child's father by making a dramatic appeal to a sense of shame that Hester plainly does not feel over her sin. As a result, this use of *pathos* only serves to expose the the manipulative intent of the reverends, offering readers some insight into their moral character as well as that of Puritan society at large. Ultimately, it's a good example of an *ineffective* use of *pathos*, since what the reverends lack is the key to eliciting the response they want: a strong grasp of what their listener values.

OTHER RESOURCES

- **The Wikipedia Page on Pathos:** A detailed explanation which covers Aristotle's original ideas on *pathos* and discusses how the term's meaning has changed over time.
- **The Dictionary Definition of Pathos:** A definition and etymology of the term, which comes from the Greek *pàthos,* meaning "suffering or sensation."
- **Pathos on Youtube**
  - An excellent video from TED-Ed about the three modes of persuasion.
  - A *pathos*-laden recording of Dylan Thomas reading his poem "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night"

HOW TO CITE

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