

Rhetorical devices

A rhetorical device is a technique of using language in a way that increases the persuasiveness of a piece of text by evoking an emotional or intellectual response in the audience.

The following devices are commonly used in argumentative writing. The reader should be aware of them, as they manipulate them into agreeing with the writer or speaker and may distract attention from the poor quality of the actual arguments.

addressing reader as ‘you’ – for intimacy and presupposition that the reader will agree; also use of inclusive ‘we’, and reference to opposition as ‘they’

antithesis – to make it seem a simple, two-sided issue

aposiopesis (...) – unfinished utterance to make the audience imagine and supply that which has not been said

colloquialisms – to create conversational effect to invite reader trust

double structures – to strengthen the point

emotive vocabulary – language used to evoke a strong feeling (e.g. guilt, pity or revulsion)

exclamations – to create the impression that the writer feels passionate or shocked about the issue

euphemisms – language which avoids directly naming something unpleasant or undesirable

hyperbole – to increase the apparent power of the argument or evidence

imperatives – to sound authoritative and superior

insulting vocabulary – to ridicule opponents

irony – to create humour and appreciation

juxtaposition – to make a stark contrast which forces a comparison to be made

lists – to give the impression that a lot of data exists to support the writer’s view

litotes – to express a positive in a negative (often double negative) form (e.g. ‘not displeasing’)

meiosis – to understate in order to draw attention to its opposite (e.g. ‘it cost a few pennies’)

modern idioms and fashionable phrases – to show the writer is up-to-date

non-sentences – to make the content stand out and sound decisive

repetition – to emphasise point to make it memorable, using same or different words (tautology)

rhetorical questions – to engage and involve the reader

sarcasm – to mock opponents so that the reader will not wish to identify with them

short categorical statements – to give the impression that there can be no argument

triple structures – to make the content striking and effective; third element is often climactic (i.e. longest or most serious word or point of the three).