

Rhetorical Theory
ENGL 7350/8350
(Same as Comm 7350/8350)
Tuesdays, 5:30 p.m. – 8:30 p.m.

The catalog description for this course reads: “History of rhetoric from the sophists through the present; includes readings from Isocrates, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Augustine, Erasmus, Ramus, Campbell, Blair, John Q. Adams, and others.” Such a course description is commendable for its ambition. But cramming the “history of rhetoric” into fourteen weeks is like stuffing an elephant into a duffel bag.

What we can do, however, is explore some important historical texts from key rhetorical theorists as the means of engaging philosophical and practical knowledge regarding the ways human beings use language to understand the world and relate to others. Because rhetorical theory can be thought of as both a cause and effect, we will endeavor to situate what we read within its milieu as well as within a longer historical trajectory. Fully aware that that our readings will be curated rather than comprehensive, we will devote time to foundational rhetorical texts from ancient Greece and Rome. We will consider rhetoricians from the Scottish Enlightenment, highlighting their influence on rhetorical theory (and theories of mind) as manifested in college English and writing studies. We will include some twentieth-century rhetoricians too. Throughout, we will make an especial effort to acknowledge voices from antiquity forward that were often omitted from rhetorical histories. We also will explore present-day applications for rhetorical theory.