

# What?! Plato, Aristotle in an English course? And, what is ‘rhetoric’ anyway?

History of Rhetoric (ENGL4625)

Dr. Brad McAdon

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T R 11:20-12:45

## Course description

This engaging course will cover rhetorical texts and concepts that span almost 2,500 years—from Alcidas (5<sup>th</sup> century BCE) to Martin Luther King Jr.—a bus tour of sorts, with several fascinating stops along the way. After consideration of the origin of rhetoric in ancient Greece, we will examine the argument between Alcidas and Isocrates as to whether speaking or writing is the more intellectually challenging and valuable means of communication. Plato then jumps into the fray, and we will read his *Apology* of Socrates, the *Gorgias*, and *Phaedrus* and try to determine if he is a fan or foe of rhetoric. Aristotle was a student of Plato, and we’ll try to understand what his *Rhetoric* says about rhetoric. (One clue is that the historical Aristotle would probably be rolling over in his grave if he knew contemporary educators were promoting a notion of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*.) Moving on from the Greeks to the Romans, we will read excerpts from the magnum opus of one of the most influential teachers of speaking and writing in the Western tradition, Quintilian’s *Institutes*. About the same time that Quintilian’s *Institutes* was in circulation (90s CE), early Christian authors were employing a variety of rhetorical techniques into their composition of texts that would become the canonical New Testament, so we will examine some of these rhetorical practices, including Greco-Roman mimesis, before moving onto the Renaissance and considering one or two of Erasmus’s rhetorical / educational works (*De Copia* and / or *The Praise of Folly*). A consideration of Margaret Fell’s and / or Sarah Grimke’s rhetorical compositions will be followed by Pauline Meier’s *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence*, which will help us to understand some of the rhetorical conventions employed in the crafting of our nation’s founding document, and we will close out the semester with a rhetorical analysis of Martin Luther King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”

Assignments include:

- 4 quizzes (20%)
- mid-term (20%)
- final exam (30%)
- 10 pg research paper with annotated bibliography (30%)

Some of the texts to be purchased include:

Desiderius Erasmus, *On Copia of Words and Ideas*, Marquette University Press, 2012, ISBN 978-087462-212-6

Plato, *Phaedrus*, Stephen Scully, trans. Focus Publishing, 2003, ISBN 978-0-941051-54-5

Plato: *Gorgias and Aristotle: Rhetoric*, Joe Sachs, trans. Focus Publishing, 2009, ISBN 978-1-58510-299-0

Pauline Meier, *American Scripture: The Making of the Declaration of Independence*, Vintage Books, 1998, ISBN 978-0679779087

Quintilian, *On the Teaching of Speaking and Writing*, James J. Murphy, ed., Southern Illinois University Press, 1987, ISBN 0-8093-1378-2

The course is still in its developmental stage, so another source or two *may* be required.