

ETHOS: THE WRITER'S VOICE

Ancient Greek rhetoricians had ideas about the ways stories can be told, arguments made, and texts written. Today we still use a few of these important ancient concepts, including logos, a text's logic; pathos, a text's emotion; and ethos, a text's character. The character of a text has a huge effect on how your reader (or listener) interprets and responds to your message, so it's useful to begin to think about what kind of character you want to create in your writing.

WHAT IS ETHOS?

Imagine a politician or a salesperson. Imagine they're telling you exactly what you want to hear, but something tells you not to trust them. That something is ethos.

Or imagine your favourite teacher. They're teaching you the same information as many other teachers do, but there is something about the way they tell it that makes you care, makes you want to know more. Again, that something is ethos.

Ethos is the credibility, the character, the life of the words.

FOR EXAMPLE

Let's get a feel for how ethos takes place by looking at some short texts. The following excerpt is from the beginning of a speech by a published writer speaking to some writing students:

"I intend to talk to you seriously. Before coming here today, I considered several possibilities of what to say to you.... I first thought of warning all of you who plan to write professionally what a bleak future lies ahead of you....I next turned to the possibility of entertaining you, of cheering you with funny and edifying tales of the writing life, so that you could go home warmed by the prospect of a delightful as well as worthwhile future. Conscientiousness nipped that idea. ...I have since decided...to make available to you as appropriately as possible what I have learned from my own experience as a writer. So I intend to talk to you seriously, perhaps at times even thornily."

-Harry Mathews, "For Prizewinners"

The author directly identifies his ethos as "serious." And by pointing this out (as well as by pointing out that he will not be warning students about their "bleak" future nor "entertaining" them) he shows that he has also given a lot of thought to what might be most appropriate. This ethos is sincere and well-meaning – it probably makes the audience feel that the speaker has their best interests at heart. Let's look at another published speech:

"Now first I gotta do my voodoo and just take a long look at you all...just sense all your faces in this big room...OK all right...I have girded my little loins, you know...because from now on I'm just gonna make up whatever I must say, make it up right here, right now. To me that is how theory as practice, theory as praxis takes place. I did, however, jot myself one note...Hmmm, the little note says 'A TIRADE AGAINST ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM.'"

-Jeanne Randolph, "Theory as Praxis"

In this second example we have a very different character. The speaker is again directly addressing her approach: She has “girded her loins” (drawn up her strength) because she is nervous about improvising her talk. But she suggests that this choice to improvise is important to her practice as a performer and theorist. We probably get the feeling that this speaker also has given care and thought to her choices, but that thoughtfulness comes out with a humourous, eccentric, and challenging character. Part of this character also comes from the tone of language she is using: It’s informal, slangy, and perhaps even fun.

Now let’s move on to something quite different:

“All stories begin with ‘Once upon a time.’ And that’s just what this story is all about: what happened, once upon a time. Once you were so small that, even standing on tiptoes, you could barely reach your mother’s hand. Do you remember? Your own history might begin like this: ‘Once upon a time there was a small boy’ – or a small girl – ‘and that small boy was me.’ But before that you were a baby in a cradle. You won’t remember that, but you know it’s true. “

-EH Gombrich, A Little History of the World

This example does not refer to or reflect on its own approach. But it has a very clear character, doesn’t it? This book, which is a world history, is told like a children’s story. The tone of the writer is perhaps that of a grandparent or elder – an authority figure, but one we feel we can trust. Notice also, the use of the word you. We have seen this in all three examples so far, but here it asks the reader to think back on personal memory. It lends the text an intimate and collaborative quality; it may even comfort the reader.

These examples only begin to give you a sense of how ethos can influence a text. We hope they begin to illustrate how choosing an appropriate character for each thing you write can really impact how your readers understand your ideas and influence how they feel about what you’re saying.

ETHOS IN YOUR OWN WRITING

So, the next time you write something, ask yourself: What kind of voice(s) fit the purpose of the text I have to write? What kind of character do I want to give the reader? Here is a very short list of possibilities (check any that seem to fit):

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|-------------|-------------|-----------|----------------|
| - serious | - confident | - curious | - intellectual |
| - fun | - humble | - caring | - poetic |
| - humourous | - generous | - ironic | - practical |

Now, how will you achieve your desired effect? What will you tell your reader and what will you choose to leave out? What kinds of words will you use? How will you present information? How will you begin and how will you end? The possibilities are numerous and the process can be fascinating. If you need a little help thinking it through, visit us at the Writing & Learning Centre and we’ll work on it together.