

WHAT IS *PATHOS*?

Humans are emotional creatures as well as thinking ones. Greek rhetoricians realized that humans sometimes can be persuaded by the force of feeling alone, rather than rational discussion. This approach is called *pathos*. The word looks like this in Greek:

πάθος

In Blaise Pascal's memorable phrase, "the heart has reasons that the mind knows not of." Sometimes, when all the statistics fail, and all the arguments fall short, and all words echo like empty gongs, the writer must make the reader *feel*.

Pathos covers all sorts of emotions: jokes to make an audience laugh, scorn to make an audience mock a stupidity, anger at an injustice to enrage readers, sorrow to make them feel regret, enigmas and paradoxes to make them feel curiosity, and soothing words to relax readers or provide comfort to them.

Pathos works best with techniques like narration, description, juxtaposition, and artful repetition. *Pathos* makes effective "hooks" (exciting introductions that involve readers with an argument) or powerful conclusions that wrap up an argument. *Pathos* ensures that readers are involved in the argument; it appeals to the human love of storytelling and detail.

The secret is not to tell the reader what to feel, but to arrange your narration or description in such a way as to conjure that emotion. Telling the reader, "You should be angry about x" is never as effective as providing a detailed example that would make any feeling creature upset.

Dangers exist with *pathos*, however. Emotional arguments tend to work best with uneducated audiences who are too lazy to think things through. This approach tends to obscure or conceal logical fallacies and inconsistencies, which may be great for evil demagogues (Hitler comes to mind), but these logical errors should be avoided in honest, open intellectual debate. Use *pathos* to put spirit as well as intellect in your writing, but use it ethically, rather than painting emotion over weak arguments too frail to stand up on the merits of their reason alone.