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Rhetoric, simply put, is the study of how language works to persuade. So any writer seeking to make a case, or hold a reader's attention — which is more or less any writer not in the service of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea — has something to learn from it.

If the classical orators have modern counterparts in the realm of the written word, pre-eminent among those counterparts are the authors of opinion pieces. Here is persuasion overt, persuasion front and center. The techniques that served Cicero will just as effectively serve modern writers of opinion.

Open a book of rhetorical terms, and you will meet a lot of gnarly looking Greek and

If you're accustomed to thinking of rhetoric as dealing only with fancy language, think again. Rhetoric is present in the plain style as much as in the high. One of the best-known figures, *erotema*, the "rhetorical question," is in regular use: "What am I, — chopped liver?" Everyday language seethes with metaphor and figuration. The trick, in a formal context, is to use it effectively.

It does help to keep in mind that, as Aristotle wrote, you have three forms of power over the reader:

Prose does not scan like poetry. But it shares its effects. One of the most memorable lines in American history, for instance, is the clause in the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident.” That, among other things, is an example of iambic pentameter.

Rhetoric, whether on the page or in the spoken word, is about patterns and echoes and resonances. Recently, Mitt Romney declared: “It’s time for a president who cares more about America’s workers than he does about America’s union bosses.” That’s, arguably, a false opposition. But my point isn’t about politics so much as about the way a ringing antithesis can sound.

The template is: “It’s time for a president who cares more about [supposedly good thing] than he does about [supposedly opposite bad thing].” The sentence is an *ethos* appeal — “I stand for [good thing]” — disguised as a piece of argument. Note how it is inflated for musical reasons by the extra syllables “he does about” and the repetition of “America’s”; and how “It’s time” lends a sense at once of urgency and of history’s being on the speaker’s side.

Whether history is on Mr. Romney’s side has yet to be established. But it’s clear that during his perambulations in the garden of rhetoric, he has been picking the flowers. So has his opponent. And so have the countless pundits whose commentary will swell blogs and op-ed pages over the coming months. Ask not what you can do for *chiasmus*, then:

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