Persuasion in Society

Persuasion in Society, Third Edition introduces readers to the rich tapestry of persuasive technique and scholarship, interweaving rhetorical, critical theory, and social science traditions. This text examines current and classical theory through the lens of contemporary culture, encouraging readers to explore the nature of persuasion and to understand its impact in their lives. Employing a contemporary approach, authors Jean G. Jones and Herbert W. Simons draw from popular culture, mass media, and social media to help readers become informed creators and consumers of persuasive messages.

This introductory persuasion text offers:

- A broad-based approach to the scope of persuasion, expanding students’ understanding of what persuasion is and how it is effected.
- Insights on the diversity of persuasion in action, through such contexts as advertising, marketing, political campaigns, activism and social movements, and negotiation in social conflicts.
- The inclusion of “sender” and “receiver” perspectives, enhancing understanding of persuasion in practice.
- Extended treatment of the ethics of persuasion, featuring opposing views on handling controversial issues in the college classroom for enhanced instruction.
- Case studies showing how and why people fall for persuasive messages, demonstrating how persuasion works at a cognitive level.
- Discussion questions, exercises, and key terms for very nearly every chapter.

The core of this book is that persuasion is about winning beliefs and not arguments and that communicators who want to win that belief need to communicate with their audiences. This new edition of Persuasion in Society continues to bring this core message to readers with updated case studies, examples, and sources.

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# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments vii

Preface ix

## PART I  
**Understanding Persuasion**  1

**CHAPTER 1**  
The Study of Persuasion  3

**CHAPTER 2**  
The Psychology of Persuasion: Basic Concepts and Principles  38

**CHAPTER 3**  
Persuasion Broadly Considered  78

## PART II  
**The Coactive Approach**  121

**CHAPTER 4**  
Coactive Persuasion  123

**CHAPTER 5**  
Resources of Communication  151

**CHAPTER 6**  
Framing and Reframing  184

**CHAPTER 7**  
Cognitive Shorthands  216

**CHAPTER 8**  
Reasoning and Evidence  250

## PART III  
**Context for Persuasion**  279

**CHAPTER 9**  
Going Public: Delivering a Presentation That Persuades  281

**CHAPTER 10**  
Persuasive Campaigns  311

**CHAPTER 11**  
Staging Political Campaigns  356

**CHAPTER 12**  
Analyzing Product Advertising  402

**CHAPTER 13**  
Talking through Differences: Persuasion in Social Conflicts  443
CHAPTER 14  Leading Social Movements  474
CHAPTER 15  More about Ethics  505

Index  537
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This book is the third in a series of textbooks on persuasion, each one building on
the last, incorporating new knowledge and new theory about persuasion while
adapting to social and cultural changes in our increasingly globalized world. Some
things have not changed in this edition, including its core convictions: that
persuasion is about winning beliefs, not arguments; that communicators who seek to
win belief need to communicate with their audiences, not at them; and that
persuasion at its best is a matter of giving and not just getting, recognizing that they
are most likely to give you what you want if they are convinced that what you
propose also gives them what they want. This is the essence of the book’s coactive
approach to persuasion.

*Persuasion in Society* also remains focused on clear-cut instances of attempted
persuasion—called *paradigm cases*—but gives increased attention to cases in which
intent to persuade is not so obvious. We have become convinced, for example, that
popular entertainment programming does more to shape American values—indeed,
the media-connected world’s values—than do sermons and editorials, political
oratory, and parental advice. Yet seldom do people think of entertainment as
persuasion. Also occupying a place in what we call the *gray areas* of persuasion’s
domain are newscasts, scientific reports, classroom teaching, and, yes, textbooks
such as this one—all rendered especially credible by appearing in the guise of
objectivity.

This edition of *Persuasion in Society* has been significantly updated to incorporate
new theory and research on such topics as priming, subliminal persuasion, framing,
political campaigning, and negotiation. New case studies on such topics as mind
control, the animal rights controversy, and the ethics of faculty advocacy should be
of interest, prompting readers to search for more information that can be readily
obtained by way of links on the book’s website, including speech and debate
transcripts, video clips, Internet sources, and Taylor and Francis’s own compendium
of published materials. The website’s code-accessible instructor’s manual includes for
each chapter sample test questions and PowerPoint lectures.
PART I

Understanding Persuasion
Today’s practice of persuasion is mired in controversies that mirror those in ancient Greece almost 2,500 years ago, and they are unlikely to go away any time soon. At issue still are questions of truth, justice, ethics, and power. These issues still matter, as we can see in The Daily Show’s Jon Stewart’s dogged pursuit of CNBC’s Jim Cramer on March 12, 2009. The interview, rated by The Week in the number one slot when ranking Jon Stewart’s five most hard-hitting interviews, took place at the height of the worldwide financial meltdown. In it Stewart confronts Cramer about his role in contributing to the situation as Cramer seeks to evade responsibility for knowingly offering bad investment advice to his viewers for the sake of personal gain:

Thinking It Through

To watch the full video on the Daily Show site, go to: http://thedailyshow.cc.com/videos/fttmoj/exclusive---jim-cramer-extended-interview-pt--1
STEWART: This is the promo for your show:

—“In Cramer We Trust” promo plays—

STEWART: Isn’t there a problem with selling snake oil and labeling it as vitamin tonic and saying that it cures impetigo…. Isn’t that the difficulty here?
CRAMER: I think that there are two kinds of people. People come out and make good calls and bad calls that are financial professionals and there are people who say they only make good calls and they are liars. I try really hard to make as many good calls as I can.
STEWART: I think the difference is not good call/bad call. The difference is real market and unreal market…. CNBC could be an incredibly powerful tool of illumination for people that believe that there are two markets: One that has been sold to us as long term. Put your money in 401ks. Put your money in pensions and just leave it there. Don’t worry about it. It’s all doing fine. Then, there’s this other market; this real market that is occurring in the back room. Where giant piles of money are going in and out and people are trading them and it’s transactional and it’s fast. But it’s dangerous, it’s ethically dubious and it hurts that long term market. So what it feels like to us—and I’m talking purely as a layman—it feels like we are capitalizing your adventure by our pension and
our hard earned money. And that it is a game that you know.... That you know is going on. But you go on television as a financial network and pretend isn’t happening.

CRAMER: Let me say this: I am trying to expose this stuff. Exactly what you guys do and I am trying to get the regulators to look at it.

STEWART: No, no, no, no, no. I want desperately for that, but I feel like that’s not what we’re getting. What we’re getting is ... [shows video clip]

CRAMER: I would encourage anyone who is in the hedge fund unit “do it” because it is legal. It is a very quick way to make the money and very satisfying. By the way, no one else in the world would ever admit that but I don’t care.

UNKNOWN: That’s right and you can say that here.

CRAMER: I’m not going to say it on TV.

CRAMER: It’s on TV now.

STEWART: I want the Jim Cramer on CNBC to protect me from that Jim Cramer.

STEWART: I gotta tell you. I understand that you want to make finance entertaining, but it’s not an f—ing game. When I watch that I get, I can’t tell you how angry it makes me, because it says to me, you all know. You all know what’s going on. You can draw a straight line from those shenanigans to the stuff that was being pulled at Bear and at AIG and all this derivative market stuff that is this weird Wall Street side bet.

CRAMER: But Jon, don’t you want guys like me that have been in it to show the shenanigans? What else can I do? I mean, last night’s show—

STEWART: No, no, no, no, no. I want desperately for that, but I feel like that’s not what we’re getting. What we’re getting is.... Listen, you knew what the banks were doing and yet were touting it for months and months. The entire network was and so now to pretend that this was some sort of crazy, once-in-a-lifetime tsunami that nobody could have seen coming is disingenuous at best and criminal at worst.

[...]

CRAMER: Well, I think that your goal should always be to try to expose the fact that there is no easy money.

STEWART: But there are literally shows called Fast Money.

CRAMER: I think that people.... [Audience laughs] There’s a market for it and you give it to them.

STEWART: There’s a market for cocaine and hookers. What is the responsibility of the people who cover Wall Street? Who are you responsible to? The people with the 401ks and the pensions and the general public, or the Wall Street traders?

There is a name for discourse of this kind. It’s called “sophistic,” after the sophists of ancient Greece and Rome. As their name continues to suggest, the sophists tended to be seen as sophisticated or worldly wise, but also, in some quarters, as “sophistic” in the negative sense of putting rhetorical power and effectiveness above truth and
justice. The sophists made considerable fortunes for the coaching they offered to Athenians in the arts of oratory, but they got mixed reviews for their ethics. No Athenian was more scathing in his criticism than Plato, a student of Socrates who had earned a reputation in his own right as the “father” of Western philosophy.

Plato’s primary way of sharing his views was through his Socratic Dialogues, a series of scripted conversations in which the respected Socrates is cast as the questioner. In the dialogue on persuasion bearing the sophist Gorgias’s name, the conversation centers upon the issue of whether rhetoric, the art of persuasion, is corrupt (Plato, 2006). Gorgias evokes Socrates’ ire when he observes that the ability to impress an audience is the surest path to power:

By the exercise of the ability [to persuade], you will have the doctor and the trainer as your slaves, and your man of business will turn out to be making money for another; for you, in fact, who have the ability to speak and convince the masses.

(Gorgias, 452c; see also Americanrhetoric.com/platoonrhetoric.htm; L’Etang & Pieczka, 2006).

Gorgias’s student, Polus, adds that power is the greatest good. Socrates affects surprise at these seemingly superficial claims. Is there not, he asks, a difference between true knowledge and mere belief? Socrates does get Gorgias to concede that power can be used for both good and ill, but Gorgias and his fellow sophists continue to argue that ultimate success comes through knowledge of persuasion. They even boast at one point that knowledge of anything else is unnecessary, arguing for the position that it is a worthy goal to simply create the appearance of knowing more than the experts.

The discussion continues, and Socrates will have none of it. Sophistic rhetoric, he maintains, is an art of hoodwinking the ignorant about the justice or injustice of a matter, without imparting any real knowledge. This kind of rhetoric does great damage in the law tribunal by making the worse appear the better argument and allowing the guilty to go free (Plato, 2006).

Years later, Plato’s student, Aristotle, would offer a defense of rhetoric (Aristotle, 2004). Aristotle’s response to Plato (and to Socrates) concedes the dangers of rhetoric but rejects their alleged inevitability. His arguments can be summarized as follows: Rhetoric can be—indeed, often is—an instrument for giving effectiveness to truth. And truth is not always easy to come by. Still, those debating about issues of policy need eventually to come to a conclusion, and those brought before the court of law have the right to defend themselves. While philosophers like Socrates and Plato have the luxury of suspending judgment until they have arrived at universal principles, ordinary citizens will need help in their roles as decision makers in assessing alternative courses of action. In addition, as persuaders ordinary citizens will benefit from guidance in determining the best available means of persuasion for a particular audience or occasion. A solid understanding of rhetoric is therefore useful.

Both Plato’s critique of rhetoric and Aristotle’s defense of it contain a good deal of wisdom. Plato’s analysis paved the way for critiques of today’s sophistic practices
in our corporate, legal, and political world that Plato himself could not have possibly imagined. Still, as you might have anticipated, this book gives Aristotle the edge in the debate with Plato. To be sure, persuasive speech can be used to deceive, mislead, exploit, and oppress. Clever persuaders can exploit what Aristotle called the “defects of their hearers.” Unwise actions can be made to appear wise by use of sham arguments, known as fallacies, which appear reasonable on first impression but fall apart on close examination. All this is possible, as Plato claimed in the *Gorgias*, but it is not inevitable. Persuaders can serve the interests of their audiences at the same time as they serve their own interests; they can achieve power with others and not simply power over others (Burke, 1969; Grunig, et al., 2002).

Insufficiently appreciated by Plato was Aristotle’s key insight: Persuasion deals in matters of judgment, rather than matters of certainty. Matters of judgment cannot be settled by fact alone or by sheer calculation. On controversial issues, we expect honest differences of opinion. Even experts can legitimately disagree on what the facts are, which facts are most relevant, and, most important, what should be made of them.

**Box 1.1 Jon Stewart: Philosopher or Sophist?**

Had he practiced his brand of serious comedy in ancient Athens, where would Jon Stewart have stood in the sophistic/Platonist debate? A modern-day Socrates but with a better sense of humor, he would surely have appreciated the importance of skillful questioning. However, it was the sophists, particularly Protagoras, who most influenced today’s courtroom practices, including the practice of cross-examination.

But then again the sophists were relativists on questions of truth. Protagoras is well known for his view that we humans “are the measure of all things”; we decide what counts, or measures up as “truth.” When Stewart turns serious, as he did in the Cramer interview there is little question but that truth to him is not simply a human invention, or, as discussed in Chapter Three, a social construction. Stewart gives evidence of having been influenced by all sides in this three-cornered debate and to have taken the best from each.
For example, when researching the effect of sun exposure on humans, scientific studies often take diametrically opposed positions. One concludes that due to the links between sun exposure and skin cancer, we should not leave the house without sunscreen on. At the same time, other studies show that we need to be exposed to the sun to be able to allow our bodies to absorb vitamin D (Jio, 2014). Or consider calcium in our diets. On the one hand, scientific studies proclaim that calcium is considered essential for maintaining strong bones and avoiding fractures, especially for older people. On the other hand, new studies are finding that calcium supplements may increase the risk of cardiovascular disease deaths (Kim, 2013).

As these examples demonstrate, the scientists offer judgments, and in these cases, conflicting judgments. There are at least two sides to most stories, a point repeatedly emphasized by the sophists. This is surely true of the sophist-Platonist controversy and it is no less true today than in ancient Greece. Now as then, say public relations experts L’Etang and Pieczka, “There is no simple way of providing moral and intellectual comfort to practitioners. Consequently, the fundamental ethical questions have to be confronted daily in routine practice” (2006).

But just because persuasion deals in matters of judgment rather than certainty, Aristotle did not view this as an invitation to impulsive or random decision making or to perpetual indecision. Nor was Aristotle of the opinion that any decision was as good as any other, any argument as good as any other. As much as audiences might be taken in by clever deceivers, for Aristotle truth still had a natural advantage over falsehood, and logic a natural advantage over illogic—all other things being equal. The power of truth and logic is best appreciated when we agree to them reluctantly, as in the following case:

At an inner-city junior high school for troubled students who had been booted out of other schools, an eighth-grade English class came to life when a student proposed that the school be put on trial for unfair rules. But the student who proposed the mock trial found himself in the role of the defense attorney for the administration, and he could not resist doing a convincing job in its behalf. Witness 1 for the prosecution was destroyed on cross-examination as he was caught over-generalizing. No, he admitted, the milk at the school is not always spoiled. In fact, it rarely is. Witness 2 was forced to concede that the school doesn’t really enforce its rule against bringing candy to class. Then the defense attorney caught the prosecution off guard by pressing an objection: The prosecution had been leading the witness. And so it went. When the deliberations were concluded, the seven student judges voted 6 to 1 for the administration.

(Michie, 1998).
WHY STUDY PERSUASION?

The study of persuasion has grown exponentially since Aristotle’s day—from oral communication to written communication, from the verbal to the non-verbal, from the unmediated to the mediated, from the obviously intended to the non-obvious, and from the public arena to the study of all or virtually all symbolic action or interaction, including the study of persuasion about persuasion. Persuasion’s increased scope places increased demands on practicing, analyzing, and understanding of persuasion. Let us consider each in turn.

Practice

Effective persuasion is a crucial component of personal and career success. But, complains business and political consultant, Frank Luntz:

The average CEO cannot communicate their way out of a paper bag. The average CEO only knows facts, figures, statistics and what to say on a balance sheet. And so there’s no resonance. There’s no empathy. There’s no understanding of the anger and frustration that some Americans feel towards corporate America…. The CEOs, they just speak from their head and it’s not coming from their heart.

(NOW, 2004)

And how important is persuasion in business? As Allied Signal’s CEO recently explained,

The day when you could yell and scream and beat people into good performance is over. Today you have to appeal to them by helping them to see how they can get from here to there, by establishing some credibility, and by giving them some reason and help to get there. Do all those things, and they’ll knock down doors.

(Conger, 1999)

Now, more than ever, persuasion is “the language of business leadership” (Conger, 1999).

The same is true of the professions. The “people professions”—law, sales, social work, etc.—could just as well be called “persuasion professions.” Moreover, virtually all professional associations require persuasion consultants. Within colleges and universities, the interdisciplinary nature of the subject is reflected by the variety of courses in different academic departments that bear upon it: “Public Opinion and Propaganda,” “Argumentation and Debate,” “Rhetoric and Composition,” “Media Literacy,” “Rules of Evidence in Criminal Law,” “Strategic Communication,” “Homiletics,” “Perception Management,” “Community Organizing,” and many others.
Beyond the private and professional levels, you may be interested in working for social and political betterment. Alone or in groups, you may be seeking more funding for environmental issues, intervention in areas where famine and genocide are occurring, racial and gender equality, or greater participation by students in university governance.

Having a solid understanding of how persuasion functions helps you determine the means that are most appropriate for achieving your goals. It helps you evaluate situations and weigh options. For example, if you are seeking donations for Doctors Without Borders, you are confronted with a dilemma. Should you ask potential donors for much more than you expect them to give in the hopes of getting what you bargain for? Or, conversely, if you ask for a larger donation than you need, would you be risking outright rejection? And what if it is societal change you are after? Should you be a moderate who signs petitions or a militant who stages confrontations? Too often, these decisions are made purely on a gut level, without sober analysis of their consequences, and the study of persuasion aids you as you seek to make the better judgments.

Analysis

Persuading others is one side of the persuasion equation; the other is responding intelligently and discerningly to the armies of message makers who compete for your attention, your agreement, your involvement, and your money. Much as we may practice persuasion, most of us spend more time on the receiving end of persuasive messages. We are literally bombarded by them from the moment we are awakened by the alarm to the instant we fall asleep before the television set.

Think about the last time you visited a department store or even a supermarket. Virtually every object there was market tested, advertised, and merchandized to get you to buy it. The objects in these stores do more than service your material needs; they’re also symbols, especially for new generations of consumption communities in the United States and abroad. How often do we define ourselves and our friends by what we wear and what music we listen to and what shows we watch on television? (Barber, 1996, 2007).

Persuasion is the engine of our market-driven global economy. In 1995, Deirdre McCloskey co-authored an influential study in the *American Economic Review* estimating that persuasion—by salespeople, teachers, politicians, lobbyists, lawyers, and others—made up a quarter of America’s gross domestic product (McCloskey & Klamer, 1995). Since the publication of that influential study, that percentage has grown, as demonstrated when the same analysis was updated in 2013 by an Australian economist and showed that persuasion now makes up 30 percent of US GDP (Antioch, 2013). In McCloskey’s mind, this is a fact not to be feared, but to be faced, in that “a free society is a ‘rhetorical society’ where speech is used to persuade people about what to buy or whom to vote for, rather than violence” (McCloskey, 2013). “People always say advertising is manipulation,” says McCloskey. “But if the only
alternative to persuasion is violence, how else are we going to decide what car to buy except by people trying to charm us?” (McCloskey, 2013).

In our increasingly smaller but more complicated world, being an intelligent consumer of persuasive messages is not easy. Part of the problem is what psychologists call the “not me” phenomenon—otherwise known as the “third person” effect (Golan, 2008). Here is what the author of *The Power of Persuasion* has to say about “not me”:

People tend to have a curious illusion of invulnerability to manipulation—a belief that we’re not as vulnerable as others around us. In part this illusion derives from the subtlety of clever operators who make it hard to see that you’re being manipulated. In part, it feeds off another “normal” illusion—that we’re more capable and, so, better defended than other people. The illusion of invulnerability is a comforting notion for moving forward in an unpredictable and dangerous world. Unfortunately, however, the more immune we feel, the less likely we are to take precautions and, as a result, the more susceptible than ever we become.

(Levine, 2003).

When we combine the “not me” phenomenon with the contemporary problem of message density, we see that the problem is compounded. Today, persuasive messages are presented to us at dizzying speeds. Gigabytes of information are available at the click of a mouse. If we believe we are invulnerable to the persuasive impact of the messages we receive, and combine that with the number of messages we take in each day, we see that without a solid understanding of how persuasion functions, we are vulnerable indeed.

Under the best of circumstances, persuasive messages present us with a dilemma. On the one side is the need for human connection, as we don’t want to go through life cynically distrusting every communicative act we encounter. On the other hand, there is quite obviously a need for vigilance in the face of unscrupulous persuaders; there is every reason to weigh and evaluate controversial assertions even when they emanate from those we trust. The study of persuasion provides us with the analytic tools we need to find a balance.
We humans are both the creators and products of our societies in a never-ending cycle. The movements and campaigns of persuasion that our forbears once waged helped produce the very institutions, belief systems, and cultural norms that now govern or at least guide our thoughts and behaviors. To be sure, historical change does not occur through persuasion alone, and in fact, a recent study of presidential influence brought news of how often American presidents have ruled by decree (Howell, 2003). Most often it is by a combination of forms of influence that major change occurs, not least the power of the “carrot” (inducements) and the “stick” (coercion) (Simons, 1972). Still, it is primarily by persuasion that ideas are introduced and hearts and minds changed.

Among the cultural truisms that people take for granted are those which at one time or other were the subject of considerable controversy. Americans are no longer British colonists. What’s more, as much as they would like to think of themselves as members of the world community, they find it difficult if not impossible to transcend their American identities. Their economic system, republican form of government, commitments to freedom of speech, conceptions of themselves as a special people, and even their idea of nationhood can be traced to efforts of persuasion from centuries past.

We can begin to understand how discourse functions to create new and accepted ways of viewing the world by examining our own era, noticing the political and social issues that we confront and the means we employ to deal with them. Looking back over the recent history of American politics, we can recall some of the rhetorical catchwords that persuaded us to create new realities:
• “change we can believe in” that led us to “hope” that the ouster of one political party would transform our world,

• “compassionate conservatism” that persuaded us to implement sweeping educational change so that “no child will be left behind,”

• the “war on terror” from which we did not “cut and run,” because we wanted to have a “Mission Accomplished,”

• “global warming” fears that persuaded some of us to “go green,” while others resisted the notion of “man-made climate change,” and

• concerns about “illegal aliens,” or should we say “undocumented workers,” that persuaded us to change our attitudes toward immigration policy.

In all of these instances, the rhetoric is richly metaphorical, and each example takes on a reality as social truth. Each persuasive construction had real-world policy ramifications for the citizenry: the first African-American president was elected, soldiers were sent to fight in wars, our public schools were transformed as they incorporated regular testing to measure student progress, car manufacturers thrived or declined as buyers sought cars that made lesser impacts on the environment, and we constructed walls on our borders to manage issues of immigration.

But it is not just in issues of public policy that rhetoric has had an influence. Rhetorical constructions also helped us understand the changes in our day-to-day lives. Americans have become far more cosmopolitan, and increasingly dependent on the new information technologies. “Spanglish” is now a de facto American language, social networks are flourishing on the Internet, the “blogosphere” has proliferated, and nearly everyone has “friended” somebody else.

Thinking It Through

Consider how you have been persuaded to think differently about communication over just the last few years. What does it mean to have “friends” on social networking sites like Facebook? How has the definition of “friend” been transformed? How have you been persuaded to think differently about friendship?

Further, how has your communication changed thanks to your laptop computer, your cell phone, and your wi-fi connection? How would you feel, emotionally and physically, if you had to live for a day without your phone or your connection to the Internet? Would you be nervous and uncomfortable? How have you been persuaded that is necessary to maintain constant connection through technology, and how does this impact your life?

Then, as if unnoticed, “predatory lenders” have caused various “bubbles” to burst, leading to a worldwide “meltdown,” with calls for a “bailout,” antagonism between “Wall Street” and “Main Street,” prompting most Americans to vote for “change.”
In addition to knowledge of the role of persuasion in society, there is considerable benefit in coming to grips with the psychological dynamics of persuasion. From an examination of persuasion at work, one gets a better understanding of how human beings attend to stimuli, how they order their environment, how thought and emotion interact. Psychological theories of attention, perception, learning, motivation, emotion, etc., have in turn contributed greatly to our understanding of persuasion. Several chapters in this book bring psychological theories to bear upon the subject.

Synthesis: Putting Together Rhetorical Practice, Analysis, and Understanding

Understanding, practice, and analysis are closely interrelated. In order to become a discriminating consumer of persuasive messages, you need to be aware of the techniques that others may use to influence you. In order to persuade effectively, you need to anticipate how consumers of persuasive messages are likely to respond. And in order to respond perceptively or persuade effectively, you need to have a general understanding of the nature of the persuasive process and the role of persuasion in society. By the same token, our experiences as persuaders and persuadees may help us to understand in small ways how persuasion has shaped human choices and destinies during the major events of history, and we may also come to a better understanding of the contemporary political process.

In some respects this text is a handbook. It provides principles by which you may better persuade or more critically react to persuasive communication by others. In addition, it is designed to provide insights about persuasion as it functions to shape your world, independent of whether these insights lead you to change your rhetorical practices or not. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this book is designed to help you understand the ways in which you can make an impact on your world. Ultimately, to seek to correct injustice or improve the lives of others requires the ability to analyze rhetoric, to understand how persuasion works to create new socially constructed “truths,” and to create ethically appropriate persuasive messages.

METHODS OF STUDYING PERSUASION

Depending on individual goals, the student of persuasion may choose among a wide variety of research methods. Although scholars these days rely heavily on social-scientific methodologies, for almost all of its long history, the field of persuasion has been the province of the humanities. The ancient Athenians’ initial method of instruction remains helpful to this day; it involved learning from role models and practice, practice, practice. Every Athenian citizen knew Pericles’ funeral oration by heart. They also knew the legend of Demosthenes’ struggle to overcome a stuttering affliction by practicing aloud with pebbles in his mouth. Out of practice came theory,
the systematizing of lessons learned into generalized concepts and principles. Drawing on the experiences of those who practiced the art, and on the critical judgments of trained observers, Aristotle and others fashioned rhetorical principles that have withstood the test of time remarkably well.

**Method One: Rhetorical Criticism**

Contemporary *rhetorical criticism* grew out of classical rhetorical theory, but has moved well beyond it to include studies of forms and genres unimagined by the ancients. Consider these sample research questions about rhetorical artifacts:

What made Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address so memorable? Why is one blog so much more persuasive than another? If I were to give a speech all over again, how would I do it differently? If I could have my choice, which celebrity would I most like to have representing my anti-bullying campaign? When is faculty advocacy in the classroom legitimate and when is it unethical?

Or consider these questions concerning the words individuals speak: Since stylistic simplicity is so highly valued in our culture, how is it that Martin Luther King, Jr. is considered such a memorable speaker while having used a highly ornate style? Why are most college course catalog descriptions so uninspiring and what can be done to improve them? Why is being a “liberal” viewed by most Americans as an elite lifestyle? What are the discursive dilemmas presidents face in trying to instill public confidence in a shaky economy and which of their strategic alternatives is likely to work best in this recession?

Each of these questions and thousands more like them constitute legitimate starting points for critical analyses of rhetorical happenings. Critics or analysts (we use the terms interchangeably) may be motivated by outrage at an apparent misuse of language or logic or a pretension to objectivity that is belied by the facts. Their critical impulse may spring from a pragmatic interest in persuading others or in determining how others attempt to persuade them. They may have an irreverent streak and thus be inclined to debunk claims and claimants to universal truth. They may appreciate a rhetorical effort and want to know why it was so admirable. Or they may simply be puzzle-solvers by temperament who enjoy unraveling some of the mysteries of persuasion. In each case, they will attempt to make sense of the rhetorical act or event, either as an object of interest in its own right or because it helps illuminate some larger issue, problem, or theoretical question. Criticism serves consummatory functions when it stops at evaluation or explanation of a rhetorical effort. It performs instrumental functions when it focuses on persuasive discourse as case-study material in service of a larger end such as theory building or theory testing. Like the objects of their analyses, critics are themselves persuaders with cases to present and defend. We may not entirely agree with the analysis, but we must respect it if the case has been well argued.

This book provides numerous examples of rhetorical criticism. Today, analysis of persuasion often is incorporated within a more inclusive term, critical studies, to
refer to criticism of all kinds bearing on persuasion. Studies of recurrent forms or patterns of discourse by linguists and sociologists, semiotic analyses of language-like objects and symbolic actions, studies in non-verbal communication, analysis by feminist theorists and scholars examining the intersections of race and culture, and more all contribute to our understanding of persuasion. Here we provide two examples of rhetorical criticism, the first of a course catalog description, the second an illustration of dilemma-centered analysis focused on the task of sounding confident about a shaky economy but not overconfident.

Case #1 A rhetorical analysis of the college catalog

Catalog Description

COM 390R Seminar in Contemporary Rhetorical Criticism. May be repeated for credit when topics vary. Semester topics have included dramatistic criticism, content analysis, and methodologies for movement studies. Prerequisite: Upper-Division Standing.

Hart (1997) analyzed this seemingly ordinary message to make two points. First, we are all experts of a sort on persuasion, having been exposed each day to a sea of rhetoric. As voracious consumers of messages, we develop implicit knowledge of their hidden meanings, undisclosed motives, and subtle strategies. We know, says Hart, that this is a catalog description; we would recognize it anywhere and be able to distinguish it from a chili recipe or a love letter or the lyrics to a rock song. We know, too, that descriptions such as these aren’t always trustworthy. The prose bears the marks of having been funneled through a bureaucracy. Before signing up for COM 390R, perhaps we ought to check with peers or with the instructor who will actually teach the course.

Hart’s (1997) second point is that even so simple a message repays close examination. For example, a good deal about persuasion can be learned by attending to its style. For one thing, the course description is telegraphic: Incomplete sentences and abnormal punctuation patterns suggest a hurried, businesslike tone, a message totally uninterested in wooing its reader. So, too, are its reasoning patterns telegraphic. Concepts such as “seminar,” “credit,” and “prerequisite” are never explained. The language is also formidable: excessive use of jargon, polysyllabic words, and opaque phrases (e.g., COM 390R).

Also revealing is what is not found in the text. Nobody runs or jumps here. No doing has been done. The absence of verbs suggests institutionalization, hardly what one would expect from what is essentially a piece of advertising. But this is a special sort of advertising, advertising without adjectives. And much else is missing. There are no extended examples to help the reader see what the course will be like, no powerful imagery to sustain the student’s visions of wonder while standing in the registration line, no personal disclosure by the author to build identification with the reader. It is almost as if this message did not care about its reader, or, for that matter, even care about itself. It does nothing to invite or entice or intrigue (Hart, 2004).
As Hart’s analysis demonstrates, rhetorical criticism is not simply about studying great speeches or persuasive essays, and the humanistic study of persuasive discourse is no longer the exclusive province of self-styled rhetoricians.

Case #2 A rhetorical analysis of discourse: shaky economy

Introduced here is a dilemma-centered framework for rhetorical criticism called the Requirements-Problems-Strategies (RPS) approach (Simons, 2007, 2000, 1996, 1994, 1970; Lu & Simons, 2006). These in brief are its basic concepts and principles:

**Requirements (R)**
By dint of their roles and of the situations they confront, persuaders are rarely free agents. The “demands” or “pressures” on persuaders constitute rhetorical requirements.

**Problems (P)**
Oftentimes these requirements come in the form of cross-pressures, necessitating difficult rhetorical choices. To the extent that these conflicting requirements are recurrent and predictable, they can assist the critic in understanding the persuader’s rhetorical problems.

**Strategies (S)**
In response to problems, and in an effort to fulfill requirements, political actors devise rhetorical strategies. Not uncommonly, the strategies they devise create new problems even as they ameliorate others. Besides posing problems, situations may present political actors with opportunities. Strategizing involves calculations about how to realize goals, minimize problems, and exploit opportunities.

Particularly as persuaders seek to thread their way through difficult dilemmas, they must be practiced at what Lyne (1990) calls the “art of the sayable.” Consider, for example, the difficulties the Obama administration faced when it inherited a recession that threatened to become a full-fledged depression. No one in the administration wanted to fuel the pessimism that comes with loss of jobs, homes, and credit, because optimism about the future is key to lending and spending; it is essential in getting a market economy back on track. Neither did they want to paint too rosy a picture out of fear of a boomerang effect, as President Bush had done with Iraq in declaring “Mission Accomplished.” So, as repairs were gradually introduced into the economy, the administration sought ways to bolster confidence incrementally. “Glimmers of hope” were upgraded to “signs of recovery.” Warning that “real recovery is months, if not years, ahead,” Obama reported that “the gears of our economic engine do appear to be slowly turning once again” (Sanger, 2009).

“There’s a kind of artistry to this, isn’t there?” said Robert Dallek, the presidential historian best known for chronicling how Lyndon Johnson, the consummate politician, never led the public out of its view that everything was falling apart. “You don’t want to come out and say the recession is over. You want to do a version of
Churchill’s line about how this isn’t the end, or the beginning of the end, but rather the end of the beginning.”

(Sanger, 2009)

Rhetorical criticism, ultimately, seeks to examine how symbols are used to shape the audience. As these two cases display, the scope of artifacts worthy of study is vast: a critic can study a political speech, but might just as likely study a billboard, a song, a work of art, or a film. For example, the rhetorical critic would find it worthwhile to study what is communicated to girls and boys in the Disney film *The Little Mermaid*, where the star is a beautiful female who cannot walk, one who can only find love and mobility by giving up her voice. Given all of the possibilities, we strongly urge that you try your hand at doing rhetorical criticism, if for no other reason than that the act of applying principles covered in this book will help you to better assimilate them.

**Method Two: Social-Scientific Approach**

While the humanities in general and rhetorical analysis in particular contribute a great deal to our understanding of rhetoric, the more dominant approach to scholarly research on persuasion today involves the use of social-scientific methods. Although the contributions of humanists and social scientists are in many ways complementary, important differences may also be noted. First, many of the issues of concern to humanists are outside the pale of scientific inquiry. Questions of ethics, beauty, rhetorical artistry, etc., may be deemed important by social scientists, but they recognize also that such questions are not answerable by scientific methods. Second, whereas humanists retain faith in the subjective impressions of sensitive observers, social scientists attempt to replace personal judgments with impersonal, objective methods. Using what is sometimes referred to as the behavioral approach, social scientists subject theories and hypotheses to rigorous empirical tests. Third, humanists tend to regard persuasion as a highly individualized art and tend to be suspicious of extrapolations from scientific research to judgments about how human beings ought to persuade. Social scientists, by contrast, insist that their methods yield reliable generalizations which can be used with profit by would-be persuaders.

Social scientists have developed an array of methodologies useful in the study of persuasion, including focus group interviews, surveys, polls, and quantitative content analysis. Campaign decisions are often made based on focus group research and then tested for their effectiveness based on polls and surveys. These days, participants in the test-marketing of a newly designed campaign advertisement may be hooked up to a brain scanner the better to trace reactions to the ad through the brain’s predominantly cognitive and emotional neural pathways (Heath & Heath 2007; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008; Westen, 2007).

For example, in one study, a group of 38 military veterans or active duty military who were now students at two different Nevada colleges participated in focus groups
that have been designed to examine the college experiences and the attitudes of this population, with a goal toward creating a college climate that would enhance the success rates for military students. The groups were held over a number of sessions, with no more than eight participants per group, and the results brought varied perspectives that would likely not have come up through other forms of feedback-seeking activities such as surveys. While some of the results were to be expected (e.g., the older veteran students felt they had less in common with traditional, non-military students), there were some unexpected findings. Perhaps most interesting was that the veterans expressed a preference for anonymity, not wearing their uniforms on campus or identifying themselves as being part of the military. In fact, they did not want special attention:

Several students reported that they were often singled out by faculty (once they knew of their military background) to speak for veterans in general or that they were called upon to make comments or be used as an example. The majority of student veterans said these in-class experiences made them very uncomfortable and made a bad impression on their non-veteran student counterparts by making them appear to be seeking attention and by highlighting how different they were from other students.

(Gonzales, 2013)

Thanks to the military focus groups, the colleges were able to develop policies that were cost effective and useful, including things such as special training for faculty and special orientations that did not cause military members to spend time considering things that are useful to 18-year-olds, but not to experienced soldiers (Gonzales 2013).

In developing generalizations about the effectiveness of various types of persuasion, social scientists rely for the most part on research experiments conducted under carefully controlled conditions. This approach is behavioral in the sense of treating human judgments and actions as in some sense akin to the predictable, controllable behavior of lower-order animals in the laboratory. Social scientists systematically investigate variations in source (that is, the persuader), message, medium, audience, and context—in who says what to whom, when, where, and how. These communication factors are known as independent variables.

Determining their effects on dependent variables is the object of research. As McGuire has put it,

The independent variables have to do with the communication process; these are the variables we can manipulate in order to see what happens.... The dependent variables ... are the variables that we expect will change when we manipulate the independent variables. Taken together, the independent and dependent variables define what we might call the “communication-persuasion matrix.”

(McGuire, 1978)
Consider, by way of illustration, the following generalizations about the psychology of persuasion. Which do you think are true? Which are false? Which are so muddled or so simplistic that you simply cannot judge their veracity?

1. The best way to persuade people to stop a practice harmful to their health is to combine strong fear appeals with concrete and convincing recommendations.

2. It is generally effective to present both sides of an issue, making sure to indicate why you think the weight of the evidence supports your position.

3. Because opposites attract, it is generally best when using testimonials in advertisements to present sources as unlike the intended audience as possible.

4. The more you pay people to argue publicly for a position contrary to their own values, the more likely they are to change their values.

5. Very intelligent people are more likely to be persuaded upon hearing an argument than are people of very low or moderate intelligence.

6. Vivid descriptions of a single problem are nearly always more impressive than comprehensive statistics.

7. The only rule about how to persuade is that there are no rules.

Not all the generalizations can be true, for if Rule 7 is correct, the others are not, and if any of the others are true, then Rule 7 is not.

There is something to be said for Rule 7. It could be argued that persuasion is too much an individual thing. It is too subject to variations in goals, media, contexts, audiences, and subject matter. Although persuasion may be fun to speculate about, it is impossible to generalize about with any degree of reliability. Many humanists subscribe to Rule 7. Rule 7 is probably wrong, however, or at least in need of modification.

Although there are no ironclad rules that apply to all individuals in all situations, it is possible to formulate general guidelines for persuaders that typically apply. Often, it is necessary to factor in variations in goals, media, audiences, and the like in formulating generalizations. For example, Rule 1 is generally on target, except that people with low self-esteem tend to become overwhelmed by strong fear appeals—at least until they are repeatedly assured that help for their problem is truly available. Especially for them, clear, specific, and optimistic instruction on how, when, and where to take action is essential (Leventhal, et al., 2005).

For reasons that will be discussed in subsequent chapters, Rule 2 is generally accurate, at least as applied to intelligent, well-educated audiences, especially those who are undecided or in disagreement with your position. Rule 3 should probably be marked false. Sources perceived as similar to their audiences tend to be regarded as far more attractive (e.g., likable, friendly, and warm) than sources seen as dissimilar. Rule 4 is generally false, and for reasons that may seem counterintuitive (see Chapter
Rule 5 is generally false as well; moderately intelligent people tend to be most persuadable. As for Rule 6, the generalization tends to hold for most message recipients, although the combination of vivid examples and comprehensive statistics tends to be even more powerful (Brock & Green, 2005).

But experiments testing for the effects of the independent variables in Rules 1 through 6 do not always yield the same results. Life is complicated, and persuasion is especially so. Fortunately, a statistical technique called meta-analysis can be used to compare studies of the same or similar variables and to reconcile apparent inconsistencies (Cooper, et al., 2009). Ensuing chapters summarize findings from a number of these meta-analyses and report on social-scientific theories that attempt to make sense of behavioral research findings and guide the search for new knowledge.

From research of this kind, scholars have become better able to understand the dynamics of persuasion and to provide useful advice to persuaders. Still, we would caution readers not to apply behavioral research findings formulaically, the way a cook uses a recipe. Our hope is not only that you will familiarize yourselves with these findings, but that you will also profit from personal practice and observation, from analysis of the communication of others, from reading humanistic studies of rhetorically significant public events, and from an examination of other social science research that may apply more specifically to the particular rhetorical problems you face. (There is, for example, an extensive body of sociological literature on techniques of community organizing, a body of political science research on electoral campaign strategies, and so on.)

Moreover, as you become more familiar with the procedures used in behavioral research on persuasion, we urge that you interpret findings critically. From time to time we have offered our own criticisms, especially of the tendency of behavioral researchers to ignore situational factors.

Finally, we urge once again that you immerse yourselves in the details of the unique situation confronting you, carefully analyzing your own goals, your audience, your subject matter, and the context in which you will be communicating. Behavioral research provides a rough guide to practice, but it is only one means for acquiring rhetorical sensitivity—and a limited one at that.

**TOWARD A DEFINITION OF PERSUASION**

How might we define persuasion and distinguish it from “non-persuasion”? How if at all does persuasion differ from propaganda?

A useful way to construct a definition is to look for common characteristics in what language specialists refer to as paradigm cases—examples from ordinary discourse that almost everyone would agree are instances of persuasion. Probably all of us would agree that the following are paradigm cases:

- a politician presenting a campaign speech to attract votes;
• an advertiser preparing a commercial for presentation on television;
• a legislator urging support for a bill;
• peaceful picketers displaying placards to passers-by;
• a trial lawyer’s summing up a case to a jury;
• a parent advising a child to dress more neatly;
• a college representative recruiting student applicants;
• a newspaper editorial complaining about anti-inflationary measures;
• a minister imploring parishioners to respect human dignity;
• an essayist decrying American materialism;
• a student appealing to a professor for a makeup exam.

From the foregoing cases it is possible to identify common elements that constitute defining characteristics of persuasion.

**Human Communication**

Each of the above cases involves acts of human communication, whether verbal or non-verbal, oral or written, explicit or implicit, face-to-face or mediated through contemporary technology. Occasionally, “persuasion” is used metaphorically to refer to nonhuman acts, as when we say, “The severity of the blizzard persuaded me to go indoors.” For the most part, however, the term is restricted to exchanges of messages between human beings.

**Attempted Influence**

To influence others is to make a difference in the way they think, feel, or act. All of the paradigm cases given above involved attempted influence. The politician attempted to attract votes; the legislator sought passage of a bill; the student sought permission to take a makeup exam. In some contexts it may be appropriate to refer to “persuasion” as an effect already produced by messages, whether intended or not. For example, we might say, “She persuaded me without even trying.” So long as the context is made clear, this deviation from dominant usage need not bother us greatly. Our conception of persuasion remains virtually the same.

**Modifying Judgments**

Message recipients—otherwise referred to here as receivers, audiences, or persuadees—are invited to make a judgment of some sort. Is this politician trustworthy? Does that legislator’s proposal warrant public support? Whom should I believe: the prosecution or the defense? Is it really so bad to want material comforts?
FIGURE 1.3  Defining features of persuasion.

FIGURE 1.4  Defining features.

The cases of persuasion noted above involve no complex mixture of motives, no masking of persuasive intent, no questions about whether they are attempts at persuasion or some other form of influence. If persuasive intent is not apparent from the context, it is made obvious by what is said and how it is said. These paradigmatic examples of persuasion rely, at least in part, on linguistic or paralinguistic (language-like) messages to promote an image, a point of view, or a proposed action of some sort.

In general, when the term persuasion is used in this book, it is with the paradigm cases in mind. Persuasion is defined as human communication designed to influence the judgments and actions of others. In these respects it differs from other forms of influence. It is not the iron hand of torture, the stick-up, or other such forms of coercion. Nor, in its purest sense, is it the exchange of money or other such material inducements for actions performed by the person being influenced (see Box 1.2). Nor is it pressure to conform to the group or to the authority of the powerful.
Addressed as it is to choice-making individuals, persuasion *predisposes others but does not impose*. It affects their sense of what is true or false, probable or improbable; their evaluations of people, events, ideas, or proposals; their private and public commitments to take this or that action; and perhaps even their basic values and ideologies. All this is done by way of communication. According to St. Augustine more than 1,500 years ago, the fully influenced persuadee

\[
\text{likes what you promise, fears what you say is imminent, hates what you censure,}
\]

\[
\text{embraces what you command, regrets whatever you build up as regrettable, rejoices}
\]

\[
\text{at whatever you say is cause for rejoicing, sympathizes with those whose wretchedness}
\]

\[
\text{your words bring before his very eyes, shuns those whom you admonish him to shun}
\]

\[
... \text{and in whatever other ways your high eloquence can affect the minds of your}
\]

\[
\text{hearers, bringing them not merely to know what should be done, but to do what}
\]

\[
\text{they know should be done.}
\]

(Quoted in Burke, 1950/1969, p. 50)

As the above indicates, not all attempts at persuasion fall inside a neatly delineated core. There are many gray areas of persuasion, the so-called borderline cases in which the intent to persuade is not so clear. Seldom are persuaders fully aware of everything they are saying or doing when communicating a message, and what they communicate may have effects—welcomed or unwelcomed—beyond those the

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**Box 1.2 Toy Truck: Persuasion, Inducements, Coercion**

To illustrate the differences between persuasion, material inducements, and coercion, consider the following nursery school situation. Olivia covets a toy truck that Caleb has been sitting on. Here are some of her options.

**Persuasion**

Aren’t you tired of being on that truck?
That ball over there is fun. Why don’t you play with it?

**Inducements**

If you let me play on that truck, I’ll play with you.
I’ll stop annoying you if you let me play with that truck.

**Coercion**

If you stay on that truck, I’ll stop being your friend.
Get off the truck or I’ll tell Miss Mary.

In her role as persuader, Olivia identifies the benefits or harms from the adoption or non-adoption of a proposal but does not claim to be the agent of those consequences. In the cases of inducements and coercion, she is the agent. Inducements promise positive consequences; coercion threatens negative consequences.
y intended. Moreover, the intent to influence another person’s judgments is often
masked, played down, or combined with other communication motives.

We should note that persuasion is not always aimed directly at modifying
attitudes or altering overt behavior. On any one occasion, in fact, its aim may be to
modify a single belief or value. Thus, the trial lawyer in our example had only one
goal, and that was to modify the jury’s beliefs about the defendant’s guilt or
innocence; the minister focused solely on the value of human dignity.

For the most part, our use of the term “persuasion” is confined in this book to
paradigm cases. That being so, few should question our use of the term or the
definition we assigned to it. But paradigm cases do not constitute the whole of
persuasion. Persuasion is practiced by advertisers, lawyers, politicians, religious
leaders, and their ilk, but also practiced by others who might not ordinarily be
thought of as persuaders. Is it appropriate, for example, to refer to the activities of
scientists addressing other scientists as “persuasion”? Can our definition be applied
to newscasters and educators or to poets and dramatists? And if representatives of
professions such as these are labeled as “persuaders,” should this demean their
status? We turn to questions of this kind in Chapter 3.

**Persuasion versus Propaganda**

Along with such terms as “rhetoric” and “persuasion,” the use of the term
“propaganda” tends to reflect the attitudes of the language user. All are emotionally
loaded terms that figure in disputes of one sort or another, as when a critic of Martin
Luther King, Jr.’s practice of civil disobedience said, “That’s not persuasion; it’s
coercion.” Propaganda differs from persuasion in that it is systematic, sustained,
organized, and one-sided. Its aim is to win over large numbers of people.

But the same could be said of virtually all persuasive campaigns. What is missing
from this list of defining features is the onus that “propaganda” has in contemporary
culture. In an earlier age, “propaganda” was seen as a vehicle for carrying Truth to
the masses (Pratkanis & Aronson, 2001). These days it tends to have more negative
connotations. Propagandists are not seen as simply one-sided; they are also seen as
manipulative, controlling, self-serving, and exploitative. On top of that their logic is
seen as defective. Says Sproule, for example, propaganda “represents the work of
large organizations or groups to win over the public for special interests through a
massive orchestration of attractive conclusions packaged to conceal both their
persuasive purposes and lack of supporting reasons” (Sproule, 1994).

Note in Sproule’s definition the emphasis on concealment. In this view,
propagandists operate in stealth. They masquerade as upstanding citizens. They
achieve their aims not by direct expression but through innuendo, implication,
suggestion, and planted disinformation. Thus has propaganda come to be regarded
as unethical persuasion or, worse yet, as persuasion’s evil twin (Bennett & O’Rourke,
2006; Pratkanis & Aronson, 2001).
But these characterizations have their own problems. If propaganda’s aims and methods are always concealed, how are we to know it when we see it? Are we to trust in the discerning judgment of propaganda analysts? But they are not immune from propaganda in their analysis of propaganda and may, in the guise of objectivity, propagandize in their own right. How are we to know? Moreover, reason dictates that we not treat all propaganda as equivalently evil. Labels aside, we might even be able to identify cases that meet with our approval. Few among us, for example, would oppose the use of one-sided, somewhat manipulative mass persuasion in support of world peace.

Reason dictates that we need to differentiate between types of propaganda, weighing the flat-out objectionable against the relatively benign (Rogers, 2007). In doing so, however, we ought not to assume that our systems of classification are free of bias. In Western democracies, for example, public relations and commercial advertising have come in for a great deal of criticism as being nothing more than tools of corporate power that blunt the power of democracy in the guise of defending it (Carey 1997; Rampton & Stauber, 2003). The problem is, though, that critiques of this kind tend to come from outsiders rather than insiders to these professions. Those who are closely entwined in the situation more often value the work that they do.

By way of another example, we might assert that many Westerners find clearly unethical the Chinese government’s propaganda in defense of its human rights abuses. But surveys of Chinese citizens find far greater satisfaction with their government than Americans express toward theirs (Osnos, 2008) and, from their point of view, Western criticisms of Chinese government practices are highly objectionable forms of propaganda in their own right.

And even when serious analysis is attempted, propaganda analysts often characterize the least objectionable propaganda as “white” and the most objectionable as “black” (Rogers, 2007; Jowett & O’Donnell, 2006). Isn’t it time to evaluate those colorations and also inquire as to what prejudices lay behind the association of black with the negative and white with the positive?

These problems of classification are taken up again in later chapters. Suffice it to reiterate here the great lesson of contemporary critical studies of persuasion: that there is no escape from rhetoric, even in textbook pronouncements about the “nature” of rhetoric—or of propaganda, persuasion, and related terms (Billig, 2008). We return to this important principle in Chapter 3.

**Ethical Perspectives of Persuasion**

Imagine for a moment that you’d like to sell your car and you place an ad in the local newspaper. Three people respond to your ad and you make an appointment with each to show up at roughly the same time. You wanted all three to show up at the same time to persuade them that your car is a hot item, much in demand. This approach has a name: *stacked competition* (Cialdini, 2009). Is your approach ethical?
In the case of your approach to selling your car, a number of questions present themselves. What if one of the prospective customers loses patience and decides to leave? What if a second catches on to your game and expresses resentment? What if your car is really a clunker and you persuade the innocent third buyer to purchase it, only to have the individual sue you later for misrepresentation?

On the other hand, what if setting up a competition among prospective buyers nets you a good price? These considerations may not be irrelevant, but they should probably not form your entire judgment in the matter, either. What about your responsibility to the prospective buyers, or to agreed-on standards for doing business, or to your own conscience? And if you go on to focus on consequences, you might also ask yourself what the effects would be on society if practices such as these became the norm. Finally, because our self-concepts are formed from interaction with others, you might wish to consider what effect your actions are likely to have on you. Common to all these questions is a concern with the ethics of persuasion.

Each of us has at one time or another been victimized by persuaders. Politicians have pandered to us, advertisers have gulled us with their evasions and exaggerations, and even those we’ve loved and trusted have, on occasion, lied to us. When it has happened to us, we have generally deplored it, and often it has caused us great anguish.

Yet if we are honest, we would likely admit that there have been times when we have abused persuasion. We may have been deceptive or exaggerated the positive when it has seemed advantageous. That leads us to questions that go all the way back to Plato’s critique of the sophists. Are pandering, evasions, exaggerations, and even outright lying always unethical, or does the morality or immorality of deception depend on the situation?

Ethics, at the most general level, is concerned with how people should act. In considering a situation from an ethical perspective, we are less interested in what a person actually did or might do. Understanding how people act is primarily a question for psychologists rather than ethicists. However, we can evaluate a person’s actions, and try to determine if what they did do is what they should have done. It is the emphasis on the concepts of should and ought that distinguish the questions that arise when we look at persuasion from an ethical perspective.

Box 1.3 How Often Do You Attempt to Deceive Others?

How often do you attempt deception? Once a month? Once a week? All the time? Do males deceive more often than females? Do adults lie more often than children? Recent research shows that 60% of people lie at least once during a ten-minute conversation and told an average of two to three lies (Feldman, et al., 2002). But deception, according to Hopper and Bell (1984), can include not just outright, deliberate lying but also exaggerations, tall tales, bluffs, evasions, distortions, concealments, indirectness, and—a big category—self-deceptions. With this list in mind, how often do you attempt to deceive others?
THE ETHICS OF PERSUASION

In this concluding section of Chapter 1, we introduce several alternative perspectives on the ethics of persuasion. Here, as elsewhere in the book, our object is not to preach on ethical matters in persuasion but to provoke thought and inform your own choices. That’s not to say that we’ll pretend to neutrality on these matters. We’ve already tipped our hand on the sophist/Platonist controversy, and we’ve made clear our own activist inclinations. But we’d like nothing better than for readers to challenge our positions and make spirited defenses of their own. And so, we now turn to an introduction to the ethics in persuasion, one that will be engaged further in Chapter 15.

Utilitarianism

One way of dealing with ethical considerations and persuasion is to conclude that you are entitled to use questionable means only when your goals as a persuader are worthy beyond question. Thus, a medical doctor might feel justified in deceiving a patient for the patient’s own good—for example, by exaggerating the negative consequences of what would happen if the patient does not get enough exercise, in order to persuade the patient to get off the sofa for health’s sake. On similar grounds, a charitable organization might exaggerate its capacity to make a difference with the dollars its donors contribute. If these inflated estimates were exposed to the press, a spokesperson for the charity might respond that his group is exempted from responsibilities that fall on lesser entities because of all the good his charitable organization does in the world.

By the same token, if our ends are of dubious value, presumably we are obligated to refrain from using ethically questionable means. A former student reported that in his part-time job as a telemarketer to physicians, he could vastly improve his chances of getting through to them by posing as another doctor. But the student ultimately could not justify this deceit to himself and wound up getting another job.

Questions of this type arise repeatedly in the policy-making arena. During the congressional hearings in 1990 on whether the United States should take up arms to combat Iraqi aggression in Kuwait, a teenager testified to Congress that she saw Iraqi soldiers tear babies from incubators. That story was repeated many times in speeches by then President George H. W. Bush and was featured in the subsequent congressional debate on whether to support U.S. military action in the Gulf. The congressional committee was not told, however, that the teenager was the Kuwaiti ambassador’s daughter; moreover, there is good reason to believe that the girl had not herself witnessed these alleged atrocities. Had he known she was the Kuwaiti ambassador’s daughter, said Representative John Porter, the ranking Republican on the committee, he would not have allowed her to testify. But then again, he had heard other witnesses tell similar stories, and he thought there was strong evidence to support the charges (McArthur, 2003).
As in the above example, it is not uncommon that persuaders employ “the ends justify the means” as a rationale for achieving rhetorical success. But we only need to remember history to see the problems that can arise with this approach. The Nazi leadership believed in its ends and justified its use of hate campaigns that were built around polarizing symbols of identification and division. Politicians, public relations professionals, advertising executives, trial lawyers—and, yes, even some classroom speakers—are not above fabricating evidence or using misleading arguments. Once individuals have engaged in practices such as these, it is all too easy to rationalize them—to decide, for example, that a classroom speech is only an exercise and doesn’t count in the real world or that fabricating evidence is justified because the speaker could always find evidence just like it if he had the time to dig it out of the library.

Moral standards for ethical persuasion can also be applied selectively and self-deceptively in conflicts between close friends and associates, and the tendency to apply moral standards inconsistently is all the more persistent because it is often done unconsciously. By deceiving ourselves about our own tendencies to deceive others, we manage both to protect our egos and to appear sincere to others.

Weighing ends against means, means against ends, and both against circumstances is most closely associated with the philosophical position on ethics known as utilitarianism. Its core principle is this: Act to promote as much good as possible. Given two or more alternatives, we should do what will provide the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Lying, ordinarily, does more harm than good, and so is presumed to be unethical. But there may be “white” lies that do little harm and a lot of good, in which case utilitarians would approve them.

Universalism

In contrast to utilitarianism, a second approach to the ethics of persuasion assumes that some practices are intrinsically virtuous and others are intrinsically objectionable, no matter what the objective or the circumstances. Universalist ethics may be derived from law or tradition or religion. For example, the Bible holds that we should never lie, slander, or bear false witness regardless of the good that might possibly come from such actions.

Philosopher Immanuel Kant held to the categorical imperative, the position that we should always act so that the principle of our actions is capable of being universalized. By that reasoning, lying is always wrong, even when it causes no harm in a particular situation, because if everyone were to lie, no one would believe anyone. Lying is wrong, in other words, because truth telling is a necessary condition of our having any meaningful verbal interaction at all (Solomon, 1984).

Of course, the issue with such an approach to the ethics of persuasion is that it does not entertain the circumstances of the particular situation, and instead gives privilege to the universal rule. Situations do intrude, though, and relationships matter. A universalist might have objected to the doctor who lied to his patient to promote her health on the grounds that the doctor has violated a universal injunction
against lying. In fact, however, the doctor might have added years to his patient’s life by persuading her to exercise. We can see how in some situations, the utilitarian and the universalist viewpoints would conflict.

**Dialogic Ethics**

A third approach to ethical persuasion may be derived from a view of communication as ideally *dialogic*. According to **dialogic ethics**, communication between two persons is facilitated when each treats the other as a *thou*, a person, rather than an *it*, an object to manipulate. Communication is imperiled, perhaps even destroyed, when the bonds of interpersonal trust are placed in question (Solomon, 1984). A list of ethical imperatives for the dialogic persuasive speaker or writer might include the following:

1. Practice inquiry before advocacy. Be open to a variety of points of view before you embrace any one of them.
2. Know your subject. If what you say isn’t based on firsthand knowledge, get the information you need from the library or from the Internet.
3. Be honest about your identity. Don’t purport to be an expert if you are not.
4. Try to tell the truth as you perceive it. Don’t deliberately mislead audiences about your true opinions on a matter.
5. Avoid fabrications, misrepresentations, and distortions of evidence.
6. Don’t oversimplify.
7. Acknowledge possible weaknesses, if any, in your position. Be honest about your own ambivalence or uncertainty.
8. Avoid irrelevant emotional appeals or diversionary tactics.
9. Appeal to the best motives in people, not their worst motives.
10. Be prepared to lose on occasion if winning means doing psychological harm to others and demeaning yourself in the bargain.

This, you might conclude, is a reasonable list, but as with any catalog of this sort, shouldn’t there be exceptions to it? For example, doesn’t politeness sometimes require a speaker to *not* tell an audience what he or she thinks of them? Given constraints of time and the situation at hand, isn’t it often impossible to avoid oversimplification? Attorneys who are defending their clients in court may think it unwise to disclose the weaknesses in their positions, and when a client’s future is a stake, can we blame them? And so we see, as with the other approaches to ethics, limitations exist with the dialogic approach. Things are not as tidy as they may first appear.
**Situationalism**

Finally, a fourth approach to the ethics of persuasion comes from those who take the position that the questions of ethics are role- or situation-specific, thus bolstering the case for exceptions to the above list of ethical imperatives. For example, the car you want to sell had been in an accident, but has since been fully repaired. Do you tell prospective buyers about it? Do you admit the problem if you’re asked?

Assuming that ethical decisions should be role- or situation-specific, you might reason that evasion, and possibly even misrepresentation, are legitimate tactics for private car sales and even for business in general. A dialogic ethic is fine in the classroom or between friends, you reason, but it doesn’t apply to strangers and certainly not if you eventually end up selling your car to a used car dealer. You might further assume that used car transactions are a form of game or contest, which is fair because both sides know, or at least should know, the rules. The game metaphor is consistent with the ethical position known as **situationalism**. This view of ethics enjoins us to pay particular attention to the special circumstances of a matter. Johannesen (2002) lists contextual factors as things like:

1. the role or function of the persuader for the audience;
2. the expectations held by receivers concerning such matters as appropriateness and reasonableness;
3. the degree of receiver awareness of the persuader’s techniques;
4. the goals and values held by receivers;
5. the degree of urgency for implementation of the persuader’s proposal; and
6. the ethical standards for communication held by receivers.

Situational ethics are often applied as a middle ground of communication ethics, between the poles of moral certainty on either side of it. In the case of the medical doctor who overstated the dangers of failing to comply with exercise recommendations, the situationalist might ask how dire is the situation for the patient and whether the doctor had tried a more honest and straightforward approach in the past. If the situation is dire and honesty hasn’t worked, then exaggeration might possibly be justified.

Situational ethics also prompts consideration of the institutions of society: Do they place persuaders in situations where, try as they might, it is impossible for them to act honestly and forthrightly and still survive? In Mexico, bribes to local police to get out of traffic tickets is commonplace, and are considered akin to tips given to a restaurant server in the United States. Police are paid low wages because the expectation is that they will increase their income through such practices. What in the United States would be seen as a serious ethical lapse is considered as simple payment for services south of the border.
A situational ethic invites attention to other institutions as well. Which among our society’s cultural, religious, and educational institutions prompt independent thinking, and which of them prompt conformist, cult-like thinking? Does persuasive product advertising prompt another type of mindless conformity, in this case to the insatiable demands of the economic marketplace? To paraphrase Bernard Barber (1996, 2007), have we become enchained by our department store chains, our food service chains, and, worse yet, by the irresistible impulses inside us to buy, buy, buy? Nevertheless, because it emphasizes the particulars of each situation rather than general principles, the situationalist perspective could very easily slide into little more than a rationalization of our actions in different situations, rather than a guide as to what we should do in those situations.

**Putting It Together: Ethical Meta-Perspective**

The four perspectives reviewed here are offered to provide a starting place for you to create your own perspective on the perspectives. As you begin, you should probably consider that the perspective that on first glance seems most appealing to you will probably depend on whether you see yourself primarily as a persuader or as a persuadee. If as a persuader, then you will probably be more inclined to utilitarianism or situationalism, as you will want to focus on finding ways to create rhetorical success. On the other hand, as a persuadee, you are likely to be more inclined toward universalism or dialogic ethics, where the rules for conduct are solid and you will be treated as a valued human being.

In formulating your ethical meta-perspective of persuasion, we advise you to first acknowledge your own biases and then we encourage you to avoid just following the crowd. You should not assume, for example, that what’s commonly done ought to be done. Having an ethical perspective means moving beyond description (what is done) to prescription (what ought to be done), to formulating a clear sense of what’s right.

Recognize, too, that it is possible—at least some of the time—to be ethical and effective. Finally, be aware that the perspectives are not mutually exclusive; hence, it is possible to borrow from each. For example, the utilitarian who seeks to do more good than harm might look to a nuanced situationalism for an idea of the good or to the universalist “Thou shalt nots” of the Ten Commandments for a conception of doing harm. Even the universalist might concede that there are circumstances justifying adultery or even murder while insisting that adultery and murder are intrinsically evil. Even the situationalist might concede that appeal to circumstances is too often an excuse for irresponsible behavior. Ultimately, with regards to the ethics of persuasion there is no court of last resort to resolve the outstanding issues once and for all. Nevertheless we are duty-bound to confront the issues and to act in good conscience with respect to them.
SUMMARY

Rhetoric, the study of persuasion, has had an uneven past. Conceived by the ancient Greeks as the prime instrument of democracy, it has at other times been fashioned for ignoble purposes. Few people are unambivalent in their feelings about persuasion; none can do without it.

The study of persuasion serves three vital functions. First, it informs persuasive practice, enabling would-be persuaders to maximize their opportunities for social control. Second, it enables us to become more intelligent and discriminating consumers of persuasive communications. Third, and most important, it adds to our understanding about human psychology and the individual’s place in society and culture. A communication practice, persuasion is intended to influence the judgments and actions of others but always by giving them the power of decision. Thus, persuasion predisposes but does not impose.

In paradigm cases, the intent to persuade is clear-cut; in the gray areas of persuasion, it is not. Although in this text, persuasion may sometimes be treated as an effect, whether intended or not, for the most part, it is referred to as a practice. Thus, persuasion is defined as *human communication designed to influence the judgments and actions of others.*

Persuasion is of vital importance in any society but especially in a democratic, market-driven society. In an age of global economics and increasing democratization, it may be only a slight exaggeration to say that one fourth of the world’s GDP is persuasion. Your most immediate interests in persuasion are probably in mastering the art and science of persuading and also in becoming a more savvy persuadee. For these purposes, *Persuasion in Society* shifts back and forth between the these two perspectives. It also seeks to prompt us to thoughtful consideration of the ethics of persuasion no matter which side of the persuasion equation we are on. It asks this question: should we be forgiving ourselves as persuaders for practices we would condemn as persuadees?

The study of persuasion benefits from its being a branch of the humanities (here known as *rhetoric*) and also from its being an area of research in the social sciences. The former brings together rhetorical scholars (rhetoricians), media analysts, and other close “readers” of persuasive acts and artifacts in a critical studies approach to the study of persuasion. From these critical analyses may come assessments of a persuader’s rhetorical artistry, logic, or ethics. Criticism is also tied to theory building and theory testing.

In addition, behavioral research contributes a great deal to what is known about how to persuade. Using experiments, social scientists test hypotheses about what works under controlled conditions. Subjected to systematic investigation are variations in source, message, medium, audience, and context—in “who says what to whom, when, where, and how.” Determining the effects of these independent variables on message recipients’ judgments and actions is the object of the research.
Behavioral research of this type is linked to social-scientific theory in the same way that criticism both informs, and is guided by, rhetorical theory.

From the time of Socrates, and maybe even before, thoughtful people have debated about rhetoric and persuasion, some decrying it as inherently tainted, others seeing that it can serve purposes both good and ill. *Persuasion in Society* takes a middle road and features a coactive approach to the practice of persuasion. The central image is one of bridging differences, where persuaders move toward persuadees psychologically in hopes that persuadees will be moved toward acceptance of their ideas or proposals for action.

**QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY**

1. How would you define persuasion? Which of the following cases would you include, and which would you exclude?
   - The blizzard persuaded me to go indoors.
   - The puppy’s sad look persuaded me to surrender choice pieces of filet mignon.
   - The full moon persuaded us to make rapturous love.
   - On seeing the t-shirt on a passer-by, I was persuaded to buy one just like it.
   - The political candidate did her best but could not convince the voters to elect her.
   - The burglar threatened us with his gun.

2. How, if at all, would you distinguish persuasion from coercion? From the use of force? From pressures toward conformity? From harassment? From teaching? From information giving? From spontaneous expression?

3. Think back to a situation in which you were turned down for a request that you thought should have been granted, considering it an instance where your attempts at persuasion failed. In your opinion, what factors may have influenced the negative outcome?

4. Recalling Aristotle’s distinction between issues of judgment and issues of certainty, identify one issue of judgment on which you think reasonable individuals might legitimately differ and another for which you believe the arguments on one side clearly outweigh the arguments on the other. Defend your view.

5. Analyze a course description for one of your courses. Does it communicate interest in persuading? Whether it does so or not, is it persuasive?

6. What items have you purchased recently, and how were you persuaded to buy them? Did you buy them with your credit card, thereby being persuaded to purchase something even when you didn’t at that moment have the money to pay for it?
7 How do twenty-first century marketing and advertising affect you? Are you a part of any consumption communities? What name-brand items do you have in your home, and what name-brand clothing do you wear? Why?

**KEY TERMS**

- Coercion
- Critical studies approach to persuasion
- Dependent Variables
- Dialogic Ethics
- Humanists
- Independent Variables
- Inducements
- Meta-Analysis
- Persuasion
- Propaganda
- Rhetoric
- Rhetorical Criticism
- Rhetorical approach to persuasion
- RPS model
- Situationalism
- Social-scientific approach to persuasion
- Sophists
- Universalism
- Utilitarianism

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