



The Rhetoric Companion

N.D. Wilson , Douglas Wilson

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This textbook is designed for students of classical rhetoric who are old enough to drive, and young enough to still be breathing. It is offered in the conviction that God in His common grace bestowed a great deal of practical wisdom about public discourse on the ancient practitioners of rhetoric, and that we must hold what they taught up against the final standard of Scripture.

Definitions of rhetoric vary in the classical writers, but adapting one of them, with a peculiarly Christian backdrop and understanding, provides us with our working definition of rhetoric: "the art of a good man speaking well." And in this "art," you want three things to line up. You want convergence of ethos, pathos, and logos.

Logos: Logic is the foundation for logos. Logic deals with statements and their relationships with one another. For diligent speakers, and especially for those diligent students who are not all that confident, the inclination is to put all your eggs in the basket of content preparation. Logos is a great place to begin, but ethos and pathos are just as important.

Ethos: Give yourself to the cultivation of your character, but beware of the dangers of affectation. The problems attendant to this will be avoided if your first concern is that of worship, study, helping, giving, and so forth. If someone goes off to a good liberal arts college and comes back home with a tweed jacket with patches on the elbows, a pipe, and faux accent, and is twice as much of a snot as when he left home, the problem is ethos. Remember, a person cannot be a good speaker without being a good person, and this means that in the Christian worldview, ethos is holiness.

Pathos: We do not play with words, we work with them. And because we live in a fallen world, we fight dragons with them. Believe what you say, and say what you believe. And if you do not feel it at any level, this means you do not really believe it. This means there should be a correspondence between the content of what you are saying and how you are affected by it. If you shed false tears, then you are a manipulative, deceitful, treacherous hazard to the republic. Do not try to affect a group of hearers by anything that does not affect you first.

As a stand-alone text, this book can be used over the course of a term or semester. As a supplement or companion, it can be used in conjunction with some of the historic texts for the study of classic rhetoric, extended over the course of a year. Besides ethos, pathos, and logos, this book also covers the five canons of rhetoric, fallacies, the composition of arguments, copiousness, and presentation, among other things. Each of the thirty-one chapters contains a lesson, exercises, and review questions, along with suggested reading material and excerpts from the classical masters of the art of rhetoric.

The Rhetoric Companion Details

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Matt Pitts says

The book is designed to be used in a classroom setting and includes reading assignments as well as practical homework assignments. Honestly, I wish I had been taught this stuff (and understood it and cared to learn it) when I was in high school.

The Wilsons bring a wealth of experience and practice to this text. It's clear that the Christian use of rhetoric (and yes, there is such a thing) is not just a theory they believe but an art they practice. And they practice it well. So well, that you will want to keep reading! Only the Wilsons could make rhetoric this interesting and even entertaining.

For any pastors who might be interested in this book, I found the content helpful for thinking about preaching well. However, their primary aim is merely speaking well and not all that they say would necessarily apply to preaching.

Certainly recommended to anyone interested in learning the art of speaking well and who wants to enjoy themselves while they learn about it.

Jordan Dorsett says

I would love to see a narrative form of this. In it's current format, the workbook is better suited for a classroom (it is a textbook, after all) than for a sit-down read.

The content of the book is great, very typical of Doug Wilson (I'm not yet familiar with his son the co-author). The best of the lessons in my opinion is on the usefulness copiousness and how to achieve it. Buy it for reference/one-off readings, but don't expect to read it through and absorb all it has to offer.

Josh says

Some parts were a 3, other parts absolutely a 5. Love the holistic, practical take on the art of rhetoric. Actually a good resource for pastors and teachers in the Church.

Suzannah says

This was an excellent book summarising the ancient and honourable art of rhetoric, defined by the Wilsons as "a good man speaking well".

I would recommend this book to just about every good man who wants to learn the art of speaking well. A lot is packed into this short course; while I read it with little difficulty over the course of a few hours, it has the kind of density that rewards careful and repeated study.

I have never studied formal rhetoric, but have been accustomed to write and debate from an early age. This

book was a great help, explaining things I had only partially observed (such as rhythmic metre in prose) and filling in gaps (ethos and pathos, or character and emotion, as appropriate persuasive tools). As a writer myself, I'm excited to study my craft in more depth.

I also recommend this book to anyone who wants to learn the gift of the gab, to become powerfully persuasive in speech or writing. The exercises and disciplines in this book will, if you have any aptitude at all, hone and develop your skill into something formidable. However, the book may require a little patience and independent study if the student has never studied formal logic, for example.

Finally, what makes me recommend *this* rhetoric manual above any other is the stout Christian worldview of the authors. They provide a Christian rhetoric, founded solidly upon the Word. Highly recommended.

Joel Griffis says

This was a slightly awkward book. It's billed and organized as a textbook, but doesn't read like one at all. While the book is thoughtful and informative, I couldn't help wishing that the rhetorical cutesy-ness had been ratcheted down a few notches. And this is coming from someone who generally loves the Wilsons' creative style. It just doesn't seem fitting for a textbook to read like a series of blog posts.

Gary Morris says

Just getting started. Footnotes alone are worth the price.

Luke Miller says

I loved this book, savoring it a few pages at a time on my lunch breaks. It packs the punch of a textbook, but it doesn't read like one, because it's filled with striking metaphors and vivid prose (not normally characteristics of textbooks).

The authors define rhetoric as "the art of a good man speaking well", and then proceed to outline that journey for the reader, covering the basics of reading, logic, writing, and speaking. Of course, all of this is done from a distinctively Christian worldview, because (as the authors make clear) this is the only foundation that can support these pursuits. The chapters on copiousness, the rhythm of words, and metaphor were fascinating. Can't wait to do the book debrief on this one.

If the idea of rhetoric seems dry and dusty (maybe even a little shady), you should read this book. If you want to learn to write and speak sincerely (ethos), truthfully (logos), and passionately (pathos), you should read this book. If you're suffocating under the avalanche of nonsense from news outlets, social media, and (at times) even your own heart, you should read this book. It will give you a love and appreciation for the power and beauty of words and the tools to spot when they're being hi-jacked.

Scott says

Purchased via recommendation of a source I trust. And the fact that two of the most enthralling writers I appreciate wrote it.

This is basically a textbook for a classical school. Wonderfully helpful and will be a good resource to go back to over time (e.g. fallacies, deconstructing poetry, etc.) I am actually feeling saucy and kind of want to start reading a dictionary (seriously), pick up Latin again (stopped in high school), and start reading/writing poetry (who knew!)

I'll honestly probably buy more of the classical material that the Wilsons use at St. Andrews just to help sharpen my thinking especially since I'll be graduating from college here in a few months.

Brent Pinkall says

This book is exactly what it claims to be -- a companion. It does not work as a stand-alone textbook, but it works very well accompanied with Quintilian, Cicero, and even modern writers. The Wilsons are pithy, intelligent, and winsome. Where they especially succeed is in applying ancient -- and what can sometimes seem boring -- rhetorical principals and theory to a modern context.

Leila Bowers says

Fantastic as a companion for rhetoric studies and the general curriculum of classical education...you know...like the name suggests. Not so good for what I was looking for, which was a stand-alone text to introduce rhetoric in an understandable and fun way.

Ed Lang says

Very helpful to have it all in one place. Thanks Wilsons. "Senor Cicero"? Which of you did that?

Victor says

Fantastic. Nothing quite like it.

John says

Fun stuff. It's text-bookish, but the Wilson duo are punchy and light so as to keep things moving and interesting. See a short reflection of it here.

G.M. Burrow says

I've read Aristotle. I've read Quintilian. I've read Cicero. I've read half a dozen books written by guys who aren't dead yet. And none of them come even close to what Doug and ND Wilson accomplish here.

This is clear, hearty, powerful stuff--not to mention punchy, quotable, and just a real hoot. If you want the wisdom of the ancients (those dead guys I mentioned up there) without their pomposity and paganism, if you want the advice of the current speech-writing hotshots without their paint-by-numbers, here's-a-list-of-grammar-tricks approach, then this right here is what you want. It'll teach you what rhetoric is (i.e., all of life), what your job is as a rhetorician (speak the truth in love), and how to do it effectively (guts; humility; fall on your face; don't worry--it's not about you).

Having sat under the lectures of both these gentlemen and gotten slapped with many, many grades (both good and bad), I know how powerfully their teaching works, and I know that it whips students into shape for a life of words: words written, words spoken, words acted out.

So get this book. Read it (slowly). Sip it like fine Scotch. And when you're tanked up, go change the world.

Laura says

Surprised at how Wilson can make rhetoric so interesting and even funny. A great resource for students and teachers who are trying to understand a Biblical basis for persuasion in speech and also writing.
