

## A Neo-Aristotelian Critique of the Rhetoric Used by “College Dropouts” in University Commencement Addresses

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### Abstract

University commencement addresses are sources for the study of rhetoric. Speakers at these events have to think carefully about the wording they use when speaking. Otherwise they will not capture the attention of their audiences, nor will they achieve their goals. In this study, the researcher examines the addresses of four university commencement speakers, none of whom were university graduates. The aim is to establish what rhetorical methods of persuasion were used by these speakers in their addresses. As such, the researcher analyzed the artifacts left as records of these addresses from a Neo-Aristotelian perspective. Thus, in this study, the researcher examines the effects of these commencement addresses through applying the three canons of persuasion of classical rhetoric as delineated in Aristotle’s Rhetoric. These three canons are (1) invention, (2) organization, and (3) style. Concerning the canon of invention, the researcher highlights how the speakers apply two major forms of proof used as evidence, viz., (1) “inartistic proofs” and (2) “artistic proofs.” Moreover, in order to obtain a deeper understanding of the rhetorical aspects of the addresses, the researcher also applies the other two canons used in making the addresses more persuasive. These canons are “organization” and “style”. These components could invoke the listeners’ emotional responses and could induce intended responses from the members of the audience. In addition, the study demonstrates that the speakers utilized the traditional rhetorical “elements” in their commencement addresses. It was thus found that the speakers implemented rhetorical tools so as to enhance their credibility and to appeal to their audiences.

**Keywords:** Neo-Aristotelian Criticism, Rhetoric, Commencement Address

## บทคัดย่อ

การกล่าวสุนทรพจน์ในพิธีจบการศึกษา ในระดับมหาวิทยาลัยเป็นวาทศิลป์ อย่างหนึ่ง ซึ่งผู้กล่าวสุนทรพจน์ จะต้องสร้างสรรค์บทสุนทรพจน์อย่างดีเพื่อให้สามารถดึงดูดความสนใจของผู้ฟัง และสามารถบรรลุวัตถุประสงค์ของการกล่าวสุนทรพจน์ งานวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาการใช้วาทศิลป์ในการโน้มน้าวใจของผู้กล่าวสุนทรพจน์ที่ไม่ได้จบการศึกษาในระดับมหาวิทยาลัย จำนวน 4 คน การศึกษานี้ใช้หลักนิโอ-อริสโตเติลเลียน ของอริสโตเติล โดยใช้เพียงสามองค์ประกอบดั้งเดิมของวาทศิลป์เป็นเครื่องมือ ได้แก่ (1) การคิดค้นสิ่งที่นำเสนอ (2) การเรียบเรียงวาทะ และ (3) การใช้ภาษาและลีลา จากการศึกษาพบว่า ผู้กล่าวสุนทรพจน์สร้างประเด็นโดยอาศัยข้อพิสูจน์ สองแบบ คือ (1) ข้อพิสูจน์ภายนอก และ (2) ข้อพิสูจน์ภายใน ทั้งนี้ จากการศึกษาได้สร้างความเข้าใจอย่างลึกซึ้งเกี่ยวกับการใช้อุปกรณ์ประกอบดั้งเดิมของวาทศิลป์อีกสององค์ประกอบ คือ (1) การเรียบเรียงวาทะ และ (2) การใช้ภาษาซึ่งองค์ประกอบเหล่านี้สามารถกระตุ้นความรู้สึกของผู้ฟังและสามารถดึงความคิดของผู้ฟังให้คล้อยตามความมุ่งหมายของผู้กล่าวสุนทรพจน์ได้ นอกจากนี้ ยังพบว่าผู้กล่าวสุนทรพจน์ได้ใช้หลักการดั้งเดิมในการสร้างสุนทรพจน์ ดังนั้น จึงสรุปได้ว่าวาทศิลป์ เป็นเครื่องมือสำคัญที่ผู้กล่าวสุนทรพจน์ใช้ในการสร้างความหนาเชื่อถือ และโน้มน้าวใจผู้ฟัง

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## Introduction

At the graduation ceremonies, the guest speakers receive an opportunity to increase public attention and accomplish their goal. According to Rutherford (2004), in America, speakers at graduation ceremonies come from a variety of backgrounds. However, if the speakers of this event never graduated from a university, this could decrease their credibility as a speaker of the ceremony. This “A Neo-Aristotelian Critique of the Rhetoric Used by “College Dropouts” in University Commencement Address” is a study about how rhetoric serves as an important function in the commencement speeches. The artifacts used in this study are the commencement speeches of four speakers who are college dropouts. They are Michael Dell, Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, and Mark Zuckerberg. The major tool employed in this study to analyze the speeches is a neo-Aristotelian approach of rhetorical criticism.

## Purposes of the Study

The primary concern of this research is to examine the effect on and applicability of the commencement addresses of the three canons of classical rhetoric, according to Foss (2007), that have stemmed from Aristotle’s Rhetoric: invention (the creation of ideas and materials for the

speech); organization (the structure of the speech); and style (the language of the speech).

Therefore, the research questions of this study are:

RQ1: How were inartistic proofs and artistic proofs, according to the neo-Aristotelian approach, employed in the speeches in the American university commencement addresses?

RQ2: What are the general characteristics such as organization and style of the American university commencement addresses?

Through this study, the researcher hope that, it could contribute the better understanding of Aristotle’s rhetoric and help the learners to practice their critical thinkers. In addition, the knowledge of this study will become potential information of the study which is about the effective of rhetoric in the commencement speech in the future.

## Methodology

The methodology utilized in this study is a neo-Aristotelian approach which is one of a qualitative method of a rhetorical criticism. There are three step process to analyze artifacts in this study.

First is data collection. The commencement addresses which are the artifact used in this study are from the four speakers who

did not graduate from the university. All of these speakers are college dropouts who now become some of the most successful men in the world whose were ranked by TIME Magazine. The original speeches were downloaded from internet web sites, and obtained directly by the administration of the academic institution where the speech was delivered. Four speeches given at the university commencement ceremonies employed in this study are presented below.

1) The commencement speech delivered by Michael Dell was at the University of Texas on May 17, 2003

2) The commencement speech delivered by Steve Jobs was at Stanford University on June 12, 2005

3) The commencement speech delivered by Bill Gates was at Harvard University on June 7, 2007

4) The commencement speech delivered by Mark Zuckerberg was at the university of California on June 2, 2001

The second step is data analysis. The neo-Aristotelian approach was employed in this study. According to Foss (2009), the neo-Aristotelian method of criticism was the first formal method of rhetorical criticism developed in the communication field and it was developed to analyze speeches. The neo-Aristotelian approach consists of five canons of classical rhetoric which are invention, organization, style, memory, and delivery. However, in this study, three of five canons were employed to analyze the selected speeches. The three are invention, organization, and style.

Finally, after all speeches had been interpreted and evaluated, the ideas from each speech were tied together to get the conclusion regarding Aristotle's inartistic proofs and artistic proofs as employed in American university commencement speeches. In addition, the general characteristics of the commencement speeches were summarized.

## Literature Reviews

In order to answer the first question, the canon of invention, according to Aristotle's rhetorical criticism, was utilized to generate the implications of the commencement speech. In applying the canon of invention, Foss (2009) mentioned that this step is concerned with the speaker's major ideas, line of argument, or content. The invention includes two major forms of proofs - external proof and internal proof. External or inartistic proofs are used to investigate the sources used by the speakers of the commencement speeches, but whose sources are not the speakers themselves. Internal or artistic proofs, on the other hand, are used to examine the sources that the speakers create.

Artistic proofs are divided into three categories, including logos, pathos, and ethos. In terms of logos, the study investigates the speakers' use of logical appeals by exploring the argument or thesis the speakers are presenting and how that thesis is developed and supported. In order to investigate how ethos was employed in the commencement speeches, the study explores how the speakers enhanced his or her credibility with the audience. To examine how the third form of artistic proof, pathos, was employed in this study's artifact, the author identifies the emotions that the speakers evoked the audiences.

In order to answer the second question, the canons of organization and style of Neo-Aristotelian criticism were applied to investigate the general characteristics in the speeches. In regard to examining the organization or the arrangement of the commencement speeches, Foss (2009) stated critic's task here "is to determine the general pattern of arrangement adopted for the rhetoric." She explained that "organization" of the messages could be constructed in different form such as a chronological order and a problem-solution. According to Andrews (1983), he said that the

structures of the speeches could be topical arrangement, a cause-effect arrangement, a problem-solution arrangement, and a climatic arrangement. Therefore, the study explores how the structures of commencement speeches were structured.

Regarding “style,” Foss (2009) explained that the canon of style is concerned with the language used by the speakers. Therefore, this study assesses how particular kinds of words or other symbols are used by the speakers and how they contribute to the achievement of the speakers’ goal and helps to create the intended response.

## Finding

This section is divided into two major parts: (1) findings on how invention, inartistic proofs and artistic proofs, were employed in four university commencement addresses, and (2) findings on the general characteristics such as organization and style of the university commencement addresses. The tables below demonstrate how four university commencement speakers enhanced rhetoric through three canons of rhetoric, including invention, organization, and style.

**Table 1** Summary of Invention, Artistic Proofs and Inartistic Proofs, employed in the College Drop Outs Commencement Address

Name	Invention			
	Inartistic Proofs	Artistic Proofs		
		Ethos	Logos	Pathos
Michael Dell	utilizing expert’s claim and statistic’s claim <b>Example:</b> “So as a three-year-old company, with just 150 employees, we opened our first international operation in the UK.” (statistic’s claim)	demonstrating good moral character <b>Example:</b> “... I have some bad news for you. I may be on the stage, but I’m still not going home.” (good moral character)	reasoning through deduction (enthymeme) and induction (examples) <b>Example:</b> “Though I left UT prior to the achievement that you’re all celebrating, this school has been a big part of my life in many ways: as a source of guidance and counsel for a young start-up company, as a constant resource of talent and support for a growing and established business, and as the foundation for a dream that this community has helped to build. I feel a tremendous connection with this university, and that’s why I’m so honored to be with you this evening.” (deductive reasoning in the form of enthymeme)	evoking feeling of patriotism, curiosity, pride, and hope <b>Example:</b> “We are a nation of accomplishment, and this ceremony is a great testament to that.” (evoking feeling of patriotism)



Name	Invention			
	Inartistic Proofs	Artistic Proofs		
		Ethos	Logos	Pathos
Steve Jobs	Utilizing expert's claim and quoting of book's claim <b>Example:</b> "Beneath it were the word: "Stay Hungry. Stay Foolish." It was their farewell message as they signed off." (quoting of book's claim)	Demonstrating good moral, good sense, and good will character <b>Example:</b> "I never graduated from college. Truth to be told, this is the closest I've ever gotten to a college graduation." (good moral character)	-	evoking the feeling of pride, curiosity, concern, sympathy, and fear <b>Example:</b> "My doctor advised me to go home and get my affairs in order, which is doctor's code for prepare to die." (evoking feeling of sympathy)
Bill Gates	utilizing expert's claim and statistic's claim <b>Example:</b> "The bigger problem is not the plane crash, but the millions of preventable deaths." (statistic's claim)	Demonstrating good moral and good sense character <b>Example:</b> "So we began our work in the same way anyone here would begin it. We asked: How the world could let these children die?" (good moral character)	Reasoning through deduction (enthymeme) <b>Example:</b> "We can make market forces work better for the poor if we can develop a more creative capitalism –if we can stretch the reach of market forces so that more people can make a profit, or at least make a living, serving people who are suffering from the worst inequities. We also can press governments around the world to spend taxpayer money in ways that better reflect the values of the people who pay the taxes." (deductive reasoning through the use of enthymeme)	evoking a feeling of pride, inclusion, concern, sympathy, and sorrow <b>Example:</b> "The answer is simple, and harsh. The market did not reward saving the lives of these children, and governments did not subsidize it. So the children died because their mothers and their fathers had no power in the market and no voice in the system." (evoking feeling of sympathy and sorrow)
Mark Zuckerberg	Experts' claim, books' claim, and statistic's claim <b>Example:</b> "Except you'd be competing with me and the Open Compute Project I've set up. And if you go up against me you will be crushed, and your \$200,000 educations will be	demonstrating good moral and good sense character <b>Example:</b> "So, Class of 2011, how many times this week have you been told to "follow your dreams?" Six times? A dozen? Your teachers, your parents, your advisors, they all tend to give advice like	reasoning through deduction (enthymeme) and induction (example) <b>Example:</b> "In closing, I hope I have inspired you to follow your dreams today. Although apparently I haven't inspired all of you. I've just been passed a note saying, "Please stop talking. My	Evoking feeling of pride, hope, sympathy, and fear <b>Example:</b> "Remember Tom Anderson and Chris DeWolfe from MySpace? Like Julia, they competed with me before I even competed with them. And do you know

Name	Invention			
	Inartistic Proofs	Artistic Proofs		
		Ethos	Logos	Pathos
	wasted because my PR people will hunt you down and spread rumors about you and your malformed startups that will make your fathers cry and your mothers ill and your siblings shred your baby pictures and your friends slap your grandparents for having you. your parents for having you.” (statistic’s claim)	that. Probably you ignore it. Well, may be I’m getting old, but I actually agree with them.” (good sense character)	friend Terry is suicidal now.” That is nice of you, warning us of your friend’s potential suicide. But did you know I already do that with Facebook’s suicide alert system? It’s true. And if you try to help, I’ll think you’re competing with me. And I won’t trigger the alert system. And your friend Terry will die.” (deductive reasoning through the use of enthymeme)	where they are now? In a basement in Sausalito. No, in a deep, dark, hole under a basement in Sausalito.” (evoking feeling of fear)

**Table 2** A Summary of General Characteristic such as Organization and Style employed in College Drop Outs Commencement Address

Name	Organization	Style
Michael Dell	arranging the speech in a chronological, biographical, and systematical order	utilizing rhetorical devices (repetition of words and phrases, simile, analogy, parallelism, hyperbole, allusion, and rhetorical question), simple sentence, colloquial terms <b>Example of parallelism:</b> “Over the years, I’ve had the opportunity to travel a less-traditional path. But I’ve managed to cover a fair amount of territory. They may be some lessons that I’ve learned that could help you in some small measure on your road ahead.”
Steve Jobs	arranging the speech in a form of topical order and biographical	utilizing rhetorical devices (hypophora, irony, simile, analogy, litotes, repetition of words and phrases, distinction, allusion, rhetorical question, hyperbole, antithesis, and metaphor), simple sentence, and conversational quoting, <b>Example of irony:</b> “But I naively chose a college that was almost as expensive as standford, and all of my working-class parents’ saving were being spent on my college tuition.”
Bill Gates	arranging the speech in a logical chronological order, biographical order, and problem-solution manner	utilizing rhetorical devices (hypophora, anaphora, rhetorical question, hyperbole, simile, allusion, parallelism, and irony), simple sentences, conversational quoting, and colloquial terms <b>Example of conversational quoting:</b> “I’ve been waiting more than 30 years to say this: “Dad, I always told you I’d come back and get my degree.” I want to thank Harvard for this timely honor. I’ll be changing my job next year...and it will be nice to finally have a college degree on my resume.”
Mark Zuckerberg	Organizing in a chronological, biographical, and systematical order	utilizing rhetorical devices (hypophora, anaphora, allusion, hyperbole, litotes, metaphor, analogy, rhetorical question, and repetition of words and phrases) and simple sentences <b>Example of rhetorical question:</b> “follow your dreams? Six times? A dozen?

## Result

All speaker, Dell, Jobs, Gates, and Zuckerberg, enhanced their speeches by using three rhetorical canons such as invention, organization, and style of Aristotle. Regarding invention, inartistic proof and artistic proofs were employed in all commencement speech. However, only logos, according to artistic proofs, were not found in Jobs' commencement speech. With regard to the canon of organization, all speakers constructed their speech in a systematic pattern. The organization of all speech in this study is consistent with the subject and purpose of the discourse and they are appropriate for the audience. In terms of employing the canon of style or language used, all speaker created particular kinds of words that could create varying effects and contribute to the accomplishment of the speakers' goals and help to create the intended response.

Regarding university commencement address invention of inartistic proofs and artistic proofs, the speakers made convincing use of the aforementioned types of proofs. The speakers enhanced their integrity using external proof, internal proof, persuasive language, inclusion method and also problem solving method. The speakers used external proofs frequently which makes the speakers more believable, this is since the evidence is based on statistics or experts claim. Other external proof employed by the rhetors include quoting of conversation and quoting of a books claim makes it more believable than personal opinion. The speakers employed this device to make their speech credible and sincere. This is relevant to Aristotle's theory stating that speakers can gain credibility by employing this type of device in their speech.

Regarding the canon of invention, all speakers enhance their credibility through the use of external evidence. One of the speakers, Steve Jobs, in order to emphasize his sickness, he brought up the explanation of his symptoms from

the doctor's words. Using this expert's claim is more believable than his own word. In addition, using this claim increased the power of the phrase so his audience would remember his suggestion. This is relevant to Aristotle's opinion that speakers can enhance their credibility by employing external evidence. Herrick (1998) ascertains that the credibility of a speaker is a based on his ability to employ the use of external devices effectively since it directly influences his audience response.

Regarding the use of internal proofs, the findings disclosed that the speakers tried to enhance their credibility using good morals. The speakers tried to demonstrate good character, good ethics, and good character. All the speakers portray themselves as sincere, fair, hardworking individuals with good morals. Every speaker motivates his audience to follow their dreams and this portrays them as good individuals who would love everyone to excel. Herrick (1998) and Foss (2009) stated that credibility can be represented through validating a speaker's indulgent on the audiences, moral character, and intelligence.

Secondly the speakers employed the use of pathos extensively so as to evoke various emotions from his audience. The findings indicated that all the speakers employed all the three artistic devices; pathos, ethos and logos. Gates, for instance, evoked his audience's feelings of sympathy when he mentioned about children dying because of the world's deepest inequities. All the speakers tried to evoke their audience's emotions using rhetorical questions, hyperbole and irony. However, in all the university commencement addresses studied the speakers put emphasis on different issues. The findings also showed that all the speakers tried to evoke the audience's emotions by stating their life experience. Herrick (1998) states that pathos is useful and an effective power to move the audience to action. In addition evoking feelings

can strongly influence the judgmental power of the crowd, and all the speakers implemented this. Keith and Lundberg (2008) and Benjamin (1997) stated that speakers have the ability to convey their messages employing vivid languages so as to create the audience familiarity. In addition, all the speakers evoked their audiences' feelings and this made their speeches exceptional and memorable. Benjamin also stated that the speakers could evoke a certain emotion from his audience so as to gain specific attention.

The speaker used ethos the speakers demonstrated themselves as honest and sincere individuals because all of them admitted to have dropped out from college. This increased their credibility with the audience. Ethos has the ability to create a good first impression that will evoke the audience to listen to your speech keenly, Herrick (1998) study proved that ethos is the most persuasive means of persuasion.

The speakers tried to enhance their credibility and strengthen their claim using logical appeal. Logical appeal includes both inductive reasoning and deductive reasoning. The speakers used inductive reasoning using examples that the audience could relate to so as to enhance their credibility. The speakers also used their life experiences as an example. In addition the speakers, used syllogism and enthymeme because all their statements were connected. However, the speakers could ruin their credibility by quoting a book claim and it happens to be false. They could lose their audience's trust and could even falsify all their claims. The speakers also used an analogy irrationally because most of them did not give the things to be compared to and this can lead to the audience drawing the wrong conclusions. Vleet (2011) supports the above argument by claiming that "if an argument contains unknowledgeable fact, illegitimate authority, language inconsistency, and common beliefs, they might be fallacious." Herrick (1998) stated that logos could affect the credibility of a

speaker since it could influence the audience perception of the speakers' intellect.

In terms of general characteristics of the university commencement address, the speakers arranged their commencement addresses in a systematic and logical way. The speakers presented a challenge and solution to their audience. This is to help the audience to relate to the speakers challenges within the real world. The speakers also presented their speeches in a problem solution manner to achieve more understanding and attention from his audience. Herrick (1998) demonstrated how well organized messages could enhance credibility, and the show that the speakers achieved it.

Regarding style or language used, the speakers also used a less formal language: however, it was the appropriate choice of language and words. The speakers also employed the use of hypophora, anaphora or redundancy, rhetorical questions, simile and irony to make their speech memorable and also poetic. The speakers portrayed to be intelligent speakers with the wide coverage of the language and the use of various artistic devices. Herrick (1998) explained that language use could enhance the speaker's credibility. Employing these devices enabled the audience to have a feeling of inclusion.

### Limitation and Future Direction

One of the potential limitations that must be addressed is the limitation of using neo-Aristotelian criticism approach. This study's artifact, in fact, is the commencement speeches from different speakers, but all speeches were delivered to the similar audience in a particular situation. Neo-Aristotelian criticism is an approach which is used to investigate a series of speech from a particular speaker in a specific situation. In addition, this study had investigated only four artifacts, because the commencement speeches from college dropout speakers are very less. Therefore, the finding from this study may not be

an indication of the commencement ceremony speaker's achievement.

Regarding the future study, the researcher should study a series of commencement speech which from a particular speaker in order to use neo-Aristotelian criticism approach. In the other way, if the researcher aims to investigate the speech from different speakers using Aristotle approach, adding more investigating tool may help the researcher to find out better result.

Also, regarding the future the study should not only focus on the three canons of rhetoric, but also how the speakers presented their speeches. This is because the way a speech is delivered is an important determinant of the effect of the speech on the audience. Future research should investigate on how the speakers present his speech.

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