

CHAPTER 1

Introduction to
Digital Writing

QUICK STATS: MONTHLY ACTIVE USER POPULATIONS	
Google Search	3–5 billion
Facebook	3 billion
YouTube	2.5 billion
WhatsApp	2 billion
Instagram	2 billion
TikTok	1.5 billion
LinkedIn	930 million
Snapchat	900 million
ChatGPT	700 million
X (Twitter)	550 million
Reddit	500 million
Google Gemini	400 million
Current Earth Population (Approximate)	8.142 billion
Total Earth Population Connected to Internet	5.5 billion ¹

¹ These are broad estimates pulled from multiple data sources; user populations regularly fluctuate, but this paints a general picture of the extraordinary ubiquity of these technologies.

1.1 // INTRODUCTION

I wanted to start the book with some numbers. There's something of a widespread perception that social media is just a silly diversion that can be dismissed and disregarded. But if you look at the massive scale of these technologies and their influence, we can start to see why this dismissive attitude could be worrisome for our species. Advertisers spent more than \$160 *billion* on Facebook ads alone in 2024. I don't think people would be spending that kind of money on something that didn't work. And it's not just companies selling products; it's political parties who are advertising and trying to get you to vote a certain way, or think a certain way; it's organizations who want your time and your money and your life and your attention. Social media isn't just a cute little thing you do in your spare time. It invades and influences almost every facet of human life. It's time to wake up and smell the silicon, folks.

Approximately 96 per cent of Americans own a cell phone of some kind, and 90 per cent have internet at home, with 81 per cent owning smartphones. Americans use their mobile device, on average, for around three and a half hours every day. Canadians, by comparison, rank slightly higher in total smartphone ownership, at 86 per cent, with Canadians spending more than three hours per day on their device. Globally, companies now spend more money on digital advertising than television advertising, with the global digital advertising spend surpassing the global television advertising spend in 2017.

Global superpowers and special interest groups use social media to spread disinformation. United States president Donald Trump published more than 100 tweets in 24 hours on multiple days during his first presidency from 2016 to 2020. Since then, the world's richest man, an American immigrant from South Africa named Elon Musk, purchased the Twitter company and renamed it "X,"² while Donald Trump started his own social media company, which he called Truth Social. I wonder why these super-powerful men would be interested in controlling social media companies?

Well, the digital data industry circulates billions of dollars, while unchecked and minimally regulated **technology** companies wield tremendous power and accumulate unprecedented wealth. And, with the majority of North Americans getting their news from social media, these platforms are immensely powerful propaganda platforms that can influence public opinion and perspectives in a heartbeat. We're unprepared as a species to deal with these issues; social media seems to have snuck up on humanity, and very few people take it seriously enough. How did we get to a point where more than three billion people on the planet actively use Facebook? And what are the implications of this new media situation? Our new media environment

2 Throughout most of the book, I'll refer to this company as X (Twitter).

has shifted in the last decade from a largely centralized model to a decentralized media model, where social media has taken center stage.

These problems are highlighted and accelerated by the emergence of easy-to-use artificial intelligence chatbots. Social media content, posts, images, videos, and interactions can be generated at a rapid pace using AI tools. A user can create bots to post content on their behalf, sowing discord in online spaces; this can be amplified by large organizations that can employ hundreds of programmers to run thousands of social media bots. Some scholars are using the term **zombie internet** to describe what's now happening on social media sites: as tech journalist Jason Koebler describes, this zombie internet is made up of bot accounts interacting with other bots, spamming low quality text and images, or strange mixtures of human and bot accounts talking to each other, leaving very little real, human connection. And it's happening in every corner of the internet, including the most popular social media sites like Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, Reddit, and everywhere else.³

In the summer of 2025, Donald Trump, at the outset of his second presidency, shared a fake, AI-generated video of former president Barack Obama being handcuffed while accusing him of treason.⁴ Political allegiances aside, this may serve to illustrate that we're not just *entering* strange times; we're deep in the middle of the weirdness.

The problems of social media and computer technologies are not just problems of marketing, advertising, and economics. They are problems of communication, language, **ethics**, government, disinformation, and psychology. The problems of social media are the problems of our daily lives, our children's lives, and the world that we are building for future generations. Consider how disinformation about fossil fuels and climate change, published in the form of Facebook advertisements by oil companies, can literally change the course of humanity's history and jeopardize our survival on this planet. A Stanford History Education Group study found that 96 per cent of high school students did not see a conflict of interest in a web page about climate change published by a fossil fuel company.⁵ Humans are not yet equipped to deal with the complexities and nuances of digital communication.

The purpose of this book is to offer a rhetorical approach to using and understanding these emergent, digital tools in purposeful, effective, and ethical ways. We must collectively recognize that social media is no longer a tool, toy, or novelty. It is a powerful, new form of media that we must contend with. And a rhetorical approach

3 Alex Hern and Dan Milmo, "Spam, Junk ... Slop? The Latest Wave of AI behind the 'Zombie Internet,'" *The Guardian*, May 19, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/article/2024/may/19/spam-junk-slop-the-latest-wave-of-ai-behind-the-zombie-internet>.

4 Matthew Bigg, "Trump Posts Fake Video Showing Obama Arrest," *New York Times*, July 21, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/21/us/politics/trump-fake-video-obama-arrest.html>.

5 Joel Breakstone et al., "Students Civic Online Reasoning: A National Portrait," Stanford History Education Group and Gibson Consulting, November 14, 2019, purl.stanford.edu/gf151tb4868.

to using digital communication technologies can not only help train writers to secure interesting, useful jobs as social media specialists and digital marketers, but also help to ensure that we are using these technologies in ethical and meaningful ways.

The essence of social media is textual and visual communication. Parts of social media look and act like old media. Parts of social media are completely new and shape the way we communicate with one another, as well as the way that information finds us. Users of digital media easily blur the lines between fact, opinion, promotion, advertisement, and sponsorship. Technology companies take little responsibility for the massive, far-reaching issues they have helped to create.

This new media reality puts a writer in a serious position. To find a job as a person who writes means to also find a job that deals, at least in part, with technology and digital media and thus with the ethical problems related to social media. Social media technologies provide both great opportunities and great responsibilities for a writer. The world is now your **audience**. There are powerful tools built into social media platforms that allow a user to **target** other users directly. A writer and communicator who is adequately preparing themselves for the contemporary job market must immerse themselves in the world of digital media. Despite this, college programs often fail to keep pace with the rapid advancement of technology. Most people who love to write and are passionate about language will not be so lucky as to find literary fame and become the next Ernest Hemingway, Fyodor Dostoevsky, or Sylvia Plath. Many college-aged writers hang onto these dreams without fully assessing the reality of the current job market. Now writers must find new ways to use their talents so they can survive and support themselves in the world.

Increasingly, jobs in marketing, communications, advertising, and media are jobs that deal directly with social media and the internet. Thus, preparing yourself to use these tools and technologies in purposeful and ethical ways will not only help the world contend with social media but will also help you prepare for a career. Companies are recognizing that they must enter the digital space and are looking for writers and communicators who know how to use social media and digital tools effectively.

It is plain to me that many college degree paths for literature, writing, communication, and sometimes even marketing are not up to date with the technological landscape. Even college first-year composition programs are struggling to keep up with the rapid developments in disinformation, digital literacy, and artificial intelligence. Thus, this book fills a gap in the available resources and provides a text for those who seek to prepare themselves for the technical and ethical issues that surface in the use of social media and web-based tools for communication.

This guidebook does not provide a complete answer to the proposed problems surrounding social media and society. These problems will always need further thought and investigation. You can be part of that process of thinking about our technology. The technological landscape is always shifting. New problems arise. This

book can be added to a college writing course to give it a digital and technological update. It can be used by a writer who wants to learn competitive skills to break out onto the job market. It is also a useful resource for small business owners and other professionals who would like a compact but comprehensive resource on using and understanding social media and the web for growing their businesses online and learning about the issues and problems that surround social media and its usage.

We can no longer ignore social and digital media. Digital and emergent media are not just made up of funny cat memes and silly videos. Social media is used for disseminating hyper-targeted propaganda, for enormous marketing and advertising campaigns (from the local to the global level), for organizing political revolution, and for gathering data about the private lives of citizens. At the time of writing this updated edition of the book, Facebook has more than three billion active monthly users and continues to grow. This massive upheaval of social media technologies has come with a slew of enormous problems: How do we combat disinformation? How do we use internet technologies ethically and for the good of humanity? How can we write effectively across the ever-changing social media platforms that billions of people use every day, such as Facebook, Bluesky, TikTok, X (Twitter),⁶ and YouTube? How do you choose a social media platform to run your first advertisement on? And should you even be handing over your money to these platforms? These are all important questions that you will encounter in this book.

1.2 // WHAT IS DIGITAL WRITING?

What is the theory and practice of digital writing? In simple terms, digital writing is writing with technology and writing the type of content that appears across digital media. Digital writing primarily means writing for the web and social media. But it is also an interdisciplinary practice that brings in skills and ideas from the fields of graphic design, computer science, psychology, the philosophy of technology, and **rhetoric**. The most effective digital writers understand, at least in part, how the tools and technologies they are using operate. They understand how to target specific populations using Facebook Ads Manager and understand the subtle nuances of memes to capitalize on viral moments. The most ethical and serious digital writers also understand the underlying technologies so as not to abuse them.

Billions of people use digital tools and technologies every day to communicate. It is worth examining how these tools can be used effectively and ethically. Effective digital writers use technology skills, language and writing skills, and a rhetorical, analytical approach to help inform their decisions. This book is held together by

⁶ Twitter was rebranded to “X” by Elon Musk in 2023. Bluesky, a competing and similar short-post platform, was created by one of the original Twitter founders, Jack Dorsey.

what I call a “rhetorical spine.” If you ever feel as though you are lost or don’t know how to approach a particular digital media project, you should always be able to go back to the principles and foundations of rhetoric to help guide you.

What does this mean in concrete terms? Let’s imagine that you just started your first day as a digital marketing intern at Pipeline Engineering Firm. Your supervisor asks you to use their new “social media listening” software to gather data about how the world is reacting to the news of a tragic accident involving one of their employees on an oil pipeline repair project in Alberta. They ask you to present this data in a two-page, easy-to-read report. Next, they ask you to write a series of X (Twitter) posts to update the public on their concerns related to this pipeline accident. How would you approach this problem? It almost seems as if there is no place to start for our intern. They have never used this social media listening software before. They have used X (Twitter) before but only have 30 followers and have never managed an account for an enormous brand, especially not in a crisis communication situation.

Should our intern ask a colleague for help? Should they start Googling the name of this social listening software to figure out how to use it? Is there some kind of internal manual that the intern should reference? Should the intern suggest that such a critical public relations crisis should be handled by someone with deeper expertise and familiarity with the company, its history, and how to deal with massive emergencies of this scale? The answer to all of these questions is maybe, eventually. But these are not the first actions our intern should take.

The best answer, perhaps not to your surprise, is that our intern should stop and *think*. You may already realize that there is too much *doing* being done in our world and not enough thinking. But how does *thinking* help our intern in this stressful moment of dealing with new technologies? And what will our intern think about? Here is where rhetoric can guide us through this uncharted territory. Rhetoric, crucially, not only deals with the effectiveness of communication but also with matters of truth. Feeling unprepared in an early digital writing role is normal; a rhetorical framework will help you navigate situations that initially seem impossible.

Plato famously reveals in his dialogue *Phaedrus* (c. 360 BCE) that speakers must align themselves with philosophy in pursuit of the truth.⁷ The rhetor who does not think philosophically about the issues they speak about can lead us down dark pathways. And history has proved this time and time again, when we see powerful orators who have not considered the full weight of their arguments or who deceive

7 Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehemas and Paul Woodruff (Hackett, 1995), 259e–262c. Readers can also find a free copy of Plato’s *Phaedrus* and many other classic texts via the MIT Internet Archives or Project Gutenberg. For example, see Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, The Internet Classics Archive, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, classics.mit.edu/Plato/phaedrus.html. However, the online versions of Platonic dialogues do not usually include Stephanus numbers.

their audience, sometimes at the national or global scale, and often with horrific repercussions. Adolf Hitler was one such talented orator who used the power of persuasion to disastrous effect. But we do not always realize when we are complicit in doing something unethical with digital media, text, language, video, or speech. The linguist and political theorist Noam Chomsky has argued that what is more horrifying than “the occasional Hitler” is the reality that millions of people go along with these persuasive figures.⁸

To think about a digital writing **scenario** such as the one I have described above means to think about a set of issues surrounding the creation of a text or project and a complex network of interests, organizations, groups, people, economics, social realities, ethics, new technologies, and much more. The digital writer must stop to consider elements such as audience: who are the real people who will read these posts? What do they really want to know? Who are the real people within the company who will be looking at this social media listening to data I’ve been asked to gather and report upon? What will they do with it? How does all of this relate to the overall message and goals of the company itself: What is the company’s “voice” and how will it be perceived by these audiences?

1.3 // RHETORICAL FRAMEWORK FOR DIGITAL WRITING

Here is how we can put many of these ideas into a simple framework that can guide the digital writer toward handling a project:

- › **Scenario:** Stop and think about the scenario and take notes. Who is the audience? Or who are the audiences? What do they want or need to know? What is the most effective way to send that message to your audience?
- › **Purpose:** What is the purpose of this project, message, or campaign? Are you trying to drive traffic to a specific URL? Or are you looking to increase the number of post engagements within a specific social media platform? (And for what purpose does the company want increased post engagements?)
- › **Media Object:** Consider the text or media that needs to be created. What should it look like and where will it be published? Who will read or see it? What content needs to be communicated, and how will this particular form or genre help communicate the message? Should it be a short or long video, for example, or could it be a quick post?

8 *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media*, directed by Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick, Zeitgeist Video and Necessary Illusions, November 1992, archive.org/details/dom-25409-manufacturingconsentnoamchomsk.

- › **Technology:** What technology do you need for the “collateral” or media you are creating? What software and hardware will you need to create the media object? How can you teach yourself to reasonably use this software if you aren’t familiar with it?
- › **Deadline:** How long do you have to create the media object, post, text, image, or content? What is the deadline? What obstacles will you face?
- › **Process:** Will you stop to review and revise your own work? Will you then also edit it? Who will review your work and provide feedback? What will they be looking for? And at what stage will you receive this feedback? Even if it’s just a “quick post” on the company LinkedIn page, you should still stop to revise and edit your work and make sure you haven’t made any mistakes. (I once did a big “Ooops” when I labeled a leading surgeon at our hospital as the *wife* of our CEO in a company-wide newsletter. My supervisor told me it was his wife, but I should have fact-checked this, and I shouldn’t have followed his and my own bias and assumption. They were standing next to each other in the picture.)
- › **Ethics:** What, if any, are the ethical problems associated with what you have been asked to do? How can you reconcile those issues within yourself or your organization? What can you do about them within the web of competing interests around you?
- › **Benchmarks and Review:** How will your success be measured by others? Or how will you measure your own success?
- › **Value and Data:** What value does this media object or messaging or set of data outcomes have for you, your business, your company, or your organization? What can you do with the data from this project in the future?
- › **Optimization/Reflection:** How can you learn from this project? And, in the future, how can you create an even more successful project based on your findings and audience response?⁹

You will return to this framework throughout the book whenever you plan, draft, or evaluate digital content. And a final note here: the digital writer cannot forget the self in this complex network of messages, ideas, actors, organizations, and technology. What do you as the writer value and find meaningful? Rhetorician Kenneth Burke wrote that you are also an audience to your rhetoric, to your writing, speech, and communication. The self is also an audience. Can you hear yourself? Are the projects you are working on challenging you without overwhelming you? Does

9 Sorry, I couldn’t come up with a catchy mnemonic device for this framework. I always thought those were kind of cheesy and suspicious, anyway. Like, “Oh, your framework just happens to fit into this catchy, memorable, and relevant word? No way, I don’t buy it.”

the company you work for engage in business practices that match your personal values and ethics? Perhaps these questions fall more into the realm of psychology and outside this book's purview—or perhaps not; but they are incredibly important questions nonetheless and can even lead you to great philosophical insights or at least a degree of important introspection: Are you doing what you should be doing in the world? Are you contributing to a better world? If not, how can you negotiate with your employer to adjust your workload or contribute your thoughts about the ethics of the projects in a way useful to your employer or teams around you? Or do you need a career change to a new industry?

It's not a trivial consideration. An anti-capitalist atheist is probably not going to have a very fun time working as the social media manager for a mega-church. Someone who grew up on a 40-acre farm surrounded by conservationists will feel an extraordinary conflict writing deceitful or slanted content for an oil company's social media page. Ultimately, the self, the speaker, is an incredibly significant part of the rhetorical situation. You matter, and the things that you do professionally and creatively matter.

The best advice I can give in this domain is again from Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*. Rhetoricians also need to be philosophers. Rhetoric and philosophy were once closely linked disciplines. Plato has Socrates tell us, in this dialogue, that the most effective rhetoricians are concerned with speaking the *truth*. Underlying the web of social media, internet, technologies, corporate interests, and the mess of the present world is this guiding principle you can return to: When you are creating language, no matter the platform, that language should approximate or orient itself toward *truth*. Readers of *Phaedrus* will see this theme emerge throughout the many meandering exchanges between Socrates and Phaedrus.¹⁰

We should remember, too, that even when a digital writer does everything thoughtfully, thoroughly, truthfully, and to the highest professional standards, there can be circumstances outside of our control. Virality and viral moments on the internet can be orchestrated for nefarious or for well-intentioned purposes. Social networks and actors engage in complex ways that are not fully understood at this point in time. So, if you ever need to, you can come back to this place in the text and show your employer the following lines: Sometimes large groups of people behave incredibly unpredictably and irrationally on the internet, and no one knows exactly why. There is no science of social media to model how, why, or when it happens, and it can happen even when a company or team member or individual acts responsibly and thoughtfully. We are not able to control everything that happens on the internet or social media.

¹⁰ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 260e–263c.



DISCUSSION: Think of a recent “viral” event, such as a video that “went viral,” a news clip, a song, an idea, behavior, or fashion style that has erupted into the public’s attention. One of the top trending X (Twitter) hashtags in 2020 was #BlackOutDay. In the United States, Black Out Day is a day when Black citizens spend no money (or only spend money at Black-owned businesses) as a form of collective protest against racial inequality and systemic oppression. What viral events have occurred recently? What do you think made them “go viral”? What appeals so broadly about these particular media objects, ideas, or events?

For rhetorician Gerard Hauser, this indeterminable nature of communication is characteristic of all human interaction. Hauser tells us that rhetoric occurs in the spaces where some objective view of the world cannot solve our problems and we must negotiate an outcome.¹¹ For example, when my wife and I measure a door frame in our old house to figure out what size door we need to purchase, there is not much opportunity for rhetoric related to the facts of the matter to emerge. We simply take out our tape measure and we can come to a fairly precise understanding of the dimensions of the door we will need. However, when it comes to the style, materials, whether the door should have a glass window in it, or the price we

¹¹ Gerard Hauser, *Introduction to Rhetorical Theory*, 2nd ed. (Waveland Press, 2002), 7–8.

are willing to pay for a door, there are almost limitless opportunities for rhetoric to emerge. We will need to negotiate and come to a shared understanding of each other's positions. For Hauser, rhetoric is what happens when there is no objective truth to be found. And in technology, government, education, business, and all of our social and civic life, the majority of issues we face personally and as a collective cannot be perfectly measured or determined with absolute, objective truth.

Also, just as we are not in control of how the world responds to us, we are not always perfectly in control of our economic or social situations. I recognize this deeply, having spent several years trying to find an ethical and useful place in the world; I worked as a marketing coordinator in commercial real estate, a digital marketing specialist and later a marketing/communications specialist in healthcare, a semi-professional traveling musician, a dishwasher at an Irish pub, a technical writing consultant with an engineering firm, a small business owner running a short-term vacation rental on Airbnb, and now as a professor. Sometimes we do need to make moral sacrifices to earn an income just to survive. That's a harsh truth. And our values and ideas about the world can change. These days, I think short-term vacation rentals and small-town landlords are ruining our economy by strangling the housing supply and driving up property prices. Anyway, you won't find your dream job right away. That's fine. I'll discuss the immense and varied career opportunities for digital writers in Chapter 5.

For German philosopher Martin Heidegger, the way that beings encounter the world is through being thrown into it. In other words, when we are born into the world, we find ourselves with a number of conditions of the human world already set in place. Our language has already been created for us. We have systems of money. We have religions, belief systems, value systems, ideologies, governments, institutions, and science already buzzing and alive in the world. In digital writing, this means we inherit platforms, algorithms, and technological norms we did not choose but still must navigate. To be a human means to be thrown into a world that is already moving along at a furious pace. Put very simply and somewhat reductively, Heidegger tells us that to be human means to be a sense-making creature. To better understand ourselves—to make sense of ourselves—we can question our relationship with technology and not take for granted the understandings that have been passed down to us. For example, most people think that technologies are just tools that accomplish some goal or act as a “means to an end.” We think of a hammer as being something with which to drive nails, or a car as something to get us from A to B. But these technologies reveal truths about human nature and actually reshape the way we understand the world.¹² In this vein, this book tries to make some sense of what digital and social media are, what we can do with them,

12. Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (Harper & Row, 1977), 287–317.

and how we can use them in ways that are useful and generally good, as well as how we can use these tools and technologies in ways that express meaning effectively and accomplish communication goals that we set out to achieve.

In summary, the term digital writing encompasses a wide array of rhetorical, digital, writing situations that are not covered by traditional coursework or textbooks on technical writing, business/professional writing, or composition. This book seeks to lay groundwork for students and professionals to think rhetorically about writing in digital media spaces. To do this, I look at the skills we can develop, the models and theories that inform our understanding of media and technology, the various genres and ever-changing platforms that people use (like landing pages, Facebook, or Google Analytics), and how all of this can be brought together into a comprehensive approach toward using and harnessing social media and the web as a writer.

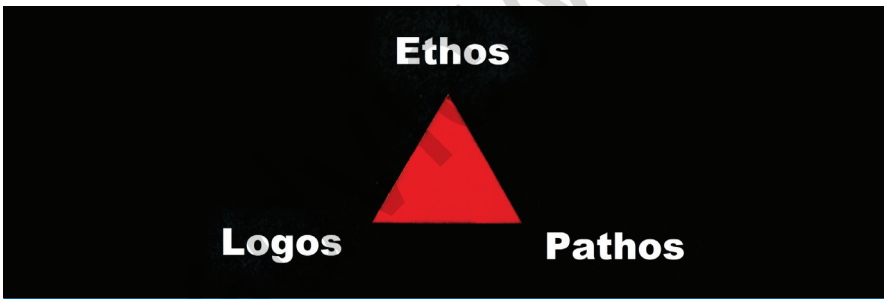
1.4 // RHETORIC, AUDIENCE, AND TECHNOLOGY

Digital writing involves multiple, simultaneous skill sets. For example, when you write a Facebook post as a social media specialist, you are not just writing the words of the post. You are also, perhaps, selecting an image from your organization's archive that will resonate with your target audience. Perhaps you plan to schedule the post to be published at a specific time because you've analyzed data that suggests that your audience is most active on Facebook on Saturday evenings. Perhaps you are even writing two similar posts to run an A/B test to see which one will perform better. Perhaps you will then take the results from your posts and synthesize this information with other data to prepare a report for a manager. Thus, you can see that to do something that seems quite simple at face value—writing content for a corporate social media page—is actually a complex series of actions and decisions that involve strategic, rhetorical writing and ethical considerations; the use of several different types of software; some applied mathematics in data analysis; and a broader understanding of business, marketing, and culture.

Today's writer is not just a wordsmith. Today's successful professional writer is often using complex software, analyzing data, designing digital publications, posting on a company blog, or writing highly targeted advertising copy. This book is designed to help readers understand the various tools and technologies that are used in social and digital media, and to help readers practice the craft of writing for digital media. These are essential skills for college students who are studying in degree programs such as English literature, communications, business, creative writing, journalism, and marketing, among others. This book is also useful for writers who are interested in advancing their career, brushing up on their professional and digital writing skills, or "catching up" to the common business writing practices that are now taking place across the world.

The core of this book is based on a rhetorical approach for writing for digital media. But I also bring in *interdisciplinary* ideas to help explain complex issues. So, this book brings in perspectives from the fields of computer science, psychology, marketing, linguistics, media theory, and the philosophy of technology. Of the utmost importance to this book is the field of rhetoric: an ancient and now somewhat forgotten art form, which was once the necessary companion of philosophy.

When we begin with the significant study of rhetoric, we can look back to the historical time period of Ancient Greece. Rhetoric is most often associated with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, the three most famous Ancient Greek philosophers. While Plato and Aristotle both wrote extensively on rhetoric, it is of course very likely that other thinkers and writers were dealing with topics in rhetoric at the same time. We just happen to have surviving and significant texts from Plato and Aristotle, which ground the field of rhetoric to them. Socrates didn't write anything down, it appears, but he does appear as a character in or subject of Plato's dialogues.



Every college student in North America has probably seen this triangle at least a dozen times, usually first in an advanced K–12 English course or in a freshman composition course at a university: one triangle with the corners labeled Ethos, Pathos, and Logos, and often a second triangle with the corners labeled (something along the lines of) Speaker/Rhetor, Audience, and Text.¹³ As a professor who often teaches freshman composition and academic writing, I have had students tell me that they understand the triangle to be a powerful framework for analyzing advertisements, speeches, and more generally the world around them. But these reductive triangles do not capture the whole picture of rhetoric. Thus, I've also discussed with students how these heuristics might be incomplete. Of course, I've also had students who find rhetoric to be an absolute bore, and they fairly say they are sick of the triangles! What do you think? Come back to this section on rhetoric later on and revisit these principles. They may start to come together or make sense as you dig deeper into this book and your pathway as a digital writer.

13 I maintain that these triangles can be problematically reductive. The Ancient Greeks integrated their metaphysical ideas with their philosophy and rhetoric, and triangles are often incorporated into religious and spiritual thinking. We might call this something like “The Ideology of the Triangle,” and we can be critical of these heuristics, even though they are helpful. Still, it wouldn't be a book about rhetoric and writing if it didn't have at least one triangle diagram in it.

The study of rhetoric is the study of the *art of persuasion*. For Aristotle, rhetoric was the *faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion*. Across the web and social media, this might mean using language, graphics, video, evidence, emotion, speech, appeals to authority or endorsements, or an incredible array of other persuasive techniques. The *means* of persuasion are vast.

These tools and technologies that we use to communicate were developed by others: by private individuals, by companies, by organizations. For philosopher and computer scientist Jaron Lanier, certain technologies get “locked-in” to our world. Facebook does not need to exist, in other words. It’s possible that Myspace could have been the dominant platform for social media in the 2010s. Innumerable factors play into the emergence of new media. Moreover, these technologies operate in ways that we do not always understand, using proprietary algorithms to distribute and sort information. An effective digital writer who uses social media does not also need to be a software engineer. But just as a pilot who understands how to conduct maintenance on their own aircraft is a more effective and better-informed pilot, a digital writer who considers how technologies work and what constitutes them will be a better informed and more effective digital communicator.

Rhetoric is also the critical framework through which we can analyze digital media and the ways it manifests in the world and appears on our screens. What does the media want us to do? How does it want us to behave or think? Commercially, it almost always wants us to buy the product. But it can also want us to sign up for a newsletter, desire a new product or lifestyle, plan a trip to a specific location, or purchase an experience. For thinkers like Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, these complex desires, and the way that organizations exploit these desires through advertising, can be fruitfully explored through the lens of ideology.¹⁴ When we see an advertisement such as an airline billboard with a fit, attractive, young couple lying on the beach, we are not just being told to “buy an airline ticket.” We are also being told that we should value vacations. We are being told we should value spending money. We are being told that relaxing on a beach is more valuable than caring about the carbon emissions expended from taking the airplane to another country across an ocean. There are ideological messages coded into communication that we must consider alongside the surface and readily apparent messages like “Drink Coca-Cola.” Advertisements and marketing carry moral messages within them, like sets of instructions for what we should value.

Rhetoric, put briefly, then, is the art of *persuasion*. Rhetoric is taught in university writing classrooms across the United States, and it’s a powerful toolkit for professional writers, including marketing and social media professionals. A primary concept from the study of rhetoric that you should become adept at thinking about

14 *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology*, directed by Sophie Fiennes, screenplay by Slavoj Žižek, P Guide Productions & Zeitgeist Films, 2012.

is *audience*. Audience is a term that refers to the intended recipient of a message or communication. When you plan to write or create something, you should always have an audience in mind. Who will receive the message? What characteristics do they have? What is your audience's age, socioeconomic background, education level, and familiarity with your brand or product? What types of occupations do they have? What are their politics? Who are the people—the real people, the living, breathing humans behind the screen—whom you are trying to reach?



Too often we think of advertising in simple terms: yes, it's the glaringly obvious billboard or loud toothpaste commercial. But the average human now sees thousands of advertisements in a day, across multiple forms of media, and they are not all as obvious as the giant electronic billboard. For example, advertisements appear as sponsored articles, Facebook videos, and search results in Google. Rhetoric is a framework that helps us to ask a number of important questions when we are both analyzing and creating digital media. Rhetoric is an ancient art, a contemporary field of study, and a deep and rich discipline that is often misunderstood and overlooked. Only in the past few decades have scholars and professionals begun to grasp again the significance of the study of rhetoric. With rhetoric, we can begin to ask the following questions: What messages are at the surface of an advertisement? And what messages are beneath the surface, or ideological? What does the advertiser (the company, organization, political party, etc.) want us to do? to think? to feel?

This term, *audience*, becomes incredibly important as we begin to dive deeper into this book and the world of social media. You can imagine a marketing team sitting around a board room table and discussing a new product and how they will

market it to customers. The marketing team will seriously consider their audience from a demographic perspective: What is the age group, gender, ethnicity, income level, educational background, and other characteristics of the people who buy our product? Audiences are composed of real people with deeply held values, ideas, ideologies, various cultural backgrounds. These people come from different social and economic experiences, with varying education levels and different understandings of the world.



Audience can mean the immediate, physical audience directly in front of you, such as a crowd at a music concert or the people listening to a speech at a political rally. But audience in the rhetorical sense means something much more. Consider this question: Who comprised former US president Joe Biden's online audience? Biden's audience consisted of millions of X (Twitter) followers. It consisted of Facebook users who scrolled across advertisement videos. His audience consisted of not just those who voted for him in 2020, but anyone who came into touch with his image, ideas, policies, or messages. As digital writers, we must think about audience not just as the immediate, physical audience but as the enormous network of interconnected people who tune in and out of messaging across multiple forms of media. Heck, this is exactly why ancient rulers used to stamp their faces on coins. It's a powerful method of building an audience, building recognition. To return to the music concert, the band on stage has a much larger audience than the people who are in the crowd on any single night. The true audience of the band is also every person who has enjoyed their song on the radio, watched one of their music videos on YouTube, or purchased one of their T-shirts, and so on. Audience is a broad, encompassing term that can be used to encapsulate the full extent of a person's or group's reach in the world.

In the world of social media, audience starts to mean something concrete. We often have the opportunity to analyze the available data of our audience. Where do they live? What do they do for a living? What are their interests? What information have they voluntarily submitted over these platforms?

In marketing terms, these sets of data about consumers are called demographics. It is often helpful to break down the etymology of words. You can see *demos* from the ancient Greek, meaning collective people, as in “democracy.” And you can see *graph*, which refers to writing. So, demographics, put differently, are descriptions about populations of people. The concepts of rhetoric and audience are incredibly powerful. In fact, you can easily imagine how these types of data sets drive business decisions. If research shows that consumers are buying millions of a certain type of frozen burrito with beans and chicken, a company that produces frozen Mexican American food might launch an entirely new product to meet this demand. Businesses need to listen to their audience. In terms of social media, companies use Facebook Ads Manager and similar platforms to target specific segments of the population with particular messages.

1.5 // RHETORIC IN APPLICATION

The rhetorical triangle is a system of analysis that can be applied to arguments. It is an extremely useful tool to think about when designing and developing social media content.

While the rhetorical appeals represented in this diagram were first conceived by Aristotle more than two thousand years ago, their utility is still quite apparent. Almost any advertisement or intentional messaging uses the appeal of **ethos**, **pathos**, or **logos**, or some combination of the three, to attempt to persuade its audience.

Think of an advertisement you have seen lately. Perhaps it was a Coca-Cola commercial showing a group of young, attractive people dancing on a beach and drinking soda. This type of advertisement works through pathos by appealing to emotions like joy or the phenomenon of the “fear-of-missing-out.” It makes the argument that “if you drink Coca-Cola, you will enjoy your life and have fun” or perhaps “if you drink Coke you will improve your social life and make friends.” It is not selling the product itself as much as a set of ideas and emotions surrounding the product and, by extension, the brand. **Brand awareness** marketing is a subset of marketing ideas that does not seek to immediately sell a product but rather raise awareness of a particular organization or set of products; for example, a clothing company might pay hundreds of thousands of dollars for an Instagram celebrity to wear one of its articles of clothing and post a picture of themselves in that branded piece of clothing on their Instagram account. There may or may not be affiliated links to purchase the clothing item. What is important about this strategy is the message

it sends: “I can be like Kylie Jenner if I wear this sweatshirt with this particular logo on it.” When we start to break down these types of messages with rhetorical analysis, we begin to see their absurdity. Yet advertising is effective. Why is this so?

Oftentimes an advertisement does not sell a product directly but rather these associated ideas. Slavoj Žižek refers to the kernel of meaning at the center of an object as the “agalma” of a product.¹⁵ For example, a recent advertisement campaign for the Subaru auto company shows someone surviving a car crash. This plays off the emotion of fear, through the appeal of pathos. This advertisement is not selling the technical specifications of the automobile. Rather, it is selling a concept or an idea: the idea of keeping your family safe through purchasing this automobile.



How can we explain the sudden celebrity fascination with the Champion clothing line in 2019 and 2020? For decades, the Champion brand was most widely known as an inexpensive, athletic clothing line featured in major North American retail outlets like Walmart, Shopko, and Kmart. Then, high-profile US celebrities began sporting this brand across social media. What explains this phenomenon? Is it an “organic trend”? Or was it a paid and coordinated effort by the clothing company? Does it matter how this fashion cycle began? What can this trend teach us about paid versus organic marketing efforts? In a universe with billions of galaxies in it, what makes one hooded sweatshirt more desirable than another?

¹⁵ *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*.

One possible explanation for the effectiveness of advertising is the irrationality of humans and their overreliance on emotion in decision-making. We are largely irrational creatures, even if we do not believe we are irrational. We make decisions based on emotion. We are driven very heavily by our desires and our unconscious, as well as millions of years of evolutionary conditioning. We are not always as logical as we imagine ourselves to be. Rhetorical analysis of advertisement and marketing helps us see through the veil and the tricks.

To start to learn how to conduct rhetorical analysis, we can use the helpful (though not perfect) framework first proposed by Aristotle. We will now look at the rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos and how they can be applied in both traditional and digital advertisements and marketing messaging. Rhetorical analysis can be applied to any media object, speech, text, product design, and even to our own thoughts in self-reflection and meditation. It is a powerful tool.

1.5.1 ETHOS

Ethos refers to “character” and “credibility.” For Aristotle, ethos was perhaps the most important component of rhetoric. When all else fails, we fall back on our trust of a person to evaluate their message. This is important to remember. Because of our long-term, sometimes lifelong exposure to certain brands, we come to know and trust them and thus purchase their products instead of other options. Appeals to ethos are appeals to credibility. These appeals to credibility also apply to influential figures in our lives; for example, we trust a medical doctor over a nurse. In terms of social media, and in all of our writing, it’s important to think about how we create ethos as a **brand** and as individuals.

Ethos is also closely tied to our values and belief systems. There are many parts of the United States where the perspective of a pastor is more important to certain people than the perspective of a scientist with a doctoral degree. The ethos we build in our lives is communicated not only through the style and diction in which we write and speak but also in our credentials, the manner in which we dress and present ourselves, our gender, and the medium through which we communicate. Ethos is closely tied to trust and respect. Why do we respect certain figures more than others?

In social media, how do we build ethos? We might consider social media followers to be a significant indicator of a person’s credibility. We might say, “Look, they have millions of followers! They must have something important to say!” But we know that big brands and famous figures use hundreds of thousands and often millions of dollars in advertising to build their social media presence. Nowadays, social media is largely a “pay to play” game. I have purchased YouTube views as an experiment, and it’s surprisingly easy and can be inexpensive at a certain scale, due to the rise of “click farms.”

Consider the common toothpaste advertisement trope: “Nine out of ten dentists recommend this toothpaste.” Well, if the dentists recommend it, it must be good for you! That’s what we think. But then think back to the mid-twentieth-century tobacco company advertisements that showed white-coat-wearing physicians smoking cigarettes and promoting the product. We have to be careful who we trust; ethos can in some cases be manufactured, not merely earned. Aristotle wrote that the appeal to credibility may be the most persuasive of all and that a person’s “character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses.”¹⁶

If we are thirsty and walk into a gas station and have two minutes to get back to the car to make it to our destination on time, we may be more inclined to trust our evaluation of ethos than any other appeal: we will grab a familiar brand that we know we enjoy over anything else. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we also saw the very serious dangers of ethos. Why do some individuals trust a political figure’s interpretation of science over the scientist who has read the peer-reviewed literature?



Consider how then-presidential candidate Barack Obama used Facebook to connect with a young audience. How did Obama build his ethos with the aid of the social media platform Facebook? How, also, was the ethos of the Facebook company impacted by Obama’s use of it? How has the ethos of the Facebook company and its figurehead Mark Zuckerberg changed since 2008? How does Facebook’s attempt to portray its ethos compare to how public opinion generally sees Facebook? How does Facebook attempt to sway public opinion about the company and its platform? What strategies does Facebook use to capture more of the global or international market? How does Obama continue to use social media like Facebook and X (Twitter) to sway the opinions of voters in relation to the formal US Democratic party?

16 Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, The Internet Classics Archive, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/rhetoric.1.i.html.

Making judgments based on ethos can be efficient if we vet our sources and listen to the right people making the right arguments. But we do not always know who to trust or in what domains we can trust them. Even experts make mistakes (though scientific experts make mistakes much less often than do politicians, because of their training and usually rigorous methodological approach).

Whom do you trust and why? Who trusts you or your organization? Should they?

1.5.2 PATHOS

Appeals to emotion are called pathos. Most humans experience a wide variety of rich emotions that range from utter despair to incredible joy. **Universals** are phenomena that appeal to everyone, or almost everyone. They are shared experiences. Advertisers know that food, animals, and sexuality are useful subjects or themes for their campaigns because everyone has a hunger drive, almost everyone likes cute animals like cats and dogs, and almost everyone has a libido or natural



Ethics: A “click farm” is a business that employs artificial intelligence and human labor to generate social media likes, clicks, and interactions artificially. You can imagine a room filled with hundreds of people, each with 10 to 20 devices in front of them, clicking in a machine-like fashion, playing videos, and artificially increasing a company’s or individual’s social media engagements. Companies like Facebook and YouTube try to “crack down” on these types of businesses, but they are too widespread, and they can be difficult to detect. Google is more serious about this issue in relation to their advertising platform. You can imagine that a person could pay for clicks to generate advertising revenue in a sort of digital advertising positive feedback loop. Is this unethical? From the perspective of this textbook, and in terms of professional advice, you should never pay for clicks or artificially increased social media statistics. Consequences could include legal action against you to being permanently banned from certain web or digital services. But, nonetheless, lots of people do it or use other strategies to pay their way “to the top” of social media algorithms. Otherwise, how can we explain actor Will Smith’s constant appearance in YouTube’s top videos and video recommendations after he partnered with the company? It is my opinion that the people of the world generally have better taste, and this must be one of the most flagrant examples of “pay to play.” Another rhetorical strategy of analysis: follow the money.

sexual drive. So, you can quickly think of a number of companies that use appeals like these ones to elicit particular emotions within you.

Imagine the string of successful Hardee's (or Carl's Jr.) fast-food commercials starting in the 2000s that featured tall, lithe, normatively sexually attractive women eating cheeseburgers and wearing the colors of the United States flag with classical rock as a music bed. It's simple, stupid, and probably unethical, but it *works* to sell burgers. Such an ad appeals to several emotional or psychological factors at once: sexuality, hunger, nationalism or patriotism. I believe that humans can do a lot better than these types of advertisements. Nonetheless, we see themes of power and sexuality appear in advertisements across all industries: automotive, travel, technology, and beyond.



This cheeseburger may look delicious, but how closely is the image related to reality? It's actually covered in glue and inedible substances. And should we be so easily persuaded by an image? In Canada, the obesity rate for both adult men and women is approximately 30 per cent.¹⁷ In the United States, it is around 40 per cent for adult men and women aged 20 and above; and as many as 80 per cent of US citizens are either overweight or obese.¹⁸ So, are we really doing any service to the overall well-being of humanity with these types of appeals? For Plato, rhetoric and philosophy must go hand in hand so that we speak the truth. Yet, in food photography, non-food substances like glues and chemical sprays are used to create shining surfaces and to hold pieces together, while a fast-food burger meal can contain more than a day's worth of calories for an average person. Is marketing simply the process of aligning a producer with a consumer, as so many traditional theories of business and economics would ask us to believe? Are we speaking the truth to ourselves as a species? Or are we killing each other and our planet in the pursuit of profit? Is that a leading question? Yes, my friends. Yes it is.

¹⁷ Public Health Agency of Canada, *Obesity Statistics in Canada*, September 2024.

¹⁸ National Center for Health Statistics, *Prevalence of Overweight, Obesity, and Severe Obesity among Adults Age 20 and Older: United States, 1960–1962 through August 2021–August 2023*, NCHS Health E-Stat no. 111, February 2026.

Let's return to the above example. The Subaru Corporation ran a series of ads in the mid-2010s showing violent, horrific, destructive automobile crashes in which the driver of the vehicle survives. What arguments does this video advertisement make to the audience? Critics of these types of advertisements discuss post-traumatic stress disorder that can be brought on by intense vehicle crashes. Imagine if we could extract or remove the dimension of pathos from such an advertisement. What would it look like?

Let's try a thought experiment. Let's imagine we are tasked with writing a video commercial for a Subaru vehicle. Let's imagine that we are asked to make the advertisement as factual as possible. Let's imagine that the Subaru company has received feedback that its advertisements are too emotional. So, we are going to try to write the most rational, factual, non-emotional Subaru commercial possible. How can we remove pathos entirely from an advertisement? Let's try.

To remove pathos from a video advertisement, we would have to remove the "music bed," the background music used in a video advertisement. Music stirs and sets our emotions. So, we must remove the music in order to attempt to remove any appeal to pathos. What else? Perhaps the human subjects in the video use facial expressions like smiling. We would need to ask our actors to remain deadpan. But then someone says, "Wait, that actor looks kind of like my brother." So, we must remove the young male actor. Then we realize we must remove all the actors.

So now we have no people and no music in our commercial. Can we continue? Not like this, no, we cannot continue. The viewer might be stirred emotionally by the sight of a street with rows of houses that remind them of the street where they grew up. Let's be safe if we really want to remove any appeal to pathos: we should remove all the video. Instead, let's just put black text on a white background. That way we can be perfectly rational and non-emotional in our video advertisement, right?

You can imagine a Subaru commercial that attempts to stick purely to "factual" information. Imagine a white background with black text that reads as follows:

The new Subaru Forester is the safest vehicle on the market. It starts at \$34,900 with 0 per cent down. Learn more by calling your local dealership or visit Subaru.com.

This seems simple enough. But where does pathos still remain at play here? Do we really know if the Subaru is the safest vehicle on the market? How could we even verify this? What if there is some defect or recall that comes out later? We would have to qualify this sentence immensely to make it "factual."

We could try something like, "The 2027 Subaru Forester is a safe vehicle." But this statement is not rooted in any quantitative data. We could try looking to the internal data we have from our colleagues at the Subaru Corporation to say, "The 2027 Subaru Forester received a higher safety rating than any other 2027 vehicle." Even if we assume this is true for the sake of the thought experiment, it is still not a

pure representation of logic or fact. It is a value judgment. We have to assume that the safety rating bodies are purely objective. We also have to wonder if the quantitative rating is higher than any 2020s vehicle that might still be on the market. And so on, and so on, like this, until we must come to the eventual conclusion that all language can strike up a **pathetic** appeal, or an appeal to pathos.

For an example of this type of video advertisement with vehicle crashes from Subaru, use the following search query in YouTube: “Forester 2016 New Subaru Commercial Checking on the Kids.”

DISCUSSION: Is it ethical to use this type of footage in a paid advertisement? What type of unforeseen effects might this footage have on the audience? Is it effective at presenting an argument? What is this argument?

1.5.3 LOGOS

Logos refers to appeals of logic. Most humans consider themselves to be rational, logical beings, but studies time and time again have shown that this is far from the truth. Many people commit logical fallacies daily and make ill-informed decisions that can lead to wide-scale economic catastrophe. Consider the phenomenon of “panic-selling,” which occurs when stock prices begin to decline, prompting investors to sell their holdings, which causes a further decline in price, which creates massive, rippling, negative effects for thousands or even millions of people, all based on emotional decision-making unrelated to the productivity or worth of the initial company in question.

Logical arguments very rarely appear as pure logic. Appeals to logos typically work on several levels. Let’s consider the following scenario. Let’s imagine that we are looking for a pub to visit during our vacation in Savannah, Georgia. We might think to ourselves, “I will just Google ‘pubs in Savannah’ and pick the one with the highest rating!” Does this not seem like the most rational and logical way to select a brewery? If the locals love it, and the masses have spoken, then it must be a great place to have a drink and maybe order some food!

But here is what we have not considered: To what extent is the data skewed? Perhaps the top-rated pub in Savannah ran a marketing campaign in which they offered a free beer to anyone who left them a five-star review online. Perhaps the top-rated pub in Savannah is owned and operated by a family with generational wealth that has been maintained since before the American Civil War, so they are able to spend millions on advertisements to shape public opinion. Perhaps the top-rated pub in Savannah was previously owned by locals who built a wonderful

business that the city loved, and these are old reviews; now it is owned by a corporate chain that has raised prices and changed the nature of the business.

We have to be careful to think about where the numbers come from and the methods employed to collect the data we use. Otherwise, we run the risk of coming to false conclusions using bad data. When collected properly, such as through scientifically proven methodologies, data should be neutral or close to neutral. But this is not always the case. Data can be wielded like a weapon to prove a point. Data exists in contexts, and those contexts need to be analyzed and qualified and understood to the best of our ability.

It's important to recognize the longstanding philosophical debates about the divide between subjectivity and objectivity. There are also interesting debates about the social construction of science. Nonetheless, the world's greatest thinkers recognize the importance of science for social progress and democracy. When we do not make decisions based on science and instead choose to inform public policy from ideological or political standpoints, we run the risk of horrific and unforeseen consequences. While most of the European Union was able to stamp out the first wave of COVID-19 in their countries by the summer of 2020, the United States was seeing a record number of cases that summer.

But we should be very clear here. Logic alone does not always persuade. In a perfect world, where we could identify absolute truths and share them with others, we could imagine that logos would be the “be-all and end-all” of rhetoric. We would work together to find truth, share that truth, and make decisions based on that truth. Of course, you must know, the world we live in does not work in this way, and we are a long way from some sort of peaceful scientific utopia. We would not need to convince, persuade, or debate if we could simply “look to the truth” on every issue and find the “right” answer.

You have probably had a frustrating conversation with a colleague, loved one, family member, or friend at some point, probably in the recent past, in which you attempted to show them evidence about something, but they were still not convinced. Let's imagine that you have a family member who thinks that the recommendation to wear a face mask during a global pandemic is a hoax perpetrated by political motivations and that masks are not actually effective at preventing the spread of COVID-19. You might go on your phone or computer and try to find an article that explains how masks help prevent the spread of the disease, and you might send that link to the person whom you are trying to convince. What happens next? They might listen, but more often than not, especially with deeply charged political issues, most people will not immediately change their mind. People are resistant to change, especially about issues that they associate with their values, such as religion and politics.

You could go even further. You could construct a literature review gathering up all of the peer-reviewed, best possible evidence that exists on the planet Earth

and give a two-hour lecture explaining the major findings about mask usage and pandemics. And you *still* may not convince your friend, relative, or acquaintance. This is frustrating, but it's an important realization: logos *should* be the most effective of rhetorical appeals, but it seldom is. We *should* try to build our world based on reason and evidence, logic and science. But the reality is that we do not, and most people do not, function this way. So, when is logos effective? I am not saying logos is ineffective, not at all. You have probably seen countless advertisements that (at least at first glance) appear to rely primarily on appeals to logos. Let's look at some practical examples.

Consider a real estate listing on a site like Realtor.com or Zillow.com. There is a reason that real estate listings are image-heavy and that, even during a pandemic, home buyers want to see either 3D models online or ask their realtor to give them a tour of a prospective house. There is a reason that the average home listing features at least 20 photographs of the house. Buying a house is not as simple as saying, "We want to purchase a house with at least 1,500 square feet, 3 bedrooms, a bathroom, a roof that is less than 10 years old, and a yard that is larger than 50 feet by 150 feet within 10 miles of a school and fits our budget of roughly \$200,000." Home shoppers may start with a list of practical features, but they are not always what drive the purchase. When a prospective homebuyer visits a home, they are doing more than thinking about the dimensions of the rooms and the age of the boiler. They are smelling the house. They are seeing how the light comes in through the windows at 7:00 p.m. and dances through the oak tree in the front yard. They are imagining a yet-to-be-born child laughing and playing and running down a hall. They are lifting up a bathmat to see if there are cracks in the tile and signs of neglect.

But there are logics underlying even our emotional decisions that we may not always recognize. We might not realize the connections and associations we make. A realtor might be frustrated when their client says something like, "I didn't like how the house smelled." The home shopper might not even realize that they subtly picked up on the smell of old cat urine and that not only do they have a sort of evolutionary biological disposition to be revolted by the scent of feline urine, but they may also have buried memories of cat smell that they associate with a verbally abusive uncle's house they visited once 20 years ago. Their mind associates the smell with verbal abuse. And that is a powerful conclusion, even if it is absurd. The threat of verbal abuse is gone, but the memory is triggered by cat urine. These types of illogical logics are always lurking about in our mind.

1.6 // PROCEDURAL RHETORIC

The field of rhetoric has made important progress in the last decade. While rhetoricians continue to consider the significant frameworks left to us from Ancient

Greece and classical rhetoric, scholars have contributed useful and interesting new frameworks for rhetoric. These contemporary areas of rhetoric include subfields such as visual rhetoric, digital rhetoric, procedural rhetoric, and non-discursive rhetoric. Rhetorician and game designer Ian Bogost describes procedural rhetoric as arguments that are made through “rule-based representations and interactions.”¹⁹ Bogost’s work uses procedural rhetoric to explain how video games make arguments. But the idea of procedural rhetoric can also be used to consider how complex digital systems make arguments.

In video games, a procedural argument can be quite simple. Let’s consider a two-dimensional, side-scrolling platformer game, such as Nintendo’s *Super Mario Bros*. The game makes a number of arguments through its rules and systems. The player has a limited amount of time to complete a level, a restriction that creates an argument about the urgency of the situation. The player sees a countdown timer and hears music that speeds up if the clock starts running out of time. The player can even have a physiological reaction to this sense of urgency: elevated heart rate and sweaty palms. The argument in this game design tells us to “run!”

In digital writing, procedural rhetoric is an extremely useful concept and tool of analysis. It can help us think about how technologies shape the way we think about the world and the types of arguments that complex systems are making, such as those that appear in organizations, social media platforms, or operating systems. Consider something as seemingly simple and “neutral” as a drag-and-drop web building tool like WordPress or Wix. What if the most common default background color for their templates were yellow instead of white? There would be a lot of yellow websites out there. And then we might start to normalize yellow as a background color. Maybe demand would go up for yellow print paper. Scientific studies would examine whether yellow backgrounds and yellow paper increase reading attention or result in higher test scores. Much of what we take for granted in our immediate reality is absolutely arbitrary. Procedural rhetoric can help us to unravel some of those arbitrary features of reality by guiding us to examine the choices that are made within systems and how those systems play out those decisions into our world.

An example of procedural rhetoric that is often used involves a case of civil engineering. Imagine that we have an Island A and an Island B, both part of the same country. Let’s imagine Island A contains many natural resources, which have created a lot of wealth and prosperous companies on the island. Let’s imagine that Island B does not have many natural resources and its residents live in abject poverty. The government, which is responsible for both Island A and Island B, has decided that there must be a bridge built between the two islands to increase commerce, ease the exchange of goods, and allow for faster transportation. The representatives from Island A say that their island can pay for the bridge, and it can come out of

19 Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (MIT Press, 2010), ix.

their budget. Seems like a good deal so far, right? Everyone gets to use the bridge, and the wealthier island will pay for the bridge for the good of everyone.

Well, not so fast. The engineers from Island A bring their proposal to the government. It's a bridge with an eight-foot height capacity. The engineers tell their government that this design will increase the stability of the bridge and that it's the best way to build the bridge. So, the government approves the project, and construction finishes in just under a year. But it's only much later that the residents of Island B realize what has happened. Can you tell what the problem is?

The average height of a public transit bus is more than eight feet. Eight feet is no problem for privately owned cars, trucks, and vans to get through. But the residents of Island B, who rely on public transport much more heavily than the residents of Island A, now have no way to get to the other island unless they walk.

What has happened here? The bridge makes an argument. The government makes an argument. The wealthy island has made an argument. What are these arguments?



Above, a person plays the video game *Minecraft*. *Minecraft* is the best-selling video game of all time, with approximately 350 million copies sold at the time of writing this book. *Minecraft* is a “sandbox game” that allows players freedom and choice in their exploration and development of the virtual world. According to figures from the International Data Corporation (IDC), the video game industry is now larger than the global film industry and the North American sports industries, making it the world's largest entertainment industry. Contrary to the popular perception that video games are only played by young men, the fastest growing population of gamers in the United States is adult women.

Another Bogostian example of procedural rhetoric in games is to think of character creation options within video games. For a long time (and still today), it was uncommon to be able to choose dark skin tones in video game character creation menus. And it has nothing to do with the difficulty of implementing such a feature, which is relatively trivial. Rather, game designers make an argument about what they believe to be normative by creating rules or processes that limit options within a system. It is a kind of procedural argument about the range of “normal” skin colors.

Procedural, algorithmic issues can be found not just in video games but in much of the software that we use. In the rapidly emerging world of facial recognition and surveillance, it’s not surprising that these types of software currently have much higher accuracy in identifying white male subjects more than any other type. These artificial intelligence programs are designed by staff who are disproportionately white and male. Can we not then blame a case of mistaken identity on the software? These types of procedural, technological situations should be at the forefront of our attention in the coming years. As the creators of our technology, we do not need to let it control us and go unchecked. Yet here we are. Advertisers, marketers, programmers, developers, stakeholders, and so many involved in organizational decision-making often forget that audiences are composed of real, living people. It is perhaps too easy to forget this when we are looking at data sets. Certainly, it must be recognized that people can sometimes be easily persuaded to purchase, vote, or think a certain way. And humans can sometimes commit to extraordinarily irrational decisions and ideas. We cannot forget the human element of technology and media. The viewer, the user is a real person with their own set of goals, ambitions, pains, pleasures, and values.

1.7 // CAREERS IN DIGITAL WRITING

Almost all ways of being a writer now involve computer technologies. Even a strictly creative writer must contend with word processing software to prepare their manuscript for submission, send emails to literary agents, or use social media to promote book readings.

There are many occasions when writing by hand is useful: in taking notes, in signing documents, in carefully editing a printed piece of writing, in concept mapping or sketching ideas. But, by and large, writing professionally means using a computer or, increasingly, a mobile device. It means learning new software and applications quickly. It means adapting to new media and quickly evolving memes. But these tools and technologies are powerful. To be a responsible digital writer sometimes means staying abreast of the “global conversation.” It means knowing where to draw the line, when to ask the right ethical questions, and when to push back.

As writers who seek to enter the job market, you may increase your field of opportunity by enhancing and strengthening your digital skillset. Candidates with strong digital skills listed on a resume may stand out among competitors as having a technical edge or skill-based advantage.

There is no denying that companies are now spending more on digital marketing than on television advertising. These days, the digital sphere is where much of our commerce, socialization, and humanity takes place. There are almost countless career opportunities for individuals who have developed strong digital writing skills and continue to expand their technology skills in tandem with their writing and rhetoric toolkit.

A writer with strong technology skills can be hired as a graphic designer, communications specialist, user experience designer, instructional designer, marketing specialist, digital marketing specialist, human resources representative, website manager, public relations specialist, or for hundreds of other jobs with wide-ranging titles. The outlook for marketing/advertising careers is strong in North America and throughout much of the world.

Chapter 5 will deal more explicitly with careers and landing a job as a digital writer, but you can see for yourself, right now, how many opportunities are on the job market for your future. Use a job aggregate site such as Indeed or Google's job search platform to search for keywords such as "marketing," "social media," "digital marketing," or "communications" and browse through the thousands of job openings. These job openings exist at non-profits, in the private sector at small companies and enormous corporations, in school districts and universities, and in state and federal governments. The astute job seeker will look everywhere for openings. Here are just a few of the titles you might find that rely on digital writing and digital media skills:

- › Web Manager
- › Digital Content Specialist
- › Social Media Coordinator
- › Digital Marketing Specialist
- › Communications Specialist
- › Director of Communications
- › Marketing and Communications Specialist
- › Crisis Communications
- › Internal or External Communications Specialist/Director
- › Social Media Specialist
- › Marketing Coordinator
- › Marketing Specialist
- › Social Media Director
- › Social Media Manager
- › Email Marketing/Marketer
- › Copywriter
- › Public Relations
- › Human Resources
- › Technical Writing
- › User Experience
- › Journalist/Reporter
- › Social Media/Digital Media Journalist/Reporter
- › Editor

Salaries for marketing and communications professionals, especially those with strong digital skills, tend to be very high. If a person lives in an area with a reasonable cost-of-living, they can live a decent life by making a good salary as a marketing or communications professional. For example, in 2015, I made \$77,000 per year for a starting salary as a digital marketing specialist for a healthcare company in a small city of around 25,000 people in the Midwest region of the United States. Salaries for marketing managers in the US can easily reach \$90,000 and above, and marketing and communications directors made an average of around \$130,000 per year in 2020.

1.8 // HOW TO USE THIS TEXT

This text can be used in several ways and has a few distinct audiences in mind:

- › College students with an interest in entering a career in writing
- › College students who are taking a composition, professional writing, technical writing, or digital media course (as an add-on, overlay, or supplemental text)
- › Composition instructors who would like to add a technological component to their course to update or “modernize” some elements of the curriculum
- › Instructors who need a stand-alone digital writing textbook for a web-based writing course
- › Professionals who would like to update their digital skills for the job market

As such, the way you use this text can vary, depending on your needs. As a college graduate who wants to find a job as a writer, you might be most interested in beginning with Chapter 5, which has useful information about applying for contemporary jobs. Or you might want to read the whole text from front to back to best prepare yourself for the job market.

Or perhaps your instructor will assign one or more chapters of this book to supplement a composition or business writing course. These are all great ways to use this book.

Discussion Questions

- › Do you use social media? How has social media changed since you started using it? When did you start using it? What has changed?
- › Which of the following social media platforms have you used: X (Twitter), Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, VSCO, Snapchat, or YouTube? Any others? What is different or the same about them? Why do they exist and what do people use them for?
- › How has technology changed during your lifetime? What have been the impacts or effects of those changes?
- › Do you own a smartphone? If you do, how often do you use it each day? What do you use it for?

1.9 // EXERCISES

1. **Writing and Voice:** Research a brand you are familiar with and find their social media presence on Facebook. Conduct a rhetorical analysis of the brand's Facebook page. It could be a brand of clothing, makeup, automobile, video game, tool/hardware, or any other brand or company. How does the company use ethos, pathos, or logos to create a particular argument?
2. **Rhetorical Analysis:** Using the same company or organization you selected for Exercise 1, or choosing a new one altogether, answer the following question: What do you think is the company's primary, underlying argument they attempt to convey through Facebook? What are the central messages of the company? What impressions are they trying to give of their company? For what purposes? For example, McDonald's uses advertisements to essentially say, "If you eat here, you will be happy" or to emphasize "healthier" or more "environmentally sustainable" practices through greenwashing. Or consider the safety-related television advertisements from Subaru in the 2010s, in which they fundamentally argued, "If you buy a Subaru, you will be safe."
3. **Collect and Reflect on Data:** Use a tracking application like "Screen Time" on iOS to monitor how you use your smartphone, laptop, or other device. Track your data for at least a week. Reflect on the data. Are you surprised? What do you spend most of your time doing on your phone? Try not to rationalize or excuse the behavior but objectively consider what type of activities you use your screens for during the day.

4. **Visualize and Analyze Data:** Create an Excel sheet using the data from Exercise 3. If you were able to put yourself in another person's shoes, what advice would you give yourself? In other words, looking at your data, where do you objectively think you should improve? Create a set of visuals to represent the data.
5. **Digital Identity:** If you have a Facebook account, go to your settings, find the option to "Download a copy of your Facebook data" and click on "Download Archive." Write a 2-page report about your findings. What information does Facebook store about you? What is your "digital identity"?
6. **Research and Write:** What was Cambridge Analytica? What are the current digital data rights issues that are being discussed in your country? Write a short research paper.
7. **Research and Write:** Begin a longer research paper about an issue related to digital media, such as digital data rights, free speech, the use of social media advertisement in elections, social media addiction or the psychological effects of social media usage, or another pertinent topic related to social or digital media. Create an annotated bibliography with 6–10 high quality, peer-reviewed sources from academic journals.

1.10 // ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE EXERCISES

1. **Reflect:** Make a list of the AI tools that you have used, how frequently you use the tool, and why you use (or used) the tool. For example, perhaps you used ChatGPT recently to help you study for a difficult class. Did you find the tool helpful? Did it save you time? What were the drawbacks?
2. **Ask Questions:** Is there something about AI that you don't understand that you're very curious about? Take a moment to research your questions about AI. Where are good places to find information these days, anyway? Which sources you can trust reliably?
3. **Ethics Discussion:** Your parents send you a gift for the holidays. It's a package with snacks, a Bluetooth speaker, and a notebook. You think it's pretty nice. But then, with a sneaking suspicion arising in your heart, you pull up ChatGPT and type in the prompt, "Generate a list of holiday gift ideas for college students." The response from ChatGPT is: "1. Snacks 2. A Bluetooth speaker 3. A new notebook." How do you feel? Was this a good use of AI? What are some ways you've seen AI affect everyday conversations and "real life" interactions between you and your friends or family?