Finding the "Available Means of Persuasion": Rhetorical Strategies for LOIs and Grant Proposals
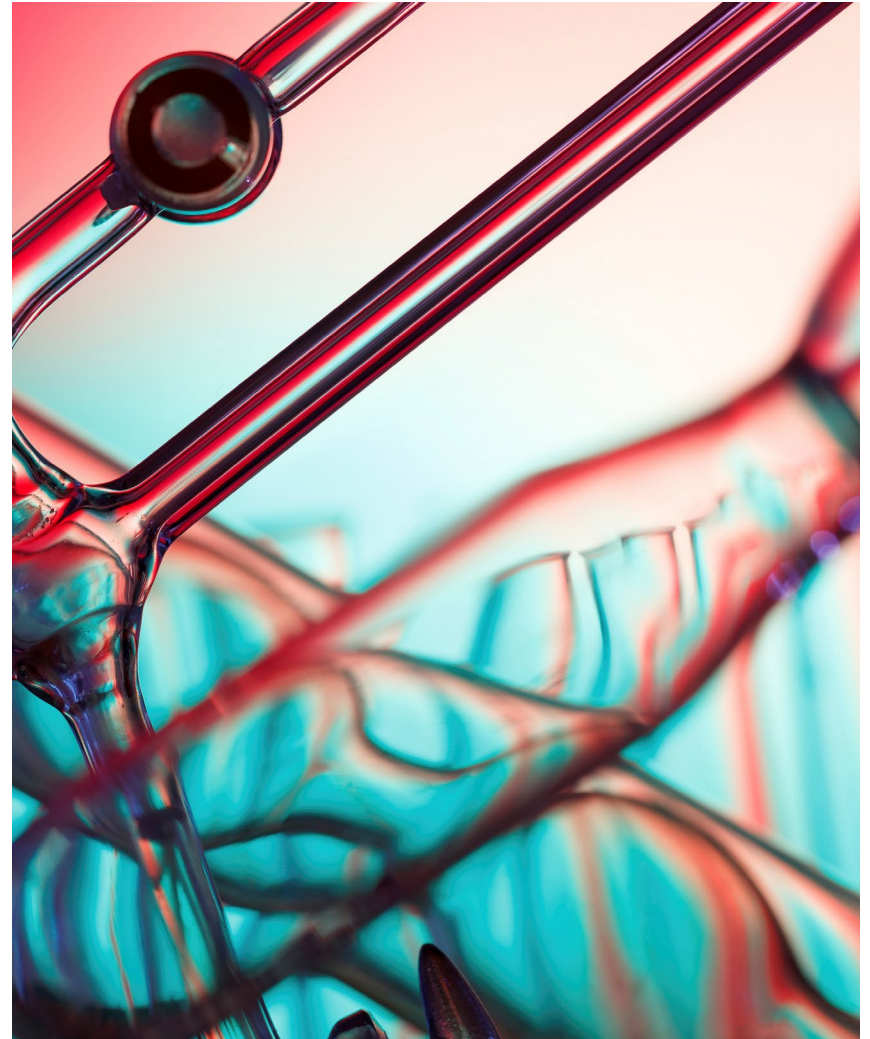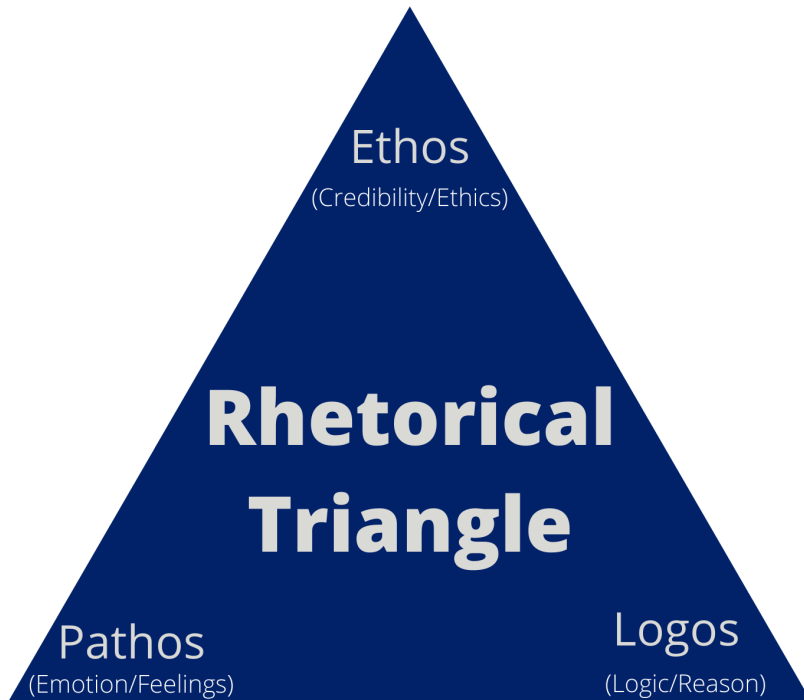
Julie Hawk, Ph.D.

3/14/22

Agenda

- Introduction to Rhetorical principles
- Brief Review of Literature
  - Why Academics Struggle with Writing Grant Proposals
  - Synthesis of Key Findings in the Literature
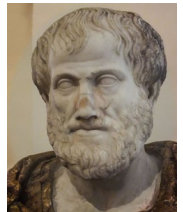- LOIs vs. Full Proposals

What is Rhetoric?

Rhetorical Triangle

Ethos (Credibility/Ethics)

Pathos (Emotion/Feelings)

Logos (Logic/Reason)

- Different ways we tend to think about rhetoric
- The rhetorical triangle (plus one)
  - Ethos
  - Pathos
  - Logos
  - Kairos
- Does it even apply to science writing? (spoiler alert: YES)
- Ethical considerations

"Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion."

-Aristotle

Why Academics Struggle with Grant Proposals

Academic Writing	Grant Writing
Scholarly pursuit: *Individual passion*	**Sponsor goals:** *Service attitude*
Past oriented: *Work that has been done*	**Future oriented:** *Work that should be done*
Theme-centered: *Theory and thesis*	**Project-centered:** *Objectives and activities*
Expository rhetoric: *Explaining to reader*	**Persuasive rhetoric:** *"Selling" the reader*
Impersonal tone: *Objective, dispassionate*	**Personal tone:** *Conveys excitement*
Individualistic: *Primarily a solo activity*	**Team-focused:** *Feedback needed*
Few length constraints: *Verbosity rewarded*	**Strict length constraints:** *Brevity rewarded*
Specialized terminology: *"Insider jargon"*	**Accessible language:** *Easily understood*

Orientation in Time

Past-Oriented

- Describes a completed project
- Lends itself to expository rhetoric (see next slide)
- Organizes itself more easily because it has already been done (certainty of the steps that were taken)

Future-Oriented

- Describes a project you want to do
- Lends itself to both expository and persuasive rhetoric (see next slide)
- Offers multiple ways of organizing with possibly less certainty of steps

Remember you audience: Your reviewers need to know when you plan to perform what activities as well as what research has already been performed.

Rhetorical Approach

Expository Rhetoric

- Explains ideas and processes
- Builds a logical progression of thought
- Aims to convince the reader only that the author's ideas are sound

Persuasive Rhetoric

- Sells a project to the reader
- Convince the reader that the project is unique and deserving of funding
- Aims to convince the reader that the author's ideas are sound enough **to fund**

Remember you audience: Your reviewers are reading several proposals competing for the same funding; you must persuade them yours is close to the top of the list.

Length Requirements

Few Constraints

- Verbosity may not be rewarded, but it also isn't punished

- Conciseness is a matter of style, not an imperative

Strict Requirements

- Brevity is rewarded

- Conciseness is an imperative

Remember you audience: Your reviewers are tired and overworked. They want you to get to the point as quickly as possible.

Language and Terminology

Specialized Terminology

- Used when speaking to experts in your specific field
- Appropriate for subspecialty academic journals and some sections of some research grant proposals

Accessible Language

- Used when speaking to a more general audience
- Appropriate for most research grant proposals, other communication to general field of study and even more general audiences

Remember you audience: Your reviewers may not be in your exact subspecialty and therefore appreciate language that they will readily understand but that is not reductive.

Top Recommendations from the Literature

Recommendations for Writing Successful Grant Proposals From a Synthesis of the Literature, 2000 to 2012

Recommendation	Articles, no. (% of 53) that mention the recommendation
Research and identify appropriate funding opportunities.	33 (62)
Use key components of the proposal to persuade reviewers of the project's significance and feasibility.	32 (60)
Describe proposed activities and their significance persuasively, clearly, and concisely.	30 (57)
Seek advice from colleagues to help develop, clarify, and review the proposal.	30 (57)
Keep the study design simple, logical, feasible, and appropriate for the research questions.	29 (55)
Develop a timeline that includes time for possible resubmission to guide the grant proposal process.	25 (47)
Choose a novel, high-impact project with long-term potential.	21 (40)
Conduct an exhaustive literature review to clarify the present state of knowledge about the topic.	13 (25)
Ensure budgets request only essential items and reflect an honest portrayal of the funding that the team needs to successfully carry out the work.	10 (19)
Consider interdisciplinary collaborations.	8 (15)

The Seven Rules of NIH Grant Proposals*

	Following these "rules" (let's call them "guidelines" instead) will improve both LOIs and full proposals
Rule 1	Write from the reader's perspective
Rule 2	Be linear (the product, not the process)
Rule 3	Keep it simple
Rule 4	Tell a story
Rule 5	Communicate your excitement
Rule 6	Words matter
Rule 7	Get feedback early on

*According to Gerin, William and Christine Kapelewski Kinkade. *Writing the NIH Grant Proposal: A Step-by-Step Guide,* 3rd ed. Note that these "rules" are more broadly applicable than for just NIH.

LOIs vs. Full Proposals: Considerations

LOI

- **Lit Review**—Highlight key takeaways of seminal sources; synthesize sources instead of highlighting them individually

- **Project Details**—Keep this in broad strokes; don't go too far into the weeds

- **Methodology**—Convey the high points of proposed methodology

- **Significance**—Don't forget to include this, but usually a sentence or two will do

Full Proposal

- **Lit Review**—Fuller detail of the sources is possible; synthesis is still good, but you can be more individualized here as well

- **Project Details**—Provide a detailed description of all aspects of the project

- **Methodology**—Go deeper into the methods and structure of your study

- **Significance**—Go much deeper into how your project impacts the field

11

A Few Key Takeaways

- Understanding the assignment is essential; this is the foundation of determining the components that belong in the LOI or proposal.
- Understanding your audience is crucial; this will help guide you in terms of the language you use and the rhetorical devices you employ.
- Rhetoric is not a dirty word; the key is to remember the Ethos part of the triangle. That's what keeps rhetoric from being manipulative.
- LOIs are basically mini-proposals; writing them is like writing a prose outline for your full proposal.