

Persuasive Techniques in Speeches

Rhetoric = the art of effective persuasion in the spoken or written word. **Device** = a compositional technique used by a writer that has a specific effect on the reader or listener.

1. Anaphora/ repetition – particularly of singular, evocative phrases:

- “I have a dream...” (Martin Luther King).
- “the people who pressed on with that American creed: Yes, we can. At a time when women's voices were silenced and their hopes dismissed, she lived to see them stand up and speak out and reach for the ballot. Yes, we can. When there was despair in the Dust Bowl and depression across the land, she saw a nation conquer fear itself with a New Deal, new jobs and a new sense of common purpose. Yes, we can. When the bombs fell on our harbor and tyranny threatened the world, she was there to witness a generation rise to greatness and a democracy was saved. Yes, we can. She was there for the buses in Montgomery, the hoses in Birmingham, a bridge in Selma and a preacher from Atlanta who told a people that ‘We Shall Overcome.’ Yes, we can” (Barack Obama).
- “government of the people, by the people, for the people” (Abraham Lincoln).
- “We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender” (Winston Churchill).

2. Rhetorical questions – some of these you can answer yourself in the speech/ on behalf of the listener or reader:

- “Who will deny that thirty years of my life have been spent knocking in vain, patiently, moderately, and modestly at a closed and barred door? What have been the fruits of moderation?” (Nelson Mandela quoting ANC President and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Chief Luthuli).
- “Can you conceive a greater objective for the Germans in the air than to make evacuation from these beaches impossible, and to sink all these ships which were displayed, almost to the extent of thousands? Could there have been an objective of greater military importance and significance for the whole purpose of the war than this? They tried hard, and they were beaten back; they were frustrated in their task” (Winston Churchill).
- “If our children should live to see the next century; if my daughters should be so lucky to live as long as Ann Nixon Cooper, what change will they see? What progress will we have made?” (Barack Obama).
- “I ask, is it right for you to distrust such an organization with all its background, tradition and record of over half a century and misrepresent its endeavours before all the world by every means at your command? Is it right that by hook or by crook, aided by the foreign press, aided by the President of the U.S.A., or even by the Generalissimo of China who has yet to win his laurels, you should present India's struggle in shocking caricature?” (Mahatma Gandhi).

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3. Dramatic contrast, i.e. stark juxtaposition of contrasting ideas and imagery:

- “Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quick sands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood” (Martin Luther King, Jr.).
- “United, there is little we cannot do in a host of cooperative ventures. Divided, there is little we can do — for we dare not meet a powerful challenge at odds and split asunder” (John F. Kennedy).
- “If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich” (John F. Kennedy).
- “I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination” (Nelson Mandela).
- “The history of this nation has not been, as is so often said, the history of a military struggle of 750 years; it has been much more a history of peaceful penetration of 750 years. It has not been a struggle for the ideal of freedom for 750 years symbolised in the name Republic. It has been a story of slow, steady, economic encroachment by England” (Michael Collins).

4. Alliteration and assonance:

- “Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation (Martin Luther King, Jr.).
- “there was despair in the Dust Bowl and depression” (Barack Obama).

5. Hyperbole and exaggeration – or, simply making a great deal of the issue at hand:

- “I believe that in the history of the world, there has not been a more genuinely democratic struggle for freedom than ours” (Mahatma Gandhi).
- “So first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself” (Franklin D. Roosevelt).
- “Why you got scars and knots on your head from the top of your head to the bottom of your feet. And every one of those scars is evidence against the American white man” (Malcolm X).

6. Personal pronouns/ language of inclusivity, and language of ubiquity.

- “Let us not wallow in the valley of despair, I say to you today, my friends” (MLK).
- “But above all, I will never forget who this victory truly belongs to — it belongs to you [...] This is your victory. I know you didn't do this just to win an election, and I know you didn't do it for me. You did it because you understand the enormity of the task that lies ahead” (Barack Obama).
- “Our climb will be steep [...] I promise you: We as a people will get there” (Barack Obama).

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7. Sense of immediacy/ urgency (particularly when the present time/issue is juxtaposed with the past/old issues).

- “We have also come to his hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now” [...] Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quick sands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children [...] It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment” (Martin Luther King, Jr.).
- “Even as we stand here tonight, we know there are brave Americans waking up in the deserts of Iraq and the mountains of Afghanistan to risk their lives for us” (Barack Obama).
- “This is our chance to answer that call. This is our moment. This is our time” (Barack Obama).
- “That freedom, if it is to come, must come today” (Mahatma Gandhi).

8. Imagery and metaphor.

- “a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice” (Martin Luther King, Jr.)
- “the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity” (Martin Luther King, Jr.)
- “America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked insufficient funds” (Martin Luther King, Jr.)
- “This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality” (Martin Luther King, Jr.)
- “The road ahead will be long. Our climb will be steep” (Barack Obama).
- “the German eruption swept like a sharp scythe around the right and rear of the Armies of the north” (Winston Churchill).

9. Proposing a problem and offering solutions.

- I.e. Emphasize what has gone wrong in relation to the given issue throughout your speech, and offer a “turning point” moment, at which point you can offer hope in the form of solutions. Conclude with this inspirational point of hope also. You can do this throughout your speech, and you can also do it overall/ structurally.

10. Direct/famous quotations and references.

- “She was there for the buses in Montgomery, the hoses in Birmingham, a bridge in Selma and a preacher from Atlanta who told a people that ‘We Shall Overcome.’ Yes, we can” (Barack Obama).

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11. Appeal to the personal/ familiar/ local.

- “I would not be standing here tonight without the unyielding support of my best friend for the last 16 years, the rock of our family and the love of my life, our nation's next first lady, Michelle Obama. Sasha and Malia, I love you both so much, and you have earned the new puppy that's coming with us to the White House. And while she's no longer with us, I know my grandmother is watching, along with the family that made me who I am. I miss them tonight, and know that my debt to them is beyond measure” (Barack Obama).
- “There are mothers and fathers who will lie awake after their children fall asleep and wonder how they'll make the mortgage, or pay their doctor's bills, or save enough for college” (Barack Obama).
- “I feared it would be my hard lot to announce the greatest military disaster in our long history” (Winston Churchill).

12. Circularity.

- I.e. near/at the end of your speech, return to and address earlier points, questions, problems, or phrases from the speech. This will make listeners feel like the speech has “come full circle”.