

Ethos



DEFINITION

What is ethos? Here's a quick and simple definition:

Ethos, along with *logos* and *pathos*, is one of the three "modes of persuasion" in rhetoric (the art of effective speaking or writing). *Ethos* is an argument that appeals to the audience by emphasizing the speaker's credibility and authority. If the speaker has a high-ranking position, is an expert in his or her field, or has had life experience relevant to a particular topic, anything the speaker says or does to ensure that the audience knows about and remembers these qualifications is an example of *ethos*.

Some additional key details about ethos:

- *Ethos* shares a root with the word "ethics." This is helpful to remember because speakers often try to establish their own strong moral character by using *ethos*.
- The word "ethos" is also often used to refer to a community or organization's characteristic belief or spirit, as in the sentence, "We will not give you a larger bonus than your coworkers: that is against our company's *ethos* of fairness." However, this guide focuses specifically on *the rhetorical technique of ethos* used in literature and public speaking.
- The three "modes of persuasion"—*pathos*, *logos*, and *ethos*—were originally defined by Aristotle.
- While *ethos* appeals to an audience's instinctive respect for authority, *logos* appeals to the audience's sense of reason, and *pathos* appeals to the audience's emotions.
- *Ethos* is used in advertising just as often as it is used in public speaking and literature. Any commercial in which a celebrity endorses a product, for example, hopes to persuade its target audience by cultivating an aura of authority or expertise through its association with the celebrity—and is therefore an example of *ethos*.

How to Pronounce Ethos

Here's how to pronounce ethos: **ee**-thos

Ethos Explained

Aristotle (the ancient Greek philosopher and scientist) first defined *ethos*, along with *logos* and *pathos*, in his treatise on rhetoric, *Ars Rhetorica*. Together, he referred to *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos* as the three modes of persuasion, or sometimes simply as "the appeals." Aristotle believed that in order to have *ethos* a good speaker must demonstrate three things:

- **Phronesis:** Sound reasoning, and relevant experience or expertise.
- **Arete:** Moral character.
- **Eunoia:** Good intentions towards the audience.

Aristotle argued that a speaker in possession of these three attributes will naturally impress the audience with his or her *ethos*, and as a result will be better able to influence that audience. Over time, however, the definition of *ethos* has broadened, and the significance of the three qualities Aristotle named is now lost on anyone who hasn't studied classical Greek. So it may give more insight into the meaning of *ethos* to translate Aristotle's three categories into a new set of categories that make more sense in the modern era. A speaker or writer's credibility can be said to rely on each of the following:

- **Authority:** A speaker in a high position of authority—for example, a president, or CEO—will possess a certain level of *ethos* simply because he or she can claim that title.
 - Within literature, it's interesting to notice when characters attempt to invoke their own authority and enhance their *ethos* by reminding other characters of the titles they possess. Often, this can be an indication that the character citing his or her own credentials actually feels his or her authority being threatened or challenged.
- **Trustworthiness:** Often, a large part of conveying trustworthiness to an audience depends on the speaker's ability to demonstrate that he or she doesn't have a vested interest in convincing the audience of his or her views. An audience should ideally feel that the speaker is impartial—doesn't stand to gain anything personal, like money or power, from winning listeners' favor—and that his or her opinions are therefore objective.
 - In literature, this form of *ethos* is particularly relevant with respect to narrators. Authors often have their narrators profess impartiality or objectivity at the outset of a book in order to earn the reader's trust in the narrator's reliability regarding the story he or she is about to tell.
- **Expertise:** The credentials, education, and professional specialty of a speaker all greatly contribute to his or her *ethos*. For instance, a doctor's assessment of a patient or a new drug will carry more weight with an audience than the opinion of someone with no medical training whatsoever.
 - This type of *ethos* translates into literature quite easily, in the sense that characters' opinions are often evaluated within the framework of their professions.
- **Similarity:** Speakers can strengthen their *ethos* by pointing out things that they share with an audience. This is a common technique in American politics where, for example, a candidate

for office might describe his or her modest upbringing, in an effort to demonstrate that he or she is an average American and therefore shares the same values as voters. On the other hand, some speakers might find it more useful to convey that they are *not* like the audience and have a fresh, outside perspective. Either way, an important part of *ethos* is deciding whether to portray oneself as an insider or as an outsider to best make a point.

- Literary characters often use *ethos* to communicate similarity or likemindedness to other characters, and you can detect this by certain changes in their speech. In these situations, characters (as well as real-life speakers) often use a *shibboleth*—a specialized term or word used by a specific group of people—to show that they belong. For example, if you knew the name of a special chemical used to make jello, and you wanted to impress the head of a jello company, the name of that chemical would count as a *shibboleth* and saying it would help you show the jello executive that you're "in the know."

The Stagecraft of Ethos

In order to impress their positive personal qualities upon audiences, public speakers can use certain techniques that aren't available to writers. These include:

- Speaking in a certain manner or even with a certain accent.
- Demonstrating confident stage presence.
- Having reputable people to introduce the speaker in a positive light.
- Listing their credentials and achievements.

Put another way, the *ethos* of a speech can be heavily impacted by the speaker's confidence and manner of presenting him or herself.

Ethos and Ad Hominem

An ad hominem argument is a specific type of argument which involves attacking someone else's character or *ethos*, rather than attacking that person's position or point of view on the subject being discussed. Ad hominem attacks usually have the goal of swaying an audience away from an opponent's views and towards one's own by degrading the audience's perception of the opponent's character. For instance, if one politician attacks another as being "elite," the attacker may be seeking to make voters question whether the other politician is trustworthy or actually has the public's interest at heart. But the first politician is not in any way attacking their opponent's positions on matters of policy.

An ad hominem argument is not necessarily "wrong" or even a bad strategy, but it's generally seen as more dignified (another component of *ethos*) for speakers to focus on strengthening their own *ethos*, and to debate their opponents based on the substance of the opposition's counterarguments. When a literary character uses an

ad hominem argument, this can sometimes indicate that he or she is insecure about his or her own position regarding a certain issue.



EXAMPLES

Examples of Ethos in Literature

Characters in novels often use *ethos*, as well as *logos* and *pathos*, to convince one another of certain arguments in the same way that a speaker in reality might use these techniques. In addition, authors often use a subtler form of *ethos* when establishing a narrator's reliability at the outset of a novel.

Ethos in Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*

In *Atlas Shrugged*, a group of pioneering American industrialists, financiers, and artists go on strike against a corrupt government. As the strike nears its end, its leader—John Galt—delivers a speech to the nation about his ideals. He promises that the strike will end only if Americans allow him to remake the country according to his moral code, which he explains in the following lines:

Just as I support my life, neither by robbery nor alms, but by my own effort, so I do not seek to derive my happiness from the injury or the favor of others, but earn it by my own achievement. Just as I do not consider the pleasure of others as the goal of my life, so I do not consider my pleasure as the goal of the lives of others. Just as there are no contradictions in my values and no conflicts among my desires—so there are no victims and no conflicts of interest among rational men, men who do not desire the unearned and do not view one another with a cannibal's lust, men who neither make sacrifices nor accept them.

Galt not only creates an impression of moral rectitude, but also emphasizes his own self-sufficiency. He assures his audience that he expects nothing in return from them for sharing his personal views. In this way, his ability to cultivate an aura of impartiality and objectivity enhances his *ethos*.

Ethos in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

The Scarlet Letter opens with a chapter called "The Custom-House," in which the unnamed narrator—who has a similar biography to Hawthorne—describes his job in a Custom House, a place where taxes were paid on imports in 18th century Massachusetts. The narrator's stories about his job have no relation to the actual narrative of *The Scarlet Letter*, except that he finds the scarlet letter of the title in the Custom House attic. This discovery inspired him to research the life of the woman who wore the embroidered letter, and to tell her story. By presenting himself as someone who merely discovered, researched, and "edited" the story the reader is about to begin, the narrator effectively creates the impression that his is a reliable historical account, thereby strengthening his *ethos*.

It will be seen, likewise, that this Custom-House sketch has a certain propriety, of a kind always recognised in literature, as explaining how a large portion of the following pages came into my possession, and as offering proofs of the authenticity of a narrative therein contained.

This, in fact—a desire to put myself in my true position as editor, or very little more, of the most prolix among the tales that make up my volume—this, and no other, is my true reason for assuming a personal relation with the public.

Ethos in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

In the opening lines of [The Great Gatsby](#), the narrator, Nick Carraway, claims that he has followed one piece of his father's advice throughout his life:

In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since.

"Whenever you feel like criticizing any one," he told me, just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had!...

In consequence I'm inclined to reserve all judgements, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores. The abnormal mind is quick to detect and attach itself to this quality when it appears in a normal person, and so it came about that in college I was unjustly accused of being a politician, because I was privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men...

Nick's tendency to reserve judgement makes him an ideal, objective narrator, while his awareness of his own economic and social advantages makes him a perfect guide to the privileged world of *The Great Gatsby*. Though he describes his non-judgmental, "neutral" affect with self-deprecating humor, it's a subtle way of strengthening his *ethos* as a narrator, and of causing the reader to eagerly anticipate hearing the stories that "wild, unknown men" have shared with him.

Examples of Ethos in Political Speeches

Every politician recognizes that a speaker must earn an audience's respect and trust if he or she expects to be listened to. As a result, it's difficult to find a political speech that *doesn't* contain an example of *ethos*. It's particularly easy to spot *ethos* in action when listening to speeches by candidates for office.

Ethos in Mitt Romney's Acceptance Speech at the 2012 Republican National Convention

When he accepted the Republican presidential nomination in 2012, Romney pointed to his business success as relevant experience that would serve him well if he were to take office:

I learned the real lessons about how America works from experience.

When I was 37, I helped start a small company. My partners and I had been working for a company that was in the business of helping other businesses.

So some of us had this idea that if we really believed our advice was helping companies, we should invest in companies. We should bet on ourselves and on our advice.

So we started a new business called Bain Capital...That business we started with 10 people has now grown into a great American success story. Some of the companies we helped start are names you know. An office supply company called Staples – where I'm pleased to see the Obama campaign has been shopping; The Sports Authority, which became a favorite of my sons. We started an early childhood learning center called Bright Horizons that First Lady Michelle Obama rightly praised.

In addition to strengthening his *ethos* by pointing to his past achievements, Romney also hopes to portray himself as principled, rational, and daring when he explains how his company decided to "bet on ourselves and on our advice."

Ethos in John Kasich's 2016 Ohio Primary Victory Speech

After winning his first campaign victory, 2016 presidential candidate John Kasich told his supporters about his disadvantaged yet hardworking relatives to contextualize his own rise to success:

And you know, ladies and gentlemen, my whole life has been about trying to create a climate of opportunity for people.

You know, as my father carried that mail on his back and his father was a coal miner, and you know, I was just told by my cousin—I didn't realize this—that my mother, one of four [children], was the only one to graduate from high school. The other three barely made it out of the eighth grade because they were poor...

And you know, as I've traveled the country and I look into your eyes... You want to believe that your children are going to have ultimately a better America than what we got from our mothers and fathers. That's the great American legacy: that our kids will be better than we are.

By saying that he comes from a modest background, Kasich hopes to convey that he is "just a regular American" and that he will advocate for other hard working Americans.

Ethos in Winston Churchill's 1941 Address to Joint Session of the US Congress

In this speech to the US Congress during World War II, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill enhances the *ethos* of his speech by

emphasizing both the qualities he shares in common with the American people and the American Democratic values instilled in him by his parents:

I am a child of the House of Commons. I was brought up in my father's house to believe in democracy. "Trust the people." That was his message. I used to see him cheered at meetings and in the streets by crowds of workingmen way back in those aristocratic Victorian days when as Disraeli said "the world was for the few, and for the very few."

Therefore I have been in full harmony all my life with the tides which have flowed on both sides of the Atlantic against privilege and monopoly and I have steered confidently towards the Gettysburg ideal of government of the people, by the people, for the people.

Examples of Ethos in Advertisements

Advertisers often attempt to use *ethos* to influence people to buy their product. Dressing up an actor as a doctor who then extols the benefits a medication is a way that advertisers *used* to try to gin up a little *ethos*, but such obvious practices of what might be called "fake ethos" are now regularly mocked. However, any celebrity endorsement or testimonial from an expert are also attempts to build up *ethos* around a product's endorsement. For instance, here's a Prudential Financial [commercial](#) that ups its *ethos* with an appearance by Harvard social psychologist Dan Gilbert.



WHY WRITERS USE IT

Politicians, activists, and advertisers use *ethos* because they recognize that it is impossible to convince an audience of anything if its members do not believe in the speaker's credibility, morality, or authority.

The use of *ethos* in fiction is often different from real-world examples. Authors are not usually trying to directly influence their audience in the way politicians or advertisers are. Rather, authors often show one of their *characters* making use of *ethos*. In doing so, the author gives insight into characters' perceptions of one another, their values, and their motives.

In addition, *ethos* is an especially useful tool for authors looking to establish a narrator's credibility. Having a credible narrator is hugely important to the success of a literary work. Books with narrators that never establish a reasonable claim to an objective viewpoint are nearly impossible to read because everything they say is cast in doubt, so that readers come to feel like they're being lied to or "jerked around," which is fatiguing. Although often enough readers simply *assume* that a narrator has credibility, if you've ever read a book where you felt you simply didn't *like* the narrator very much—or watched a television show where you felt that none of the characters were likable or believable—that might be another sign that the writer has failed to establish a character's *ethos*. There are circumstances in which a writer creates an unreliable narrator—a narrator who is either purposefully or subconsciously offering a slanted narrative—but *ethos* is just as crucial in creating such a narrator: the author must first establish the narrator's *ethos* and then slowly undermine it over the course of the book.



OTHER RESOURCES

- **The Wikipedia Page on Ethos:** An in-depth [explanation](#) of *ethos*, and how the concept has changed over time.
- **The Dictionary Definition of Ethos:** A [definition](#) and etymology of the term, which comes from the Greek *ethos* meaning "character, custom, or habit."
- **Ethos on Youtube:** An excellent [video](#) from TED-Ed about the three modes of persuasion.

HOW TO CITE

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