



Rhetoric is a common term within the communication world, but what does it actually mean, and how should it be used? Historically, according to Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin (1995), *traditional rhetoric* has been dominated by patriarchal voices and is really all about persuading others, with the goal of changing others' opinions and behaviors. The study of *traditional rhetoric* began with the purpose of finding the best ways to convince others. In 1995, Foss and Griffin wanted to challenge this understanding of *rhetoric* by exploring power dynamics and finding a different approach. These authors developed the concept of *invitational rhetoric (IR)*, a way for individuals and groups to discuss and disagree with each other on challenging topics, while encouraging curiosity, learning, perspective-sharing, and mutual understanding in an open setting with no expectations of opinion change or persuasion.

Foss and Griffin considered *traditional rhetoric* to be limiting and not able to include or account for a wide range of different communication and disagreement styles among people. *Traditional rhetoric*, according to Foss and Griffin, is competitive, demands change without understanding, and usually involves one person dominating the conversation while the other is forced to listen and agree to the "more correct" position. *Traditional rhetoric* sees anyone who disagrees with the "more correct" position as a case to be conquered.

But how often do we have a conversation with someone where we disagree without fully understanding what their position is? How often do we debate another position before even fully understanding our own opinion? While *traditional rhetoric* works to convince and persuade, *IR* welcomes all perspectives so that people can more fully understand differing positions. *IR* challenges commonly held beliefs that disagreements have to end in winning or losing, and instead gives time and space for each voice in the room, working to avoid ranking systems, competition, and power imbalances. The only voice that doesn't have a place at the *IR* table is "correctness."

Traditional rhetoric aims for...

"Changing your mind and course of action."

Invitational rhetoric aims for...

"Both of us better understanding each other's perspective."

Traditional rhetoric assumes...

"I know everything there is to know about your position."

Invitational rhetoric assumes...

"I don't have all the information. More information is needed to fully understand opposing view(s) as well as my own."

Traditional rhetoric asks...

"What strategies can I use to convince you of my position?"

Invitational rhetoric asks...

"What do I want to communicate about my position to increase understanding? What do I still have to learn about opposing position(s)? Do I need to be more open to hearing alternative views?"

IR invites people to suspend judgment while disagreeing and doesn't force anyone to land on the same side as another. Below you can read about two real-world contexts to which *IR* has been applied in research.

The AIDS Memorial Quilt: Human rights activist Cleve Jones developed a quilt made up of stories about the loved ones of people who have died of AIDS (National Aids Memorial). The AIDS Memorial Quilt honors the lives of over 100,000 people with quilt patches the size of caskets to show the gravity and impact of the disease. This quilt is an example of *IR* because it welcomes the perspectives of anyone who wants to participate by contributing a life story on a quilt patch. The quilt is only displayed in cities where it's invited to come and there is no vetting or editing process for people who submit a story about a lost loved one. The quilt is meant to be representative of different perspectives and doesn't push one way of thinking or feeling. Instead, the quilt lets people who come to see it choose how they'd like to interact with and respond to it.

Abortion debate: After the horrific 1994 Planned Parenthood shooting that took two lives and injured five more, heads of both the pro-life and pro-choice organizations realized they needed to act quickly to address the issue and work to improve relations between both sides (Bone et al., 2008). They engaged in important conversations, using the services of the Public Conversations Project, an organization that mediates conversations between both sides of challenging and controversial social topics and uses *IR*. The outcome of these conversations you might ask? Both sides ended up more deeply affirmed in their beliefs. No one was convinced of anything new, and no one "switched sides." Persuasion didn't happen, but each side grew in their understanding, care, and admiration for the other side. While the two sides agreed that they still held wildly different beliefs, they created a space where they could completely disagree while still living peacefully and respectfully together.

*It is important to keep in mind that, while *IR* is a great alternative to *traditional rhetoric*, in many situations, it is not meant to completely replace *traditional rhetoric* and it is not applicable in all situations.

Discussion Questions:

- What do you think of Foss and Griffin's critique that the universal applicability and dominance of traditional rhetorical practices should be challenged?
- How would you describe *IR* in your own words?
- Are there any aspects of *IR* you feel skeptical about? Which aspects and why?
- Have you ever witnessed or participated in *IR*? What was the context? The outcome?
- What aspects of *IR* could you use in your daily life? How and when might you apply *IR*?
- Which real-world societal issues might benefit from *IR*?
- *Traditional rhetoric* and *IR* both have their own limitations. Can you think of other rhetorical possibilities that might reflect other cultural viewpoints and/or identities/intersections of identities?