

Rhetoric Sample #1

Hugh Blair wrote that an author's style always has some reference to his manner of thinking, making it often, "extremely difficult to separate the style from the sentiment." (Blair) Kenneth Burke wrote that even factual information is filtered through screens, which eliminate a portion of the whole truth. (Burke) These insights are very valuable for journalists responsible for delivering information in the context of today's frequent anti-media criticisms that journalism is merely rhetoric – in the most negative connotation of the word – designed to win adherents to the reporter's point of view.

In light of such criticisms, Blair and Burke's writings on rhetoric can be seen as both manuals for effective use of rhetoric by journalists and as warning signs against it. This essay will consider the use of rhetorical strategies in Dan Balz's article, entitled "Bush Wins Second Term; Kerry Concedes Defeat; Both Speak of Need for Unity," which appeared on the front page of *The Washington Post's* November 4, 2004 issue, following the presidential election. (Balz)

Though Blair suggests that a writer's manner of thinking and his compositions are virtually inseparable, Balz had a responsibility in this article to objectively report the results of a hotly contested election, which he may personally have celebrated or lamented. Further, he had the challenge of satisfying a variety of readers who were divided in celebration and lament, themselves. In writing the article, which addresses a variety of issues related to President Bush's victory, such as precise numbers of voters and electoral votes, the timeline of concession and victory speeches and potential policy outcomes from the election, Balz had to recognize, as Blair said, "The tastes of men may differ very considerably as to their object, and yet none of them be wrong." (Blair)

Blair's rhetorical teachings provide a set of recommendations much like the mantras heard in today's journalism classrooms and copy desks, and many are evident in Balz's article. From the very first sentence, in fact, Balz reflects Blair's recommendation that dry language be colored with ornamentation, when appropriate. (Blair) Stepping briefly out of the reporter's strictest bounds, Balz writes that Kerry's concession was "gracious," Bush was "elated," and the campaign was "long and contentious." (Balz)

For additional variety in the story, Balz uses a small number of figurative phrases, which Blair discussed as tropes, such as "Kerry *snuffed out* the hopes of many Democrats who were eager to keep the fight for the White House alive," and "Bush's speech *offered an olive branch* to the opposition." (Balz) In the context of a typically journalistic piece, featuring predominately plain and literal language, Balz added texture and interest with the brief departures.

Later in the article, Balz balances this ornamentation all the more, communicating complicated information with no flourishes at all. Blair wrote that the "first object," of writing is to "make our meaning clearly and fully understood, and understood with the least difficulty." Balz accomplishes this better, in fact, than Blair, himself, who

complicated the message of this very instruction by including an extended quote in Latin. (Blair)

Balz makes the meaning of complicated electoral college mathematics clear, in the following, straightforward passage:

Bush won 30 states and 279 electoral votes. Kerry won 19 states...for 252 electoral votes. Iowa and its seven electoral votes remain in doubt. Bush was leading there with 100 percent of precincts reporting, and while counties were still tabulating absentee and provisional ballots, officials in the state said they did not expect a change in the lead. (Balz)

In his extended conversation about perspicuity, Blair discusses its requirements for purity, propriety and precision in language. Purity, Blair said, is the use of words that are in the most common, familiar usage in the language. Propriety is the selection of the best and most established usage of the meaning intended. Precision is the avoidance of a loose style including a lot of words which could express an unintended meaning, a meaning which approaches but does not reach the intended meaning, or that reaches the intended meaning in addition to unintended corollaries. (Blair)

Abiding closely to Blair's instructions, which he may have heard phrased only slightly differently from a savvy copy editor, Balz writes:

Bush claimed 51 percent of the popular vote to Kerry's 48 percent, with a margin of about 3.5 million votes, removing the label of minority president that he had carried since 2000. Four years ago, Bush lost the popular vote to Vice President Al Gore, but on Tuesday he became the first president since his father in 1988 to be elected with a majority of all votes cast. (Balz)

Each word in this paragraph – pure, proper and precise – helps to construct the meaning of the whole.

It is important to note, however, though an article may be written with perfect adherence to the best of Blair's advice, it may not necessarily be appropriate journalism and may fail in its fundamental purpose of providing truthful, balanced information.

Burke taught, however truthful a message may be, the writer will inevitably narrow attention to some facts at the expense of others. (Burke) The truth of this inevitability is evident in Balz's article. For example, Balz states the fact of Bush having won more votes than any presidential candidate in history. (Balz) However, for a full picture, information could have also been provided about the effects of a growing electorate, third party candidates and many other

factors, which conceivably could have played a role in Bush setting the historical record. Even more significantly, another historical record could have been provided – that Bush also had more votes *against* him than any previous candidate.

Though complete truth is impossible, Burke instructs how to approach a fuller truth by making points clearly and unambiguously. (Burke) Most all of Balz's piece could serve as an example of this instruction. However, it seems, there are occasions when it would be inappropriate for a reporter to make the sort of bald statement Burke would prefer. In fact, Burke's disparaging discussion that metaphysics' "coy theology," implies rather than introduces God, calls to mind a modern journalistic convention known as "show, don't tell." (Burke) In Balz's piece, for example, he wrote, "Kerry choked back tears and his voice broke as he recalled the experiences of his two-year campaign and talked about the need for unity in the election's aftermath," instead of simply, "Kerry was sad." (Balz)

Some of Blair's teachings stand in opposition to the conventions of journalism, as well. As evidenced by some of the late-breaking news content in Balz's story, he did not have the opportunity to set his writing aside, as Blair recommends, to give himself sufficient distance from the writing to "discern imperfections which at first escaped [him]." (Blair) In fact, having written another election wrap-up story only the day before, it is clear Balz had only hours to research and write this story. Though suiting Blair's recommendation for frequent practice, daily journalism does not allow a writer to think long and carefully about a topic, and "then and not till then," to write about it, which Burke also advocated. (Blair, Burke)

Though Blair and Burke's individual instructions about long, focused thinking and slow writing and editing processes may be impossible in the field of daily journalism, the two writers certainly have provided the field with enduring directives on how to write carefully, clearly, and with an understanding that there is much more truth that will remain untold.

Works Cited

Balz, Dan. "Bush wins second term; Kerry concedes defeat, both speak of need for unity." The Washington Post. A1. November 4, 2004.