

Visual Rhetoric

C. Jason Smith Ph.D., English

Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* is predominantly a visual text that presents information in order to make an argument. His original lecture and film (based on his earlier book) is a PowerPoint supported presentation; however, the printed version is not simply a "print off" of the PowerPoint with text added, but a well thought out, visually based presentation of information in support of Gore's assertion that global warming is not only a real phenomenon, but a "moral issue" for all Americans.

The following questions are designed with a double purpose. First, these questions are intended to engage teachers with the visual nature of the arguments presented in order to engender ideas for class assignments, homework assignments, writing assignments, and longer research projects. Second, each of the following could be used as a stand-alone assignment in a class or as the basis for group or individual assignments.

Images as Argument

The cover (and inside cover) of *An Inconvenient Truth* features an image of the Earth as seen from space. This image of planet Earth is repeated throughout the book. We can describe images in two ways: their objective content or subject matter and their subjective impact or the emotions they bring forth. Look at the image of the Earth on page 15. In complete sentences, describe, in detail, exactly what you see there (the actual elements of the picture) and then describe how the image makes you feel. What subjective elements of the picture help produce the objective elements? How might your subjective response to the photo support Gore's message? Where else in the book do you see images that elicit similar objective responses?

Audience

Gore uses many different types of support for his claims. He uses scientific data, images, charts and graphs, quotes from famous people, his own biography, and even references to religious works. This is his attempt to appeal to a wide variety of people and reach as many different audiences as possible. Which type of support do you find most compelling or convincing? What in your life has led you to respond to, or even trust in this type of appeal?

A previous generation—the Baby Boomers—grew up with the omnipresent fear of a nuclear war. The current generation is coming of age in a climate of concern about both global terrorism and global warming. How do these concerns define our national character? How does our national character now compare to that of a generation ago? How does Gore's text reveal how well he knows, or does not know, the concerns of the current generation?

Logos, Ethos, and Pathos

Rhetoric is the study or application of *argument* and has been around at least since Classical times when the Greeks established rules for both conducting and analyzing arguments. They described three different methods that honest speakers and writers use to win people over to their point of view which they called “logos” (or logic), “ethos” (or ethics), and “pathos” (or emotion). The best speakers and writers effectively use all three. Let’s look at how Al Gore does in his use of the appeals to his audiences’ *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.

Logos: When a writer uses facts, data, or formal logic to make an argument, he is said to be appealing to the readers’ *logos* (or logic). Locate a few specific instances in the text where the author is using logos to support the argument that a) global warming is a real occurrence and b) that global warming is a moral issue (as opposed to being just a political or scientific issue).

Ethos: Writers also have to establish themselves as credible speakers on a topic. When they use this personal credibility, they are said to be appealing to the audiences’ *ethos* (or ethics). If we don’t trust the writer, we will likely not trust their arguments—if we listen to them at all! What do you know about Al Gore? Look at the short biography on back cover. What, according to the biography, gives Al Gore credibility? Based on this information, do we trust his presentation of the global economy? Why or why not? What factors strengthen or weaken his ethos? Gore also includes stories about his life in the text (the “yellow pages”). Pick one of these and write an essay in which you discuss how it serves to strengthen his ethos.

Pathos: Writers appeal to *pathos* when they try to elicit strong feelings about a subject from their readers. These feelings could be of guilt, outrage, nostalgia, or even joy. Pick a specific photo from *An Inconvenient Truth* and describe how it makes you feel. What, exactly, in the image makes you feel that way? What other images can you locate that elicit similar feelings?

Pathos: In his introduction, Gore uses the experience of his child almost dying to explain his personal understanding of our duties to our children (10-11) and worries that they may feel bitterness towards us as they grow into adulthood for the terrible conditions we leave behind. How does this statement make you feel? How would you feel if your child grew up to think you had failed as a parent? What if they thought you had failed as a human being?

Pathos: Skim through *An Inconvenient Truth*. Make a list of the predominant colors and shapes. What does each of these colors and shapes make you think of (what do they symbolize?) How/what do they make you feel? Knowing that public speakers and book publishers (like advertisers) spend a lot of time and money putting together the “right look” to define their message, what does the overall “look” of Gore’s presentation say to the audience?

Logos, Ethos, and Pathos: Look at the images of glaciers on pages 42-57. What facts or data do they show (logos)? Why does Gore include so many different shots? Is the information trustworthy (ethos)? How do you know? How does the series of images make you feel (pathos)? Is showing so many shots an appeal to logos, ethos, pathos, or a combination of these?

Other Rhetorical Structures

Analogy: In pages 10-11, Gore is using an analogy between being a parent and being a human being. Is the analogy between the parent-child relationship and the “humans now” and “humans in the future” relevant? Does it make sense? Why or why not? On pages 18 and 19, Gore uses another analogy. Can you explain what the analogy is and how it is supposed to work?

Emphasis: On pages 22-25, Gore shows an image of the earth from space, then the relative thickness of the atmosphere followed by a shot of an industrial scene. These images were carefully chosen to emphasize the thinness of the atmosphere (which is shown very small) and the massiveness of industrial pollution (which is shown very large). Find another example of Gore’s use of *emphasis* to visually support his arguments. How does it work? What is Gore trying to say through emphasis?