DOI:10.46991/FLSP.2025.25.093
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RHETORIC AS A TOOL OF LEGAL ARGUMENTATION

ABSTRACT

One of the fundamental purposes of communication is persuasion. For legal professionals, the ability to persuade is not merely advantageous but essential, as the outcome of a case often depends on it. Persuasion, viewed as a refined art, is realized through the strategic use of rhetorical techniques. To deliver compelling arguments, lawyers must develop both rhetorical competence and a deep understanding of how to construct coherent, persuasive speeches. Opening statements and closing arguments, in particular, serve as crucial moments in which attorneys can appeal to the jury's emotions. This research examines theories on how rhetoric and persuasion contribute to effective legal discourse. Drawing on scholarly works in the field, the article applies cognitive and critical approaches to demonstrate the role of rhetoric in legal contexts. The findings suggest that understanding how rhetoric functions help reveal the strategies and skills that underline persuasive courtroom advocacy.

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Received: 05/11/2025
Revised: 11/12/2025
Accepted: 12/12/2025

Keywords: lawyer's speech, rhetoric, rhetorical means, art of persuasion, persuasion in practice.

ԱՄՓՈՓՈՒՄ

ՀՌԵՏՈՐԱԲԱՆՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ՝ ՈՐՊԵՍ ԻՐԱՎԱԿԱՆ ՓԱՍՏԱՐԿՄԱՆ ԳՈՐԾԻՔ

Հաղորդակցության հիմնարար նպատակներից է համոզումը: Իրավաբանների համար համոզելու ունակությունը ոչ միայն շահավետ է, այլև շատ կարևոր, քանի որ գործի արդյունքը հաճախ կախված է դրանից: Համոզումը, որը դիտարկվում է որպես նուրբ արվեստ, իրականացվում է հռետորական ռազմավարության կիրառման ճանապարհով: Համոզիչ փաստարկներ ներկայացնելու համար փաստաբանները պետք է օժտված լինեն ինչպես հռետորական կարողություններով, այնպես էլ հետևողական ու հմուտ լինեն համոզիչ ելույթներ ստեղծելու հարցում: Մասնավորապես՝ կարևոր են բացման խոսքերն ու եզրափակիչ փաստարկները, որոնք ներկայացնելիս փաստաբանը հաճախ դիմում է ատենակալների հույզերին:

Սույն հետազոտությունն ուսումնասիրում է արդյունավետ իրավական ելույթին նպաստող հռետորաբանության և համոզման տեսությունները: Հաշվի առնելով տեսական աշխատանքների ժամանակակից գիտական ուղղվածությունը՝ հոդվածում իրավական համատեքստերում հռետորաբանության դերը ի ցույց դնելու նպատակով կիրառվում են ճանաչողական և քննադատական մոտեցումներ: Հետազոտության արդյունքները ցույց են տալիս, որ խոսքի հռետորաբանական հայեցակերպի քննությունը օգնում է բացահայտել համոզիչ պաշտպանության ռազմավարություններն ու հմտությունները դատարանում:

Բանալի բառեր՝ հռետորաբանություն, հեռետորական միջոցներ, համոզելու արվեստ, փաստաբանների խոսքի անձնահատկությունը:

РЕЗЮМЕ

РИТОРИКА КАК ИНСТРУМЕНТ ПРАВОВОЙ АРГУМЕНТАЦИИ

Одной из фундаментальных целей коммуникации является убеждение. Для юристов способность убеждать не просто желательна, а необходима, поскольку исход дела зачастую зависит от неё.

Убеждение, понимаемое как утончённое искусство, достигается благодаря стратегическому использованию риторических приёмов. Чтобы представить убедительную аргументацию, юристам следует развивать риторическую компетентность и глубокое понимание того, как выстраивать связные и убедительные выступления. Особую роль в этом процессе играют вступительные и заключительные речи, которые предоставляют адвокату возможность воздействовать на эмоции присяжных.

Данное исследование рассматривает теории о том, как риторика и убеждение способствуют эффективности юридической речи. Опираясь на научные труды в этой области, статья использует когнитивный и критический подходы, чтобы показать роль риторики в юридическом контексте. Полученные результаты свидетельствуют о том, что понимание механизмов риторики позволяет раскрыть стратегии и навыки, лежащие в основе убедительной судебной аргументации.

Ключевые слова: речь адвоката, риторика, риторические средства, искусство убеждения, убеждение на практике.

Introduction

The art of persuasion is one of the key elements of successful speech which is also known as rhetoric – one of the oldest types of discourse in the world. Specifically, the implementation of figures of speech in a certain discourse contributes to the rhetoric and efficiency of speech (Bose, 2020: 1445). When rhetoric is applied in political communication, lobbying and public affairs, it is usually used to convince the audience (Bitoni & Trupia, 2021: 1). However, rhetoric is not limited to the sphere of only political or public affairs; it is also practiced in the legal field, since it is lawyers' and attorneys' job to employ the art of rhetoric while passing

information and facts to the judge and jury to defend their clients and win the case or to get the best verdict as a sentence.

The rhetoric of the Nazis bore negative and scornful connotations when they propagated hostility among people through rhetoric. Nevertheless, we should not refer rhetoric to negativity only, since persuasion being part of rhetoric, it is not subjected to adverse impact due to the fact that it is not considered to be a negative aspect. Therefore, any argument or debate inevitably involves rhetoric, as each participant not only presents their own understanding of the truth, but also seeks to persuade others to accept that viewpoint as valid (Toye, 2013: 1-2).

This article uses qualitative and descriptive methods to explore how rhetoric appears in courtroom speeches. A selection of segments from well-known trials is used to demonstrate how defense lawyers and prosecutors apply persuasive techniques in practice. These examples were chosen because they clearly show common rhetorical patterns. The segments are studied through the basic principles of classical rhetoric, focusing on ethos, logos and pathos. We attempt to show how these strategies help the lawyers to present their speeches to the jury. The methodology is based on observation and comparison by looking at how similar techniques are used across different cases, highlighting the crucial role of persuasion in legal communication.

The Philosophical Perspectives of Rhetoric and Persuasion in Practice

To go back to ancient times from where rhetoric originated, we need to mention philosophers Plato and Aristotle. Plato believed rhetoric to be a disgraceful phenomenon since rhetoric is not taught, and its outcome and the effects are dishonest. In "Gorgias," Socrates asks Gorgias to define the craft he practices, and Gorgias identifies it as rhetoric, describing it as the "power of persuading by words." According to him, this persuasive skill operates in courts, political assemblies, and public gatherings. As Socrates probes further, he concludes relying on Gorgias' own explanations that rhetoric "is an artificer of persuasion productive of belief but not of instructions in matters of right and wrong." In essence, rhetoric does not aim to teach moral truth, but rather to influence opinion and secure belief (Plato, 380 B.C.).

Aristotle argues that rhetoric is inseparable from human interaction, as individuals constantly rely on persuasive language to justify their own views or to challenge another's claims. Central to his perspective is the idea that rhetoric functions as the art of persuasion. He also stresses the importance of strong legislation, noting that lawmakers should establish clear rules rather than leave judges wide discretion. When decisions depend too heavily on a judge's or juror's emotions, personal bias, or momentary sympathy, the outcome may stray from justice. For this reason, Aristotle emphasizes that verdicts must rest on concrete facts and verified evidence, rather than personal sentiment or subjective judgment (Aristotle, 350 BC:

1-11). In rhetoric, the persuasion can be affected by the ability to analyze the situation and information rationally, to comprehend human nature and character in its different manifestations and forms, manage reading and discerning human emotions, and understand why such an emotion is aroused, and how to control them (ibid, 350 BC: 1-11). We can consider one of the court cases. That is Karen Read's case called Commonwealth v. Read, which for the first time resulted in a mistrial with a hung jury, i.e. the jury could not come to the verdict regarding the case. In the second hearing of the case, the defense side won and the jury found Karen Read not guilty of any of the charges presented against her (Schooley, 2025). We can assume that it is not only because of the presented facts but also the persuasive way those facts and evidence were delivered by the defense lawyer in his opening statement:

Karen Read was framed for a murder she did not commit.

From a very early juncture in this case, you will question the Commonwealth's theory of the case. You will question the quality of the Commonwealth's evidence. You will question the veracity of the Commonwealth's Witnesses, and you will question their shoddy and biased investigation, a faulty investigation that led Karen Read sitting here today.

You'll learn that Michael Proctor had her Lexus SUV towed from her parents' home. But you'll also learn that he wrote a search warrant, in which he falsified the time that he took that. He swore under oath that the vehicle wasn't towed until 5:30 p.m. but you'll learn that we obtained surveillance footage that he didn't know we would get. And that

surveillance footage exposed that Michael Proctor's words in that sworn affidavit were a lie. Michael Proctor had that vehicle for about 90 minutes before he claimed to have taken it.

(CBS Boston, 2024).

These are just a few examples out of many to show the probable result which led the jury to come out without a unanimous verdict and cause the trial to be a mistrial. There is a persuasive content and idea behind these statements, where the falsification and untruthfulness are emphasized to direct the attention towards inaccurate statement provided by the prosecution to mislead the jury. The persuasive nature can be considered in the repetitions, the inconsistency and disparity in prosecution's statement.

Aristotle believed that persuasion relies on three fundamental modes: *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*. These elements shape how a speaker convinces an audience. *Ethos* concerns the credibility and moral character of the speaker which helps establish trust. *Logos* involves appealing to reason by presenting evidence, logical arguments, and factual information. *Pathos*, in contrast, seeks to influence emotions, aiming to move the audience through feelings such as sympathy, fear, or anger. For Aristotle, effective rhetoric requires a balance of all three, as each contributes differently to convincing and engaging listeners (Barker, 2015: 3; Yakutina et al., 2020). Let us consider the following examples which include all the three components of rhetoric:

You heard a testimony from firefighter Timothy Nuttall.

You heard from all of the paramedics from the civilian witnesses, from the First Responders.

Here was a testimony from officer Sarah, statements that she tributed to the defendant as saying that morning "This is all my fault. This is all my fault, I did this".

(CBS Boston, 2024).

These two segments are taken from Karen Read's first trial, where the prosecutor was delivering his closing argument. These are three examples of ethos as the prosecutor shifts the attention to the firefighter's, paramedics', witness', officer's, etc. statements made in court that highlights the credibility and accuracy of the case.

In support of this argument, counsel stated: "In Georgia v. Russia, the Court held that negotiations require that . . . the subject-matter of these discussions must relate to the 'substantive obligations under CERD'."

But that is not what the Court said. I invite the Court to closely review the Wednesday transcript, which is now on your screens, with the passage I just quoted highlighted in yellow. As the transcript makes clear, only the phrase "substantive obligations under CERD" falls within quotation marks — the remainder is counsel's own representation of the Court's views.

(International Court of Justice, 2024: pp. 10-11).

This segment is taken from Mr. Salonidis' speech, one of the representatives on behalf of Armenia in International Court of Justice in the Hague, where he presents the inaccuracy provided by the Azerbaijani

representative through facts and evidence. The logos is obvious taking into consideration the logical delivery of the facts through evidence and showing the obvious misinterpretation of those facts by the Azerbaijani representative.

The next segments are taken from XXXTentacion murder trial called the State of Florida v. Michael Boatwright, Trayvon Newsome, and Dedrick Williams:

Prosecutor: You'll hear how he was a young celebrity rapper who gained his fame through social media and downloads and things like that. He was very much a self-made artist who then rose up the ranks. He was wealthy as a result of his celebrity, and he also had a pregnant girlfriend who was pregnant with his first child.

Defense Lawyer: For over four and a half years Michael has been accused of a terrible murder that he did not commit. For four and a half years he has had this accusation branded about across our community and across the world and finally Michael is getting his day.

(Facing Reality, 2023).

In these segments, both the prosecutor and the defense lawyer employ pathos in their opening statements. The first discusses the victim's life, how due to his ambition and resilience, he became a famous rapper. In addition, the prosecutor mentions the victim's pregnant girlfriend, to move the juries' feelings even more, arousing emotions and sympathy towards the unborn baby that is left without a father and towards the girlfriend that is left as a future single mother. On the other hand, the latter states that the

defendant has been sentenced for a crime he had not committed, paying it with his life in prison for more than four years. It is sad and unfair for an innocent man to be convicted for somebody else's crime, which can impact the juries' decision during the verdict. The three components suggested by Aristotle can develop a persuasive tone and have a great impact on the court if delivered skillfully and masterly.

The Importance of Delivery in Legal Rhetoric

Cicero identifies five core elements of rhetoric: *delivery, memory, expression, arrangement*, and *invention*. *Delivery* represents the effective presentation of the speech to engage and persuade the audience, while *memory* ensures the orator's command of the material. *Expression* reflects the appropriate use of language, style, and vocabulary. *Arrangement* refers to the logical organization of arguments, while *invention* concerns the process of developing those arguments to make them convincing and reasonable (Cicero, 1470: 9-10; Walters n.d.:10-51; Barnwell, 2015: 31-39).

Considering that rhetoric is the art of persuasion and influential speakers such as politicians, lawyers, etc. need to master the art, it is important to study the rhetorical specificities of lawyers' speeches. The lawyer's task is to defend their clients and successfully win the case based on evidence and facts. There are certain key points that make the lawyer's speech impressive and persuasive. The lawyer should be a good rhetorician to persuade the judge and jury, speaking about the loopholes of the prosecutor's case, concentrating on facts and witnesses, and the client's

good characteristics, background, family, etc. (Clements, 2013; Pioneer Law Office).

The main aspect that can be decisive for the case is the lawyer's opening statement. It must be constructed in a way to persuade the jury about their client's innocence. In the opening statement, the defense lawyer should describe the events without arguing with the prosecutor, rather, telling the story and trying to reveal such strong points that will draw the attention of the jury to the powerful and catching statements and phrases (Hayrapetyan 2024). Let us consider the following examples taken from Karen Read's 2nd court trial:

There was no collision *with John O'Keefe.*

The evidence will show that Massachusetts State ***Police found him guilty****, found Michael Proctor guilty of dishonoring the department with his conduct.*

(CBS Boston, 2025).

From the examples, it is evident that the defense lawyer's points are effectively solid and confirming key aspects of the case. With the confirmations such as *there was no collision*, and *police found him guilty* it shows that his speech is based on facts and is not a mere allegation.

An essential element of an effective opening statement lies in the lawyer's ability to address the jury directly, maintaining steady eye contact and speaking without relying on notes. Such delivery reflects will testify, as unexpected developments during the trial might alter that decision. If this occurs, the jury may form assumptions unfavorable to the defense.

Lawyers should avoid following the principle of "presenting no argument" and instead treat the opening as a concise and purposeful version of the closing arguement (Pioneer Law Office).

A lawyer's courtroom speech must be convincing enough to influence both the judge and the jury; otherwise, their representation loses its purpose. To achieve this, attorneys need to master the art of rhetoric and persuasion, ensuring they can maintain the juries' attention and direct it toward their client's advantage. As E. Burkley and D. L. Anderson emphasize, lawyers should not only present facts and evidence but also possess the discernment to know precisely how and when to highlight them (Burkley & Anderson, 2008: 1). Knowing these key factors is very valuable to get the outcome for your favor as a lawyer.

A good lawyer should also be a good psychologist to grab the emotional state of the jurors targeting the accurate time for stating the weakest point of the prosecutor and the strongest point of the defense.

You'll learn that in Michael Proctor's world, rank has its privileges. The evidence will show that privileges that you don't get and I don't get, but apparently a Boston police officer, Brian Albert, and his friends, they do get. You'll learn that in Michael Proctor's world, he didn't care about finding the truth.

(CBS Boston, 2025).

In this example, we can notice the psychological targeting of the speech, namely, mentioning the rank being a privilege (*rank has its privileges*). Many people generally would love to be privileged but

because of certain aspects they are not, but here, a cop has a privilege based on the rank. The important fact here, is that even being a police officer, Michael Proctor had no interest to find the truth. This is a good example to show how the defense lawyer provides facts taking into account what words need to be said and in what context.

Barnwell (2015: 17) emphasizes that persuasion is inseparable from the psychological act of perception. When the audience fails to fully grasp the information presented, the persuasive effort loses its effectiveness. For persuasion to work, the delivery of facts and reasoning must be clear, coherent, and easily understood. Hence, lawyers need to strategically engage the jurors' perceptions and mental processes, presenting arguments in a way that shapes their interpretation of the case. The crucial element lies not in the mere presentation of facts, but in the ability to communicate them persuasively enough to influence belief and judgment (ibid: 33).

You can see it in the Snapchat that he ***executes him in a brutal fashion****, not the legal.*

(News 19 WLTX, 2023).

This is a good example of the above-mentioned theory since the defense lawyer in Alex Murdaugh trial called State of South Carolina v. Richard Alexander Murdaugh does not simply state a fact in his opening statement, rather employing emotive vocabulary, he *executes him in a brutal fashion*. The *brutal execution* is emphasized in such a manner to emphasize the cruelty and make an impact on the jury.

A good persuasion technique is giving such arguments that can be easily understood and perceived by the audience. Those finding it hard to perceive the information may not be persuaded since apprehensible arguments make them understand the point and agree with them.

According to Clements (2013: 320–337), a lawyer's persuasiveness largely depends on the effective use of rhetorical techniques to shape how the audience perceives facts, interprets evidence, and judges witness credibility, at the same time exposing weaknesses in the opposing attorney's case. In criminal defense trials, both the prosecution and defense often present the same facts through contrasting narratives. To achieve a favorable verdict, the defense must build a story grounded in verified evidence, appeal to the jury's emotions through pathos, and clearly justify why their version of events should be accepted as true (Fisher, 2022). A good example of this can be the following:

Prosecutor: And he looked up at Miss Read and he said: "What happened?" And you'll hear her words through a firefighter[...]. She said: "I hit him. I hit him. I hit him." And it was at that time through the words of the defendant that she admitted what she had done that night that she hit John O'Keefe.

Defense: John didn't come home. And the evidence will show that Karen Read never said, "I hit him." Never. Not in the background of the 911 recording, not on any dashcam video, not on any audio, not on any police body cam, not to a first responder. It's never mentioned in a single report.

It's never reported in a single report from January 29th, not by one person because it never happened.

(CBS Boston, 2025).

These segments show that the prosecutor says one thing, claiming that the defendant confessed in having hit the victim, while the defense lawyer denies the claim stating that there is no single evidence that proves her confession. This turns one word against the other, the prosecutor quoting the defendant while the defense lawyer claims the opposite, stating that his client had not made such a statement previously. The prosecutor brings the firefighter's testimony quoting their conversation while the defense lawyer claims there is no evidence to prove the allegation.

Closing arguments do not include evidence or facts, it is the person's opinion about whether the certain evidence or argument during the trial is true or false, which means the jury should not pay close attention to what is said for their own decision to construct as a result (Judge Sisco, 2021). Nevertheless, according to Guichard (2005), the closing argument represents the ultimate moment of persuasion in a trial. Its primary aim is to convince the jury however, this process does not begin at the end of the trial but rather from the very formulation of the case theory. Every stage of the trial should work towards reinforcing this persuasive goal. The attorney's responsibility is to define the key issues and present them compellingly, ensuring that their interpretation of the facts, supported by vivid imagery and analogies, guides the juries' deliberation. A closing argument should not merely recount witness testimonies or restate legal

principles, it should present a coherent theory of the case, argued with clarity, conviction, and rhetorical force. We can consider the following segments for a criminal trial:

[1] *So he's five or six whiskeys deep into the night by this time* (Court TV, 2024).

[2] *He points over at John and he motions for him. "Come on, come on, come with me"* (ibid, 2024).

[3] *He's out of luck and the hounds were at the gate* (News 19 WLTX, 2023).

[4] *The best dressed Uber driver I have ever seen[…] Gucci down to the socks* (

Law Talk With Mike, 2023).

[5] *And it really affected the investigation of this case, and tunnel vision is like termites to the foundation of a house. If you are an investigator you have to look at all of your options* (ibid, 2023).

A few examples have been picked out from some court trial cases to show some of the vivid imagery and interpretation of facts present in the speeches. In [1] and [2], the defense lawyer from Karen Read's trial talks about an intoxicated person, creates the image of a drunkard that has been drinking through the whole night. Then he talks about the taunting behavior towards John, which creates the image for the jury about the interaction, to comprehend that person's situation and behavior.

In Alex Murdaugh trial [3], the prosecutor talks metaphorically about the situation, where the "predators" were expecting the person.

In XXXTentacion case [4] and [5], the defense lawyer mocks the Uber driver's clothing that creates the image of someone rich. The jury may get the mockery since typically a rich person wearing Gucci will not drive Uber. The defense lawyer also uses a metaphor "*tunnel vision*" to explain that whatever the prosecution does, is not a correct way to lead an investigation, since they need to take every detail into account, instead of using a blind eye and letting the "termites eat the foundation."

Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be stated once again that rhetoric remains a fundamental aspect of effective communication, particularly in legal contexts where persuasion can directly influence the outcome of a trial. From the philosophical foundations laid by Plato and Aristotle to contemporary courtroom practices, rhetoric enables speakers to present facts, evidence, and arguments in a way their audience can relate to. Lawyers must not only rely on the logical presentation of evidence but also strategically employ ethos, logos, and pathos to establish credibility, appeal to reason, and engage jurors' emotions. Court case trials such as Karen Read's, Alex Murdaugh's, and XXXTentacion's out of many can illustrate how persuasive language, vivid imagery, and carefully framed arguments can shape perceptions, highlight inconsistencies in opposing testimony, and underscore critical facts. Furthermore, the effectiveness of a lawyer's speech often hinges on psychological awareness, timing, and the ability to direct the jury's attention toward key points while maintaining clarity and

credibility. By combining careful reasoning with emotive and memorable expression, legal rhetoric ensures that the audience not only receives information but is guided to interpret it in a way that supports the lawyer's case. This demonstrates that rhetoric is not merely about presenting facts, it is an artful practice of persuasion, essential for achieving justice and influencing decisions in the courtroom.

ԳՐԱԿԱՆՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ

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