ANALYZING ETHOS

EXAMPLE:

*The following speech presents an example of an ethos-centered approach to expressing an argument. In this brief address, delivered spontaneously by Sojourner Truth at a women’s convention in 1851 and transcribed by an observer, Truth argues that women should be treated as equals with men and uses her own experience and her own character to illustrate her argument. Observe the techniques she uses and the impressions they create.*

**“Ain’t I a Woman?”**

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| TEXT | ANNOTATIONS |
| Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter.  I think that ’twixt the Negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what’s all this here talking about? | The speech begins with Sojourner addressing the audience as “children.” This creates an affable, informal tone and establishes Truth’s image as a motherly figure. |
| That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere.  Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman?  Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman?  I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman? | In this passage, Truth describes her own experiences to establish her expertise on the subject of how women differ from men. Through the experiences she lists here, Truth demonstrates that she has firsthand knowledge of how hard women can work and the kinds of hardships they are capable of surviving. Truth’s testimony of her own strength and perseverance make her a credible witness on the subject of women’s abilities. (Note that this is not an argument from authority because Truth is using herself as an example, rather than using her opinion as the defining point of the argument.) |
| Then they talk about this thing in the head; what’s this they call it? [A member of the audience whispers, “intellect.”] That’s it, honey. What’s that got to do with women’s rights or Negroes’ rights? If my cup won’t hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn’t you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full? | Truth makes herself appear humble and likable through self-deprecating humor. |
| Then that little man in black there, he says women can’t have as much rights as men, ’cause Christ wasn’t a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him. | Here, Truth again makes an attempt at humor to establish rapport with the audience. |
| If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them. |  |
| Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain’t got nothing more to say. | In another display of modesty, Truth thanks the audience for hearing her and refers to herself as “old Sojourner” |

Truth’s ethical appeals in this argument defy expectations: rather than presenting herself as highly educated and erudite, she embodies a simple, plainspoken persona. In so doing, she comes across as likable, trustworthy, and world-wise. In many cases, downplaying one’s personal abilities, as Truth does here, is even more effective than highlighting them.

Ethical appeals can take many forms, and most arguments will be presented with some regard to ethos, even if the speaker never makes any specific reference to him or herself; even the decision to remain formal and distant can be a part of a speaker’s ethos. Every detail of a composition can reflect in some way on the speaker, and must, therefore, be chosen wisely.

Now, you try!

**Directions:**

*In 399 B.C., Socrates was tried for having corrupted the youth of Athens and defied Greek religious teachings. Before being sentenced to death, Socrates spoke in his own defense at his trial. The following excerpt comes from the beginning of Socrates’ address to the jury, as rendered by his student Plato. Read the following passage carefully. Then, identify and describe Socrates’ methods in presenting a persuasive ethos. Be sure to name the specific qualities Socrates attempts to embody, and include examples from the text to illustrate your points*.

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| **Text** | **Annotations** |
| “I know not, O Athenians, how you may be affected by my accusers: I indeed have through them almost forgotten myself, so persuasively have they spoken; though, as I may say, they have not asserted anything which is true.  But among the multitude of their false assertions I am most surprised at this, in which they say that you ought to beware of being deceived by me, as if I were an eloquent speaker.  For that they should not be ashamed of asserting that which will be immediately confuted by me in reality, since in the present instance I shall appear to you to be by no means eloquent, this seems to me to be the consummation of impudence, unless they call him eloquent who speaks the truth.  For, if they assert this, I shall indeed acknowledge myself to be a rhetorician, though not according to their conceptions. They have not then, as I said, asserted anything which is true; but from me you will hear all the truth.  Not, by Jupiter, O Athenians, that you will hear from me a discourse splendidly decorated with nouns and verbs, and adorned in other respects like the harangues of these men; but you will hear me speaking in such language as may casually present itself. For I am confident that what I say will be just, nor let any one of you expect it will be otherwise: for it does not become one of my age to come before you like a lad with a studied discourse.  And, indeed, I very much request and beseech you, O Athenians, that if you should hear me apologizing in the same terms and modes of expression which I am accustomed to use in the Forum, on the Exchange and Public Banks, and in other places, where many of you have heard me, that you will neither wonder nor be disturbed on this account; for the case is as follows: I now for the first time come before this tribunal, though I am more than seventy years old; and consequently I am a stranger to the mode of speaking which is here adopted.  As, therefore, if I were in reality a foreigner, you would pardon me for using the language and the manner in which I had been educated, so now I request you, and this justly, as it appears to me, to suffer the mode of my diction, whether it be better or worse, and to attend to this, whether I speak what is just or not: for this is the virtue of a judge, as that of an orator is to speak the truth. | This is where you pick out examples of Socrates using ethos to support his claims.  Hint:  You should probably identify his claims first, so that you can decide where he’s using ethos.  Tip:  If the language seems confusing/difficult to understand, pause after reading each paragraph and summarize what you read. |