Glossary of Rhetorical and Critical Thinking Terms

absolute. See primary certitude.

abstract. Adjective denoting generalized, theoretical concepts or words, in contrast to concepts or words denoting concrete, specific objects and actual instances. Critical thinking makes accurate connections between the abstract and the concrete.

ad hominem. See chapter 12.

ad ignorantiam. See chapter 12.

ad populum. See chapter 12.

alliteration. Rhetorical or poetic technique of repeating consonant sounds for rhythmic effect.

allusion. A direct or indirect reference to a piece of information that readers or listeners are presumed to be familiar with.

analogy. A comparison based on a resemblance or similarity between two or more things. Critical thinking must distinguish between sound and false analogies, based on whether the two things being compared have more significant similarities or differences.

analysis. Various modes of critically examining a subject or forming value judgments on it, such as scientific, causal, moral, historical, logical, rhetorical, semantic, or literary. Analysis precedes and leads to synthesis.

anecdote. A brief story, often humorous, used as a form of argumentative evidence. The phrase “anecdotal evidence” has a somewhat negative connotation when it is used to suggest that a particular anecdote might be an unrepresentative sampling or argument from the exception.

anthropomorphism or androcentrism. The tendency to view humans as the center of all life, superior to all other animals, or to project human characteristics and expectations on everything in nature.
appeal to authority. See chapter 12.

appeal to fear or scare tactics. See chapter 12.

appeal to the past. See chapter 12.

appeal to pity. See chapter 12.

argument. Defense of a premise, assertion, or claim through deductive or inductive reasoning and supporting evidence. The mere assertion of an opinion without support does not constitute an argument, though many people fail to understand the distinction.

argument from the exception. See chapter 12.

assertion or claim. In inductive argument, a disputable statement to be supported by evidence or reasoning.

attribution. Support of an argument through attributing a claim to a source, preferably a reliable one.

authoritarianism. The mental trait of uncritically accepting or obeying anything that someone perceived to be in a position of authority says. It also describes the mentality of political rulers who impose uncritical acceptance of their authority on those they rule, particularly through an undemocratic government, and it can be a description of the ideology of such governments.

bandwagon. See chapter 12.

begging the question. See chapter 12.

bias (Noun. The adjective is biased). In the neutral sense, any particular, subjective viewpoint. In the negative sense, synonymous with prejudice.

causal analysis. Mode of critical thinking identifying, or distinguishing between, causes and effects.

causal fallacies or faulty causation. See chapter 13 for blaming the victim, confusion of cause and effect, giving your side credit for positive results, post hoc ergo propter hoc, reductive fallacy, slippery slope, too much or too little.

circular argument. See chapter 12.

“cleans” and “dirties.” Words with strong positive or negative connotations, often used selectively and irrationally for emotional appeal in favor of one’s own side and against opponents. Also called by various semanticists “God” and “Devil” terms or “purr words” and “snarl words.”

committed relativism. The understanding that in spite of the complexity and uncertainty of many truths, judgments of truth and falsity, right and wrong, and moral commitments still need to be made, on the basis of the most complete, diverse knowledge presently available to us.

common practice. See chapter 12.

compartmentalization or compartmentalized thinking. See chapter 12.

conclusion or inference. A reasoned judgment in an argument reached deductively through a sequence of premises or inductively through supporting evidence.

concrete. Adjective for concepts or words denoting a specific object or actual instance, as opposed to abstract or theoretical concepts and words.

conflict of interest. A financial or other kind of involvement (such as a family tie or friendship with one of the parties) in a controversy that might bias the viewpoint of a writer or speaker.

connotation. The emotional associations with, or implications of, some words, beyond their literal denotation.
**consistency.** The need for a speaker or writer to put ideas together that are free from self-contradiction, **compartamentalization**, and **doublethink**.

**context.** The parts of a discourse that surround a word, passage, or concept and that can help elucidate its meaning, or the interrelated conditions within which something exists. **Quotation out of context** is a common fallacy (see chapter 12).

**critical thinking.** An approach to argumentative rhetoric that includes formal and informal logic; the judicious use of evidence; ability to evaluate the quality of written or spoken arguments; awareness of psychological, sociological, and political factors in the formation of our thinking; skeptical questioning of, and open-minded dialogue on, all matters of truth and belief.

**cultural conditioning.** The whole complex of social forces that form our attitudes and behavior, frequently without our being conscious of their influence on us.

**cultural literacy.** Education theorist E. D. Hirsch's term for the body of factual knowledge needed as a basis for critical thinking and higher education, and the ability to recognize and use cultural allusions.

**culturally conditioned** or **socially constructed assumptions.** Beliefs or attitudes that we absorb unconsciously from our cultural conditioning. Learning to question those assumptions is an essential aspect of critical thinking.

**cumulativeness or cumulation.** The process of writing or understanding an extended line of argument through developing a sequence of ideas and synthesizing them into a conclusion. Related to **recursiveness** in the critical thinking process of moving forward and back repeatedly to get a coherent sense of a piece of writing.

**deductive reasoning** or **argument.** A form of argument in which a conclusion or inference follows through a logical chain of reasoning from one or more premises.

**defense mechanisms.** Psychological blocks to critical thinking that result from defensiveness against recognizing truths that are threatening to oneself or one's side. They include reaction formation, denial, projection, and rationalization.

**demagogue.** A politician or other public figure who cynically manipulates the emotions, ignorance, and prejudices of the masses for his or her own benefit or to gain power for a party or clique. **Demagoguery** or **demagogy** are the words describing this practice.

**denial.** Psychological **defense mechanism** involving irrational refusal to acknowledge an unpleasant truth, as distinguished from the justified denial or refutation of an asserted truth on reasoned grounds.

**denotation.** The concept or object that a word literally or objectively designates, apart from its possible connotation.

**derision.** See chapter 12.

**disinformation** or **black propaganda.** Information propagated by a governmental or other agency that is calculatedly false, intended to confuse opponents or discredit them by fabricating malicious stories about them.

**distortion.** See chapter 12.

**double standard** or **selective vision.** Seeing faults on the opposing side that one is blind to on one's own, or applying a harsher standard of judgment to opponents than to oneself and one's allies. A common form of the ESBYODS principle and of doublethink.

**doublethink.** A term from George Orwell's novel *1984*, devised by the all-powerful ruling party of the future state of Oceania to describe the self-contradictory mental process through which the masses are culturally conditioned into rationalizing all the party's lies, deprivations of rights, and constant changes of policy.
downplaying. The rhetorical pattern of deemphasizing or ignoring altogether evidence or arguments that are unfavorable to one's own side and favorable to the opposing side, while playing up the reverse pattern in favor of one's own side and against the opposing side. Can be done in either a scrupulous or an unscrupulous manner.

drawing the line. Indicating the limits of one's argument to prevent the possibility of its being pushed farther than one would be willing to defend, to the point of reduction to absurdity.

either-or fallacy, or false dilemma, false dichotomy. See chapter 12.

elitism. The mentality of, or social domination by, a small group of people regarded by themselves or others as superior to the masses in either power, wealth, or education and culture. Opposed to populism.

elocuence. Language that is both emotionally moving and on a high moral plane, such as Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address or Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Eloquence also is distinguished by memorably articulate, ingenious, and apt language; as the eighteenth-century English poet Alexander Pope put it, in what is itself a famously eloquent phrase, "What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed."

emotional appeal. An attempt to sway the opinion of others through an argument based on appeal to pity, fear, or sentimentality.

empirical. The kind of inductive evidence derived from systematic observation, experimentation, or survey, typified by scientific or social-scientific research.

enthrall. A common form of deductive reasoning, a syllogism with one missing or implied premise.

equal and opposite extreme. See chapter 12.

equivocation. See chapter 12.

ESBYODS principle. Acronym for “Everyone says, but your own doesn't stink.” The universal, ethnocentric tendency for us all to be more perceptive of, and angered by, faults in others than in ourselves and our allies.

ethnocentrism. A conscious or unconscious belief in the inherent superiority of one's own social group or culture—nation, political party, religion, race, gender, locality, school, and so on—over others, and a tendency to view other groups or cultures in terms of one's own.

ethos. The moral or intellectual character that speakers or writers project, as well as the kind of identity they establish with their listeners or readers. The Greek word ethos is the root of the English word ethics, so the meaning of ethos can be extended to include the ethical dimension in argument, including moral judgments and the quality of support for them, as well as the forcefulness of the emotion and language supporting the judgment or action being advocated.

euphemism. The use, sometimes with deceptive intention, of a blandly positive word to sugarcoat a harsh reality.

evidence. Various means used to support an assertion, claim, or premise. Useful sources of evidence include (1) the writer's or others' personal experience, examples, anecdotes, reasoned analysis, or generally acknowledged truths, (2) primary research, and (3) secondary research.

extended line of argument. The development of several single arguments into a complex, longer argument.

false inference. Drawing a conclusion from an implication that is not warranted by it.

figures of speech or figurative language. The opposite of literal language. A variety of verbal analogies or symbols made by substituting one word for another whose meaning is
in some way related to the first. The most common figures are metaphor, simile, personification, and metonymy. Irony, paradox, hyperbole, and symbolism are also sometimes defined as figures, in the sense that meaning in them is indirect and must be deciphered. In argumentative rhetoric, figures should be judged as analogies, in terms of whether they show a persuasive similarity and bring us closer to the concrete reality of a situation, or distract from that reality by vague abstraction.

flag-waving or jingoism. See chapter 12.

general semantics. The branch of linguistics dealing with the perception of external reality by human thought and its translation into meaningful language and communication, with rhetorical emphasis on sources of misunderstanding and miscommunication. Aspects of semantics include denotation and connotation, literal and figurative language, abstract and concrete language, and euphemism.

guilt by association. See chapter 12.

half-truth. See chapter 12.

hasty conclusion. See chapter 12.

hatchet job. A journalistic article or book calculated to smear the person it is about. Opposed to puff piece.

hidden agenda. A situation in which a speaker or writer, arguing on a particular issue, really is aiming for a different or larger goal without admitting it.

hype. A noun and verb used in advertising, public relations, show business, and political campaigns to mean publicity or promotion of a product, idea, or individual, often extravagant or hyperbolic. By extension, anything for which the public's expectations built up by publicity far exceed the reality.

hyperbole. Deliberate exaggeration for a rhetorical effect such as humor or shock.

hypothesis. A tentative assertion made in order to test its possible truth through exploring evidence and consequences of its implementation supporting or refuting it.

ideologue. A spokesperson for a particular ideology, usually political, who is so certain of its truth and closed-minded that she or he presents its viewpoint in a one-sidedly polemical or propagandistic manner.

ideology. A systematic body of ideas, religious, philosophical, aesthetic, or—most commonly—political. The dominant ideology of a society or social group is often absorbed by individuals unconsciously, as a pattern of culturally conditioned assumptions.

image. A word or phrase denoting a visual or other sensory object. Images can be either literal or figurative.

implied or hidden premise. In deductive arguments, usually enthymemes, a premise on which the conclusion depends but that is not stated explicitly or supported. If it is not especially controversial, then no harm is done by not stating or supporting it, but arguments frequently are weakened by assuming the truth of hidden premises that are disputable.

imply, implication. To imply, or make an implication, is to suggest that something is true without stating explicitly that it is. The opposite of infer and inference—the reader or listener infers or makes an inference from what the writer or speaker implies. “The implications of X’s position” refers to the consequences of a policy or argument.

inductive argument or reasoning. Marshaling of empirical evidence, data (facts and figures), or specific examples, either to support an assertion or to lead to a conclusion or inference.

inductive leap. See chapter 12.
infer, inference. For a reader or listener to infer something to is draw a conclusion from a writer's or speaker's implication. Inference is also synonymous with the conclusion of an argument. A frequent error in reasoning is false inferences, drawing conclusions from a speaker's or writer's implications that are not warranted.

invective. A kind of polemics whose tone is angry or strident, filled with insults and name-calling toward opponents, and propagandistically one-sided.

irony. General term for many kinds of disparity, employed or pointed out by a writer or speaker for rhetorical effect—disparity between what is said and what is meant (verbal irony), between appearance and reality, between what people say and what they do, between intention and outcome, between what characters in a literary work know and what the audience knows (dramatic irony), between past and present realities (historical irony), and so on.

I won't . . . but I will. See chapter 12.

Let's you and him fight. See chapter 12.

levels of meaning. In approaching serious academic studies, it is necessary not only to read or write recursively and cumulatively, on a linear or horizontal plane, so to speak, but also to stop frequently to process varieties of information stacked or compressed “vertically” in a text, including multiple or complex meanings and viewpoints; irony, paradox, figures of speech, allusions or references (cultural literacy), between-the-lines implications, words to look up in a dictionary, facts to look up in reference works, and citations to check for accuracy and further information.

literal language. Words that are used purely for denotation or description, as opposed to figures of speech.

metaphor. Figure of speech using a word or phrase to describe an object or concept it does not literally denote, in order to suggest a comparison, without the comparison being explicit as in a simile.

metonymy. Figure of speech making a symbolic substitution of a part for a whole or a location for what is located there.

name-calling. See chapter 12.

non sequitur. See chapter 12.

overgeneralization. See chapter 12.

oversimplification. See chapter 12.

paradox. A seemingly self-contradictory statement that contains an ironic truth.

partisanship. Allegiance by a writer or speaker to a particular political party or ideology.

personification. Figure of speech assigning human characteristics to animals or objects.

phallocentrism. Cultural bias assuming men as the norm of humanity or the superior gender.

plain folks. See chapter 12.

playing up. The rhetorical pattern of emphasizing one side of a controversy while downplaying the other side, which can be done in either a scrupulous or unscrupulous manner.

polemics. (Singular or plural noun.) Heated, usually partisan argumentation. Argumentation can be polemical while still being fair-minded and not resorting to invective. See “Ground Rules for Polemists” in chapter 11.

populism. Ideas or policies that speak for, and serve the interests of, the common people. Opposed to elitism. Appeals to populism can be judged either authentic or fake, as in
demagogy and plain folks.

prejudice. Literally prejudging; making judgments, typically with strong attitudes, before one has studied a subject enough to make a fair judgment on it. Also, general closed-mindedness and quickness to form negative stereotypes, especially toward particular nationalities or social groups. Synonymous with bias.

primary certitude. Being absolutely sure that your viewpoint is correct, even if you don’t have enough information to form an educated opinion; thinking in terms of black and white and failing to comprehend complex realities.

primary research. Any form of empirical support for an argument gathered personally by a writer or speaker. Contrasted to secondary research.

projection. Psychological defense mechanism shifting one’s own traits or faults onto others, or blaming others for doing to us what we are doing to them.

propaganda. A deliberately one-sided account of all issues, usually engineered by a government, political party, or special interest group.

puff piece. A journalistic article or book that is calculated to make the person or cause written about look good, downplaying all faults and suppressing any criticism. Opposed to hatchet job.

quotation out of context. See chapter 12.

rationalization. Psychological defense mechanism through which people convince themselves that irrational beliefs supporting their side are really rational. “To rationalize” means to reason in a way that justifies a predetermined or desired conclusion.

reaction formation. A psychological defense mechanism in which people respond with irrational anger to an idea that is threatening to their way of thinking.

red herring. See chapter 12.

reduction to absurdity. A rhetorical technique that pushes an opponent’s unqualified position to its extreme logical consequences, in order to show a weakness in it.

rebuttal (verb to rebut). A response to an argument presenting an opposing view. Often used synonymously with refutation and refute.

refutation (verb to refute). An attempt to discredit an opposing argument by showing factual errors and fallacies in it.

relativity of viewpoint. The concept that different individuals’ perceptions and beliefs tend to be relative to their ethnocentric biases. This concept does not imply that there is no objective truth or reliable basis for value judgments, but only that we need to become aware of our subjective viewpoint in order to approximate a more objective one or committed relativism.

relevance. Having significant and demonstrable bearing on the matter at hand, as opposed to various forms of the fallacy of irrelevance.

religiosity. A form of sentimentality that appeals to religious feelings but that lacks any true substance; it is sometimes hypocritical, but more often it is simply superficial.

rhetoric. The art of persuasion; principles, techniques, and forms of argumentation, incorporating but not limited to aspects of logic or reasoning. In popular usage rhetoric has a negative connotation associated with unscrupulous arguments, but in its actual denotation, rhetoric can be either scrupulous or unscrupulous.

Rogerian argument. A rhetorical method devised by psychologist Carl Rogers in which opponents in an argument agree to show that they understand and respect the opposing position by summarizing it as they think its proponent would.
**secondary research.** Argumentative support through citation of scholarly, journalistic, or other sources, as opposed to the **primary research** that writers or speakers conduct themselves.

**self-fulfilling prophecy.** A variety of **circular argument** in which the belief in, or publicizing of, something itself causes it to become true or accepted. It can be a form of **vicious circle,** as in: Citizens think politicians are all corrupt, so they don’t inform themselves about politics or vote. But it’s their ignorance and apathy that enables politicians to become corrupt, so that political corruption becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

**sentimentality.** See chapter 12.

**setting the agenda.** The control by one side in public discourse not only of particular arguments on controversial issues but also of the very framework of issues that will and will not be discussed. This is a powerful force in **downplaying** issues unfavorable to those setting the agenda by simply excluding them from consideration. Communications scholars talk about “the agenda-setting function of the media.”

**shifting ground.** See chapter 12.

**simile.** A common **figure of speech** in which a **metaphorical** analogy is made explicit by the words “like” or “as.”

**skepticism.** The philosophical doctrine, central to critical thinking, that absolute, unchanging knowledge is impossible and that inquiry must be a process of systematic questioning in order to acquire approximate or relative certainty.

**Socratic dialogue.** A rhetorical method associated with Socrates in the dialogues of Plato, consisting of the attempt to arrive at truth through a series of questions and answers between two or more participants.

**special interests.** “Special” in the sense of selfish or personal, and “interests” in the sense of an investment or stake in a particular outcome. Individuals or organizations (such as corporations or labor unions) that have a stake, financial or other, in issues such as legislation, and that attempt to influence legislation or public opinion toward their own selfish ends, often against the interests of the general public.

**special pleading.** See chapter 12.

**stereotyping.** **Overgeneralization** about some social group, often of a prejudicial nature.

**straw man.** See chapter 12.

**style.** The distinctive characteristics of a particular writer’s or speaker’s language, or the genre of a written or spoken work. The style of a piece of writing, especially in the sense of its level of discourse, is related to its **tone.** Popular journalistic writing is likely to be more simplified, generalized, and superficial in style, as well as more polemical, than serious journalism or scholarly writing. Writers using the latter genres, however, often do combine serious research and documentation with a polemical tone.

**syllogism.** The classic form of deductive reasoning, consisting of two **premises** and a **conclusion** or **inference** drawn from them.

**symbol.** All language is symbolic, in the sense that spoken or written words are only arbitrary symbols for what they denote. The word **symbolism,** however, also refers to a distinctive kind of **figure of speech** in which a verbal **image** does not merely suggest a one-to-one analogy with some other denoted object, as in a **metaphor,** but stands for something larger or more elevated, as when Henry David Thoreau in *Walden,* seeking higher truths than those of the physical world, says, “I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars.”

**synthesis.** The cumulation of the parts of an expository or argumentative **analysis** into a cogent conclusion.
taboo. A belief or value that is, in effect, forbidden to be considered in a particular society, even though it may be reasonable. Opposite of totem.

tone. The writer’s implicit attitude, the tone of voice you “hear” in a piece of writing. Its importance in argumentation lies in the appropriateness and persuasive effectiveness of the tone the author chooses to use. Some of the adjectives applicable to tone include compassionate, fair-minded, evenhanded, calmly and carefully reasoned, objective, opinionated, inspirational, sentimental, skeptical, cynical, humorous, ironic, satirical, tongue-in-cheek, sarcastic, facetious, angry, belligerent, accusatory, derisive, strident, shrill, polemical, and invective.

totem. A belief or value that is, in effect, held sacred by a particular society, shielded from critical scrutiny, so that it is taboo to question it.

tu quoque. See chapter 12.

unconcretized verbal abstraction. A vague concept, word, or phrase, usually with a strong connotation, but that denotes no concrete, specific reality, and thus impedes critical thinking.

unrepresentative sample. See chapter 12.

validity. A term used in evaluating deductive arguments. Strictly speaking, a deductive argument is said to be valid when its conclusion follows logically and necessarily from its premise(s). For the conclusion of a valid argument to be true, however, the premises must also be true.

vicious circle. A sequence of events, identified through causal analysis, in which a cause leads to an effect, and the effect in turn perpetuates the cause.

viewpoint. The subjective, restricted position from which each of us perceives both personal and social issues. Every viewpoint is a biased one, in the sense that nobody has a total, completely objective perception of controversial issues, but critical thinking enables us to aspire toward increased objectivity precisely through becoming more aware of our subjective biases and learning to understand others’ differing viewpoints.

what do you mean, “we”? See chapter 12.

wishful thinking. See chapter 12.