

Rhetoric/Slash/Composition

Cynthia Haynes
University of Texas at Dallas

I have been hailed by a slash, called into these questions (How has the slash between rhet/comp come to be and to mean? Will the slash between rhet/comp persist?) by a virgule, a solidus, a dia/critical mark (of sorts). It is not a task I take lightly, nor one that I find distasteful. I am somewhat of a virgule myself, poised on the cusp of a slightly disreputable figure. (I once bristled when an oh-so-proper official of the MLA requested that I remove a slash from the title of my already-accepted MLA conference presentation. Before the program went to print, you see. I said no. The slash was necessary, and it stayed. For once in my life, it was an either/or decision.) Such it is with rhetoric/composition—both doomed and/or fortunate to live with this aporetic virgule between them, listing like a slightly disfigured lightning bolt. This slash should (perhaps) be historicized, and yet that would not disburden it of the will-to-privilege invariably invoked by a binary such as the “rhetoric/composition” syntagm. It is a border not unlike that between and/or, which Derrida describes as “The mobile slash between and/or, and/and, or/and, or/or, . . . a singular border, simultaneously conjunctive, disjunctive, and undecidable” (*Aporias* 23). Which cleverly avoids the Hegelian dialectic, but not the ubiquitous five-paragraph theme. So be it. Consider the theme introduced. What follows are three points and a conclusion.

Slash as pedagogy (conjunctive)

There is no question about rhetoric’s role in composition instruction as practiced during the last twenty-five years or so (aside from isolated examples of composition purists’ rhetoric claiming otherwise). Thus, it is relatively easy to (perforce) denote the slash between rhetoric and composition as pedagogically conjunctive—that is, teaching one is teaching the other. The syntagm rhetoric/composition forms a mutually beneficial tautology, and rhetoric and composition textbook publishers are ever so eager to perpetuate the slash, multiplying their investment in perpetuity.

Slash as techné (disjunctive)

Not so easily, however, can we designate the slash as disjunctive (aside from isolated examples of speech communication purists’ rhetoric claiming otherwise, eager to lop off composition altogether). One way to perceive the disjunction is to view the slash as a technology. In other words, the difference between rhetoric and composition is in how they each define and employ *techné*. Classical rhetoric notwithstanding, the proximity of rhetoric to technology has historically oscillated between nearness and distance. Not so with composition. With the advent of the moniker computers and writing, rhet/comp has had to invite technology into the fold, so to speak. Rhetoric, as a consequence, has taken a back seat. But computers and writing has never been designated similarly, (i.e., computers/writing). The question is why? Are we too near the birth of this particular conjunction (and)? Has technology sped up (exponentially) the dissipation of this slash before it even became a reality? That is, isn’t the and between computers and writing already utterly unnecessary? If so, how is this tautology different than the one mentioned above? Is there, in other words, an isomorphic relation between rhetoric and technology? If so,

where does this leave composition? The irony of asking the question in an essay destined for publication in a digital format, enculturated (in a manner of speaking) as an electronic expression, should not be lost on the reader. (And clearly a rhetorically informed reader would recognize the irony sooner than others, right?)

Slash as scapegoat (undecidable)

In the introductory paragraph of this five-paragraph theme, I rendered the image of our slash as a disfigured lightning bolt. But a trinity of slashes (perhaps) requires a more theological (though not teleological) image for the figure that deconstructs the binary of conjunction/disjunction. The undecidable figure is the blade, Abraham's raised knife, to be exact. Although both noun and verb, to slash is the predicate with which the scapegoat enters culture and unleashes a devastating mechanism upon humanity. The slash / signals an image—Abraham standing over Isaac, knife raised at an angle, prepared to sacrifice his only son—that marks a moment of indecision; but the undecidable dynamic is set in motion—rhetoric, and/or composition, caught in an act of faith. Faith won out that day. The scapegoat was always already present, a ram caught by its horns in the thicket (Genesis 22)—in Greek, the *pharmakon*. Derrida describes the “*pharmakon* [as] the combat zone between philosophy and its other” (*Dissemination* 138). For example, in Greek culture there were rituals of purification in which the “*pharmakoi* were put to death” (132). But, it is ironic that those who represented evil (the outside threat) were “nonetheless constituted, regularly granted [their] place by the community, chosen, kept, fed, etc., in the very heart of the inside” (133). Derrida notes the paradox of this structure: “The ceremony of the *pharmakos* is thus played out on the boundary line between inside and outside. . . . The origin of difference and division, the *pharmakos* represents evil both introjected and projected. Beneficial insofar as he cures—and for that, venerated and cared for—harmful insofar as he incarnates the powers of evil—and for that, feared and treated with caution. Alarming and calming. Sacred and accursed (133). It is not coincidental that the slash is rendered by drawing a *virgula divinatoria* (divining rod).

To conclude (by deferring a conclusion), it is as the undecidable (aporia, paradox) that our slash represents the origin of difference and division—the rhetoric to our composition, and vice versa. Without the vice (the turn), we would face living in the shadow of the versa (the having turned)—the decided, and perpetually divided, city of Rhetoric or Composition.

Works Cited

Derrida, Jacques. *Aporias*. Trans. Thomas Dutoit. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993.
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Contact Information:

Cynthia Haynes, University of Texas at Dallas

Email: cynthiah@utdallas.edu

Home Page: <http://www.utdallas.edu/~cynthiah/>