

John Muckelbauer
University of South
Carolina

 [print version](#)

Risking a certain redundancy, I'd like to return for a moment to the little question that never seems to stop returning to us: "What is rhetoric?" In their efforts to figure the intersections between rhetoric and composition, the contributors to this special issue have all, more or less explicitly, offered different responses to this question ([Coleman and Goodman](#)). For a moment, though, I'd like to pause before the question itself and before the many different idioms that circulate through it. If we're lucky, maybe this hesitation will enable a different kind of orientation into the problem of rhetoric/composition.

Those of us who traffic in this word, "rhetoric," have a great deal of experience with the ubiquity of the question "What is rhetoric?" and the countless idioms and situations in which it reappears. One might hear in this question, for instance, a gesture of good will from a departmental colleague, or the confusion of an administrator trying to decide on funding priorities, or the affected profundity of a scholar beginning a theoretical inquiry. But one might also hear in this question the skepticism of a family member, the obligatory interest of a stranger you meet on a plane, or perhaps, sometimes, the curiosity of a friend. The simple fact of its recurrence in so many different venues is something worth noting, since I doubt that, for instance, biologists are routinely asked "what is life?" at job interviews or anthropologists asked "what is man?" at a bar. This persistent demand that we provide an account of our field can come from anywhere at any time—and usually does. As Jarratt notes, "The person on the street, or in a campus-wide faculty meeting, for that matter, greets the announcement of my academic field of specialization with as much puzzlement today as twenty years ago when I selected it" ([Jarratt](#)).

So when this question is put to us, it's entirely understandable that we might hesitate. Maybe we aren't quite sure which idiom is offering us the question (is the question curious or obligatory, dismissive or confused?). Or maybe we just haven't come up with an answer that is pithy enough yet.

Whatever the case, our hesitation is not unjustified. Even if we confine ourselves only to explicit references, it is easy enough to show that rhetoric has enjoyed an extraordinarily promiscuous history. We might, with equal precedent, claim that rhetoric is the study of literary tropes, the practice of civic action, or the study and practice of teaching first-year writing (to name only a few possibilities). And for the same reason, we can cite ample precedent to refute any particular claim as well: rhetoric is not literature; it is not writing instruction, etc. ([Crowley](#)).

But in addition to intervening in so many disparate "content" areas, this history also offers a wealth of divergent structural possibilities for rhetoric. Even if we confine ourselves to its institutional incarnation, we might, for instance, see rhetoric as one particular field of study among others—and perhaps inquire into how its "tradition" intersects with that of other fields (like composition, or cultural studies, or philosophy [[Vandenberg](#)] [[Welch](#)]). Or we might conceive of

it as a kind of architectonic principle for all kinds of inquiry and perhaps attempt to distinguish a distinctively rhetorical element within any given field (say, the rhetoric of science). Or we might even conceive of rhetoric as, in a certain way, disengaging from the entire problematic of "fields," disconnecting from both "interdisciplinary studies" and work in the "rhetoric of x" genre (indicating, perhaps, an ontological rhetoric).

Indeed, owing to its historical and structural promiscuity, rhetoric seems never to stray very far from the question of what it is. And if it is a "field," it may well be one that is constituted by the return of this fundamental uncertainty. Of course, this shouldn't really be all that surprising. After all, the first articulation of the word "rhetoric" was coupled with the implication that even its most faithful practitioners in ancient Greece couldn't sufficiently articulate exactly what rhetoric was. While it appeared to have some connection to things like pedagogy, civic virtue, and language, it also seemed uninterested in providing a rigorous account of its involvement with any of these things. As a result of its commitment to "appearances" and to "seeming" (which, it should be added, may not be very reliable kinds of "commitments"), this rhetoric appeared capable of insinuating itself into every kind of inquiry and every kind of action. With no clearly defined content and no rigorous method, rhetoric could very well be anything at all, regardless of whether the word was used explicitly or not ([Bolin](#)). So even at the moment of its historical origin, rhetoric already suffered from a kind of identity crisis (one that would, as we all know, intrinsically complicate the possibility of pointing to the moment of its historical origin). Even at that time, one might easily have responded to the question "What is rhetoric?" with the answer, "The art of never finally answering that question."

These days, a commitment to the promiscuity of "appearances"—and to complicating the relation between "seeming" and "being"—has acquired a certain degree of institutional and cultural respectability ([Holzman](#)). One can recognize this newfound currency not only in the philosophical tradition of phenomenology (from Kant to Heidegger), but also in the work of film studies, complexity theory, the science of marketing, post-structuralist ontologies of difference, or the practice of constructing a freshman's essayistic ethos. Of course, these analyses rarely use the word "rhetoric" or engage what many of us have recently begun to call "the rhetorical tradition." So the disciplinary identity crisis returns even when the question "what is rhetoric?" is not asked explicitly (here, one might note the murmur of questions like, "Aren't they really doing rhetoric, perhaps without knowing it?" [[Ratcliffe](#)]). And while it seems necessary that this crisis return, it is also the case that our contemporary milieu simultaneously invites us to encounter our disciplinary identity crisis less as a crisis of identity and more as an opening of alterity.

In this sense, it may be entirely productive not to know the answer to the question, "What is rhetoric?" ([Haynes](#)) Not because there have been so many different incarnations of the word that it seems unjust to simply pick 1 or 2 to the exclusion of countless others. Nor because rhetoric harbors some ineffable quality that, while we cannot explain it, enables us to "know it when we see it." Instead, it might be productive not to think that we know what rhetoric is at all. Rhetoric might simply be a term for the intersection and articulation of divergent connections, regardless of their vocabulary or their "traditions" (and this "theoretical" point might have many "practical" implications, from the way we pose—or don't pose—the problem of rhetoric/composition to the strategic

demands of placing a paper at any particular journal or conference ([Farris](#)), to the function of implicit and explicit citations in our writing).

Of course, when an administrator or a search committee or a new friend at the bar puts this question to us, they usually don't care about any of this. Beyond any metaphysical investment, we may credit Plato with demonstrating that most questions aren't really interested in responses at all; most questions simply want an answer. So most of us manage, more or less disingenuously, to give the question what it wants. We offer up a paraphrase of Aristotle, summon up words like "teaching" and "writing," or repeat some clever definition we read in an essay.

So while we may agree that it can be productive not to know the answer to this question, we still, somehow, have to give an answer (even, at times, to ourselves). Of course, these dual demands don't have to be contradictory. We don't necessarily do an injustice to the diffuse history and conceptual promiscuity of the term by giving a single answer. Indeed, much of this history indicates that it is never simply a question of choosing, for instance, the opening of alterity over the crisis of identity ([Vitanza](#)). As Haynes writes, "To conclude (by deferring a conclusion), it is as the undecidable (aporia, paradox) that our slash represents the origin of difference and division" ([Haynes](#)). While there are certainly different orientations into this mix, the task of our current tradition might already be to practice their irreducible combination. In other words, even if rhetoric is the art of never finally answering the question, "What is rhetoric?" this art would necessarily include all attempts to finally answer that question. So, when the question is posed to us, we might instead act like Nietzsche's stoic man who perpetuates the greatest act of dissimulation by simply walking from beneath a storm cloud. We might, in other words, just answer it - again.

Works Cited

Haynes, Cynthia. "Rhetoric/Slash/Composition." *Enculturation* 5.1 (Fall 2003): http://enculturation.gmu.edu/5_1/haynes.html

Jarratt, Susan. "Rhetoric in Crisis?: The View from Here." *Enculturation* 5.1 (Fall 2003): http://enculturation.gmu.edu/5_1/jarratt.html

Citation Format:

Muckelbauer, John. "Returns of the Question." *Enculturation* 5.2 (2004): http://enculturation.gmu.edu/5_2/muckelbauer.html

Contact Information:

John Muckelbauer, University of South Carolina

Email: muckelba@gwm.sc.edu

Home Page:

http://www.cas.sc.edu/engl/faculty/faculty_pages/muckelbauer/muckelbauer.html

[Submissions](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Copyright](#) | [Review](#) | [Links](#)