

10-9-2017

# Teaching ethos from the dumpster: Dive and food waste rhetoric

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# Teaching ethos from the dumpster: Dive and food waste rhetoric

## **Abstract**

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## **Disciplines**

Agricultural Education | Educational Methods | Higher Education

## **Comments**

This is an accepted manuscript of an article published as Dubisar, A., & Hunt, K. Teaching *Ethos* from the Dumpster: *Dive* and Food Waste Rhetorics. *Communication Teacher*. (2017). doi: [10.1080/17404622.2017.1372597](https://doi.org/10.1080/17404622.2017.1372597). Posted with permission.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17404622.2017.1372597>

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## TEACHING *ETHOS* FROM THE DUMPSTER

### Teaching *Ethos* from the Dumpster: *Dive* and Food Waste Rhetorics

#### Abstract

This unit examines food system waste through the lens of dumpster diving, an alternative food procurement strategy of salvaging food items thrown away by commercial grocers and food retailers. After viewing a short documentary and studying a research report, students will be able to: (1) identify persuasive ethos; (2) critique rhetorical appeals used in food waste and dumpster diving arguments; and (3) practice persuasive ethos by developing arguments to reduce food waste. The goal of this unit is to challenge students to both critique and practice a rhetorical strategy while considering the relationship between food waste and environmental degradation.

**Keywords:** rhetoric, ethos, documentary, food waste

#### Courses

Rhetorical Criticism, Composition, Environmental Communication

#### Objectives

This unit activity, for which students view a documentary to identify and evaluate persuasive ethos and then create their own rhetorical messages for reducing food waste, serves as a platform for teaching both the critique and practice of rhetoric as well as familiarizing students with the complexities of the global food system and food waste.

#### Introduction and rationale

Scholars and teachers are continuing to recognize the ethical imperative of engaging the food system, including issues of sustainability and social justice (House, 2014; Louis, 2016; Murray, 2014). Food provides a tangible medium for connecting communication concepts to personal experience, “anchor[ing] discussions about the ways in which the emotional aspects of the self radiate out to society, and vice versa” (Murray, 2014, p. 479). Further, the exigency of resource scarcity emphasizes our motivation to teach about food waste, as nearly 40% of US consumers’ food goes uneaten each year (Gunders, 2012).

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Food, like rhetoric, transverses the boundaries between public and private, individual and community, nature and culture, imbricating democracy, ethics, and social justice (Frye & Bruner, 2012; Lucaites, Condit, & Caudill, 1999; Stormer, 2015). Various food authorities exercise *ethos*, or argument by character (Heinrichs, 2013, p. 40), when they appeal to the trustworthiness of science in debates about genetic engineering (GMOs), the virtue of food production in Farm Bill deliberations, and other arguments influencing what makes it to our plates. The unit activity outlined here illuminates an aspect of the food system that is often hidden: its waste, by consumers as well as corporate food retailers. Through this unit activity, students are invited to consider the environmental and social impact of everyday food choices as well as how solutions to food waste are embedded in complex communication contexts.

*Communication Teacher* has documented various activities for teaching rhetoric and persuasion (Hess, 2013; Kahl Jr., 2012; Wells, 2016), as well as the pedagogical efficacy of documentary film (Akande & Schmidt, 2006). *Dive* (2010), a short documentary that explores food waste through the practice of dumpster diving, enacts rhetorical strategies to advocate for food system change. By analyzing how one rhetor presents himself as an authority on food waste reduction, students can identify and critique his construction of *ethos*. Further, by crafting their own persuasive food waste reduction arguments, students have the opportunity to adapt rhetorical devices such as *ethos*, using insights from rhetorical analysis in the service of their own rhetorical practice for food system advocacy.

### **Overview of *Dive***

*Dive* (2010) documents one rhetor's strategy for saving food from the landfill. Jeremy Seifert (2010) presents his search for food in dumpsters along with members of his community. Viewers witness Seifert (2010) how dumpster diving is, for some, a regular food acquisition

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strategy, just as others might normally go to a grocery store. Unlike stigmatizing arguments that frame scavenging for food as shameful or criminal, *Dive* (2010) positions waste as part of the global food system with corporations responsible for perpetuating the practice as a matter of procedure. The visual display of delicious-looking food obtained from a trash receptacle, and the excitement of salvaging presents dumpster diving as an empowering, even adventurous practice as it challenges traditional norms and expectations of food procurement.

### **The activity**

This engaging unit can be completed in three to four class periods, depending on length of sessions. The documentary *Dive* (2010) is shown in the first class meeting, to which students come having completed reading that introduces the topic of dumpster diving. During and after watching the film they complete a worksheet on *ethos*. Class session two begins by discussing the worksheet. It facilitates students' understanding of the film as a persuasive text. Session three involves an activity for which students brainstorm how to compose their own arguments against food waste, which they complete before session four, which is a classroom showcase of presentations of students' projects.

This unit enhances student learning about rhetoric in three important ways. First, it invites students to think critically about food waste arguments through examination of *ethos* and rhetorical appeals as presented in *Dive* (2010). Second, it supports the use of food-related texts as pedagogical tools (Hunt & Krakow, 2015; Murray, 2014). Third, the activity challenges students to both critique and practice rhetorical strategies. Students are guided through an in-class screening of the 42-minute film, *Dive* (2010), followed by an examination of the rhetorical appeals used by Seifert to construct his *ethos*. After critiquing the documentary, students adapt

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what they have learned about effective persuasion and construct their own food waste reduction arguments.

### *Assumptions about Previous Learning*

Before students engage in this unit, it is assumed that they have previously learned two important topics related to rhetoric, which are beyond the scope of this activity. First, it is assumed that students have already gained exposure and practice in close textual analysis. We suggest Brummett's (2009) discussion of "noticing what you see and hear" (chapter 1) in *Techniques of Close Reading* for exercises unpacking the symbolic complexity of persuasive texts. Second, it is assumed that students have been exposed to the basics of rhetorical appeals (*logos, ethos, and pathos*) and their use as persuasive devices. We suggest Heinrichs's (2013) book, *Thank You for Arguing*, as it presents a simple description of Aristotle's essential qualities of persuasive *ethos* (p. 56):

Virtue: the audience believes the rhetor shares their values

Practical wisdom: the rhetor appears to know the right thing to do

Selflessness: the audience's interest seems to be the rhetor's main concern

With this background knowledge, students will be prepared to critique rhetorical appeals in the readings and documentary and practice persuasive *ethos* in their own arguments about food waste reduction.

### *Analyzing Dive*

For homework before the first session, students read Dana Gunders's (2012) report "Wasted: How America Is Losing Up to 40 Percent of Its Food from Farm to Fork to Landfill" and Lars Eighner's (1990) essay "On Dumpster Diving" to contextualize the issue of food waste. The 26-page Gunders report (2012) offers comprehensive data, including tables and graphs,

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about food waste; Eighner's (1990) essay provides a personal narrative with instructions for readers who want to try dumpster diving.

When assigning the food waste reading homework, instructors should direct students to note rhetorical appeals that surface so these can be compared to those deployed in the film. As students view the documentary in class, they should take notes on the rhetorical appeals utilized in *Dive* (2010). To facilitate this, instructors can provide a worksheet that students complete while watching the film and bring back to class for the second session of this unit-with questions adapted from Heinrich's (2013) characterization of *ethos*, which students can use as a viewing guide:

As you watch the film, consider how the filmmaker uses *ethos* and other rhetorical appeals:

1. Using details from the film, which audiences does the film hope to address?
2. Through their acts, speech, and the visual depictions of dumpster diving and eating the dumpster food, how do the people in the film demonstrate Heinrich's (2013) idea of "practical wisdom"?
3. List details from the film that show its efforts to persuade its audiences that dumpster diving is an effective way to prevent food waste.

The worksheet can be completed as homework between the first and second class sessions if time does not permit during the class session. A follow-up discussion in which students can share and compare their responses can debrief the film, check for comprehension of *ethos*, and prompt brainstorming for students' food waste arguments in the second part of the activity.

*Practicing ethos*



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After examining the use of rhetorical appeals in *Dive* (2010), students can adapt the qualities of persuasive *ethos* by composing their own food waste reduction arguments during the third class session. Students benefit from taking insights from their evaluation of *ethos* in the readings and documentary to create their own arguments against food system waste. As an activity in rhetorical invention, this portion of the unit asks students to use available means of persuasion for addressing food waste.

First, in small groups or individually, students should use Gunders's (2012) NRDC report to brainstorm an aspect of food waste reduction for which they would like to advocate. For example, students may choose to address food waste in the area of post-harvest loss, consumer households, or on campus. Second, instruct students to create an argument to persuade their audience to reduce food waste. Students benefit from the opportunity to apply rhetorical concepts to practice. The persuasive messages created for this part of the activity should be modeled after what students find to be effective, or that improve on any shortcomings, regarding the use of rhetorical strategy in the assigned texts and documentary. We have provided a sample assignment prompt below, though instructors may modify as appropriate for their course:

Consider an aspect of food waste about which you would like to make an argument for an alternative practice, advocate for change, or other means of food waste reduction. Who is your audience and what do they value? Use the qualities of persuasive *ethos*, and your assessment of the readings and documentary, to craft a claim for your audience to reduce their food waste. Arguments may be textual, visual, digital, oral, or aural. Arguments will be presented in class.

Suggested formats include, but are not limited to a short PSA video, brief letter to the editor or op-ed, visual poster, or social media meme. Because students often encounter these types of visual and textual messages, they may wish to craft persuasive arguments using both words and images. Applying rhetorical theory to the design and visual components of persuasive messages provides students the opportunity to consider how solutions to food waste are

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embedded in complex communication contexts. The goal is for students to develop a creative and persuasive argument that demonstrates their *ethos* on their chosen food waste issue. At the instructor's discretion, students can use one or more rhetorical strategies. All students should attend to elements of *ethos* within their argument. Third, inform students that their arguments will be presented in class and evaluated with the same criteria as used to examine *ethos* in *Dive* (2010).

### Debriefing

After all students have presented their arguments, the class can discuss successes and challenges experienced regarding the practice of persuasive *ethos* and the effectiveness of peers' use of rhetorical appeals. The following questions can guide this discussion:

1. How does your classmates' *ethos* compare to the authors and the documentary?
2. Who is your target audience for your argument? How did their values inform your use of *ethos*?
3. What considerations did you make in choosing your audience and structuring your argument the way you did?

Instructors should also provide feedback regarding the use of rhetorical appeals, including *ethos*, as appropriate for the course. This feedback, in written and/or oral form, can be useful in helping students learn not only to examine rhetorical choices made by other rhetors, but also to utilize rhetorical appeals strategically in their own compositions.

### Appraisal

This unit helps students learn to identify and practice the qualities of persuasive *ethos* while confronting the critical issue of food system waste. Students may be initially shocked by

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the idea of “eating trash” (Seifert, 2010), but we have found that most value the opportunity to reflect on food procurement and the pervasiveness of food waste. We find that students appreciate how Seifert (2010) presents himself as friendly and knowledgeable, explaining the complex issue of food waste in an informed, often humorous, and accessible manner. Our students report a new understanding of rhetoric and *ethos* through its linking to foodways and food waste.

Some students may seek to present their persuasive arguments to a public audience. For example, one student used her brochure on the waste created by disposable of K-cup coffee pods to persuade her dorm to switch to a more sustainable option. Pairing a public screening of the documentary with opportunities for community members to address local food waste, hunger, and other food system issues could extend this activity.

This unit activity challenges students to think about food as a commodity that they consume (and waste). Teaching about food waste demonstrates the ubiquity of food, yet also how it enfolds rhetoric as we all participate in the global food system every time we eat (Stormer, 2015).

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