

this is water rhetorical analysis

This Is Water Rhetorical Analysis: Unpacking David Foster Wallace's Masterful Commencement Speech

this is water rhetorical analysis invites us into a thoughtful exploration of one of the most profound and widely discussed commencement speeches of recent times. Delivered by David Foster Wallace at Kenyon College in 2005, "This Is Water" transcends the typical graduation address, offering a deep meditation on awareness, empathy, and the challenges of everyday consciousness. But what makes this speech so compelling? How does Wallace's use of rhetoric engage listeners and provoke reflection? By diving into a rhetorical analysis, we can uncover the layers of meaning and the persuasive techniques that make "This Is Water" resonate across audiences and time.

Understanding the Context of "This Is Water"

Before dissecting the speech's rhetorical elements, it's crucial to grasp its context and purpose. Wallace crafted "This Is Water" as a commencement speech, a genre traditionally filled with motivational platitudes and celebratory messages. However, Wallace chose to subvert these expectations by addressing the often overlooked struggles of adult life and the importance of mindful awareness.

The speech is aimed at recent graduates embarking on the transition from academic life to the real world, a moment fraught with uncertainty and routine challenges. Wallace's central thesis revolves around the idea that true freedom comes from choosing how to perceive and think about the world around us — a profound call for conscious living amidst the monotony and frustrations of daily existence.

Key Rhetorical Strategies in "This Is Water"

Wallace's speech employs various rhetorical strategies that enhance its impact. Let's analyze the primary techniques that contribute to its enduring power.

1. Use of Anecdotes and Relatable Examples

One of the most effective ways Wallace connects with his audience is through vivid, relatable anecdotes. For instance, he describes the mundane frustrations of everyday adult life: being stuck in traffic, dealing with tedious grocery store lines, or enduring repetitive work tasks. These examples serve a dual purpose. They ground the abstract concept of awareness in concrete experiences, and they foster empathy by reflecting common frustrations listeners can identify with.

By painting such familiar scenarios, Wallace invites the audience to recognize the

automatic, often unconscious ways people respond to irritation and boredom. This technique helps him build a bridge between his philosophical message and the practical realities his audience faces.

2. Conversational Tone and Direct Address

Unlike formal oratory that distances the speaker from listeners, Wallace adopts a conversational tone that feels intimate and sincere. His use of direct address — phrases like “you will be” or “this is water” — creates a sense of personal engagement. This style reduces barriers, making the speech feel less like a lecture and more like a heartfelt conversation.

Moreover, the informal tone, peppered with humor and self-awareness, invites the audience to reflect without feeling judged. This rhetorical choice enhances the speech’s accessibility and emotional resonance.

3. Repetition and Parallelism

Wallace strategically uses repetition and parallel structures to emphasize key ideas and make them memorable. The phrase “this is water,” repeated several times, becomes a metaphorical anchor. It symbolizes the often invisible realities we live within and highlights the difficulty of seeing beyond our default perspectives.

Similarly, parallelism in sentences like “It is unimaginably hard to do this, to stay conscious and alive and awake” reinforces the gravity and challenge of the task he proposes. These rhythmic patterns help embed the central message in the listener’s mind.

4. Ethical Appeals (Ethos) and Credibility

David Foster Wallace’s ethos is established subtly but effectively. As a respected author and intellectual, his credibility precedes him. However, within the speech, he further builds ethos by acknowledging his own struggles with the subject matter, admitting the difficulty of maintaining awareness and choice in thought.

This humility makes him relatable and trustworthy, rather than a distant authority. By positioning himself as a fellow traveler navigating life’s complexities, Wallace strengthens his ethical appeal.

5. Emotional Appeals (Pathos)

The speech’s emotional power lies in its appeal to the shared human experience of frustration, fatigue, and the search for meaning. Wallace taps into feelings of existential weariness and the desire for genuine connection. His empathetic tone and vivid

descriptions evoke both sympathy and hope.

By confronting the audience with the stark realities of adult life, then offering a hopeful path toward awareness, Wallace stirs emotions that motivate reflection and change.

6. Logical Appeals (Logos) and Reasoning

While the speech is rich in emotion and ethos, it also employs logical reasoning to persuade. Wallace outlines a clear argument: default settings lead to autopilot living, but conscious choice allows for freedom and compassion. He explains the mechanics of how attention and thought shape experience.

This logical framework provides a solid foundation for his message, making it not only emotionally compelling but intellectually convincing.

Exploring the Central Metaphor: "This Is Water"

At the heart of the speech is the metaphor encapsulated in the phrase "this is water." The story Wallace shares about two young fish swimming and not knowing what water is serves as a powerful illustration of unconsciousness. The metaphor symbolizes the invisible, omnipresent truths and realities of life that we often overlook.

By drawing attention to "water," Wallace challenges listeners to recognize the default settings of their own consciousness — the ingrained patterns of thought and perception that shape their experiences. The metaphor encourages a shift from automaticity to awareness, a theme that resonates deeply in discussions about mindfulness and self-awareness.

Implications for Everyday Life and Mindfulness

The insights gleaned from this is water rhetorical analysis extend beyond literary appreciation; they offer practical lessons for navigating daily life.

Choosing Awareness Over Autopilot

Wallace's speech underscores the importance of choosing how to think and what to pay attention to. In an age dominated by distractions and habitual responses, this message is more relevant than ever. Embracing awareness can transform mundane or frustrating moments into opportunities for kindness, understanding, and growth.

Empathy as a Cognitive Choice

Another takeaway is the idea that empathy is not just an emotional reaction but a deliberate choice. By consciously deciding to see the world from others' perspectives, we can break free from self-centered narratives and foster deeper connections.

Mindfulness and the Power of Perspective

Wallace's emphasis on perspective aligns closely with mindfulness practices. Recognizing "this is water" moments encourages a nonjudgmental awareness of the present, helping individuals cultivate patience and resilience amid life's challenges.

Lessons for Effective Rhetoric from "This Is Water"

For anyone interested in crafting persuasive and meaningful communication, "This Is Water" offers valuable lessons:

- **Use relatable stories:** Connecting abstract ideas with everyday experiences makes messages more accessible.
- **Adopt a conversational tone:** Speaking directly and sincerely fosters engagement and trust.
- **Employ repetition thoughtfully:** Strategic repetition reinforces key themes without becoming redundant.
- **Balance ethos, pathos, and logos:** Combining credibility, emotion, and logic creates a well-rounded argument.
- **Utilize powerful metaphors:** Metaphors like "this is water" can crystallize complex concepts elegantly.

These techniques are part of why Wallace's speech remains a touchstone for effective rhetorical communication.

David Foster Wallace's "This Is Water" continues to inspire reflection on the nature of consciousness and the choices we make daily. Through a masterful blend of rhetorical strategies, relatable anecdotes, and profound metaphors, the speech invites us to wake up from autopilot and engage with life more consciously. This is water — and recognizing it might just change the way we live.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main theme of 'This is Water' by David Foster Wallace?

The main theme of 'This is Water' is the importance of awareness and conscious choice in everyday life, emphasizing empathy and mindfulness in how we perceive and interact with the world around us.

How does David Foster Wallace use rhetorical strategies in 'This is Water' to engage the audience?

Wallace employs rhetorical strategies such as anecdote, repetition, contrast, and direct address to engage the audience, making complex philosophical ideas accessible and relatable through personal storytelling and conversational tone.

What role does irony play in 'This is Water'?

Irony in 'This is Water' highlights the contrast between the default, automatic way of thinking and the deliberate, conscious awareness Wallace advocates for, emphasizing how easy it is to fall into self-centered perspectives.

How does Wallace use repetition in 'This is Water' to reinforce his message?

Wallace uses repetition, especially of the phrase 'This is water,' to remind the audience of the often-overlooked, mundane aspects of daily life and to emphasize the importance of awareness of one's surroundings and thoughts.

What is the significance of the metaphor 'This is water' in the speech?

The metaphor 'This is water' signifies the default settings of human consciousness—how we often fail to notice the obvious realities around us, much like fish unaware of the water they swim in, urging listeners to recognize and choose their perspectives deliberately.

How does Wallace address the concept of free will in his rhetorical analysis?

Wallace addresses free will by arguing that while we cannot control our automatic thoughts, we can choose how to think and what to pay attention to, thus exercising freedom through conscious awareness and empathy.

In what way does 'This is Water' challenge conventional

perspectives on daily struggles?

'This is Water' challenges conventional perspectives by suggesting that daily frustrations and annoyances are not inherently painful but become so when we choose self-centered interpretations, encouraging a shift toward compassion and understanding.

How does David Foster Wallace use ethos in 'This is Water'?

Wallace establishes ethos by presenting himself as a thoughtful, relatable speaker who shares personal insights and acknowledges common human experiences, thereby building credibility and trust with his audience.

What is the impact of Wallace's conversational tone in 'This is Water'?

The conversational tone makes the speech approachable and engaging, reducing the distance between speaker and audience, and helping complex ideas feel personal and relevant to everyday life.

How does 'This is Water' exemplify the use of rhetorical analysis in understanding speeches?

'This is Water' exemplifies rhetorical analysis by showcasing how language, structure, and stylistic devices work together to persuade and influence an audience, highlighting the power of rhetoric in shaping perception and behavior.

Additional Resources

This Is Water Rhetorical Analysis: Unpacking David Foster Wallace's Masterful Speech

this is water rhetorical analysis delves into one of the most influential commencement speeches delivered by the late author David Foster Wallace. Delivered at Kenyon College in 2005, "This Is Water" has since become a staple in discussions surrounding consciousness, awareness, and the human condition. The speech's rhetorical brilliance lies not only in its content but also in how Wallace carefully crafts his message to resonate on both intellectual and emotional levels. This article explores the rhetorical strategies Wallace employs, examining how he engages his audience, constructs ethos, pathos, and logos, and ultimately challenges listeners to reconsider the mundane aspects of everyday life.

Contextual Overview: The Setting and Purpose of "This Is Water"

Understanding the rhetorical impact of “This Is Water” requires a brief look at its context. Delivered as a commencement address, the speech targets recent graduates transitioning from academic life into the complexities of adulthood. Wallace’s goal is clear: to awaken his audience to the automatic, often unconscious mindset that governs much of daily existence. The title itself — “This Is Water” — serves as a metaphor for the unseen, default realities people often overlook.

By setting a tone that is simultaneously conversational and philosophical, Wallace positions himself as both a relatable guide and a profound thinker. This duality is crucial in making his message accessible without sacrificing depth, a balance that is central to the speech’s enduring popularity.

Rhetorical Strategies in “This Is Water”

Wallace’s speech is a masterclass in rhetorical technique. His use of ethos, pathos, and logos is nuanced, blending informal language with sophisticated thematic elements to create a compelling narrative.

Establishing Ethos: Credibility Through Vulnerability and Relatability

One of the most striking rhetorical choices Wallace makes is establishing ethos by presenting himself as a fellow struggler rather than an omniscient lecturer. Early in the speech, he acknowledges the difficulty of truly understanding and practicing the awareness he advocates, admitting his own failures and doubts. This vulnerability enhances his credibility, making his advice feel sincere and grounded.

Furthermore, Wallace’s use of everyday examples — such as the frustrations of grocery shopping or traffic jams — serves to relate directly to the audience’s lived experiences. This relatability forms a connection that bolsters his authority, not through expertise alone but through shared human experience.

Appealing to Pathos: Emotional Engagement Through Common Struggles

Wallace’s rhetorical appeal to pathos is subtle yet powerful. By painting vivid scenarios of daily irritation and monotony, he taps into the emotional landscape of his audience. The speech’s emotional resonance is heightened by the implicit promise that awareness can alleviate the mental burdens these experiences impose.

His discussion of default settings and the “natural” way of thinking invites listeners to confront uncomfortable truths about their mental habits. This gentle confrontation is designed to provoke introspection and a desire for change, engaging the audience’s emotions without overt manipulation.

Employing Logos: Logical Structure and Philosophical Insight

The logical appeal in “This Is Water” unfolds through Wallace’s clear explanation of his central thesis: that true freedom comes from conscious choice in how one perceives the world. He logically dismantles the assumption that default, self-centered thinking is inevitable, proposing instead that it is a learned behavior that can be altered.

Wallace’s use of metaphor — “this is water” — functions as a logical anchor throughout the speech. By likening unnoticed realities to water that fish swim in, he illustrates the idea that people often fail to recognize the context shaping their experiences. This metaphor provides a concrete framework for understanding abstract philosophical concepts, enhancing the speech’s persuasive power.

Language and Style: Crafting Accessibility and Depth

Wallace’s linguistic style is integral to the speech’s rhetorical success. He opts for plainspoken language peppered with humor and irony, which serves to demystify complex ideas. This approach ensures the speech remains accessible to a broad audience, avoiding alienation through jargon or philosophical obscurity.

The juxtaposition of casual tone with profound content creates a dynamic rhythm that maintains audience engagement. Wallace’s strategic use of repetition, especially around the phrase “this is water,” reinforces key themes and encourages listeners to internalize the message.

Use of Anecdotes and Hypothetical Scenarios

Throughout the speech, Wallace employs anecdotes and hypothetical situations to illustrate his points. For instance, he describes the mental routine of encountering frustrating fellow commuters or grocery shoppers. These scenarios are not merely illustrative but serve as rhetorical devices to invite empathy and reflection.

By presenting these common experiences, Wallace lowers barriers to understanding, allowing listeners to see themselves within the narrative. This technique helps translate abstract philosophical ideas into tangible, relatable moments.

Balancing Optimism and Realism

A notable feature of Wallace’s rhetoric is the balance between hopeful possibility and sober realism. He does not promise an easy transformation but rather emphasizes the ongoing effort required to maintain awareness. This honesty prevents the speech from

slipping into platitude, lending it a weight that resonates deeply.

The realistic framing encourages a sense of responsibility, motivating graduates to actively choose their mental focus rather than passively succumbing to default settings. This call to conscious living is at the heart of the speech's enduring relevance.

Impact and Legacy: Why “This Is Water” Endures

The rhetorical craftsmanship of “This Is Water” has cemented its place as a seminal piece in contemporary discourse on mindfulness and adult life. Its wide circulation, especially online, testifies to its appeal across generations and contexts.

From an analytical perspective, the speech exemplifies how rhetoric can elevate a simple message into a transformative experience. Wallace's ability to blend ethos, pathos, and logos with relatable storytelling and philosophical depth creates a multifaceted argument that continues to inspire reflection on consciousness and choice.

Moreover, the speech's emphasis on the often-overlooked “default setting” of human cognition aligns with broader trends in psychology and neuroscience, which increasingly highlight the importance of mindfulness and cognitive awareness. This alignment enhances the speech's credibility and applicability beyond its original academic setting.

Ultimately, the rhetorical power of “This Is Water” lies in its invitation: to look beneath the surface of everyday life and recognize the water we swim in, thereby reclaiming agency over our thoughts and actions. This message, artfully delivered, remains as vital now as it was at its inception.

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