

Using Rhetorical Tropes to Create an Authentic, Meaningful Narrative for a Design Project

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Many design students solve design problems through “cool” form, material and color solutions that in the end don’t resonate with their peers, or their professors. What method can design educators use to help move young designers beyond shallow design solutions and into solutions that are meaningful to the student, their peers and a target audience? This paper will outline how to use rhetorical tropes (figures of speech) in design projects to lead students through the generation of authentic, meaningful design narratives that articulate clear, memorable design solutions that resonate with contemporary culture.

First, the terms “meaningful design” and “rhetorical tropes” should be defined.

A meaningful design solution on any design project evokes positive emotions, passions, memories, and understanding and often causes delight in the target audience. Meaningful design solutions incorporate a narrative that comprises a variety of ideas and a dominant story that is understandable and clear. If the narrative is smart, and the solution’s form, materials, and colors enhance the developed story, then the design solution should resonate with an audience. Using tropes in the design process naturally frames the design problem through the generation of a narrative for the design to follow.

Tropes are defined as the use of a word or expression as changed from the original signification to another, for the sake of giving life or emphasis to an idea. Commonly, tropes are often called “figures of speech.” Of the hundreds of tropes in literature only a few dozen are typically known and used in daily life; examples being metaphor, hyperbole, pun, irony and so on.

Cicero in *De oratore* - III, states that:

Whereas tropes were originally used because the language lacked a proper expression, they now incite pleasure. Their functions are to underline, illustrate, and make an idea more graphic by appealing to the perceptive faculties, especially to the visual sense.

A historically rich and deep list of literary tropes can be used by designers to provide a path to meanings and messages to both inspire and explain their design work. Tropes represent the key foundation point in creating fresh, meaningful design solutions. By their nature they provide a framework for a meaningful message to be developed, while simultaneously providing meaningful words to provoke the designer to think about and explore the problem within well-defined constraints.

Aristotle taught us that:

Strange words simply puzzle us, ordinary words convey only what we know already, and that it is only through the comparison of two elements (the object and its trope) that the creation of a third, new meaning can occur. It is from this combination of elements that we understand and obtain fresh ideas.

Thus Aristotle provides for us a method to create product design solutions that have meaning. To understand this idea better, let’s look at some examples from recent design competitions.

How Tropes Are Used in Contemporary Design Solutions

Each year, the Industrial Society of America (IDSA) holds a product design competition called IDEA that is sponsored by *BusinessWeek*. In this competition, new products from all over the world are reviewed by a jury of notable designers who pronounce that certain products are better than others, and declare winners. How this jury comes to these conclusions is another discussion. However, images of the winning

products from each year are posted on the IDSA web site and some of the best examples are published in the July *BusinessWeek* magazine. It is from these winning product images (this is assuming that these images represent product designs that resonate with contemporary culture) that the idea of tropes as a product explanation is explored. Though the actual intention of the various designers is unknown, many of the design solutions can easily be associated with a particular trope and often with multiple tropes.

All of the following rhetorical figure definitions and examples come from the web site *Silva Rhetoricae*, created by Gideon Burton at BYU.

Antithesis—The juxtaposition of contrasting words or ideas (often, although not always, in parallel structure). For example, “it can’t be wrong if it feels so right.” —Debby Boone

Echo by Davidoff, men’s cologne bottle, designed by Karim Rashid Inc. for the company Davidoff is an award-winning design that uses the trope “antithesis” in the design (Figure 1). They insinuate in their design that a fishnet can hold water. The design juxtaposes a fishnet-like graphic image, with that of a net-shaped container with a shark fin-like spout (simile of form) that magically retains the perfume inside. Fishnets are purposely designed not to hold water but to capture a certain target sea species. The same can be said of the possessor of this poetic liquid product, it assists in capturing the heart of a target species (simile of purpose).



Figure 1.

Metonymy—The reference to something or someone by naming one of its attributes. For example, “the pen is mightier than the sword.”

The city library in Kansas City uses the trope “metonymy” in the design of their building facade (Figure 2). The key attribute for a library is books, thus, they take this actual relationship with books and substitute it for an external wall.

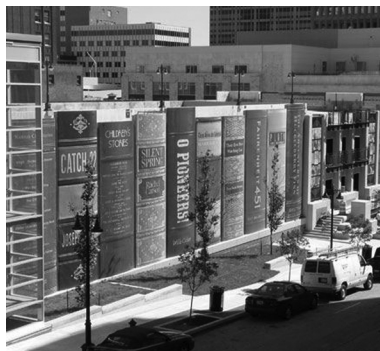


Figure 2.

Hyperbole—Rhetorical exaggeration. Hyperbole is often accomplished via comparisons, similes, and metaphors. For example, “I’ve told you a million times not to exaggerate.”

The “Hoof Shoe” (Figure 3 and 3a bottom view) by student Henry Law of San Jose State University uses the trope hyperbole to exaggerate the idea of an animal hoof for the sole of human shoes. This extravagant form is not intended to be understood literally, but is used to emphasis associations with the sure footedness of hoofed animals.



Figure 3 and 3a.

Onomatopoeia—Is using or inventing a word whose sound imitates that which it names (the union of phonetics and semantics), for example, “the buzzing of innumerable bees.” The “zz” and “mm” sounds in these words imitate the actual sounds of bees.

The “glowbuoy” (Figure 4) from Ultralight Floating Objects in Canada uses onomatopoeia in its design. It imitates in form (rather than sound) an aquatic animal, the jellyfish, to produce a floating light for swimming pools. The associations are a pure and natural match for the proposed needs of the product.



Figure 4.

The examples can go on, but these examples should provide enough thought for the reader to continue exploring how tropes can be associated with design and add meaning to product explanations.

Using Tropes in the Classroom

Young designers often have difficulty creating a multitude of meaningful ideas and stories for a design project. For those designs they have created, they often have difficulty explaining the designs’ ideas. To aid the designers in creating and communicating meaningful designs this exercise was developed to explore how tropes can be used to direct the creation of design solution narratives.

First tropes are defined and explained, samples like the ones provided above are demonstrated, and then the students are asked to participate in the creative process, exactly as Aristotle outlined it: take an object and a trope and combine them in some way to create a new, fresh idea. In this exercise the game of “checkers” was provided as the object. It is a simple understandable object that each student has some experience with. A list of 18 common tropes and their definitions were given to each student. They were

asked to understand and explore these tropes and how they might inform their design of a game of checkers.

The main points behind this exercise are threefold. One, it is to develop and understand a tool to direct the creative process. Two, it is used to provide a framework in which to create a story. Three, tropes provide well established and understood words and thoughts that, if used, will help designers verbally communicate their design ideas and stories.

A Creative Tool—Students are constantly asked to be creative, but they often do not understand how to be creative on demand. Typically they wait for inspiration, or some sort of intrinsic enlightenment that will spark the ideas behind their projects. This exercise forces them to do what the cognitive scientists studying creativity have verified over the last decade and what Aristotle taught us long ago. Creativity is the act of taking one notion or item, combining it with another notion or item and the result will be the creation of a third new notion or item. Combining a trope with their subject matter pushes the student to be creative, on demand, with a focus.

Framing a Narrative—The designer is always asked for the story behind the design. What is your inspiration, what are the associations that directed you, why did you do what you did? Why is this idea valid? Using tropes as a starting point automatically builds in a potential framework for a story to be built around.

For example, one student selected *Parabola* (a parable)—the explicit drawing of a parallel between two essentially dissimilar things, especially with a moral or didactic purpose, as his trope to work with. This student began to consider the parable of Narcissus of Greek mythological fame, who rejected the many nymphs and girls that fell in love with him only to fall in love with his own reflection in a pond, and let himself die watching himself.

The student framed the story of Narcissus within the controlling environment of the trope “parabola” and added the game of checkers to create a new game of checkers based on an *explicit parallel between the two dissimilar things*. “Narcissus checkers” (Figure 5) is a game played on a typical board, but there is only one set of checker pieces and they are made of mirrors and are so large that they cover and even overflow the borders of the board. Any person, despite their overwhelming desire to play, would find it is impossible to play as there is no room or pieces for them on the board. They are outright rejected as a playing partner.

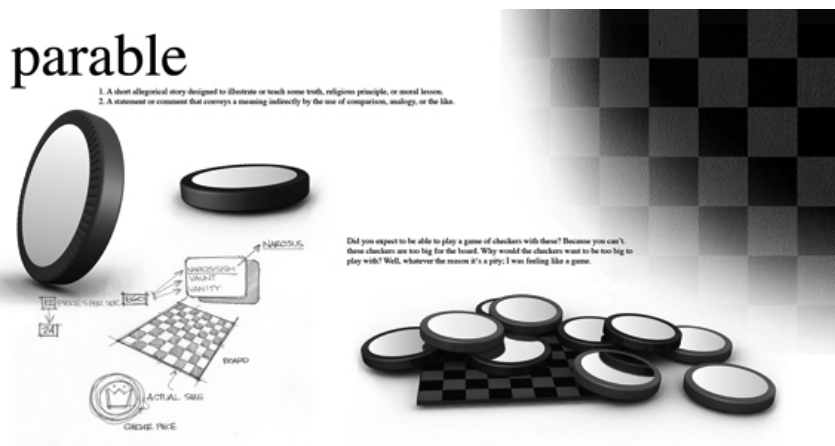


Figure 5.

This is a simple, clear, and understandable story with a simple, clear moral message that was driven by the definition of a selected trope. This product story is somewhat humorous, very emotional, carries a strong message and is socially touchy. This product could possibly be the perfect Christmas gift for

certain recently separated couples. A good story is evidenced by its ability to expand on itself; for example, when an audience hears the story do they naturally begin to generate new ideas, stories, uses or extensions of that story or design project? What other stories or products does this narrative lead to?

The designer did not have to work very hard to create this story or the design solution to accompany it. The product solution was, in essence, provided for him by the method of framing the effort. As students create multiple stories using tropes, they begin to understand the value and power in creating stories for their designs. They begin to learn from each other that an audience remembers the design story before the design form.

A Useful Vocabulary—By their nature, typical design students are not the most verbally gifted people around. For many students, design presentations go something like this: “this is a concept, and this page is another concept, and this next page is an idea” and so on. Tropes provide for the students a collection of useful key words that they can use in their narratives.

Most students understand the meaning of most tropes, they just don’t think about using these words in their presentations. For example, the design world is full of designed “metaphors,” students often create great associations with their designs, but they never use the word “metaphor” while presenting their design. If the designer would use the word “metaphor,” he would then be forced to explain what the metaphor is. Using this “word” leads the designer into a short meaningful explanation of his idea.

Typically, most designs have multiple tropes associated with them. For example, the first product that we talked about in the paper was the Echo by Davidoff men’s cologne bottle designed by Karim Rashid. It had at least three tropes associated with it, simile, metaphor and antithesis. Each one of these tropes has a definition made up of clear, meaningful words that the designer could use while describing his design. Antithesis has “juxtaposition,” “contrast,” and “parallel structure”; metonymy has “reference” and “attributes”; hyperbole has “exaggeration,” “comparisons,” “similes,” and “metaphors”; onomatopoeia has “imitates,” “union,” “phonetics,” and “semantics.” Using any of these words in the presentation forces the student to then talk about what that word represents, which hopefully is reflected somewhere in the design solution itself.

Tropes provide a preprepared set of discussion points for the student to reference during his design creation and presentation. An outstanding by-product of this exercise is the clarity of idea that the student is forced to go through, if he is critical about his own work. How is this “exaggeration”; should it be more, is it too much? Why is this “juxtaposed”; does anyone care if it is? What are the evident “attributes” of this design? Are they relevant to the idea or should they be cut out or changed to become more relevant?

Contemporary culture craves meaning in their objects, not just cool shapes, materials and colors. How to identify, create and communicate “meaning” remains the difficult task for the designer. Hopefully, as the student designers move on to explore and create more complex designs, the lessons of this exercise will remain with them. The need to create “meaning” in objects, to develop a poetic story and to clearly articulate ideas remains the critical point, or in Aristotelian terms, the logos (the persuasive appeal) of any meaningful design. Using tropes to frame design projects has proven to be a powerful tool to create a design narrative that leads the designer to a memorable, meaningful design project.