



Rhetoric and Oracy in the Classics Classroom

by Bhavini Tailor

How many interactions do you have with students on a daily basis? In these interactions do you lead the conversation or do the students? Do students in your classes have the confidence to speak rather than listen? This is what this article is about: giving your students the ability to confidently assert their opinions and ideas. Classical subjects are some of the few subjects where students *learn* about rhetoric, what it is and how the ancients used it; yet they often do not necessarily know how to *use* rhetoric or *employ* rhetorical skills themselves. Most students, who have taken a Classical subject, will consider the term rhetoric to be connected with the sorts of rhetorical devices common in Cicero and speeches in Greek drama. However, rhetoric is used by everyone. Rhetoric is found everywhere in every type of communication, and it is almost impossible to escape from it. Rhetoric embodies everyday communication skills, how we speak, what we write, the debate in a discussion, how we present ourselves in meetings, how we teach and our online presences on *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *LinkedIn*. Rhetoric is a useful skill and at the heart of the concept is the ability to express oneself effectively orally and in writing; what are more commonly known as communication skills. Oracy is part of *everyday* rhetoric: it encompasses how we are communicating with our intended audience and others around us through spoken language, body language and gestures.

At school students learn components of rhetoric which can broadly be defined as communication skills, theories of persuasion, analysis and discourse. Rhetoric is not taught as a single discipline; rather, it is taught through multiple subjects, without students being aware that rhetoric is a discipline in itself. Classical subjects give students a good foundation and an understanding of rhetoric in specific parts of their learning, giving them in turn the opportunity to write about rhetoric and show their understanding in relation to a piece of text. On the other hand, there are fewer opportunities for students to use rhetoric themselves and practise this as a skill in their own speaking and writing.

Many teachers may question why they should incorporate additional activities to help oral development and increase students' rhetorical ability, and also how they are going to do this when learning time is already stretched. This article will highlight some of the key reasons to improve students' literacy and oracy, ideas to incorporate rhetoric and oracy into the classroom, and a map of rhetoric to help students learn the key features of rhetoric and how this can be used by students to analyse texts and in their own writing. The examples here will focus on GCSE specifications but all exercises and activities are also relevant to A Level Classical subjects too.

Why should we help improve students' literacy and oracy?

Rhetorical awareness is thinking about how one should write or speak before doing the action, as a matter of course, and pinpointing specific points and arguments when listening to others. In practice, this means planning our communication according to the audience, tone and language before putting pen to paper. Learning rhetoric and using rhetorical skills could enhance achievement and teach skills which could be used in both the short and long term. In the short term, for students, developing their rhetorical awareness and practising it helps them to be an active participant in their learning and communicating across all subjects, not just Classics. In the long term, their communication skills and, therefore, their rhetorical awareness are integral to the university, training and careers where students may end up. Booth (2004) and Leith (2012) have highlighted how rhetoric is consistently present in our daily lives through advertising or social media and if students do not have an understanding of rhetoric they cannot interact with the variety of communications they are faced with on a daily basis in a successful manner, even if that is recognising the misinformation in different media. An awareness of rhetoric is not just about being able to write well

or speak well; it is also about how we interact with each other, different media and having an understanding of differences and conflicts.

A rhetorical awareness includes the ability to analyse elements that the author is likely to have thought about when composing their work. This includes the audience, aims, literary effects, tone, language and structure and choices the author has made. We often consider these when analysing a set text or a source but these are also components of rhetoric which students need to consider in their own writing and speaking as a matter of course, rather than just in a specific subject. Thus, having a rhetorical awareness provides a process for students better to understand the text they are reading and what they should be thinking about in their own communication before committing pen to paper. This not only makes it clear how to analyse a text but also creates a process for students to think about while planning a written answer, presentation or an essay. It can help clarify the strategy and aim of a student's own piece of writing. This makes the tasks of writing essays, exam answers or preparing presentations more effective as students gain an insight into the literary techniques, structures, language and tone they will need to adapt for their audience to ensure their communication is successful as possible.

Furthermore, in the short term a rhetorical awareness could help improve students' exam results through teaching them a strategy for writing answers and analysing texts. In Classical subjects at GCSE this is most useful for analysing set texts, sources, writing extended exam answers and controlled assessments. Both the OCR and WJEC specifications ask students to 'analyse', 'evaluate', 'respond to' and give a 'personal response'. However, it is difficult for students to be able to show they can do this analysis, evaluation and so on if they do not possess an understanding of what their writing needs to demonstrate to their audience (the examiner) to get the marks (OCR, 2012a and WJEC, 2009a). The actual teaching of the rhetorical analysis and awareness that takes place in the classroom is focused on the set texts and literature: students can only prove they can 'analyse', 'evaluate' and give a 'personal response' through their writing in their controlled

assessment or exams at the end of the year. Therefore, it may be useful to teach students an awareness of rhetoric in terms of how to write their controlled assessment or final examination successfully. In many classrooms, teachers already do this by making students aware of what the examiner is looking for in the specific type of question or assessment, although a rhetorical awareness is more about giving students a clear approach to their writing and how they communicate as a whole before they have even started writing. Holmes-Henderson (2013) highlights that students with a rhetorical awareness go beyond the basic critical thinking skills to substantiate arguments and considering how best to communicate their ideas which is particularly important when an assessment requires a 'personal response' from the student (Holmes-Henderson, 2013, p. 39). This will demonstrate to the students that they are doing what ancient authors have done and can help clarify the strategy and aim of text or students' own writing, providing them with a clear understanding of what they are being assessed on, which can only lead to improved results. Students will eventually be able to recognise they are doing what the ancient authors did and establish a clear strategy for how to achieve the assessment criteria.

Classical subjects are well suited to practising rhetoric as students become familiar with rhetorical devices and analysing text at an early stage. The variety of genres such as oratory, drama, poetry and epic give students ample opportunity to interact with different forms of communication, and rhetorical awareness is already taught as part of understanding the context behind texts and why an author has crafted a text in a certain way. Henderson explains 'the optimal approach to rhetoric is one that allows the learner to construct and de-construct communication and critically analyse theories of discourse, composition and argumentation' (Homes-Henderson, 2013, p. 44). The Classics curriculum gives students numerous opportunities to *de-construct* text but makes it more difficult for students to *construct* their own written and spoken communication. Yet, speaking and presenting is the area in which most students struggle and is one of the key

skills they will need later on in life. Although, students may have some opportunities to present and discuss in class, the *construction* aspect of learning rhetoric needs to be improved upon in order to give students the confidence to communicate their ideas and demonstrate their opinions effectively. For students, having a rhetorical awareness is a real practical skill which can be applied across the curriculum in Humanities, English and even the sciences.

There has been a resurgence in thinking about the oral development of students in recent years. This has been embodied by the use of oracy in schools, whereby students focus on their spoken language and how they express themselves. Oracy is a term which can be retraced to Wilkinson in 1965 who used the term to highlight that oral development is just as important as reading and writing (Alexander, 2012, p. 10). Greater oral development of students could be introduced into the Classics classroom through using some of the aspects of oracy. Oracy is a course or series of tasks focusing on students' talk in lessons. Oral communication skills have been a concern over a number of years. Alexander's report on oracy (2012) and the Bullock report 'A Language for Life' (1975) contains many of the same concerns about whether students gain and learn sufficient communicative skills in lessons where they are learning through listening rather than speaking. Scholars have proposed a number of ways in which they believe such classes should be conducted and exactly what students should learn. Denman's strategy is one of the simplest methods to introduce oracy into classes and would be most approachable for students. It presents them with the basic structures of rhetorical practice within classroom experiences which they relate to and apply their rhetorical awareness to. This gives teachers a large scope of examples and situations to create including debates, performing a part of a text or even just asking students whether they agree or disagree.

For Classical subjects this would work well, as an understanding of rhetoric is already embedded into the curriculum. But it is how the students apply their understanding to their own communication in tasks where they are encouraged to speak to give them the

practice in constructing spoken communication. Alexander (2012) makes two important points in his report on oracy. Firstly, it is important for students to learn that they are required not only to be able to provide relevant focused answers but also to learn how to pose their own questions and how to use talk to narrate, explain, speculate, imagine, hypothesise, explore, evaluate, discuss, argue and justify and to learn that without practice they are not going to be able to do so effectively now or in the future. In addition, he also explains that talk can be an effective method of re-engaging those who are disengaged and closing the overlapping gaps of inequality and attainment (Alexander, 2012, pp. 3-4).

School 21 and the University of Cambridge piloted a project to improve Year 7s' oracy skills. The project developed an 'Oracy Skills Framework' setting out the physical, linguistic, cognitive and social-emotional oracy skills which students need for education and for life, in addition to introducing a whole school oracy culture, oracy in every lesson, a Year 7 oracy curriculum and an oracy assessment toolkit. The evaluation published by the *Education Endowment Foundation* suggests that there is potential in an oracy curriculum to 'support the development of talk for learning', provide opportunities for students to use talk effectively in diverse contexts and for a range of purposes and audiences including those associated with different subjects, and equip students to reflect on their use of talk and make choices about the kind of talk that is appropriate to different contexts (Maxwell *et al.*, 2015, p. 7). There are parts of the evaluation and impact of the study which do stand out. For example: 'The emphasis on oracy is seen as particularly empowering for those students who find it difficult to express themselves and explore ideas through writing'; and in mixed-ability groups oracy-inspired exercises could be useful in helping understand tricky parts of set texts that do not always make sense the first time (Maxwell *et al.*, 2015, p. 26). The evaluation suggested that the curriculum needs to include 'greater emphasis on the different kinds of talk which might be appropriate in different contexts and for different purposes, to include a focus on the kind of talk that might be associated with developing thinking or understanding' (Maxwell *et al.*, 2015, p. 32).

The findings outlined here suggest that oracy could be a method to improve students' communication skills, with the added benefit of improving the engagement of students. The context of the Classics classroom could be extremely useful for this point as students interact with a variety of genres so it could easily be explained how the same individuals speak in different ways in different situations. Short classroom activities and practice could reinforce this. As the project is still developing, results have so far not been conclusive and there needs to be further research; but the project maintains that the promotion of oracy can play a central role in students' current and future learning and their lives.

Teaching students to have a rhetorical awareness can benefit them in the long term. Scholars have drawn attention to how oral communication skills have become one of the key skills today's economy and enterprise culture seek and certain types of communication are being demanded in workplaces (Doherty *et al.*, 2011, p. 27). This means that if students do not have adequate oral communication skills they could be overlooked for opportunities after they have completed their education. Even though there has been a resurgence of an interest in communication skills, employers and university admissions tutors have drawn attention to the fact that applicants' oral communication skills are in decline (Alexander 2012, p. 5). Incorporating rhetorical awareness and oracy into Classics could have an impact on what students do after compulsory education. Indeed, Einhorn (1981) has demonstrated how rhetorical techniques are used by successful candidates in job interviews. They used rhetoric in the way they approached answering the questions asked of them (Einhorn, 1981, p. 219). Successful candidates used a variety of arguments to substantiate why they possessed the desired qualities and were also able to analyse rhetorically what the interviewers liked or disliked when listening, simultaneously dismantling the questions and using a varied delivery to emphasise their points (Einhorn, 1981, pp. 220-226). These skills cannot just be summoned at a particular time but need to be practised and learnt and are very relevant to the interview process for those applying to go to university and applying for apprenticeships.

Examples of activities we might use to introduce a notion of practising rhetorical awareness in communication

Students must practise their rhetorical awareness to be able to use it on a regular basis. The best way to help students become rhetorical is to create situations where they have to be rhetorical: when students encounter examples of rhetoric they gain a sense of how rhetorical texts themselves emerge from rhetorical practice and the text has a point of view which the student will have a personal opinion about, helping to move away from the predetermined responses which students learn in class (Darwin, 2003, p. 24). This would be particularly helpful in the parts of the Classics exam where students are required to give a personal response. In all Classical subjects students are required to study sources from a variety of genres which gives them the opportunity to practise rhetorical skills, and stretch and build their rhetorical self-consciousness. As well as giving students a life skill, this will potentially also help them meet exam criteria and assessment objectives.

All Classics lessons already incorporate rhetoric through students identifying rhetorical devices, writing controlled assessments and analysing texts. Identifying rhetorical devices and understanding the functions of rhetorical devices provide a good basis for teaching rhetorical awareness and thinking about the wider context of the author's writing and the students' own communication. The overarching point which students should understand is that all set texts are forms of communication from the author to a particular audience. Therefore teaching the text to students in this context emphasises that the author has thought about this before writing – highlighting the importance of rhetorical awareness.

Practising rhetorical awareness in the classroom requires activities where students use their own ideas to construct their own pieces of communication. This can be very difficult for teachers to include in the classes as the priority is ensuring that students understand the language and texts which can be difficult when there are different ability levels and

a lack of time in the timetable. Below, are four flexible ways teachers can help students become more rhetorically aware and improve their oracy skills. There should be a balance in practice between speaking and writing; teachers may want to choose particular activities depending on where the strengths and weaknesses of their students lie and adapt the activities to the mixed abilities in their classes.

Firstly, a very simple way of getting students to become more rhetorical and thinking about how they are speaking is through introducing more discussion into the classroom. A starting point for this could be homing in on the aspect of the ‘personal response’ specified in exam syllabuses. Students could be given an opportunity to build up their own opinions on texts so everyone has something different to write in the end exam but students are also made aware that others may have a different opinion from them. This type of discussion could be particularly useful for the WJEC Latin Literature themes exam as students can think about the differences in the ideas of the authors and the ways they are represented through the varying genres of the chosen theme. The teacher’s role here is to push to students to take a view of their own and encourage them to think about how they can uphold and sustain that their personal view is valid.

Secondly, students could develop their rhetorical awareness through composing a piece of writing in the style of a set text or on the same topic in a different style. This activity gives students the opportunity to use rhetorical devices themselves and gives them a firmer knowledge of their impact and effect in writing as well as getting a deeper understanding of the text and the author. For example, students who do the WJEC specification may not notice that in the set text themes and narratives there are a number of set texts by the same author but written in completely different styles for different audiences and contexts. For example, in Theme A “Books and Writers” (WJEC, 2009a), Cicero *ad familiares* is prescribed and in Theme B “Growing Up in Rome” Cicero *Pro Caelio* is specified (WJEC, 2009f). The former text is more personal and tells us about the author whereas the latter is in response to a particular rhetorical challenge to defend Marcus Caelius

Rufus and as it is a speech students may need to consider the delivery and performance. Teachers could ask students to write a defence in this style for the same character or someone of their choice who has done some kind of wrongdoing. Students could also write a letter in Cicero’s style, but they would have to think completely differently about language, audience and context. Through homing in on the different styles of text by the same author, such an activity would help students get into the mind-set of the author and to become aware of the rhetorical methods he employs.

Similarly, in the OCR specification there are two Pliny texts *avunculus meus* and *Arria* (OCR, 2014). Both texts recount historical events; however, they do this in slightly different ways, due to the topics and contexts. Again, getting students to write a text recounting an event could help them to understand how difficult it is to make the event they are writing about sound exciting and they will want to use some of the techniques used by Pliny. In the Classical Civilisation specification, there is more scope to get students to write in the style of the authors as less time is spent on understanding the language of the text; therefore, there is wider scope for this kind of exercise (OCR, 2012b). In this specification there are larger sections of the prescribed texts with a wider breadth of topics and themes that can be used as a springboard for ideas and different styles. For example, if Virgil’s *Aeneid* is the chosen text, students could write a speech in the roles of either Dido or Aeneas. However, it does not necessarily need to be in an epic style; instead it can be a stand-alone piece of oratory. The same exercise can be used for Greek tragedy and comedy. It is even possible to take writing in the style of set texts even further by bringing ancient authors or characters into the modern world of social media by turning what they would say into a tweet or a *Facebook* status. This requires students to think about how they could summarise the thoughts, feelings or events into a short sentence which is still recognisable as a Classical character or author. Summarising thoughts and ideas is a rhetorical skill in itself.

Short role-play exercises are another way which can help students to

understand how they need to adapt how they usually communicate to the aims, style and structure of the role they are given. Armitage (1998) explains that role play can enhance the student’s understanding of issues they are meeting in their work and create opportunities for writing and communicating information and opinions fluently (Armitage, 1998, p. 87). Through role play, they will also gain an understanding of rhetorical issues such as delivery and voice. This type of exercise could include delivering the speeches or pieces of writing which they have created in emulating classical texts. An interesting way to encourage students to think about how they are communicating is by asking them to give a report on the events in the text, at a certain time in history or even as a figure in a piece of archaeological evidence. They could also bring popular culture into their role play by acting out scenes in the style of their favourite television shows such as *Eastenders* or *Dr. Who*. Some students may not be comfortable in taking part in the role play and so could take a role in writing the script and directing the scenes; this ensures the exercise can play to the strengths of all students in a mixed-ability class. Role play can help cement the students’ understanding of what is happening in a text by making them explain the story in their own words, which can be particularly helpful if the text is in the original language.

Doing presentations or recording videos and podcasts can also make students think about how they are communicating. Similarly to the other exercises, students will need to plan how they are going to present their ideas and consider their style, delivery and tone. These modes of presenting ideas have a time limit, which creates the challenge of incorporating and prioritising all their points and ideas. Presentations, videos and podcasts can be useful revision materials for the whole class after they have been made by the students and checked by the teacher. Podcasts could be used in WJEC literature examinations for each of the different themes or texts to explain the content or points of the authors. Again, this will simultaneously support students with their exam preparation in understanding the texts they have been given, helping them develop a rhetorical awareness and their communication skills.

Topography of the text — a process for understanding and analysing a text and to plan one’s own writing

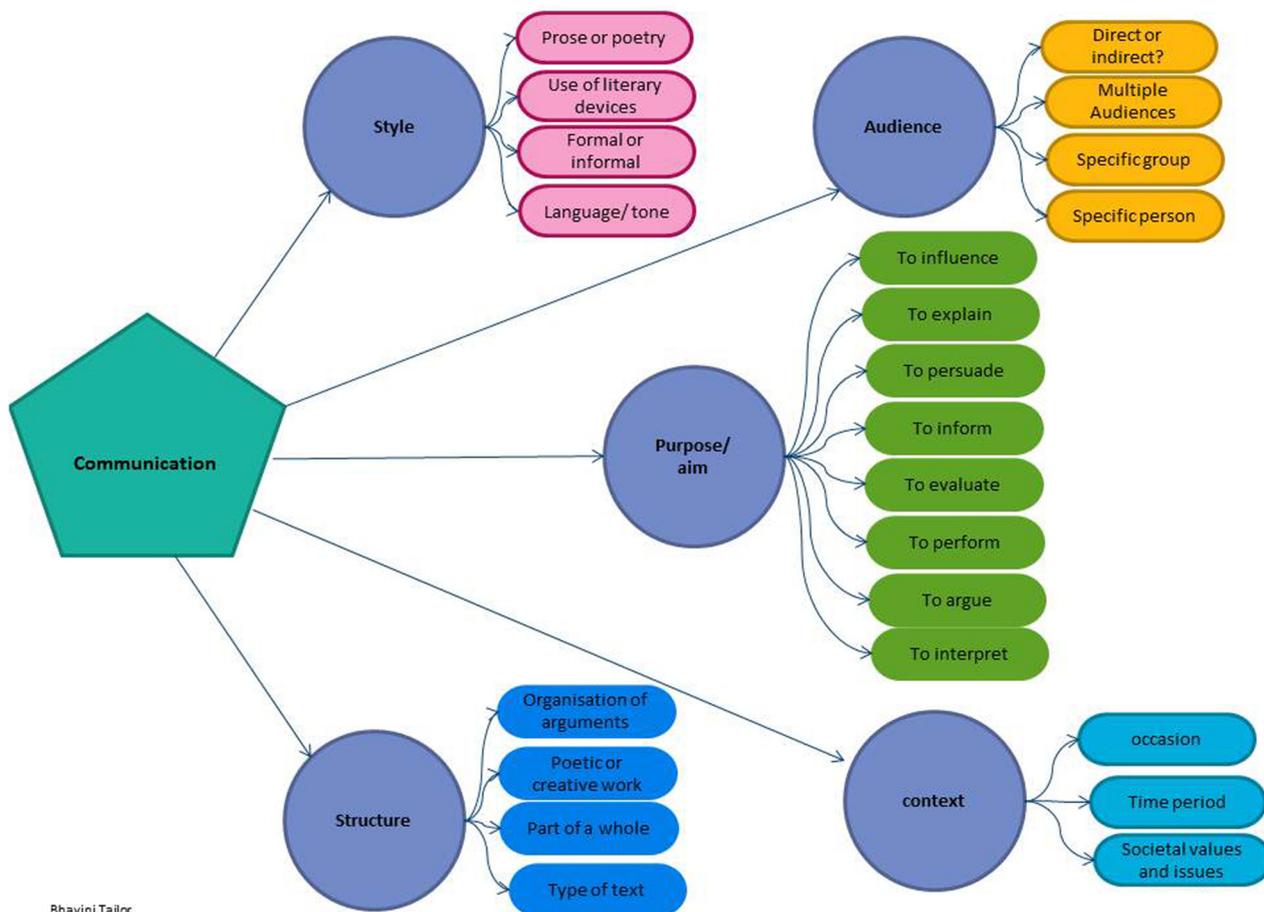
I have created a map of rhetoric (Figure 1) which can be used in two ways. Firstly it can be used as a reminder about what they should be analysing in a text or source and secondly it can be used in the planning stages of composing any type of their own communication. This approach could introduce students to rhetoric and rhetorical analysis. Each separate arm could be taught and then put together as a whole. This sheet is intended to make students more aware of the different components of rhetoric by giving them a process to understand the authors, texts or a source and factors to consider in their own writing or even when they are analysing a spoken text.

Once students have been taught how to use the sheet it could be committed to memory and used as a revision aid and in exams. Eventually, if these simple components of analysis can be used as a

basis to analyse different forms of communication, this can be used as a foundation for students’ communication skills throughout further education and careers. Figure 1, the un-adapted map of rhetoric, may assist the teacher in explaining how literary devices work, the different genres of speech, the personality of the speaker, intentions, delivery, influences of context, structure and style. This then gives the student an opportunity to understand the importance of these components in creating a successful piece of communication. This kind of analysis of spoken text is a useful way to help demonstrate the benefits of rhetoric and its components employed by the author. After understanding Figure 1 students can create a method for themselves which is almost a checklist to analyse the text and include their own interpretations.

Figure 2 simulates how this can be used to analyse a set text and aid understanding of a text. This uses the example of Ovid *Metamorphoses*, Book 8, lines 152-168 and 183-235, which is prescribed for WJEC Latin Literature Narratives exam (WJEC, 2012e). This type

of text can be more difficult for students to understand and identify with as there is no clear purpose and some ideas can be very abstract. Here, I have included some information in the context section which may not be completely necessary for the final exam but supports the understanding of the text as a whole. The structure and purpose arms act as a reminder for the student where they are reading the whole book and summaries the prescribed lines. One of the most important components is the *style arm*. This encompasses the major analysis of the text and thinking about the impact of the rhetorical devices. It would be impossible to fit everything onto one page about the text or prescribed lines that a student would need to know for their exam but this can act as a discussion starter and revision aid after the text has been covered in class. If necessary, it may be possible to remove some of the arms from the map of rhetoric which students may not need to cover. As well as helping students with their prescribed text it also gives them some background, helping them think about why Ovid used particular devices



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Figure 1. | Map of Rhetoric.

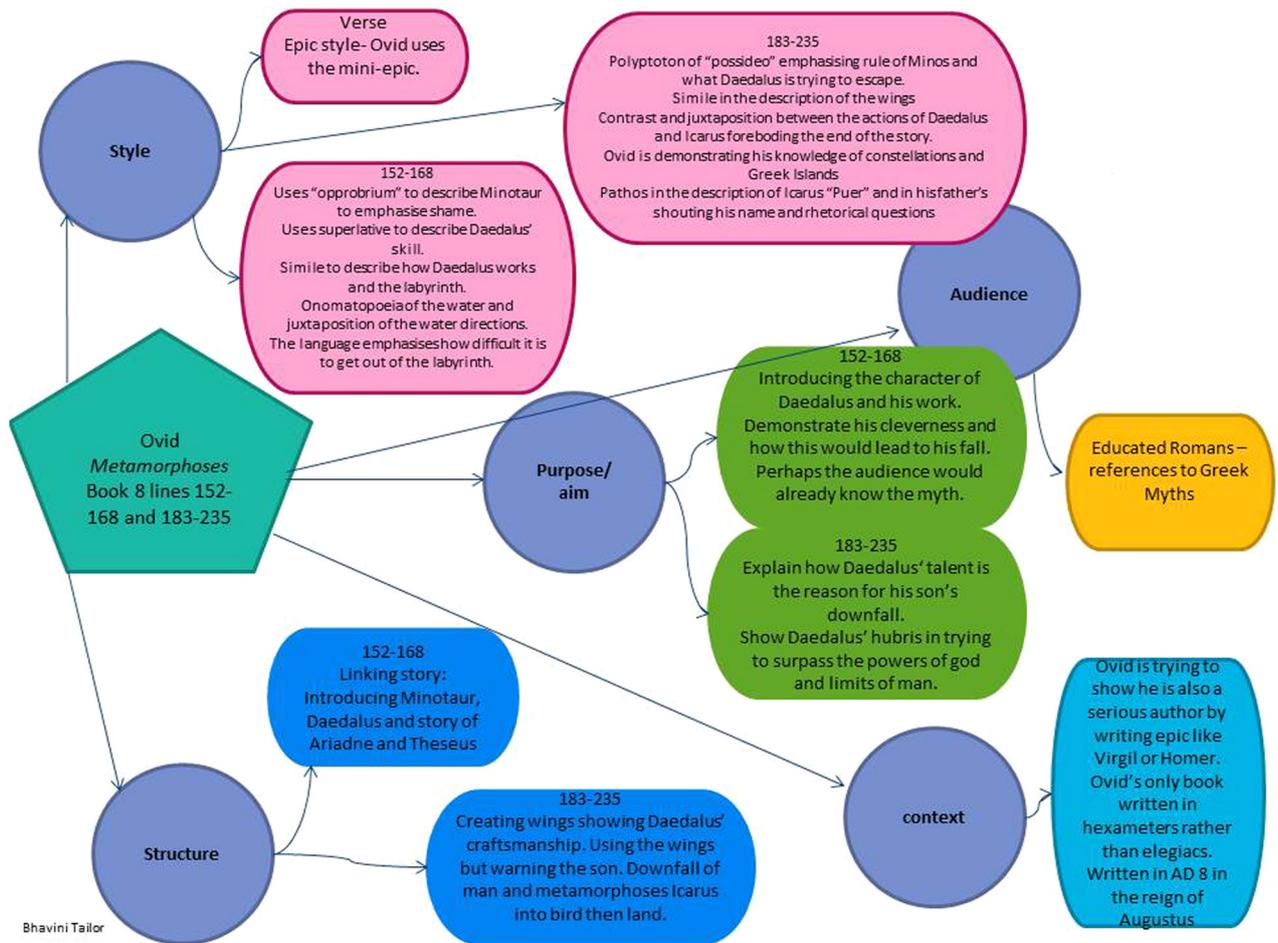


Figure 2. | Map of Rhetoric – adapted for analysis.

and characters and how this fits in with the overall text. This is particularly important when thinking about lines 152-168 which is a linking passage. Indeed, this type of approach may be easier to apply to prose text such as a speech or historical writing but equally gives students a process signposting where they could start analysing a text.

The same approach can be adopted when thinking about a student's own piece of writing. This is demonstrated in Figure 3, for an example of a WJEC GCSE controlled assessment question (WJEC, 2009a). Each of the arms has slightly changed to think about how the student should answer the question, what they should be aiming for and the primary sources they could use. The idea here is to direct the students to what they should be thinking about in the planning stage; then they can add the layers onto the map when they have the information. The 'audience' is there, as a way to remind students that the examiner requires them to do some specific analysis and evaluation to get as many marks as possible and that they need

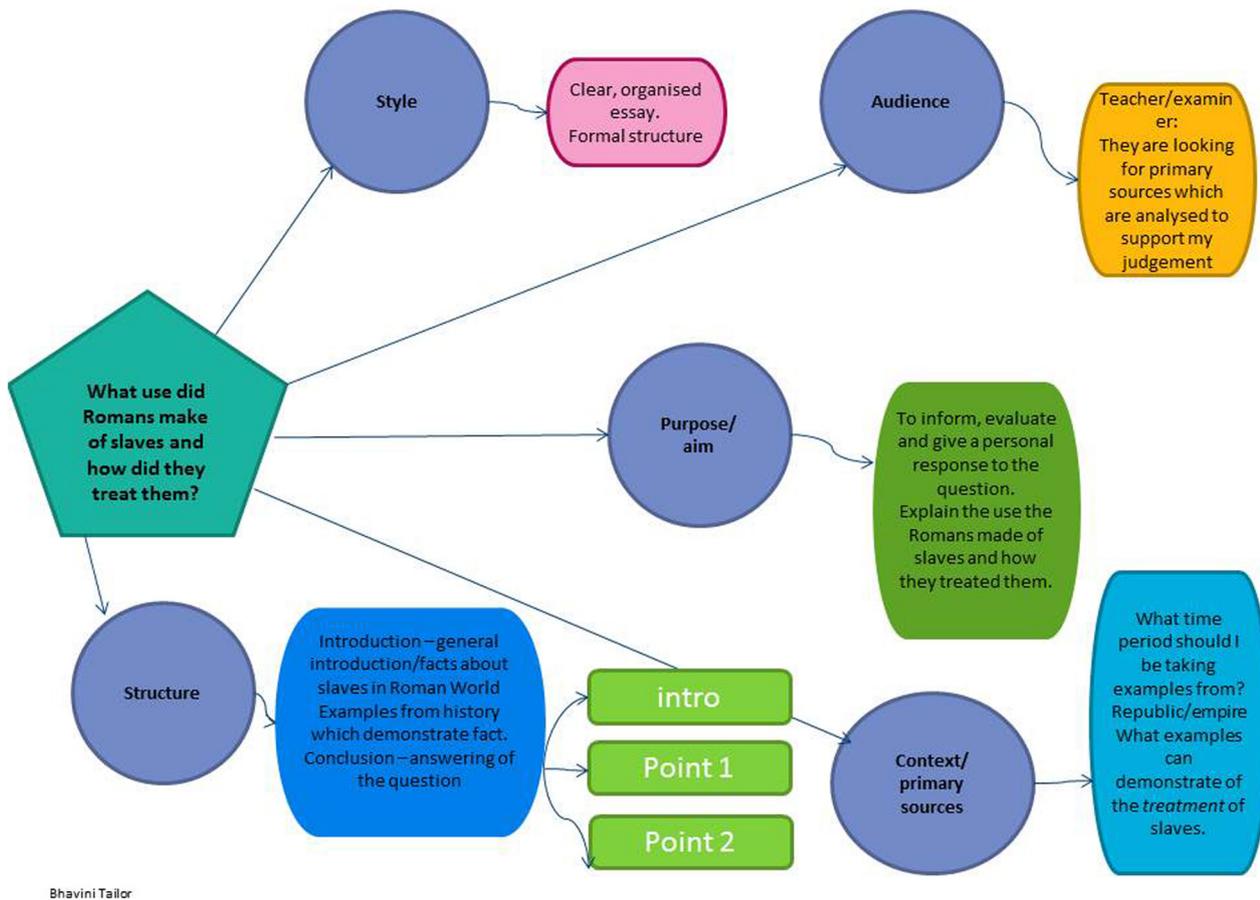
to think about how they will do this in the planning stages of their essay. In Figure 3 the next steps might be to add the primary sources into the context / examples sections, then plan the discussion around the examples and, finally, where this will go in the overall essay in the structure section. The headings of each section could be changed to suit the essay or exam question. This approach may be even more useful at A Level when students are developing their writing and analytical skills. The map of rhetoric could act simultaneously as an aide-memoire for analysis and as a planning tool for writing.

I have outlined the importance of developing rhetorical awareness to support and develop communication skills and as a skill for students' educational and professional lives in the future. Rhetoric and oracy can be added to Classics classes to complement the work and learning which students already do; many teachers do include a dimension of oracy and some focus on rhetoric in their classes. However, there could be a greater emphasis on helping students to

understand what rhetoric is and how to use it themselves through oracy-type exercises. The map of rhetoric is a tool that can be adapted to analyse texts, as a memory aid or to help students in their own writing understand the factors they should be thinking about in the planning or thinking stages. Again, this can be used as a flexible tool for different types of essay and exam questions at different levels. The most important and inspiring part of rhetoric and oracy is to encourage students who may be disengaged or of different ability levels to talk and write about their opinions and to help students hone a skill which they can use and improve upon on a daily basis.

Thank you to the attendees of Classics Teachers Colloquium 2015 at Royal Holloway, University of London, who initially discussed and gave me feedback on the ideas included in this article.

Bhavini Tailor completed a MRes Rhetoric at Royal Holloway and is now a civil servant.



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Figure 3. | Map of Rhetoric – adapted for writing.

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