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Introduction and Overview

Invention has always been central to rhetorical theory and practice. As Richard Young and Alton Becker put it in “Toward a Modern Theory of Rhetoric,” “The strength and worth of rhetoric seem [. . .] to be tied to the art of invention; rhetoric tends to become a superficial and marginal concern when it is separated from systematic methods of inquiry and problems of content” (127). Yet by the mid-twentieth century, invention and rhetoric itself had disappeared from English Studies, including composition. In the 1960s, however, as Rhetoric and Composition was forming as a disciplinary field, one of its first focuses was on invention. Some scholars examined the loss of invention during the Renaissance and its vestiges in early nineteenth-century instruction. Others developed new inventional theories and practices, including conceptions of rhetoric as epistemic. This volume offers readers an account of some major discussions of this core rhetorical component, including an overview of the history of invention that stretches back to the Sophists and a narrative of developments in inventional theory since the mid-twentieth century. It will also examine the intimate connections between inventional theory and composition pedagogy.

All writers face the problem of finding subjects to write about and of developing these subjects. Invention provides guidance in how to begin writing, to explore for ideas and arguments, to frame insights, and to examine the writing situation. Although rhetorical invention is a broad and complex term that will require this entire volume to clarify, at the outset it may be helpful to identify some of its features. Of all the five canons—or major parts—of classical rhetoric, invention is the only one that directly addresses the content of communication as

well as the process of creation, thus dealing with one of the most visible parts of published rhetorical performance, the content, and one of the most often invisible—the process by which a writer produced that content. The term *invention* has historically encompassed strategic acts that provide the discourser with direction, multiple ideas, subject matter, arguments, insights or probable judgments, and understanding of the rhetorical situation. Such acts include initiating discourse, exploring alternatives, framing and testing judgments, interpreting texts, and analyzing audiences. As this book will illustrate, various theories of invention include some or all of these acts and differ in their conceptions of the purposes of invention and its underlying epistemology. Because invention has both theoretical and practical importance for writing theory and the teaching of writing, this text will offer an historical review of issues in invention theory and pedagogy. The text will also offer two chapters dealing with contemporary work on invention: one on theoretical issues and one on issues in inventional pedagogy. Although invention is only one part of rhetoric, it keeps raising questions that implicate the whole of composition and other fields, as this text will demonstrate.

Issues in Rhetorical Invention

In order to highlight the contentious nature of the narrative of invention and its pedagogical impacts, Chapter 3 will demonstrate that theories and pedagogies of invention have been embedded in spirited historical debates over both the primary texts and their secondary interpretations. Chapter 4 will present modern and contemporary theories of invention since the 1960s, examining issues over the nature, purposes, and epistemology of invention. Chapter 5 will focus on disagreements over inventional pedagogies since the 1960s. My purpose in these chapters is to represent the debates clustered around these issues, noting the points of conflict and agreement. I do so to narrate an account of rhetorical invention that pays attention to how power has circulated in this saga. The major issues that will be examined are discussed below.

Differences over the Nature, Purpose, and Epistemology of Rhetorical Invention

The Nature of Invention. Theorists differ over what rhetorical invention encompasses. In some theories, invention is restricted to exploratory activity: constructing or finding lines of argument, examining subjects, searching for material to develop texts, articulating goals, and/or researching for intertextual support for a discourse. In other theories, invention is also conceived to include the initiation of discourse, e.g., posing questions or selecting subjects; the formation of probable judgments, focuses, insights, or theses; and the rhetorical situation: contexts, readers, and discourse communities. Scholars also discuss whether inventional practices are non-discursive acts or are symbolic, particularly written, acts and whether invention is tacit or explicit. They also argue over whether invention is individual or social and over the extent to which invention engages writers in examinations of political, social, and economic conditions. Finally, scholars differ over whether writers exercise agency in inventional activity or whether they are written by these acts.

The Purpose of Invention. Theorists also posit different purposes for invention (e.g., to lead to judgments, reach new insights, locate arguments to support existing theses, solve problems, achieve identification, reach self-actualization, or locate subject matter for texts). These purposes entail different epistemologies and inventional strategies. They also imply somewhat different conceptions of the composing process and of its originating acts. For example, if invention's purpose is to locate arguments to support a thesis, the composing process would likely begin with an existing thesis. If invention's purpose is to reach new insights, the process would likely begin with questions. Theorists also disagree over whether invention is hermeneutic or heuristic or both (i.e., whether invention's purpose is to interpret and critique existing texts, produce new texts, or both).

Invention's Epistemology. The third disputed aspect centers on the epistemology underlying inventional processes. Historical scholars continue to debate whether rhetorical invention helps writers to construct new knowledge or only to find arguments or material to support and convey judgments reached elsewhere (e.g., through philosophy or science). Finally, rhetoricians (theorists of rhetoric) also argue

over whether rhetorical invention can function only in certain subject areas or in all kinds of arenas.

These issues, which began with the Sophists, as Chapter 3 illustrates, extend to current disputes about rhetoric as epistemic and postmodern views of epistemology as rhetorical. An era's position on these questions has had important consequences. It has determined how central a role rhetoric played in both the academy and the professions and how much respect was accorded rhetorical research and teaching.

Arguments over Inventional Pedagogy

The second broad issue this text addresses centers on differences over inventional pedagogy. Here, too, the arguments extend back to the Sophists. A major disagreement festers over whether rhetorical invention is an art that can be taught or a natural ability that can only be nurtured; another discussion and debates continue over the relative importance of natural talent, practice, imitation, or art in educating a writer or speaker. Over the centuries, advocates of one or the other of these pedagogies or of their integration have expressed their views vigorously, and today these debates are as heated as ever. Since the 1960s, new questions have arisen over heuristic procedures (see Chapter 2). Can they aid rhetorical invention? Which heuristics best guide invention for different writers and situations? Should student writers use strategies to prompt and shape the direction of their writing process? How can writers best learn to select and deploy different arguments? Which heuristics are more effective—general or discipline-specific ones?

Organization and Scope of the Text

Following the format for this series, Reference Guides to Rhetoric and Composition, Chapter 2 offers some definitions of pervasive terms. Chapter 3 examines the history of the above issues, demonstrating that many of the questions debated today have been argued since the time of the Sophists. It is important to note that these historical disagreements occurred not only among the primary texts themselves (e.g., Plato's *Phaedrus* and Cicero's *De Oratore*) but also among scholarly interpretations of each primary text. My presentation of this historical scholarship will only be illustrative because of the constraints of

a reference volume and the massive body of historical interpretation. Although the two broad sets of issues (over theory and pedagogy) introduced above are inextricably bound, they will be treated separately here. Chapter 4 examines issues regarding the nature, purposes, and epistemology of invention in modern and contemporary theories of invention. Chapter 5 investigates issues of inventional pedagogy. These two chapters present work by scholars in the disciplines of Rhetoric and Composition, Communication, and other fields like Classics. Although the focus of this text is on invention in the discipline of Rhetoric and Composition, the scholarship on invention in other fields forms an essential part of the intertext of those studying and teaching written discourse. The text does not treat invention's relationship to audience, readers, or discourse communities because these subjects are handled in another volume in this series. Chapter 6 provides a glossary of terms. Chapter 7 offers an annotated bibliography of selected texts on theories of rhetorical invention and pedagogy.