

Admiral William H. McRaven

Posted on April 5, 2018

Rhetorical Analysis of Admiral William H. McRaven gave the famous, memorable commencement speech at the graduation ceremony of the [University of Texas](#) in 2014. (“Adm. McRaven Urges Graduates to Find Courage to Change the World”)The admiral uses different rhetorical strategies in his speech to achieve his purpose of teaching essential life lessons, which makes it inspirational for millions of people around the world. The majority of the present audience at the ceremony was the young generation, which is why he used informal language and diction to communicate his message to a generation that is entirely different from his.

Admiral uses the rhetorical technique of “framing” to draw upon the power of reason to teach the students some leadership lessons. The speech also appeals to the emotions of the listeners. He uses many expressions like “the fact that” and “most importantly” to assert the facts in his speech to show that his statements are factual, which is one of the essential ways of framing. Thus, he presents examples from his own and others’ experiences to persuade the audience about the authenticity of his argument.

Admiral also uses pre-emptive arguments. He acknowledges the opposing position but then shows the reason why the particular circumstances require an alternative approach. For example, he says,

Know that life is not fair and that you will fail often. But if you take some risks...then the next generation and the generations that follow will live in a world far better than the one we have today.

In these lines, the propositions preceding the word “but” acknowledge a counter-argument that is to counterbalance the sentence.

Rhetorical Analysis of Admiral William H. McRaven redefines some words to suit his purposes. The semantic categories of words like “serious” and “young” in “serious girlfriend” and “young Army officer” are redefined to suit his purpose. By “serious,” he means that he was in a serious relationship and wanted to marry the girlfriend that he had when he was graduating from college. It does not say that his girlfriend was a stone-faced being and uncheerful. Similarly, young means more than just young by age here. It is an expression of honor and respect for the officer’s enthusiasm and vigor who got killed in Iraq.

Rhetorical Analysis of Admiral William H. McRaven tells many stories in the speech from his personal experience to create cohesion and identify himself with the values taught in the story. A story is defined as “a fact wrapped in an emotion that compels us to take an action that transforms our world.” The concept of pathos, i.e., the appeal to the emotions of the audience to create a rhetorical effect, is essential to a gripping story that includes identification and a sense of suffering.

He draws a lot of analogies and metaphors between the terms that are used in the story and real-life happenings. The “circus,” which means exercise and PT for two more hours, mentioned in one of the stories, is equated with the difficult circumstances in real life that can make a person stronger. Further metaphors are used in the speech to elicit emotions and to communicate the lessons. These tropes include faith that a single person can change the world. Instead of refuting an already existing frame, Admiral William H. McRaven frames a new one that appeals to the standard values.

After we are presented with many examples that illustrate that one person can change the world, the audience feels assured about the authenticity of the speaker’s point. The dream and the future of a better world are one of the most inspiring things for a human soul. The mention of moral imagination and our faith in changing the world makes the audience hopeful for the aspirational future.

The concept of ethos, i.e., the credibility of the narrator that is judged by knowledge, evidence, credentials, and authority, is also used by the admiral to prove the authenticity of his point. The fact that he is an Admiral of the United States Navy and Navy SEAL trainer presents him as an authoritative leader whose arguments can win minds and hearts.

Words with value judgments attached or connotations are used to put a story in a nutshell by the mere choice of words. In his speech, Admiral William H. McRaven uses words like “Vietnam veterans” and “calisthenics” to save himself from giving details about his instructors and the exercises he was made to do during the training.

He employs a careful use of pronouns to establish his authority and leadership. In the speech, the admiral shows his achievements and the hardships that a SEAL goes through during the training, to show his leadership. He uses the second person pronoun is used while relating what he did not do, as in, “all you have to do to quit is ring the bell.” Moreover, he establishes himself as a mentor and the audience as learners by the use of the second person pronoun as he says, “If you want to change the world, don’t ever, ever ring the bell.”

Admiral repeats many words and phrases that he deems to be the essence of his lessons. For example, at the beginning of the speech, he repeats the phrase, “what starts here changes the world.”

Admiral uses funny SEAL jargon like “sugar cookie,” “circus,” and “munchkin crew” to keep the connection with the audience so that they remain interested in what he has to say.

At the end of his speech, he appeals to precedent, citing the deeds of great men. Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, and Malala Yousufzai from Pakistan are all mentioned by him; to dual enforce the authenticity of his arguments and to let some of their wisdom, charisma, and authority be passed on to him. By aligning his thinking with that of these great people, he creates a frame of reference to place himself more effectively.

Rhetorical Analysis of Admiral William H. McRaven takes the motto of the University of Texas, “What

starts here changes the world,” and elaborates it with the help of his own experiences as a SEAL and the leadership lessons that he learned, which can help in changing the world. The speech is well constructed; it starts with the motto of the University of Texas and sums it up with the same slogan.

The graduating students are about to enter the practical life, for which they need a guideline to succeed. Admiral chooses to teach the graduating batch some leadership lessons that can help them make a positive impact in the world.

His speech inspired not only the 8000 students who were graduating that night but also the millions of people around the globe and filled them with a sense of drive and empowerment. Admiral William H. McRaven uses informal language while relating his personal experiences during his training to the audience to establish a connection with the audience that certifies his credibility. It makes the audience more responsive and receptive to his message.

Work Cited

“Adm. McRaven Urges Graduates to Find Courage to Change the World.” *UT News / The University of Texas at Austin*, 16 May 2014,
<https://news.utexas.edu/2014/05/16/mcraven-urges-graduates-to-find-courage-to-change-the-world>.