Kairos and the Rhetorical Situation: Seizing the Moment
Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee

This reading is a chapter from Crowley and Hawhee’s freshman writing textbook Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students. It describes the key rhetorical concept of “kairos” (KY-ross), which pertains to timing and timeliness.

If the whole of rhetoric could be thus embodied in one compact code, it would be an easy task of little compass: but most rules are liable to be altered by the nature of the case, circumstances of time and place, and by hard necessity itself.
-Quintilian, Institutes II xiii 2

Ancient rhetoricians recognized the complexity of rhetoric, and they realized that teaching such a multivalent art was a difficult task. Rhetoric cannot be reduced to a handy list of rules on writing or speaking, because each rhetorical situation presents its own unique set of challenges. Because each rhetorical situation is unique, each occurs in a time and place that can't be wholly anticipated or replicated. The proverb that tells us to "strike while the iron is hot" is certainly applicable to rhetoric: issues sometimes seem to appear overnight; others, such as capital punishment and abortion, seem remarkably enduring in American discourse. Sometimes issues are available for discussion, but audiences who are ready to hear about them cannot be found; at other times an audience for a given issue seems to coalesce overnight. A few years ago, for example, almost no one in the corridors of power was interested in hearing about global warming, and although scientists had been publishing their concerns about climate change for many years, their work reached only a small audience of committed environmentalists. As we write, however, Americans in general are becoming more aware of the issue. Magazines and newspapers have begun to feature articles on climate change, and television news makes frequent reference to it. And now it seems that public officials are beginning to pay attention, too. In rhetorical terms, the issue of climate change has finally found a national audience.

Rhetors must always be prepared, then, to meet the moment and find the place where the sometimes-sudden conjunction of issues with their appropriate audiences appears. The ancients knew this, and they had a name for the right rhetorical moment: they called it "kairos." A multi-dimensional and flexible term, kairos suggests a special notion of space and/or time. Since American English does not have a term quite like kairos, a bit of explanation is in order.

Ancient Depictions of Kairos

The Greeks had two concepts of time. They used the term chronos to refer to linear, measurable time, the kind with which we are more familiar, that we track with watches and calendars. But the ancients used kairos to suggest a more situational kind of time, something close to what we call "opportunity." In this sense, kairos suggests an advantageous time, or as lexicographers put it, "exact or critical time, season, opportunity" (Liddell and Scott 1996, 859). The temporal
dimension of kairos can indicate anything from a lengthy time to a brief, fleeting moment. In short, kairos is not about duration but rather about a certain kind of time. In Roman rhetoric, the Latin word opportunitas was used in a similar manner; its root, port-, means an opening, and from it we get English verbs such as import and export as well as an old-fashioned word for a door or window, portal. Kairos is thus a "window" of time during which action is most advantageous. On Wall Street, there are kairotic moments to buy, sell, and trade stock to maximize gains. Victorious sprinters often accelerate at just the right time to pass their opponents. The success of a joke or funny quip depends upon its timing, or the kairos of its delivery.

Kairos was so important for ancient thinkers that it became a mythical figure. Lysippos, the famous ancient sculptor of athletes, chose to "enroll Kairos among the gods" (Himerius 759). It is little wonder that someone knowledgeable about competitive athletics—where timing and an awareness of the situation are critical—would render kairos into human form. The picture of Kairos in Figure 2.1 provides a good way to think about the rhetorical situation. Indeed, the rhetor is much like Kairos, bearing many different tools. Not just anybody can balance precariously on a stick while displaying a set of scales on a razor blade in one hand and depressing the pan with the other; such balance takes practice. As you can see in Figure 2.1, a depiction of a relief at Turin, Kairos is concerned about balancing the particulars of the situation, just as he perches tenuously on edge. His winged back and feet suggest the fleeting nature of time and situations. Perhaps the most remarkable and well-known characteristic of Kairos, however, is his hairstyle. Kairos was said to have hair only in the front, suggesting that one must keep an eye out for the opportune moment and seize it by grasping the forelock before it passes.

Figure 2.1: Kairos, from a bas-relief in Turin. Reprinted from Zeus: A Study in Ancient Religion by Arthur Bernard Cook.

Figure 2.2 shows another depiction of Kairos, still with wings, this time holding a wheel, suggesting movement again. In this depiction, found on a Theban limestone relief, Kairos is flying on the back of another mythical figure: Pronoia, the figure of foresight. Sitting dejected in the background is her counterpart, Metanoia, who is the figure of afterthought or hindsight. This scene, like the forelock in Figure 2.1, suggests the importance of anticipating opportunities and seizing them before they pass. These figures underscore the many dimensions of kairos.
The ancients were certainly aware of its relevance to the art of rhetoric. Indeed, the Older Sophist Gorgias was famed for having based his theory of rhetoric on it. The Greek writer Philostratus tells us that Gorgias may have invented extemporaneous speaking:

For coming into the theater of the Athenians, he had the boldness to say "suggest a subject," and he was the first to proclaim himself willing to take this chance, showing apparently that he knew everything and would trust to the moment [toi kairoi] to speak on any subject. (Sprague 1972, 30)

By acknowledging the importance of kairos, Gorgias's rhetorical theory accounted for the contingencies of rhetorical situations, for the timely conjunction of issues and audiences. Gorgias studied the particularities of each situation as means of invention; that is, his awareness of the right time and place helped him to discover compelling things to say.

Isocrates, too, emphasized the importance of kairos, claiming that people need to discuss prevailing issues before their currency dissipates:

The moment for action has not yet gone by, and so made it now futile to bring up this question; for then, and only then, should we cease to speak, when the conditions have come to an end and there is no longer any need to deliberate about them. ("Panegyricus" 5:2)

For Isocrates, the urgency and currency of a situation demand action in the form of lively rhetorical exchanges about an issue. But if an issue has lost its immediacy, then the rhetor must not only deliberate about the issue but make a case for the issue's relevance.

Kairos, Change, and Rhetorical Situations

Alongside the Older Sophists, we believe that the world is always changing and that knowledge itself is full of contraries—that is, never certain.
Kairos draws attention to the mutability of rhetoric, to the ever-changing arguments that can be found in connection with a particular issue. The available arguments on a given issue change over time because the people who are interested in the issue change—their minds, their beliefs, their ages, their locations, their communities, and myriad other things. Individuals can become deeply interested in issues and then they grow disinterested—people change their tastes in music and food and clothing over time, and they change their beliefs and interests as well. An individual may be religiously observant as a child, and grow utterly indifferent to religion as an adult (or vice versa). A second individual may have no interest whatever in politics until she joins a community—friends, neighbors, roommates—that is passionately engaged in political activity. Shared or communal belief changes as well, although this apparently happens more slowly. Americans have been arguing about gun control off and on for more than 200 years, but national interest in the issue waxes and wanes. Interest usually grows when some event, such as a school shooting, turns the nation's attention to the issue. That is to say, a school shooting can open a kairotic moment in which discussion of gun control seems more urgent than it does at other times.

Kairos also points to the situatedness of arguments in time and place and the way an argument's suitability depends on the particulars of a given rhetorical situation. The particulars of a rhetorical situation include the rhetor of course: her opinions and beliefs, her past experiences, as well as her position on an issue at the time she composes a discourse about it. But the rhetorical situation also includes the opinions and beliefs of her audience at that time and in that place, as well as the history of the issue within the communities that identify with it. Aristotle claimed that rhetoric seeks the available proofs, and these proofs are made available by the interactions of human beings who find themselves in particular sets of circumstances. That is, rhetorical situations create the available arguments. No one would care about gun control if people were not killed and injured by guns; no one would argue about climate change if it did not impact human lives or the lives of species on which we depend (such as fish) or about whose future we care (such as penguins and polar bears).

A kairos-based rhetoric cannot seek or offer certainty prior to composing, then. Rather, kairos requires that rhetors view writing and speaking as opportunities for exploring issues and making knowledge. A rhetoric that privileges kairos as a principle of invention cannot present a list of rules for finding arguments, but it can rather encourage a kind of ready stance, in which rhetors are not only attuned to the history of an issue (chronos) but are also aware of the more precise turns taken by arguments about it and when the arguments took these turns. One way to consider the kairos of an issue, then, is to explore the history of the issue; another is to pay careful attention to the arguments made by other parties about the issue, in order to cultivate a better understanding of why people are disagreeing at a particular time and in a particular place. In short, the rhetor must be aware of the issue's relevance to the time, the place, and the community in which it arises. Rhetors who understand all of the contexts in which issues arise will be well equipped to find convincing arguments in any given situation. In order to demonstrate how attention to kairos can guide analysis of an issue, we look at a set of events that occurred recently at the University of Illinois.
For many years, sports teams at Illinois have been represented by a mascot named Chief Illiniwek. This mascot has become a controversial figure, as the following editorial from *The Daily Illini*, the school's student newspaper, makes clear:

Much like the Chief is a symbol for the University, the controversy surrounding his image has come to represent the administration's inability to act unless their hand is forced by a third party. Now that it has been forced, the time has come for closure.

No matter where any of us fall on the debate, Chief Illiniwek as we know him is all but dead. As such, we see no compelling reason to put the issue off any longer. With each passing day, the distraction grows larger and the problem more serious.

The Oglala Sioux tribe's recent request that the University return the regalia undermines the validity of the pro-Chief argument. If the University were to refuse the request, pro-Chief advocates could no longer claim that the Chief honors the American Indian tradition. If the University were to acquiesce, then the Chief would truly become a white man made up like an Indian.

Chief Illiniwek symbolized the honor and integrity of the school for more than 80 years. He has represented the academic and athletic achievement of the University, performing at football, basketball and volleyball games in buckskin regalia adorned with a headdress.

The current portrayal of the Chief began with Gary Smith, former director of the Marching Illini, who purchased the regalia in 1982 for $3,500 from Frank Fools Crow, an Oglala Sioux tribe member. The regalia included moccasins, a tunic, breastplate, leggings, peace pipe pouch and a war bonnet adorned with eagle feathers. Last Wednesday, the tribe's five-member executive committee adopted a resolution by a 3-0 vote demanding the University return the feathers and regalia. Despite the confusion about the exact whereabouts of the various pieces of the Chief's dress, the important fact remains that the Oglala Sioux tribe, with whom the Chief has been closely linked, has demanded that the University cease their use of Chief Illiniwek.

The University has become a popular target over the issue of American Indian representation ever since the NCAA handed down a ruling last year prohibiting the University from hosting postseason events as long as it continues using the Chief, calling it a "hostile and abusive" mascot. The regalia incident also comes on the heels of embarrassing student statements encouraging violence and intolerance on a pro-Chief Facebook group.

These embarrassing incidents are a direct result of the University administration's refusal to make a decision on the Chief, even as tensions escalated. These tensions are not limited to the campus community. Alumni and other concerned parties have waged this debate far outside the area between Lincoln and Neal [sic]. Those outside this community are largely responsible for framing the argument as simply pro- or anti-Chief. The absence of leadership at the highest levels of this school's governing body has allowed the factions at the extreme ends of the issue to dominate the public discourse.

The University didn't take advantage of its students, who represented the entire spectrum of the debate. Numbering more than 40,000, the students were the best chance the University had to find an acceptable compromise. The University failed the students and community by allowing this largely symbolic argument to overshadow actual pressing issues.

The situation should have been handled once and for all after the NCAA penalized the University in August 2005.

The University Board of Trustees has promised a decision will be made this year. But for the silent majority, those who are not committed to either side of the debate but desperately seek resolution, the wait has already been too long. Instead of retiring the Chief long ago in a respectful manner when it had the chance, the Board has allowed the issue to fester, the rift to widen and its credibility to rot.
The next meeting of the University Board of Trustees will be held on March 13 at 9 a.m. in Urbana. The time for a respectable solution has long since passed, and the only way the University can move forward is to put Chief Illiniwek out of his misery. (2007)

As we inserted this example into our chapter on kairos, it was painfully apparent to us that the issues surrounding Chief Illiniwek are in one sense strictly local—the only people who know what "between Lincoln and Neail" means are associated with the University of Illinois. (The phrase refers to streets that mark the boundaries of the campus.) For Illinois sports fans, who call themselves the "Fighting Illini," the chief's performances are part of school spirit. In another sense, however, the issue has national implications because other college and professional sports teams have mascots whose costumes and performances refer to Native American cultures. In fact, in 2005 the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) took a position on this issue, defining Chief Illiniwek and similar mascots at 17 other schools as "hostile and abusive" representations of American Indians. Other national groups, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Modern Language Association (MLA), and the National Education Association (NEA) have asked that the chief be retired. Members of the university's faculty have also petitioned the University of Illinois Board of Trustees to get rid of the chief, and they were joined in this desire by some, but by no means all, students at Illinois.

The chief gave his last performance at a basketball game in February 2007.

Paradoxically, rhetors can step into a kairotic moment when it appears only if they are well prepared to do so. Rhetorical preparedness includes an awareness of the communities who are interested in an issue, as well as awareness of their positions on it. Until the chief was retired, many communities had a stake in this issue: the students, faculty, staff, administration, and the University of Illinois Board of Trustees; the Illiniwek, the Sioux, and members of other local Native American tribes as well as members of tribes located elsewhere who are concerned about the impact of such representations on their lives and cultures; fans and supporters of the University and its sports programs; the townspeople and the municipal government of Champaign-Urbana, where the University is located; the Illinois state legislature and the governor of the state; the NCAA; other schools on the NCAA's list, and, conceivably, sports fans everywhere; and last, people and groups like the NAACP, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the MLA, and NEA who are concerned about racist discourse and its associated practices. This is a very long list of relevant communities, but it indicates the sort of initial homework that must be done by a rhetor who wants to understand the kairos of an issue.

A list of interested communities can serve as a heuristic, because it can be used to ascertain the available arguments that are in circulation among interested parties. For example, residents of Champaign-Urbana might be interested in the chief for many reasons—his performances might encourage tourism, or they might encourage more people to turn out for sports events, allowing local people to make money by parking cars in their yards. On the other hand, town residents might share the concerns felt by some participants in this discussion—that the chief's performance has racist dimensions. Where this is the case, the money generated by tourists and sports fans is probably a secondary consideration. Financial incentives might also have been at work in the situation faced by the board of trustees. The chief is apparently very popular among some students, boosters, and alumni, and, of course, satisfied boosters and alumni donate money to universities. On the other hand, the imposition of NCAA sanctions on postseason sports events, including the lucrative Bowl Championship Series (BCS), represented a potentially
heavy financial loss for the university. This dilemma may have led to the delay criticized by the editors of the *Daily Illini*.

Preparedness also includes some knowledge of the history of the issue. Chief Illiniwek had a long history at Illinois; his first performance took place in 1926. Over an 80-year period, more than 30 students successfully auditioned for the role, all of them men except for one woman who performed the chief's role in 1943, when most college-aged men were in the military. Over the years, not all sports fans enjoyed the chief's performances: protests against them began in the 1970s, and in 1989, Charlene Teters, a graduate student and a member of the Spokane tribe, demonstrated at sports events where the chief was scheduled to perform.

But the earlier history of the state of Illinois is also crucial to gaining an understanding of this issue. In the early nineteenth century, some Illiniwek were forcibly relocated from their native lands in what is now the state of Illinois, and today fewer Native Americans live in Illinois than in many other states, such as Arizona. Oddly enough, the regalia most recently worn by the chief is not Illiniwek but Oglala Sioux, which suggests that those who support the chief's performances may not be interested in differences among Native cultures.

**Kairos as a Means of Invention**

We generated the material contained in the previous paragraphs by thinking about the times, places, and communities that are concerned with Chief Illiniwek's relation to the University of Illinois. Clearly, then, *kairos* can serve as a means of invention. Invention, remember, is the art of discovering all of the arguments made available by a given rhetorical situation. *Kairos* is but one of several means of invention we explore in this book—others are stasis theory, the commonplaces, and the topics. All of these means of invention can generate heuristics, which are usually lists of questions that help rhetors to investigate issues systematically.

Because *kairos* is not only temporal but spatial, its exploration can generate questions such as these:

1. Have recent events made the issue urgent right now, or do I need to show its urgency or make it relevant to the present? Will a history of the issue help in this regard?
2. What arguments seem to be favored by what groups at this time? That is, which communities are making which arguments? How are their interests served by these arguments?
3. What venues give voices to which sides of the issues? Does one group or another seem to be in a better position—a better place—from which to argue? In other words, what are the power dynamics at work in an issue? Who has power? Who doesn't? Why?
4. What lines of argument would be appropriate or inappropriate considering the prevailing needs and values of the audience?
5. What other issues are bound up with discourse about this issue right now, in this place and in this community? Why?

**How Urgent or Immediate Is the Issue?**

Usually, urgency depends on the audience as well as the existing situation—on recent activity around the issue. In recent years, arguments for and against retention of Chief Illiniwek became more and more urgent. The first widely heard arguments against the chief apparently emerged
during the 1970s, when, not coincidently, Native Americans gained sufficient mainstream visibility to participate in the national discourse. The urgency of the issue accelerated as dissenting arguments circulated among other groups, and when the NCAA imposed a postseason events ban on the university in 2005, the discussion became a very hot topic at UI and at other schools as well. But interest eventually fades, even from the hottest topics. In an interesting take on this argument, Justin Breen muses about its future impact:

Years from now, a dusty videotape of the University of Illinois’ Chief Illiniwek will surface, someone will pop it in an outdated VCR, watch it and probably utter: "What were they thinking?"

Illiniwek provided his final halftime performance at Wednesday's Illinois-Michigan men's basketball game. After two decades of complaints, protests and voting, the chief said so long.

It's about time.

The chief, an offensive portrayal of Native Americans, should have been dismissed years ago. Instead, for more than 80 years, a dancing, painted-and- feathered student provided entertainment for fans—and a nice cash flow for the university—at the expense of real honor.

I don't remember much from my college days down in Champaign-Urbana, but one distinct recollection was watching the documentary "In Whose Honor?" during a sociology class. The film showed how Spokane Indian and Illinois graduate Charlene Teters and her two children were offended by the chief, and how it mocked Native Americans.

And she was absolutely right.

Teters responded by crusading against Illiniwek, trying to get rid of him once and for all. And now, finally, she and others in a vast minority can have some peace.

For the most part, the decision to remove Illiniwek is an unpopular one.

All I say is this: Imagine if your religion—your highest beliefs—were mocked right in front of your face, while others cheered and celebrated. You'd be pretty ticked, too. And, hopefully, you'd want something done about it.

One day, hopefully, all offensive mascots and these ridiculous traditions will be removed.

And the only memories of them will be on tapes collecting dust on an antique shelf. (2007)

Like VCRs and videotapes, some issues have a relatively short shelf life. Kairos is fickle, and as is suggested by his winged shoes, he is also fleeting. The first edition of this book was written in 1990, and we have now revised it several times. Each time we revise, we update the issues we use to illustrate our points so that they will be familiar to our current readers. Most of the issues we dealt with in earlier editions no longer seem urgent. On the other hand, one or two—such as abortion—appear to have real staying power within American discourse.

If you become interested in an issue that does not seem urgent at the moment, it might help to remember that kairos is akin to the Latin term opportunitas, an opening. Is there an opening for you to begin making new arguments on a particular issue? If not, can you create such an opening? Charlene Teters took advantage of a kairotic moment when no one else seemed to be concerned. Nearly 20 years later, her effort paid off.

Arguments and Interests
The specific arguments that are currently circulating about a particular issue play an important role in creating kairos. Who makes what arguments and why? For example, what interest might motivate someone to object to Chief Illiniwek's association with the University of Illinois? In the editorial we quoted previously, Justin Breen suggests that rejecting the chief is a matter of honor. That is, Breen appeals directly to a traditional value. Of course, supporters of the chief can also
appeal to this value, although they read it a bit differently, as the sporting honor of the Fighting Illini.

We have already suggested that financial considerations often motivate arguments. What motives or values might have fueled the interests of those, like the editors of the *Daily Illini*, who want the chief to be retired? What groups would accept or reject their position? Why?

Considering the interests at stake in an issue can help a rhetor decide the most advantageous way to frame an argument for a particular audience at a particular time. Most issues that capture our attention are highly complex, and they resonate differently among groups with differing political and social agendas. Before launching an argument about a hot social issue, then, a rhetor who wishes to argue persuasively would do well to tune in to arguments already in circulation. Furthermore, he should interrogate the values and assumptions that drive those arguments. A rhetor who does this can maintain a *kairotic* stance that readies him to speak to various sides of the issue, supporting those that he finds convincing and refuting those with which he disagrees.

In order to demonstrate how consideration of the values and interests in circulation around an issue can help rhetors to generate arguments, we now turn to a frightening event: a shooting at Virginia Tech University. Early on the morning of April 6, 2007, police were called to a dorm room on that campus, where they found two people dead from gunshot wounds. Two hours later, a gunman opened fire in a classroom building, killing 30 more people before killing himself. It did not take long for this event to trigger speculation about gun control. Adam Gopnik suggested that the shootings offered us a *kairotic* moment:

The cell phones in the pockets of the dead students were still ringing when we were told that it was wrong to ask why. As the police cleared the bodies from the Virginia Tech engineering building, the cell phones rang, in the eccentric varieties of ring tones, as parents kept trying to see if their children were O.K. To imagine the feelings of the police as they carried the bodies and heard the ringing is heartrending; to imagine the feelings of the parents who were calling—dread, desperate hope for a sudden answer and the bliss of reassurance, dawning grief—is unbearable. But the parents, and the rest of us, were told that it was not the right moment to ask how the shooting had happened—specifically, why an obviously disturbed student, with a history of mental illness, was able to buy guns whose essential purpose is to kill people—and why it happens over and over again in America. At a press conference, Virginia's governor, Tim Kaine, said, "People who want to ... make it their political hobby horse to ride, I've got nothing but loathing for them ... At this point, what it's about is comforting family members ... and helping this community heal. And so to those who want to try to make this into some little crusade, I say take that elsewhere."

If the facts weren't so horrible, there might be something touching in the Governor's deeply American belief that "healing" can take place magically, without the intervening practice called "treating." The logic is unusual but striking: the aftermath of a terrorist attack is the wrong time to talk about security, the aftermath of a death from lung cancer is the wrong time to talk about smoking and the tobacco industry, and the aftermath of a car crash is the wrong time to talk about seat belts. People talked about the shooting, of course, but much of the conversation was devoted to musings on the treatment of mental illness in universities, the problem of "narcissism," violence in the media and in popular culture, copycat killings, the alienation of immigrant students, and the question of Evil.

Some people, however—especially people outside America—were eager to talk about it in another way, and even to embark on a little crusade. The whole world saw that the United
States has more gun violence than other countries because we have more guns and are willing to sell them to madmen who want to kill people. Every nation has violent loners, and they tend to have remarkably similar profiles from one country and culture to the next. And every country has known the horror of having a lunatic get his hands on a gun and kill innocent people. But on a recent list of the fourteen worst mass shootings in Western democracies since the nineteen-sixties the United States claimed seven, and, just as important, no other country on the list has had a repeat performance as severe as the first.

In Dunblane, Scotland, in 1996, a gunman killed sixteen children and a teacher at their school. Afterward, the British gun laws, already restrictive, were tightened--it's now against the law for any private citizen in the United Kingdom to own the kinds of guns that Cho Seung-Hui used at Virginia Tech--and nothing like Dunblane has occurred there since. In Quebec, after a school shooting took the lives of fourteen women in 1989, the survivors helped begin a gun-control movement that resulted in legislation bringing stronger, though far from sufficient, gun laws to Canada. (There have been a couple of subsequent shooting sprees, but on a smaller scale, and with far fewer dead.) In the Paris suburb of Nanterre, in 2002, a man killed eight people at a municipal meeting. Gun control became a key issue in the Presidential election that year, and there has been no repeat incident.

So there is no American particularity about loners, disenfranchised immigrants, narcissism, alienated youth, complex moral agency, or Evil. There is an American particularity about guns. The arc is apparent. Forty years ago, a man killed fourteen people on a college campus in Austin, Texas; this year, a man killed thirty-two in Blacksburg, Virginia. Not enough was done between those two massacres to make weapons of mass killing harder to obtain. In fact, while campus killings continued--Columbine being the most notorious, the shooting in the one-room Amish schoolhouse among the most recent--weapons have got more lethal, and, in states like Virginia, where the N.R.A. is powerful, no harder to buy.

Reducing the number of guns available to crazy people will neither relieve them of their insanity nor stop them from killing. Making it more difficult to buy guns that kill people is, however, a rational way to reduce the number of people killed by guns. Nations with tight gun laws have, on the whole, less gun violence; countries with somewhat restrictive gun laws have some gun violence; countries with essentially no gun laws have a lot of gun violence. (If you work hard, you can find a statistical exception hiding in a corner, but exceptions are just that. Some people who smoke their whole lives don't get lung cancer, while some people who never smoke do; still, the best way not to get lung cancer is not to smoke.)

It's true that in renewing the expired ban on assault weapons we can't guarantee that someone won't shoot people with a semi-automatic pistol, and that by controlling semi-automatic pistols we can't reduce the chances of someone killing people with a rifle. But the point of lawmaking is not to act as precisely as possible, in order to punish the latest crime; it is to act as comprehensively as possible, in order to prevent the next one. Semi-automatic Glock and Walthers, Cho's weapons, are for killing people. They are not made for hunting, and it's not easy to protect yourself with them. (If having a loaded semi-automatic on hand kept you safe, cops would not be shot as often as they are.)

Rural America is hunting country, and hunters need rifles and shotguns--with proper licensing, we'll live with the risk. There is no reason that any private citizen in a democracy should own a handgun. At some point, that simple truth will register. Until it does, phones will ring for dead children, and parents will be told not to ask why. (2007)

Gopnik's essay answers our first question, about urgency: when it was published two weeks after the shootings, recent events had indeed made the issue of gun control urgent once again.
Gopnik begins, in fact, by offering his readers a list of *kairotic* issues, issues that are often raised whenever a disastrous event occurs--breaches of national security, the dangers of smoking, failure to use seat belts--reminding us that while these issues are all urgently important to the nation, they seldom remain in the news for long after some event has brought them to our attention. He also addresses one of the power dynamics in this situation: his citation of remarks made by the governor of Virginia implies that public figures often ignore *kairotic* moments because they would rather not have thorny issues brought front and center when they are not ready to discuss them. Gopnik then surveys incidents of mass murder that have occurred recently in European countries, thus supplying us with a brief international history of the issue. He notes that in each case gun laws were tightened in response to mass shootings. This is not the case in America, even though there have been several recent instances of mass murders in the United States instances that Gopnik reviews. The gunman at Virginia Tech used two automatic handguns during his killing spree, which enabled him to fire off nearly 200 shots in less than ten minutes' time. He apparently purchased the handguns at a nearby gunshop with no difficulty.

Gopnik ends his essay by noting that automatic handguns do not necessarily protect those who wield them, and he notes as well that hunters do not use such weapons. These are, of course, arguments that are often used by opponents of gun control legislation, and so Gopnik is here refuting arguments that he knows will be made by those who oppose his position. In the process he gives a partial answer to our second question: which arguments seem to be favored by which groups at this time?

Ted Nugent is adamantly opposed to gun control, and so his essay on the Virginia Tech shootings stands in stark contrast to Gopnik's work:

Zero tolerance, huh? Gun-free zones, huh? Try this on for size: Columbine gun-free zone, New York City pizza shop gun-free zone, Luby's Cafeteria gun-free zone, Amish school in Pennsylvania gun-free zone and now Virginia Tech gun-free zone. Anybody see what the evil Brady Campaign and other anti-gun cults have created? I personally have zero tolerance for evil and denial. And America had best wake up real fast that the brain-dead celebration of unarmed helplessness will get you killed every time, and I've about had enough of it.

Nearly a decade ago, a Springfield, Oregon, high schooler, a hunter familiar with firearms, was able to bring an unfolding rampage to an abrupt end when he identified a gunman attempting to reload his .22-caliber rifle, made the tactical decision to make a move and tackled the shooter.

A few years back, an assistant principal at Pearl High School in Mississippi, which was a gun-free zone, retrieved his legally owned Colt .45 from his car and stopped a Columbine wannabe from continuing his massacre at another school after he had killed two and wounded more at Pearl.

At an eighth-grade school dance in Pennsylvania, a boy fatally shot a teacher and wounded two students before the owner of the dance hall brought the killing to a halt with his own gun.

More recently, just a few miles up the road from Virginia Tech, two law school students ran to fetch their legally owned firearm to stop a madman from slaughtering anybody and everybody he pleased. These brave, average, armed citizens neutralized him pronto.
My hero, Dr. Suzanne Gratia Hupp, was not allowed by Texas law to carry her handgun into Luby's Cafeteria that fateful day in 1991, when due to bureaucrat-forced unarmed helplessness she could do nothing to stop satanic George Hennard from killing 23 people and wounding more than 20 others before he shot himself. Hupp was unarmed for no other reason than denial-ridden "feel good" politics.

She has since led the charge for concealed weapon upgrade in Texas, where we can now stop evil. Yet, there are still the mindless puppets of the Brady Campaign and other anti-gun organizations insisting on continuing the gun-free zone insanity by which innocents are forced into unarmed helplessness. Shame on them. Shame on America. Shame on the anti-gunners all.

No one was foolish enough to debate Ryder truck regulations or ammonia nitrate restrictions or a "cult of agriculture fertilizer" following the unabashed evil of Timothy McVeigh's heinous crime against America on that fateful day in Oklahoma City. No one faulted kitchen utensils or other hardware of choice after Jeffrey Dahmer was caught drugging, mutilating, raping, murdering and cannibalizing his victims. Nobody wanted "steak knife control" as they autopsied the dead nurses in Chicago, Illinois, as Richard Speck went on trial for mass murder.

Evil is as evil does, and laws disarming guaranteed victims make evil people very, very happy. Shame on us.

Already spineless gun control advocates are squawking like chickens with their tiny-brained heads chopped off, making political hay over this most recent, devastating Virginia Tech massacre, when in fact it is their own forced gun-free zone policy that enabled the unchallenged methodical murder of 32 people.

Thirty-two people dead on a U.S. college campus pursuing their American Dream, mowed-down over an extended period of time by a lone, non-American gunman in possession of a firearm on campus in defiance of a zero-tolerance gun ban. Feel better yet? Didn't think so.

Who doesn't get this? Who has the audacity to demand unarmed helplessness? Who likes dead good guys?

I'll tell you who. People who tramp on the Second Amendment, that's who. People who refuse to accept the self-evident truth that free people have the God-given right to keep and bear arms, to defend themselves and their loved ones. People who are so desperate in their drive to control others, so mindless in their denial that they pretend access to gas causes arson, Ryder trucks and fertilizer cause terrorism, water causes drowning, forks and spoons cause obesity, dialing 911 will somehow save your life, and that their greedy clamoring to "feel good" is more important than admitting that armed citizens are much better equipped to stop evil than unarmed, helpless ones.

Pray for the families of victims everywhere, America. Study the methodology of evil. It has a profile, a system, a preferred environment where victims cannot fight back. Embrace the facts, demand upgrade and be certain that your children's school has a better plan than Virginia Tech or Columbine. Eliminate the insanity of gun-free zones, which will never, ever be gun-free zones. They will only be good guy gun-free zones, and that is a recipe for disaster written in blood on the altar of denial. I, for one, refuse to genuflect there (2007).

Nugent begins his essay with a history of the issue told by means of two lists of examples. The first list alludes to several well-known events wherein unarmed participants in "gun-free zones" were slaughtered by well-armed attackers; the second lists instances wherein armed participants slew would-be assassins with guns of their own. Like Gopnik, Nugent cites the Virginia Tech shootings as the urgent impetus for his essay, but he connects that episode to many others where
"bad guys" prey upon innocent "good guys." Like the history given by Gopnik, Nugent's history also goes back a long way—Richard Speck murdered eight women in 1966. This tells us that both writers expect their audiences to be old enough, or well-connected enough, to remember events that occurred more than 40 years ago.

Nugent has an interesting way of making arguments by implication. The arguments about McVeigh and Dahmer and Speck—all convicted mass murderers—are arguments from analogy: the implication is that if we don't ban Ryder trucks and fertilizer (used by McVeigh to blow up the Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995), we should not outlaw guns simply because evil or deranged people use them to kill. This argument rephrases a commonplace favored among those who want no legal controls over gun sales and distribution: "guns don't kill people, people do." Nugent also gives us some arguments that he thinks drive his opponents: they disrespect the Second Amendment, they are control addicts, they are in denial, and gun control legislation makes them "feel good." Nugent does not seem to care if he offends people who disagree with him; that is, he does not seem to mind if his arguments are received by his opponents as inappropriate.

Neither of these essays offers direct clues as to why their authors believe as they do on the issue of gun control. That is, it is difficult to determine from an examination of these texts alone to what communities either author belongs. We can make educated guesses, though; members of the National Rifle Association often take positions and make arguments similar to Nugent's, while members of the Brady Campaign to Control Gun Violence will sympathize with Gopnik's remarks. These assumptions can lead us to search engines and other research tools that will direct us toward more arguments used by those who are interested in the issue of gun control and that will allow us to define, more carefully the groups that are invested in the issue.

Nationally known public figures are also expected to voice opinions about shattering events. Often, they seem to feel that it is not in their best interests to take sides on an issue as controversial as gun control. Shortly after the shootings at Virginia Tech, Edward Epstein and Carla Marinucci published an account of the reactions of prominent Democrats and Republicans to the Virginia Tech shootings:

The Virginia Tech campus massacre may reignite a national debate over gun control, but with an election year looming and a powerful gun lobby geared for battle, Democrats probably will be reluctant to push such a divisive issue that could threaten their control of Congress and effort to win back the White House.

"Democrats tend to be worried about their electoral prospects with the gun-owning public," said Bob Levy, a senior fellow and constitutional scholar with the conservative CATO Institute, a Washington think tank. "They haven't been particularly vocal, because they understand that people in this country want their guns."

But Ladd Everitt of the Coalition to End Gun Violence said American voters, battered by the painful replays of Virginia Tech and other shooting deaths, want action.

"I don't know what the tipping point is," he said. "At some point, the public will just have to stand up and say 'enough.'"

The White House reaction this week to a question about gun control relating to the campus tragedy underscored President Bush's support for and from gun owners—a vital constituency for the Republican Party.
"The president believes that there is a right for people to bear arms, but that all laws must be followed," spokeswoman Dana Perino said Monday afternoon.

On the Democratic side, California Sen. Dianne Feinstein expressed her sorrow and issued a statement saying she hoped that the killings would "reignite the dormant effort to pass commonsense gun control regulations in this country."

Feinstein, who sponsored the 1994 federal assault weapons ban that expired in 2004, was joined in the effort by Rep. Carolyn McCarthy, D-N.Y., whose husband was killed and son wounded by a shooter in 1996 on a Long Island commuter train.

McCarthy, who was elected to the House on a strong gun control platform, admitted the matter is "a tough sell," even in the wake of the national trauma over the worst massacre by a single gunman in American history.

Politicians in Congress aren't the only ones struggling with the issue: on the presidential candidate stage, Republican former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani has spoken in favor of gun control in the past; former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney recently declared himself a "lifelong" hunter and National Rifle Association member.

GOP consultant Dan Schnur said that "for years, half of the political world has rushed to gun control as the answer, and the other half has rushed to tougher penalties for criminals using guns-and never the twain shall meet."

Because the 2008 presidential election campaign is already underway, Schnur said, "The candidate who does the best job of bridging that debate is the one who benefits."

The Democratic mood on Capitol Hill Tuesday, just 24 hours after the Virginia Tech killings, was pragmatic about gun control. Lawmakers said the shootings will revive interest in legislation, but they said they will move cautiously before pushing ahead into a politically volatile area.

Gun control divides Democrats in Congress, and it is an issue that anti-gun-control Republicans have used effectively in House and Senate races. In the Democratic-controlled House, where the party's majority is due in part to victories in November in conservative to moderate districts formerly represented by Republicans, the party's winning candidates often campaigned as advocates of gun owners' rights.

Leadership aides concede privately that leaders are unlikely to push major gun control legislation because keeping the majority depends on reelecting members from districts where gun control is a losing issue.

"The country and the Congress will have additional discussions, as is always the case, after these incidents," House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer of Maryland told reporters. "But right now we're focused on the incident itself."

"I don't want to get into a debate about what we need to do less than 24 hours after the incident. We need to focus on the victims of this tragedy; on the students, the teachers and their families."

Senate Majority leader Harry Reid of Nevada agreed, saying, "I hope there's not a rush to do anything. We need to take a deep breath."

He said he wanted local, state and federal investigations to continue into the guns, the ammunition and the shooter in the Virginia Tech killings before pushing any legislation. But Reid spoke favorably about a bill sponsored by California Sen. Barbara Boxer to improve school safety.

Boxer said the latest university killings have motivated her to push that bill, which she has introduced in past Congresses.

"Virginia Tech reminds all of us that our kids are at risk in schools," she said. She said Congress should look at two issues, "guns that are in the wrong hands, and security at these campuses."

Democrats this week, however, recalled that Feinstein's assault weapons ban was allowed to lapse before the 2004 election, even though Bush said he would sign an
extension if the Republican Congress sent him such legislation. The widespread view was that the GOP Congress blocked an extension of the ban so the president wouldn't have to upset the gun lobby by signing it or gun control advocates by going back on his pledge.

Even Feinstein didn't spell out exactly what she would like to see done. "Down the road, we should learn more about this crime, how it was perpetrated, and what lessons can be learned from it," she said Tuesday.

Everitt, of the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, said there are reasons for gun reform groups to be optimistic. He noted 188 mayors in 44 states organized to push for gun control, and cited efforts by New York's McCarthy to improve background checks on guns sales. He also said there was hope for more support on behalf of legislation--already enacted in California--to "close the gun-show loophole," which allows buyers in 33 states, including Virginia, to buy guns at such expositions "without background checks or paperwork, cash and carry and (in many cases) you don't have to fill out a form."(2007)

In general, these powerful people did not want to commit to an opinion on the issue of control, at least during the moment of highest urgency. Some mentioned moderate alternatives to the most radical positions available, but, as Gopnik noticed, nearly all counseled patience. The questions of *kairos* should lead us to ask: why do political figures avoid taking positions on controversial issues? How are their interests served by doing so?

**Power Dynamics in a Rhetorical Situation**

In some ways, Ted Nugent's essay about gun control is all about power: gun users have it; people who work in "gun-free zones" don't. And so he laments the power that has supposedly accrued to the antigun lobby that would, in his opinion, disarm people of weapons they need to protect themselves and their families. Nugent associates this lobby with the Brady Campaign, a group named after James Brady, who was seriously wounded when an assassin shot President Ronald Reagan in 1981. In an apparent effort to limit their power with the national discourse, Nugent excoriates gun-control activists in scathing terms: they are mindless, greedy, insane.

To examine and invent arguments using *kairos* is to consider the power dynamics at work in a particular issue in addition to the recent events and arguments that press on it. The questions to ask here are:

- Which arguments receive more attention?
- Who is making these arguments?
- What arguments receive less attention?
- Who is making these arguments?

When gun control arises as an issue, reporters often request statements from groups already organized, such as the National Rifle Association or the Brady Campaign. Organized groups often have more power to be heard in given rhetorical situations than do people who are unaffiliated with a relevant group. Government leaders, too, are asked to make known their stances on such issues. Here, for example, is Senator Dianne Feinstein's reaction to the Virginia Tech incident:
"My heart nearly stopped when I heard that more than 30 people had been killed at Virginia Tech today. In an instant, the hopes and dreams of students were destroyed by a cowardly and terrible act of insane violence. My deepest condolences go to all those touched by this violence.

This mass shooting will be seared into our memories, alongside Columbine, 101 California, the University of Texas Clock Tower, and the shooting at a McDonald's in San Ysidro, California.

It is my deep belief that shootings like these are enabled by the unparalleled ease with which people procure weapons in this country. And I believe this will reignite the dormant effort to pass common-sense gun regulations in this nation." (2007)

Feinstein represents the state of California, and so she is careful to mention incidents of gun violence that occurred in that state. Unlike other public officials, she connects the violence at Virginia Tech directly to the gun control issue, giving kairos its due as a spatial concept.

The arguments made by the governor of Virginia probably had more impact than those made by Feinstein, given his responsibility for the welfare of the citizens of Virginia and his relative proximity to Virginia Tech. On the other hand, we rarely hear or read the opinions of young people about gun control. Students on the campus were repeatedly asked about their emotional responses to the shootings, and they were asked as well to give factual accounts if they were in a position to do so. But reporters for the national media who wrote about the incident often did not bother to ask about the opinions of those who will some day make decisions about gun control. How do we account for the absence of the voices of the young from public discourse about gun control? Could it be that this group is apathetic? Or does their nonvoting status have something to do with the undervaluing of their position? All of these questions and more are raised by consideration of the power dynamics at work in any rhetorical situation (see the chapter on ethos for more discussion of power relations in rhetoric).

A Web of Related Issues
Rhetorical situations are complex. A rhetor who is attuned to kairos, then, must demonstrate awareness of the many values and the differential power dynamics that are involved in any struggle over an issue. The stakes in an argument can shift according to who is speaking, as is illustrated by the contrasting arguments on gun control that we cited. A rhetor attuned to kairos should consider a particular issue as a set of different political pressures, personal investments, and values, all of which produce different arguments about an issue. These diverging values and different levels of investment connect to other issues as well, producing a weblike relationship with links to other, different, new—but definitely related—rhetorical situations. The issue of gun control is linked to the issue of violence, of course, and those who are charged to prevent violence, such as the police and the courts, have a large stake in seeing to it that really dangerous weapons, such as automatic handguns, are kept out of the wrong hands.

The incident at Virginia Tech opened up other issues as well, including but not limited to the appropriate procedures for recognizing disturbed people who are potentially dangerous to themselves and others. But some mental health professionals worried as well about the impact on viewers of repetitive television coverage of the event. Here, for instance, is an entry from Natalie Reiss's blog, posted a few days after the event:
Just like everyone else, I am struggling to make sense of the VA Tech shootings. If you haven't already, I encourage you to read the pieces on Mental Help Net written by Dr. Dombeck and Dr. Schwartz. In my humble opinion, each of these pieces are much more informative and thought-provoking than the incredibly short sound bytes and quotes being presented by the news media as "analysis" of the tragedy. No matter how well-spoken or authoritative someone appears or sounds, a few minutes or a few sentences is simply not enough time to coherently and appropriately analyze something as complex as what would drive a young man to engage in this horrifying display of rage and destruction.

In my blog, I'd like to bring up a different twist on the issue. I'd like you, the reader, to take a step back and really think about your own emotional and mental reaction to this tragedy. What emotions are you experiencing today? Shock, sorrow, numbness, fear, anger, disillusionment, grief? A combination? Do your emotional reactions change over the course of the day? Are you having trouble sleeping, concentrating, eating, or remembering even simple tasks? Do you feel panicked or frantic? Are you having nightmares? Are you having repetitive thoughts about the world as an unsafe and uncontrollable place?

These are all common reactions to a stressful event, and you should not feel guilty about these reactions, even if you didn't personally know the professors and students that were killed. To cope with your feelings and reactions, it is important to share your thoughts and feelings with others; eat healthy, rest and exercise; periodically TURN OFF THE TV or STOP READING OR LISTENING TO COVERAGE OF THE EVENT (particularly graphic photos or writings); and find a way to focus on and help others. These feelings and thoughts should dissipate over the course of the next days or weeks....

We probably will never have a satisfactory answer to why this tragedy occurred. We don't live in a just world, and life is simply not fair. Human behavior is multi-factorial and complex, and a few people who desperately need help will always slip through the cracks of our mental health system. Please don't compound the tragedy by failing to seek help for yourself if you need it (2007).

Reiss's concern about mental health connects to other issues, such as the relative usefulness and potential harm of relentless media coverage of tragic events. These and other related issues form a web that provides seemingly endless possibilities, or "openings," for arguments.

We are not suggesting that a rhetor should address all the values and actions pressing on a particular issue at a particular time. Rather, we recommend that rhetors be aware of the issue's ever shifting nuances, which might lead to new opportunities for rhetorical arguments. Considering the wealth of possibilities produced by attention to an issue's kairos, it is no wonder that Gorgias was bold enough to say to the Athenians, "Suggest a subject," and remain confident that he could make a rhetorical argument about it on the spot.