

This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Neil.

Sam

And I'm Sam.

Neil

'Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears!' Do you know where these famous words are from, Sam?

Sam

I think that's a speech by Marc Antony in William Shakespeare's play, Julius Caesar.

Neil

Wow, I'm impressed! Caesar has been assassinated and Marc Antony tries to persuade the crowd to find his killers.

Sam

Using words to persuade people, giving them a good reason to do what you say, or to accept your argument, is known as 'rhetoric'. In this programme, we'll be hearing all about rhetoric and of course learning some related vocabulary as well.

Neil

The art of rhetoric started with the ancient Greek philosophers. Later, during the Roman republic, politicians and statesmen used rhetoric in speeches given to crowds in the public square.

Sam

Although technology has transformed the way we communicate since then, the art of rhetoric is still alive today. Modern politicians may prefer Twitter to the public square, but they still use persuasive language, including **soundbites** – short sentences or phrases giving a message in an easy to remember way.

Neil

We'll hear more soon but first I have a question for you, Sam. Roman politicians used many rhetorical tricks to persuade people including the *argumentum ad hominum* which was an attack on their opponent's moral character. Another was called the *argumentum ad baculum* – but what did it mean? Was it:

- a) an argument based on logic?
- b) an argument based on emotion? or
- c) an argument based on the stick?

Sam

Well, to persuade someone your argument needs to be logical, so I'll say a).

Neil

OK, we'll find out the answer later. Whether you want someone to vote for you, or to buy what you're selling, rhetoric can make your message persuasive. During his career in the advertising industry, Sam Tatum learned a lot about persuading people. Here he explains the many uses of rhetoric to BBC World Service programme, The Why Factor.

Sam Tatum

Rhetoric is persuasive language. We use it **rally**, to simplify the complex, to inspire and influence. It's important, I think, to identify what strategies might be influencing us more than we think. By understanding the power of language in shaping perceptions, we can start to see, 'I'm wondering why people are looking to be so concrete. Are we trying to **pull the wool over our eyes** on something that's more far complex than we actually state?'

Sam

As well as persuading people, Sam Tatum says rhetoric can be used to **rally** – to bring people together in support of a common goal. A recent example of this is the way politicians called the coronavirus our 'enemy'.

Neil

The words politicians choose, and the way they use them, can influence us more than we think. Sam Tatum says we should question whether political rhetoric is trying to **pull the wool over our eyes**, an informal way of saying trick or deceive us.

Sam

But in the age of 24-hour news updates and non-stop Twitter, has the skill of

making a thoughtful argument been lost? Here's Kendal Phillips, professor of political philosophy at Syracuse University, speaking to BBC World Service's, The Why Factor.

Prof Kendal Phillips

It's hard to analyse the argument or reasoning of a tweet, 'cos 280 characters is not a way for me to lay out a logical argument with a major **premise**, a minor premise and a **conclusion**, it's much easier to just use a two-word phrase or a hashtag that usually ends up adding to that kind of **polemical** division between my side and their side.

Neil

Global problems involve complex issues which cannot be solved in 280 letters, the maximum length of a tweet allowed by Twitter. According to Professor Kendal, we need logical arguments containing a **premise** – something which you think is true and you use as the basis for developing your idea, and a **conclusion** – your decision or plan of action based on carefully considering all the relevant facts.

Sam

For example: *climate change is damaging the planet* – that's a premise; *therefore, we should act to stop it* – that's a conclusion.

Neil

Few issues are simply black and white though, and this is a problem because Twitter debates are often **polemical** – argued very strongly either for or against a particular opinion or idea.

Sam

If you believe passionately in something, you need to explain it to people in a way they understand, and in ancient times rhetoric also meant building bridges between people and finding common ground. Like those Romans you mentioned, Neil.

Neil

Yes, in my question I asked Sam for the meaning of term, *argumentum ad baculum*.

Sam

I guessed it was an argument based on logic.

Neil

Which was the wrong answer, I'm afraid. In fact, *argumentum ad baculum* means the argument with a stick, or in other words, hitting somebody with a stick until

they agree with you! I guess that's one way to win an argument. OK, let's recap the vocabulary from the programme, starting with a **soundbite** – a short sentence or phrase designed to stick in the memory.

Sam

When people **rally** together, they unite to support a common goal.

Neil

To pull the wool over someone's eyes means to trick someone.

Sam

Logical arguments contain a **premise** – a truth used as the basis for developing an argument, and a **conclusion** – a decision based on carefully considering all the relevant facts.

Neil

And finally, **polemical** means strongly attacking or defending an opinion or idea. But there's no arguing the fact that once again our six minutes are up! Goodbye for now!

Sam

Bye!

VOCABULARY

soundbite

short and memorable phrase used by politicians

rally

unite to support a common goal

pull the wool over someone's eyes

(informal) trick or deceive someone

premise

idea you believe to be true and use as the basis for developing an argument

conclusion

decision or plan of action after thinking about something carefully and considering all the relevant facts

polemical

arguing very strongly for or against a particular opinion or idea