

How Authors use Rhetorical Questions

A rhetorical question Almost always best used in a series... is not answered by the writer, because its answer is obvious or obviously desired, and usually just a yes or no. It is used for effect, emphasis, or provocation, or for drawing a conclusionary statement from the facts at hand.

- But how can we expect to enjoy the scenery when the scenery consists entirely of garish billboards?
- . . . For if we lose the ability to perceive our faults, what is the good of living on? -- Marcus Aurelius
- Is justice then to be considered merely a word? Or is it whatever results from the bartering between attorneys?

Often the rhetorical question and its implied answer will lead to further discussion:

- Is this the end to which we are reduced? Is the disaster film the highest form of art we can expect from our era? Perhaps we should examine the alternatives presented by independent film maker Joe Blow
- I agree the funding and support are still minimal, but shouldn't worthy projects be tried, even though they are not certain to succeed? So the plans in effect now should be expanded to include [Note: Here is an example where the answer "yes" is clearly desired rhetorically by the writer, though conceivably someone might say "no" to the question if asked straightforwardly.]

Several rhetorical questions together can form a nicely developed and directed paragraph by changing a series of logical statements into queries:

- We shrink from change; yet is there anything that can come into being without it? What does Nature hold dearer, or more proper to herself? Could you have a hot bath unless the firewood underwent some change? Could you be nourished if the food suffered no change? Do you not see, then, that change in yourself is of the same order, and no less necessary to Nature? --Marcus Aurelius

Sometimes the desired answer to the rhetorical question is made obvious by the discussion preceding it:

- The gods, though they live forever, feel no resentment at having to put up eternally with the generations of men and their misdeeds; nay more, they even show every possible care and concern for them. Are you, then, whose abiding is but for a moment, to lose patience--you who are yourself one of the culprits? --Marcus Aurelius

When you are thinking about a rhetorical question, be careful to avoid sinking to absurdity. You would not want to ask, for example, "But is it right to burn down the campus and sack the bookstore?" The use of this device allows your reader to think, query, and conclude along with you; but if your questions become ridiculous, your essay may become wastepaper.