C. S. Lewis once remarked that “Rhetoric is the greatest barrier between us and our ancestors . . . an invisible wall.” Since 1944, when Lewis wrote these words, the immense significance of rhetoric has been reasserted by many literary and cultural theorists, from Kenneth Burke to Paul de Man. The purpose of this seminar is twofold: First, to establish a general account of classical and medieval rhetoric, or what Roland Barthes called the “old rhetoric”; and second, to construct an interpretive history of modern rhetoric from Erasmus to the present. It is generally conceded that rhetorical pedagogy, which dominated the schools of the premodern era, went into decline by the seventeenth century, to be replaced by the “new rhetorics” of the eighteenth and nineteenth century; these in turn, along with the remnants of classical rhetoric, disappeared by the beginning of the twentieth century. In addition to undertaking a scholarly autopsy of rhetoric’s demise in the early modern period, we will look closely at the development of new rhetorics, and their interaction with literary culture in modernity. And finally, we will attempt to account for the crucial revival of classical rhetoric in the formation of literary theory.

This course is designed to give students a basic understanding of the classical rhetorical system, and a knowledge base for exploring the relation between rhetoric and culture in modernity. The course is also intended to provide some useful historical and theoretical background for thinking about composition pedagogy.

Readings will include a selection of rhetorical theorists from antiquity (Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, Augustine), the Renaissance (Erasmus, Wilson, Puttenham, Bacon, Hobbes, Sprat), the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Locke, Smith, Blair, Campbell, Whately, Bain, Hill), and the twentieth century (Richards, Burke, Genette, de Man, Blumenberg, as well as selections from rhetorical theorists associated with composition).