The Rhetoric of Western Thought is a story of the evolution and development of the idea that social progress requires communication. Rhetoric—the use of language to achieve communication and persuasion—is the means by which leaders and followers may collaborate in the context of society, culture, or nation. Rhetoric is vital for human endeavor because it creates meaning and permits coordinated action.

All societies and cultures have a rhetoric, but not all develop systems of rhetoric. A rhetorical system is an organized set of generally understood analytic principles about communication that are practiced and taught in a given time and place. Only in a system of rhetoric does communication become a discipline distinct from philosophy, politics, and ethics. That is, in a rhetorical system, rules and principles are comprehensively collected so that rhetoric can be deployed as an independent body of knowledge and can be taught according to consistently organized methods.

Our study begins with a comprehensive Introduction where we locate the origins of rhetoric in humanity’s prehistorical past. Before writing began to replace oral memory, and before democracy provided social space for the comprehensive practice and teaching of rhetoric, ancient societies from around the world developed rhetorics that had both poetic and persuasive features.

Our attention then shifts in Part I to the cultural revolution in the ancient Mediterranean world whereby oral rhetoric in Greece underwent a transformation that gave birth to the first great rhetorical system. Greek rhetoric resulted from an intersection of writing—as a new medium—together with a rudimentary form of democracy. The result was to create a demand for a body of distinct rhetorical knowledge backed by specific teaching practices. The fruits of this rhetorical system served the Western world for nearly two thousand years.

In Part II we have opportunity to explore the new system of rhetoric that emerged in Europe during the period 1550–1850 and that catered to a growing middle class, to new forms of democratic politics, and to an increased interest in science.

In a new Chapter 10, we observe how American teachers and scholars adapted British and continental forms of rhetoric to social conditions in the United States. These innovations, between 1785 and 1930, established a basis for contemporary rhetoric as taught in the fields of communication and English.

Part III—“Contemporary Rhetorical Theory”—takes us to the period of the last three generations during which time a world-wide system of rhetoric has come into being. The Rhetoric of Western Thought began in the Mediterranean world, but has become a global phenomenon. Because of the great diversity of rhetorical practices in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Part III is divided into five somewhat distinct (but nevertheless overlapping) categories. These are: (A) Rhetoric Centered upon Language and Meaning; (B) Rhetoric Centered upon Argument; (C) Rhetoric as Discourse in Postmodern Flux; (D) Rhetoric as a Discourse of Political-Cultural Change; and (E) Rhetoric Reaching for New Lines of Synthesis.

THE TENTH EDITION

As with previous editions, we have revised the book to enhance its traditional strengths—variously by expanding coverage, by refining pedagogy, by updating treatment, or by improving organization, clarity and readability.

The major change has been a greatly augmented Chapter 10: “American Experimentations
with Rhetoric, 1785–1930.” Where previously the chapter centered on John Quincy Adams, now it focuses on all the approaches to rhetoric that emerged in the U.S. during the nineteenth century. This enhanced treatment of many writers and schools of thought helps clarify one of the persistent mysteries of rhetoric in the United States. That is, how were British and continental approaches of the eighteenth century related to the renaissance of rhetorical studies that began in the twentieth-century USA? Put another way, what explains the transition from rhetoric as taught in small colonial colleges (elocution, oratory, and polite literature) to rhetoric as now studied in departments of English and communication? More specifically, how did nineteenth-century social trends combine with new rhetorical approaches to produce present-day courses in composition, public speaking, and rhetorical theory? (A quick summary of these influential American authors and schools of thought, 1785–1930, is given in Table 10.1, p. 206.)

Two further substantial enhancements to the tenth edition come in the form of new essays that support existing chapters. Augmenting the new Chapter 10 is an article by Sandra Sarkela on “Mercy Otis Warren’s Contribution to the Rhetorical Tradition.” Warren's dramatic pieces for newspapers, her pamphlets, and her historical work all contributed to the revolutionary spirit and the republican philosophy of government. Moreover, Warren’s accomplishments took place during a time when women were relatively less likely than now to publish political works. The second new contributing essay follows Chapter 22 and enhances that chapter’s treatment of the rhetoric of public memorials. Here Theresa Donofrio focuses on rhetorical controversies surrounding the memorial planned for the site of the 9/11 terrorist attack at the World Trade Center. Focus is given to the rhetorical strategies of the Take Back the Memorial organization whereby family members of the 9/11 victims exerted their influence on plans for Ground Zero.

All of the enhancements and revisions in the tenth edition are united in one fundamental objective: to provide readers with a comprehensive understanding of rhetoric from its inception in the ancient world to its present-day expression in contemporary practice and scholarship. This pedagogical purpose, in turn, reflects our belief in the fundamental importance of rhetoric for democracy, social progress, and human character. These larger purposes of rhetorical study are well reflected in remarks given by our late, beloved colleague, James L. Golden, at the National Communication Association Convention, November 23, 2002: “As we take pride in fulfilling the role of evangelists [for rhetoric], there is no place in our vocabulary for the commonly used disparaging term ‘mere rhetoric.’ . . . For rhetoric, as we conceive it, is action on behalf of a significant cause which emphasizes the importance of virtue.”

Goodwin F. Berquist
William E. Coleman
J. Michael Sproule