Kitzhaber’s dissertation, as promised in the introduction written by John T Gage provides an excellent historical overview of 19th century rhetorical theory, and the higher education system and curriculum. The introduction draws attention to the continued transitional shifts in rhetoric and composition. His dissertation is credited with initiating the “reevaluation of rhetoric in American education that made the so-called paradigm shift in composition during the 1960s possible” (vii). In the dissertation there are chapters that go in to great detail to describe the academic system at the time, specifically the shift away from religious leaders founding universities, and ultimately deciding approach to curriculum. Chapter1 specifically brings to our attention the lack of growth in the American Higher Education system as a result of the religious power over curriculum and university system. This stagnation if development and growth led to students preferring to attend German schools over American schools. The importance of this history is the understanding that a change was needed, and came about, as a result of the systems that preferred to focus on the mind. This system sets up the departure from faculty psychology, and as a result a move away from rhetoric as abstract.

The chapters I’d like to focus on in this post that directly address rhetoric are Chapters 7, 8, and 11. In chapter 7 Kitzhaber provides a definition of rhetoric that is linked to language and human communication. If “language is the medium of human communication,” then rhetoric is the “art which shows how to make this communication most effective” (p. 141). This understanding of rhetoric, and its purpose is similar to Bain’s. If you recall from last week’s readings Bain defined rhetoric as discussing “the means whereby language, spoken or written, may be rendered effective” (p. 1146). Here we see again that rhetoric is active, and not abstract, and with a goal, or specific purpose to attempt to be effective. Previous rhetorical theory, according to Kitzhaber, did not give attention to the awareness of rhetoric as communication.

In moving away from psychology and the mind new areas of rhetorical theory were considered, some of which revisited previous theories. An important year in Ch. 7 is 1893, where a general consensus is reached, and rhetoric is now viewed as “the art of communication” (p. 149). Ultimately these shifts lead us to addressing the social aspect of writing, the practice of writing, and other areas explored during this transitional phase. The transitional period ends, and rhetorical theory moves toward the Four Forms.

While Chapter 7 contains a great deal of meaty content, I found chapter 11 most interesting. Chapter 11 focuses on the shift from rhetorical theory to practice, while also addressing the role of literature. This is significant because it is an area the field, in my opinion, still struggles with, and may be a result of what Kitzhaber describes as “predominantly abstract” (p. 205) rhetorical theory. Perhaps the field as a result we struggled with attempting to remedy the fact that a great deal of our rhetorical history and theory is based in the abstract. The attention then given to writing, and making rhetoric something that is practical, and therefore practiced more easily led to the use of themes, and writing practices that were more writing exercises. The significance of this specific chapter is the continued lack of connection to writing, and attempt to make rhetorical principles, I think, more accessible to actually practice, and not the repeating of principles from memory.