“What we’ve got here is failure to communicate.”

This line from the classic 1967 film Cool Hand Luke has been repeated in movies and in songs, and countless times in casual conversation. But what does it mean to communicate? Why does it matter? And what is communication, anyway?

This class will explore these questions, and no doubt many others, within the framework of the study of rhetoric. Rhetoric first became established in ancient Athens as a way of describing and studying public communication in a civic context, and continues as a vibrant tradition into the present. Throughout its 2500 year history it has offered provocative answers to questions about the value, purpose, and potential of human communication. And rhetoric also has come under critique because many of the answers it gives to these questions run counter to some widely held assumptions or ideals.

We’ll begin with the ancient Greeks — Plato, Aristotle, Isocrates — and work our way through various theorists and critics into the present. Throughout, we’ll pause frequently to put the ideas to work, to see what they can help us to understand about present-day public communication in the overlapping forms of TV, Film, social media, political speech.

Because this is a class in communication, you will be expected to come to class prepared to communicate. The ideas we will be exploring are about how to interact with others, and as such they need to be explored and interrogated through discussion and application, not merely absorbed through memorization.

All required materials for this course will be available through Oncourse.

Assignments will include several short essays of 3-5 pages and two longer essays of 10-15 pages.