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What Happens at Camp Does Not Stay at Camp:

A Rhetorical Analysis on the American Camp Association's 'Mission and Vision' Page

SCOM 381

8 July 2016

## Abstract

The American Camp Association (ACA), the largest summer camp organization in the United States, has employed many rhetorical strategies in their 'Mission and Vision' page on their official website. More than seven million children go to an ACA-accredited camp each summer with the general expectations of making new friends, participating in unique activities, and being part of a different community than usual. Because of the mass amount of people involved with ACA camps each summer, the employed rhetorical strategies are obviously successful as the number of attendees each summer continue to be massive. This generic criticism attempts to explore the ACA's use of strong ethos-building, all-inclusive language, and positive language by means of close textual analysis to ultimately show how the ACA carefully crafted their page to fit mission statement criteria and begin a conversation on the effective rhetorical methods in summer camp promotional strategies.

## Introduction

Crafting the ideal mission statement for an organization or company is a difficult task. President Woodrow Wilson once said, "If I am to speak ten minutes, I need a week for preparation," referring to shorter speeches being more difficult to compose than speeches in which one has more time to convey the message. It is this notion of having to communicate your message proficiently, yet briefly, that makes creating a mission statement particularly complex. The American Camp Association (ACA) has utilized making brief statements that, combined with some explanation on the "Mission and Vision" page as a whole, explain all of their goals for their camps and consumers. The ACA is a relevant and significant organization to analyze as it is the "largest association serving the organized camp industry" working with and serving millions of people in the United States ("ACA Facts and Trends," 2016). It is important to rhetorically criticize the missions, values, and visions of the American Camp Association as seen on their online web page titled "Mission and Vision" in order to uncover motives and expectations the association holds and how the framing and rhetoric of the page may affect readers and those being taught these ACA standards. Through our analysis, we will discover how the ACA skillfully crafted careful rhetoric with appeals to ethos and all-inclusive language to ultimately create the most ideal 'Mission and Vision' page for their organization. To understand the analysis we must first know what the American Camp Association is and does, then review previous studies on mission statements and summer camp. Furthermore, we will develop an understanding of generic criticism before proceeding with the analysis and contributions.

## Context

The American Camp Association is a 116 year-old nonprofit organization, accrediting camps across the United States based on "up to 300 standards for health, safety, and program quality"

("Who We Are," 2016). They are associated with about 2,400 camps currently, ranging from day camps, residential (over-night) camps, or a combination of both. The summer camp environment tends to be predominantly outdoors, where the settings could be in the woods, fields, mountains and/or by the water, with cabins and halls for occasional breaks from the summer heat. Time at summer camp typically involves learning new skills, building teams, making friends, and being wholly accepted. The American Camp Association recognizes and aims to prolong these successful results by detailing specific goals on their 'Mission and Vision' page for multiple genres of readers.

The 'Mission and Vision' page is featured, at a minimum, one click away from the ACA's homepage. For the purposes of this paper, I will not be analyzing surrounding features on the page that are featured as borders on every page within the ACA website as they are not specifically crafted as rhetoric for the mission page. I will be focusing instead on the exclusive choices for the 'Mission and Vision' page, including their vision, their 'Values' section, their mission and end statements, and will do a brief visual analysis on the one picture they chose to feature on this page. This will all be done using close textual analysis with an overarching evaluative analysis using generic criticism.

## Literature Review

### **Mission Statement Definition**

The overarching theme of my criticism on the American Camp Association's (ACA's) "Mission and Vision" page will be comparing its parts to the components that make a "successful" mission statement according to pre-existing literature. According to Anna Carmon (2013), "mission statements serve as a means of defining an organization's culture through articulating its values and behavioral standards...explain[ing] what an organization was created to

do, as well as communicating its corporate image" (p. 88). Linda Williams (2008) simplifies, "a mission statement tells two things: who it is and what it does" (p. 96). She goes on to explain that mission statements attempt to address numerous readers, including "management, employees, customers or clients...and other residents of the communities" they are trying to reach. For the ACA, that includes people all over the country, but individual summer camps within the association would have the responsibilities of reaching out to their local communities within their personal mission statements.

Lastly, Williams notes that this mission statement definition reigns true for more than just explicitly-stated "mission statements," but also statements referred to as anything regarding "mission," "our philosophy," "credo," "our philosophy," or anything else along those lines. This proves why it is crucial to analyze the entire "Mission and Vision" page, as every aspect of the page contributes to the reveal of the ACA's core values, more than just the mission statement would on its own. Sarah Ryan (2007) studied nonprofit organizations' mission statements specifically and found an extremely similar definition of "the mission is both the purpose and the product" (p.2). Overall, the critics and researchers tend to agree on a foundation for our mission statement analysis.

### **Internal vs. External Ethos**

Ryan (2007) also brought up an important aspect of a mission statement, that "both internal and external messages serve to perpetuate the missioning process, as nonprofits are called into being via those communicative activities" (p. 2). Williams noted this also and labeled these 'messages' as "internal ethos vs. external ethos." Williams (2008) defines internal ethos as "more important to the firms' identity," and external as "more important to the firms' image," while noting that managers see internal ethos as more important (p. 105).

She states that by appealing to ethos, these mission statements often emphasize positive values, behavior, and principles that lie within the general ideology of the organization and adds that one rhetorical strategy found in a previous study was using "we" language, first-person-plural pronouns (p. 105). A sense of community is created and the "importance of appealing to similitude by the use of "we" to highlight any similarities between communicators and their audience and, thus, encourage identification" (Isaksson & Jorgensen, 2010, p. 126). The ACA employs this strategy and was one of the first things I noticed.

### **American Camp Association**

Beth Miller (2007) notes that there is little research on the lasting results of summer camp, but the existing research shows that high-tier, efficiently-run camp programs have the ability to help children grow as people both socially and emotionally (p.10). While Miller's findings are rather outdated now, it is still proving to be true as I found little research about the ACA as an organization, let alone their mission statement. However, we can find some evidence on what the ACA wants to achieve according to their "Mission and Vision" page. According to Lindsey Patterson (2012), the family-like nature of camp has helped many people with physical disabilities feel welcomed and, for many, the first time they have been accepted and included in activities. Being around these positive environments, children with disabilities often take the self-confidence earned at summer camp and use it to become activists in college. We can use this information to compare to some of the ACA's values and goals. We can also return to Miller's research to notice that informal activities at camp are a great tool for hand-on, experiential learning and can have a "positive impact on young

people in building social skills [and] self-confidence." These go hand-in-hand with many of the values the ACA wishes to extend throughout their associated camps.

Overall, there is no definitive journal that classifies mission statements as a rhetorical genre. We are lacking in terms of pre-existing criteria to compare mission statements with, however, through the previous literature we see that there is a decent start to the formation of this genre in which we can use to compare. There is also a deficient amount of research done on the American Camp Association or summer camps as a whole by communication scholars, and even more specifically none on rhetoric within summer camps. However, we can look to the effects the camp has made through specific narratives and statistics to see some results to use as comparisons.

#### Method

When we hear the word 'genre,' oftentimes we think of 'category' as a synonym, or we think about our favorite music or movie genres. Less often do we think of various genres of rhetoric. However, they exist and have their own *genre* of criticism- "Generic (or "Genre") Criticism." First, I will explain some of generic criticism's history, the basic procedures, and what a few experts have to say about the method. Next, I will elucidate why genre criticism is a useful method and why it is perfect for our artifact- the ACA'S 'Mission and Vision' online webpage. Finally, I will explain what steps I will take in using deductive genre criticism to compare our artifact to the ideal mission statement prototype.

First, a brief history in genre criticism. According to Thomas Conley (1979), "It is in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* that we see it proposed for the first time that rhetorical activity can be divided into three *gene*" (p. 47). Conley continued that Aristotle suggested that the

differences can be used as guides for creating rhetorical "artifacts." Karlyn Campbell and Kathleen Jamieson (1978) explain that since the time rhetorical criticism was accepted into the scholarly world, critics would try and distinguish "forms" of rhetorical acts that would warrant more critiques by rhetoricians. Meaning, similar themes in rhetoric can be the basis for creating a category that rhetoricians would frequently visit anyway, as these messages [in said category] are rhetorical artifacts. By doing this, a guideline is created for that category based on 'requirements' and is then deemed a 'genre' that people can continue to use as criteria to distinguish successfulness or to continue the conversation on requirements for that genre. For example, B.L. Ware and Wil A. Linkugel (1973) produced a very popular generic criticism using apologia, introduced by Aristotle, as a genre. They stated that "apologetical discourses constitute a distinct *form* of public address, a family of speeches with sufficient elements in common so as to warrant legitimately generic status" (p. 273). From there, they were able to compare and contrast these elements to evaluate other apologetical performances.

To explain generic criticism further, we need to divide the method into two approaches: deductive and inductive criticisms. If there is an artifact or group of artifacts that would not necessarily fit in with preexisting genres, one can attempt to determine whether the artifacts have enough unique, but shared qualities among them to meet the criteria to have their own genre. They also need to all be specifically rhetorical artifacts that rhetoricians will frequently want to analyze. This method is called inductive genre criticism. However, deductive genre criticism, my approach to this analysis, is knowing a preexisting genre and its qualities and taking a rhetorical artifact to compare with those already within that



particular genre. "The measurement of the text against a preexisting model," Campbell and Jamieson note (p. 12).

There has been some critique to genre criticism, however. The previously cited Conley was a major critic of genre criticism, stating that it leads to "blindness" of the content of the text and generic classifications have "the tendency...to proliferate into tiresome and useless taxonomies" (p. 53). According to Carolyn Miller (1984), John H. Patton also critiqued and stated that generic criticism results in "critical determinism of the worst sort" (p.151). However, Miller goes on to fight both of these points and states that "it does not lend itself to taxonomy, for genres change, evolve, and decay; the number of genres current in any society is indeterminate and depends upon the complexity and diversity of the society" (p. 163). She places genre criticism into a historical context and explains how the method is relatively flexible. However, there seems to be a tendency of people using the genre critique to simply place artifacts into categories, which Wayne Brockriede (1974) states fails to provide an argument because it lacks an inferential leap. However, Stephen Lucas (1986) notes, "If the promise of a genre studies is to be fully realized, however, one major obstacle must be overcome--the tendency to treat the identification of genres as an end in itself" (p. 354). Therefore, the purpose of generic criticism is not to simply create a genre for common artifacts (inductive method) or decide that a particular artifact "fits in" to a genre (deductive method). The purpose is trying to see what we can take from knowing that these rhetorical texts exist in a certain genre. Many further questions can be answered and contributions can be made by comparing the artifact to others in its genre and continuing the analysis past the point of simply identifying the artifact as a part of that genre. We can analyze more closely the purpose behind the rhetoric, the effects it has on readers, and how to improve upon qualities of the genre as a whole to make communication more effective.

In this analysis, I will use a deductive approach to Generic Criticism and compare the ACA's 'Mission and Vision' page to an archetype of a mission statement. Through close textual analysis, I will analyze the rhetoric used for the ACA's values, visions, mission statement, and end statements on the webpage. This choice in method is perfect for my artifact because, through past research on mission statements, we know what has been considered thus far as the ultimate 'archetype' of a mission statement, and we can use that criteria to compare to the ACA's mission. By analyzing patterns such as using "we" and avoiding negative language, we can ultimately find if the ACA was successful in their hopes of creating an effectively communicated and well-received mission statement.

## Analysis

### **Vision**

We will begin by analyzing the first subsection of the ACA's 'Mission and Vision' page: the ACA's vision. This consists of only five words: "Enriching Lives, Changing the World" ("Mission and Vision," 2016). Because the vision is a crucial part of the page, yet so short, we will analyze this word by word. The first word, enriching, has many synonyms including 'inspiring,' 'enhancing,' or 'improving.' Using any of these words may provide different connotations to readers. For example, if the ACA had chosen "Improving," readers may associate general summer camps with programs geared towards self-help. However, 'enriching' provides the connotation of wealth because of the root word "rich" and is geared more towards improving the *quality of* life rather than just improving *lives*. We can also examine the phrase "Changing the World," comparing it to the words of activists, visionaries, presidents, and revolutionaries. It tends to have a positive connotation and preferably the implication of seeing actual results. Furthermore, the five words phrase shows both the

purpose and the product that Sarah Ryan (2007) deemed necessary of a successful mission statement. 'Enrich' and 'Change' are the root words that can change to the infinitive verb for the purpose as well as the adjective for the product: to enrich lives, to change the world; and enriched lives, and a changed world. Therefore, we can say that the vision effectively gives across its message, starting off the success of the ACA 'Mission and Vision' page.

## **Values**

This section of the page is the largest part, including paragraphs rather than individual sentences. We will analyze these sections in the order they appear on the page, beginning with their introduction, then 'Contribution,' 'People,' and 'The World.'

### *Introduction*

The first sentence of the introduction states "The American Camp Association is a community of camp professionals who, for over 100 years, have joined together to share our knowledge and experience and to ensure the quality of camp programs" ("Mission and Vision," 2016). This sentence establishes ethos immediately, both internal and external, as well as creating that initial sense of community the ACA is attempting to acquire and protract.

Next, the introduction continues by noting that their camp staff/employees, programs, and the children that take part in "the camp experience" are all "diverse" and "distinct" ("Mission and Vision"). It's important to note that "the camp experience" is rhetoric used in the ACA's legitimate mission statement that we will be analyzing after values. Using the same word choices consistently subliminally reinforces their purpose and, hence, product. By choosing the words "diverse" and "distinct," the ACA really shows how much, not only uniqueness but, owning your uniqueness is a great value to the camp, both in their programs and in their

campers. It also figuratively opens the arms of the camp to any and all people and shows that the camps in their association are unique just like those who attend the camp. This successfully relates the ACA to the audience, providing some pathos. They follow with, "Through what we teach, the opportunities we offer, and the example we set, children become part of a sharing community." This establishes community, once again, as well as presents the benefits of being a part of said community. Role-model counselors teach and provide opportunities to children that their parents will not be able to replicate.

The ACA separates to a road-mapping paragraph explaining that the ACA values "the world, the people who live in it, and the contribution each individual can make," which are the topics of the following subsections within 'Values' ("Mission and Vision"). The ACA explains that they are not disconnected values, but "concentric circles," which implies a systemic, cause-and-effect relationship between all of their values. That being said, this shows how much they would want to put emphasis on *all* of these values because if one were to not be emphasized, it would lead to the decline of other values learned. They explain that these values are important to them "as an organization" as well as an important part of what they want to encourage in the children that attend their camps. This, yet again, shows their purpose and product. From just a read through the introduction, one can certainly figure out the general idea of what the ACA does and aims to achieve.

### *'Contribution'*

Exploring the ACA's first subheading under 'Values,' we find that their "contribution" is working as a team to establish the ACA as a "leading authority in child development" and they "contribute" to all people who attend their camps. While at camp, attendees are taught to take those lessons out of camp to share with the community, so they're also explaining how

their contribution extends beyond camp boundaries. I will also note that they began this section with "We believe" which they began all the other subsections with as well. They formatted these sections as a general, almost mission-statement-like sentence followed by an explanation of how it is implemented.

The first sentence in this section reads: "We believe that the camp experience is essential to every child's growth and education" ("Mission and Vision," para. 4). The use of "essential" and "every" is an effective way of showing the urgency and importance of camps to local communities everywhere. It sets the precedent that what they do is unique and has exclusive benefits as well as being available to everybody.

A flaw of this section is that they do not express what their actual contribution is. They state who they contribute to ("children and adults who participate in our programs and to their families and our communities"), however they only explain that they contribute to these people by "promoting and articulating [the ACA] as a leading authority in child development" ("Mission and Vision," para. 4). They never blatantly say what they give to all of these people. Upon further examination, one may gather that growth and education are the expected contributions, taken from the first sentence, but that is not stated as a given contribution and rather just one of their values itself. Hence, this section does not pass the "Purpose and Product" test as it lacks the product, but does show a purpose: to reach as many people as possible.

### *'People'*

Again, the ACA begins their subsection with a value, "We believe in all the children and adults who come to our camps." This continues the theme of acceptance and inclusivity. The ACA also embraces a fear many parents have with camp, having their children completely out of

their control, and shows parents that camps within their association will work with them in order to help their children develop and appreciate themselves and their contributions to society. The ACA then states, “We help children develop self-esteem, character, courage, responsibility, resourcefulness, and cooperation” (“Mission and Vision,” para. 5). The six characteristics are all positive and highly-desirable, and they're all supposedly going to be improved by the end of the camper's time at an ACA-accredited camp. By listing what specific skills children will develop through their camps, the ACA gives a definitive list for those parents looking on this page and directors and staff members at camps to know exactly what the result of camp should be. Therefore, the 'People' subsection shows both the purpose and the product of the organization and contains both internal and external ethos.

Finally, this paragraph finishes off describing "quality camp experiences." It is implied that the ACA provides quality camp experiences, and then they state the "quality camp experiences" help the campers to build important interpersonal and emotional skills and develop into "strong, considerate, competent adults." I see this as an implied division, where the ACA wants to give the message, "If it's not a quality camp experience, it wasn't under the ACA because we produce strong, considerate, competent adults." This is a win-win for the ACA because it shows that attendees at their camps will return home with more developed emotional and social skills, and if people do not choose an ACA-accredited camp then this result is not necessarily guaranteed. Hence, describing all of these skills makes this subsection more persuasive than meets the skimming eye and contains a clear purpose and product.

### *'The World'*

We believe that each of us plays an important role in the stewardship of our environment—both natural and manmade. We help children grow into

committed, responsible citizens by teaching them to appreciate, respect, and care for the world in which they live. ("Mission and Vision," para. 6)

This subsection expands the ideas of the ACA that they have already established, but this time beyond the people who attend the camp, beyond their families and even their communities. This section shows that the impact the ACA has on their consumers spreads to everything on Earth, "the world in which they live" ("Mission and Vision," para. 6). They show an important value here that they believe everyone has a responsibility to the world we live in, and everyone should be grateful for and contribute to it. The specific use of "grow" in the section that also refers to the natural environment provides more interconnectivity between the children who attend ACA camps, their communities, and then the world around us. Stating that we "grow," just as we are familiar with plants growing, readers may find that they not only should care for these living things, but that we can identify with them as well.

### *Themes of Values*

Overall, we can take from their values that the ACA remains hopeful, positive, and all-inclusive consistently throughout. They want to affect as many people as possible in a positive way and have high hopes of that being a worldwide phenomenon. To emphasize these values, the ACA sticks to we-based language, avoids the use of "you" statements, and avoids any type of negative words. Inclusive words like "we" and "our" were used twenty-five times in the course of the values subsection while there was no use of the word "you" or "no," and the word "not" only appeared once. Framing their values *rhetoric* in the same light as their values helps to reinforce their beliefs while making sure to keep the image of staying true to them.

### **Mission**

The ACA's mission statement is: "The mission of the American Camp Association is enriching the lives of children, youth and adults through the camp experience" ("Mission and Vision," p. 7). Simply put, this mission statement shares the name of the association, their purpose, product, and the most simplistic description of their means of producing. As a mission statement must be so short, this is the most effective way to simplify their beliefs into one concise sentence. It uses the word "enrich," just like the vision, which I believe to be the best choice in word for this mission. The aimed reach is still in all-inclusive terms, using non-gendered language and age-inclusive rhetoric. The ACA also is clear that all of this is done through the camp experience. A flaw of this page I believe, though, is that they don't define the "camp experience." That phrase can be interpreted in a number of different ways, and one would have to do more searching to really find out what the ACA means rather than knowing from simply from that page. What should the camp experience include? That would easily fit into contributions, people, or even the introduction.

### **End Statements**

1. There will be greater public understanding of and support for the value of the camp experience.
2. An increasing number of children, youth, and adults of all social, cultural, and economic groups, will have a camp experience.
3. The camp experience will be of high quality.

The end statements sum up what has already been stated, but in a notably different way. The ACA had a particular rhetorical strategy to reinforce their values one last time on the page and to phrase them this particular way. I see these statements as: number one is what they want from their audience/readers; number two is their promised product; and number three contains both their purpose and another product. These are the biggest themes of their page, although



extremely simplistic, it's the best way to get their message across, especially paired with the actual mission statement. If one was to read simply the mission and end statements, they would definitely have a basis of understanding for what the ACA sets out to do and accomplishes. They also provide almost a promise by using the word "will" in each statement. This demonstrates that the ACA is working on and producing these goals, and they can be called out if they do not reach their own pre-set standards.

### **Visual Analysis**

The ACA features one chosen photograph to feature on their 'Mission and Vision' page.



This certainly should be a part of our analysis because there is a reason, out of the billions of photos from camps all around the country, that they chose this one. In the picture, there are three girls. They have different skin tones, different styles, two are wearing glasses. They are all evidently happy and in an obviously outdoor facility surrounded by trees. The building is cabin-like, and has a woody feel- evoking the emotion one may feel thinking about camp. The picture fits the ACA's mission and values by including diverse subjects in their photograph while in a very notable "camp environment." So here the ACA provides proof of their product and means of production just through this one picture. Looking at this picture before reading the page may

evoke slight emotions, but looking at the picture after reading the page reinforces, yet again, the purpose and product of the ACA and its inclusive, outdoors, creative, and friendly nature.

#### Contribution/Discussion

This analysis contributes to the discussion on generic criticism and specifically that of mission statements as a genre. While I was able to mostly perform a deductive genre criticism for this analysis, most criteria for mission statements came from the business realm. This study argues that rhetorical communication scholars should recognize mission statements as a genre in the future as there is enough criteria to evaluate the ACA's mission now. The ACA shows how important careful and strategic rhetoric is, which is a quality that should be noted while writing a mission statement. The qualities that have already been noted, such as product and purpose and we-based language, can continue to be reinforced as further research is conducted in the 'Mission Statement' genre as it was observed frequently in the ACA's mission page as well.

Visual analyses are also important to not overlook. For some, the photograph used on the ACA's webpage may appear to be a space-filler, but upon further analysis, one can find that the picture placement was strategic. The photo was chosen because it exemplifies the mission and values on the page. If one ignores visual rhetoric, there may be a gap in analysis- it could lose the value of a picture that indeed may be worth a thousand words.

My study also begins an entirely new conversation on rhetoric used in summer camps. The American Camp Association serves millions of children each summer, 7.1 million to be more specific ("ACA Facts and Trends," 2016). It is important to continue studying rhetoric used at summer camps to see what exactly brings in so many people each and every summer, and why the rhetorical strategies of the ACA can be used as a basis for other nonprofit organizations that are crafting a mission statement. Future potential studies could also look into different camping

organizations and their mission statements, or they could look at specific ACA-accredited camp's mission statements to see how closely it follows the ACA's.

### Conclusion

The American Camp Association has such a large outreach and continues aiming to expand their outreach making it critical to analyze their intentions and mission for their association and camps within it. Through comparing the ACA's 'Mission and Vision' page to criteria needed to be a successful mission statement, we keep contributing to the discussion on "Mission Statements" as a genre. It is noted that choosing each and every word carefully and establishing ethos, both internal and external, throughout the mission statement is critical. We can see that the ACA utilized these strategies and used them to produce the best mission statement possible for their organization. Not only did they fit the criteria of using internal and external ethos, focusing on we-based language, and expressing their purpose and product, but they did this in just about each, individual small subsection. No matter if a person were to read one paragraph on the page, they would still get a taste of what the ACA has to offer.

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