

Pysma

The rhetorical term *pysma* is a figure of speech in which multiple questions are asked consecutively in order to generate a complex response, often intimidating or confusing the responder (Peachum). The word itself originates in Ancient Greece, meaning “a question that requires an explanation.” There is no definite answer to when it was first used, but I infer that the term became popularized in the Greek activity of debate. In the 21st century, we often see *pysmas* used subconsciously in every talk in addition to *pysmas* being weaponized for political gain.

The first known recording of the term comes from the English author Henry Peachum in his piece called “The Garden of Eloquence,” published in 1577. He coins the term and defines it as a figure in which the orator demands and asks many questions at one time, knowing that it cannot be answered without a long and complex response. According to Peachum, *pysmas* are used in nine ways: to deceive by fraud, to move pitié, to provoke, to insult, to confirm, to confute, to cause attention, to complain, and to oppress by multitude. His earliest known example of its use is in Cicero’s 80 BCE speech “Pro Roscio Amerino,” where Cicero defends a man accused of murdering his own father: “In what place did he speake with them? with whom did he speake? did he hire them? whom did he hire, and by whom? To what end, or how much did he give them?” (Peachum). Here, we see *pysma* being used to confute the accuser; whoever Cicero is speaking to cannot answer these questions in a simple manner as they require a long and drawn out response, therefore helping, at least temporarily, prove Roscio Amerino’s innocence. Today, *pysmas* can be recognized in several spheres of influence- most notably politics.

One instance in which *pysma* was used in a political setting was when CA-45 representative Katie Porter interrogated former Celgene CEO Mark Alles over the rise in cancer-treating drug prices over the last 15 years, and the “coincidental” rise of the former CEO’s compensation. She exclaims “Did the drug start to work faster? Were there fewer side effects? How did you change the formula or production of Revlimid to justify this price increase?” (C-Span). In her use of the *pysma*, she does not actually expect the former CEO to be able to answer some if not any of her questions. However, she uses the *pysma* to bring attention to the fact that nothing has changed with this life-saving drug yet somehow the price of it has risen from \$215 to \$763 in just 15 years (C-Span). In bringing attention to this indisputable fact, she also provokes Mark Alles to start answering his next questions in a more panicked tone. Through the course of the interrogation, Katie Porter uses *pysmas* to reveal the absurdity of the drug’s price increase, and directly contributes it to the greed of the former CEO and to no other causation.

Pysmas in rhetoric can be utilized to gain the upper hand in a debate or argument, and it is no doubt that their correct usage is crucial to political debates and interrogations. They can serve to overwhelm with hard facts, to bring light to a previously unpopular issue, or even to just to insult an opponent and make them look unfavorable. In the final 2020 US Presidential Debate,

Joe Biden critiques President Trump's COVID-19 response with a pysma: "When's the last time? Is it really dangerous still? Are we dangerous. You tell the people it's dangerous now. What should they do about the danger? And you say, "I take no responsibility." (Rev). This pysma serves to both overwhelm and insult Trump, claiming that he essentially did nothing in response to the pandemic. Trump likely can't respond to these questions accurately given their specificity, nor would he have the time to given the debate's format. The use of pysma in this manner is impactful in promoting Joe Biden as a favorable candidate, framing Trump as irresponsible and unqualified.

Although it is easy to pick out in political discourse, pysmas are extremely common in the average person's life. For example, if you are confused about a certain topic or assignment you may send a barrage of questions to a professor without having any awareness that you're using a pysma. You may also use a pysma when questioning why someone did a certain action without even realizing it; pysmas are not always used on purpose.

Pysmas can be used in many different ways; they can be used as offense, defence, or for general inquisition. That being said, pysmas are not a positive or negative tool for rhetoricians. They are neutral and their effects depend on the intentions of the user entirely. They provide the framework for an orator to present their side or to interrogate their opponent. Therefore there isn't any anti or pro-pysma sentiment, or really any ambiguities on their use at all. They can be powerful in the realm of debate and in order for an audience to understand their true effects one must be aware of the possible intentions of the user, and how that could cause malice or positive gain.

The term pysma refers to a figure of speech in which several questions are asked rapidly with the expectation of a complex response. They may not seem like it, but pysmas are a consistent part of every area of speech ranging from everyday talk to discourse by people in power. They serve many different purposes but most commonly are used to undermine a weak argument or cripple an opponent's argument. They are seen being widely used in the realm of political discussion (at least in the US) and often sway the audience in one direction if used effectively. While pysmas do not appear to be particularly relevant to us at first glance, they are a very significant tool for any individual engaging in speech.

Works Cited

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