

December 2018

## Claiming Your Life and Education

Kelly E. Corkery  
*University of Dayton*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/lxl>

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Corkery, Kelly E. (2018) "Claiming Your Life and Education," *Line by Line: A Journal of Beginning Student Writing*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.  
Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/lxl/vol5/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Line by Line: A Journal of Beginning Student Writing by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact [frice1@udayton.edu](mailto:frice1@udayton.edu), [mschlangen1@udayton.edu](mailto:mschlangen1@udayton.edu).

---

# Claiming Your Life and Education

## **Writing Process**

My essay is a rhetorical analysis of Adrienne Rich's speech, "Claiming an Education." I chose Rich's speech because a friend of mine told me that her introduction to college seminar at Penn State discussed the speech, and I found the speech to be very interesting. After choosing the speech, I completed two drafts, which were both edited in both a peer review and by my instructor, Professor Strain. After my first draft, I also had a writing conference with Professor Strain to refine my work more. After my second draft, I met with Professor Strain again to discuss submitting this paper to *Line by Line* and to do some copy editing.

**Editor's note:** For this paper, the author received the journal's award for Best Rhetorical Analysis (\$100).

## **Course**

ENG100

## **Semester**

Spring

## **Instructor**

Margaret Strain

## **Year**

2018

# Claiming Your Life and Education

---

*Kelly Corkery*

In 1977, Adrienne Rich delivered a convocation speech called “Claiming an Education” at Douglass College, an all-women’s college in New Jersey. During this time, women often took on domestic roles such as taking care of their homes and children while their husbands left the home to go to “real jobs.” Society was male-dominated — women belonged in the kitchen and men were the moneymakers. Although it was typical for women to be considered gentle and submissive because of their roles in their households, the feminist movement was on the rise. Adrienne Rich was a leading contributor to the feminist movement, writing about women’s issues such as identity, social justice, and radical feminism (“Adrienne Rich”). In her speech “Claiming an Education,” Rich moves her audience by using extrinsic and intrinsic evidence to make the point that all students, especially women, are responsible for claiming their own lives and their own educations. By delivering this motivational graduation speech, Rich inspires her female audience to lift their voices in a man’s world and a man’s educational system. While Rich uses all three rhetoric appeals of logos, ethos, and pathos, the strength of her speech comes from her meticulous use of logos. By focusing on the struggles that women have faced throughout history and were facing during the time of the speech, Rich confirms her argument that women do not deserve to live in a world that is dominated by men.

By using both intrinsic and extrinsic evidence, Rich makes the argument that there is a difference between receiving and claiming an education. Rich uses logos in this context to contrast between the dictionary definitions of “*to claim*” and “*to receive*” — “to claim [means] to take as a rightful owner; to assert in the face of possible contradiction,” while “to receive [means] to come into possession of; to act as a respectable or container for; to accept as authoritative or true” (Rich). By contrasting these widely known dictionary definitions, Rich makes the

point that women should make an effort to claim their education, rather than to passively receive one. Historically, women were not even able to receive a public education in America until 1789. Furthermore, women were only able to attend school from the months of April to October, while men had been receiving full educations since 1635 (Cheney). She offers the history of women's education as evidence that women should work to take their education seriously by claiming it as their own.

Rich employs extrinsic evidence again when she states that women have the right to be taken seriously by the faculty members at their institutions. Rich states that many male professors feel that teaching at an all-women's college is a "second-rate career" and that many tend to "treat [their female students] as sexual objects, instead of demanding the best of their minds" (Rich). Rich uses the example of the *Alexander v. Yale* lawsuit, in which two women claimed that they were sexually harassed by one of their male professors, and their university had no vehicle for reporting the incident or someone to whom the women could appeal. This problem was so common at Yale that a group of women college students demanded for policies against sexual advances of male professors to be established at all universities (MacKinnon). By using this piece of extrinsic evidence, Rich proves that some male professors did have a history of failing to give their female students the serious education that they deserved. They had failed to teach their female students important lessons such as "clear thinking, active discussion, and excellent writing" and lessons openly available to male students, thus further exacerbating the divide between genders in educational standards (Rich). This extrinsic evidence is also a great example of how women can claim their educations; the women involved in the lawsuit took on the responsibility of claiming their education by demanding to be taken seriously by their male professors, even though it meant going through a court of law to claim it.

An argument that Rich makes, again using intrinsic evidence, is that an increasing number of women were entering the higher education system at the time of her speech, but the faculty and administration of most institutions were still dominated by men. Rich notes that at Douglass College, a women's college where Rich worked and delivered her speech, the administration was governed "overwhelmingly by men" (Rich). Women were not only underrepresented in educational settings and in the workforce, but they were also underrepresented in the subjects they studied. Rich claims that what counted as knowledge in the

college classroom was based upon “how men perceived and organized their experience, their history, their ideas of social relationships, good and evil, sickness, health, etc.” — it was rarely considered or mentioned how women had perceived their own histories in a world that they were equally apart of (Rich).

She also points to the titles of commonly used textbooks for examples of her claims: “The Descent of Man; Man and His Symbols, Irrational Man; The Phenomenon of Man; The Future of Man; Man and the Machine; From Man to Man; May Man Prevail?; Man, Science, and Society; [and] One-Dimensional Man” (Rich). By using these textbooks, all including the word “man” in their titles, as evidence, Rich argues that women were learning through the scope of the thoughts of men, which is neither “an accurate picture of the past, nor [an accurate observation of] human behavior (Rich). Rich contends that educational systems needed to have stronger female representation in both the administration and the information that was taught. In order for women to be able to reclaim their education, the whole education system needed to be changed.

Even forty years after this speech, America’s educational system still has steps to take to give female students an equal education. Many of the problems Rich touched on during her speech are still relevant today, especially her points that many institutions have administrations that are male-dominated and that women have been learning through a male’s perspective. These issues prevent girls and young women from fully participating in the classroom, which makes it difficult for women to claim their own education.

Rich also uses intrinsic evidence when she makes the argument that women learn from an early age that the opinions of others matter more than taking responsibility for themselves. Rich uses the intellectual model of “the intelligent women who denies her intelligence in order to seem more ‘feminine,’ or who sits in passive silence even when she disagrees inwardly with everything that is being said around her” (Rich). It can be difficult for women to speak up in an environment where men are considered to be bigger, stronger, and more intelligent; it has even been statistically proven that in group settings, women are 75% less likely than their male counterparts to speak when attempting to solve a problem (Hadfield). Rich makes the point that in order for women to claim responsibility for their lives, they need to “[refuse] to let others do [their] thinking, talking, and naming for [them]”; that “responsibility for yourself means that you don’t fall for shallow and easy solutions” (Rich). By taking responsibility for themselves, women can resist the expectations that society has for them; they

can claim their education rather than passively receiving one; they can hold high-ranking jobs; and they can influence other women around them to do the same.

In “Claiming an Education,” Rich makes the point using intrinsic and extrinsic evidence that all people, especially women, owe it to themselves to hold their educational institutions accountable for a fair and balanced education. By using examples that are relevant today, such as the “sexist” science and history lessons that fail to consider that women account for more than half of the human species, Rich proves that women have faced a long and drawn-out history of being thought of as inferior to men (Rich). She contends that if a person does not claim her life as her own, she risks falling into the trap of shrinking herself to live a submissive and passive life, rather than pushing herself to strive toward success and growth.

### Works Cited

“Adrienne Rich.” The Poetry Foundation.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/adrienne-rich>

Cheney, Ednah D. “Evolution of Women’s Education in the United States.” A *Celebration of Women Writers*.

<http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/elliott/art/147.html>

Hadfield, Joe. “Study: Deciding by Consensus Can Compensate for Group Gender Imbalances.” Brigham Young University.

<https://news.byu.edu/news/study-why-women-speak-less-when-theyre-outnumbered>.

Livingston, Gretchen. “Growing Number of Dads Home with the Kids.” Pew Research Center. [http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/06/05/growing-](http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/06/05/growing-number-of-dads-home-with-the-kids/)

[number-of-dads-home-with-the-kids/](http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/06/05/growing-number-of-dads-home-with-the-kids/)

MacKinnon, Catharine A. “In their Hands: Restoring Institutional Liability for Sexual Harassment in Education.” *The Yale Law Journal*.

<https://www.yalelawjournal.org/feature/in-their-hands-restoring-institutional-liability-for-sexual-harassment-in-education>

Rich, Adrienne. “Claiming an Education.” York University.

<http://www.yorku.ca/cvandaal/files/ClaimingAnEducation.pdf>