

**Rhetorical Questions:
How Ibri College Students at the Department of English View Rhetorical
Questions?**

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Abstract

This paper highlights the use of Rhetorical Questions that are, normally, asked for emphasis and eliciting more responses. The questioner does not expect or wait for an answer from the listener; on the contrary, he is well aware of the answer and intends to get the attention of the audience addressed mainly. To provide the reader with a rich grasp on the topic at hand, a questionnaire has been distributed among twenty-three male and female Foundation Year Programme students-FY- at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences in the Sultanate of Oman. What the researchers have reached is that Rhetorical Questions are not meant for getting direct answers; they are asked for persuasion, effect and influence. Implications, discussion, suggestions, and recommendations will be pointed out throughout this paper.

Keywords: audience, discourse, elicit, frequently, influence, question, response, rhetorical

Introduction

Rhetorical questions are a certain type of questions that are asked in almost all domains, academic or nonacademic. They are not asked for getting answers, but for checking the audience' reaction, influence, or effect. Some professors might ask this kind of questions as a way of drawing their students' attention when getting bored and seem they need some refreshment as a kind of change, others ask rhetorical questions to kindle minds to elicit some

new ideas that help analyzing the topic at hand. This paper fathoms Rhetorical Questions; the way they are used, and how students at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences- Ibri College- view this issue.

Literature Review

“In English, rhetorical questions are commonly used in speech and in informal kinds of writing (such as advertisements). Rhetorical questions appear less frequently in academic discourse” (Nordquist, 2020, Para.4). “A rhetorical question is a question asked not as a genuine inquiry but rather to suggest something or to make a point” (Bryson, 2017, Para. 1). This type of questions is – often- used much in conversational domains and nonacademic situations. Lectures, seminars and talks witness a lot of rhetorical questions and one can tell the reason beyond this— making the audience more active, sharing and caring about what is being discussed. In advertisements, however, eliciting responses from the readers is important, so as to make sure the message has been received and has given its good results.

Technically, rhetorical questions are not meant solely for asking about certain things, although they end with question marks. The main aim is to activate the audience and persuade it in a very smooth and indirect way, without even verbal responses in some cases. “Rhetorical questions may end with a question mark, but they are not technically questions at all because the audience- whether a large group, small group, or individual- is not expected to actually respond” (Miller, 2019, Para. 3). Scholars advise presenters to lessen using rhetorical questions in general situations even if they intend to persuade a certain group of listeners. In such cases, the aim beyond that usage disappears, unless the domain is judicious, which means more engagement of the audience takes place.

Like most persuasion tools, rhetorical questions should be used sparingly; otherwise the object of your persuasion might find them distracting and counterproductive. But, when used judiciously and effectively, rhetorical questions can be a potent way to engage your audience, create a sense of empathy, and, ultimately, guide them to view the case from your perspective instead of your opponent (Miller, 2019, Para. 12).

Presenters should not underestimate the intelligence and smartness of their audience; curiosity and deep thinking are some of the characteristics of a certain group of listeners, but sometimes amongst this audience some individuals need to be activated and that is why rhetorical questions become a necessity. “A rhetorical question poses a query without expecting an answer. It creates curiosity, anticipation, or even a suspense and gets your audience thinking about the question you just asked.”(Antony & Boyd, (n.d)). The momentum of using rhetorical questions is governed by how effective and strong one’s arguments are. If they are strong enough and have apparent effect, therefore, less usage of rhetorical questions is required, and vice versa. “If your arguments are very strong, use fewer questions (e.g., only headlines). If they are weaker, use some more rhetorical in the message.”(Ahluwalia & Burnkrant (n.d)). Though there are some

downfalls and bad usages of rhetorical questions, there is a brilliant side of using it, and it is not always bad. One, sometimes, finds themselves compelled to use such questions in order to settle down things properly.

To say that rhetorical questions are all bad is like saying hammers are all bad. Sure, when you bludgeon someone over the head with it, a rhetorical question can be really, really bad. But otherwise, it is just another tool for your writing toolbox. It can even be a necessity in some situations where any other type of sentence just wouldn't do what you want. (Nolan, 2016, Para. 4).

In classrooms, teachers feel they have to put students under much concentration and make them more focused to what is being discussed. By using rhetorical questions, teachers capture their hearts and minds. It is similar to the method once utilized by Socrates, but in a different, or even wrong scenario. "...rhetorical questions are used to capture the attention of students. It's the Socratic Method. In the wrong scenario, it makes the reader unconsciously feel childish". (Nolan, 2016, Para. 6). The bad effect of using rhetorical questions appears clearly throughout team-work that reduces the efficiency and warm relationship amongst the team members on one hand, and the presenter loses individuals' trust on the other hand, and as a result, rhetorical questions become destructive, rather than constructive, and the team-work loses its power.

Rhetorical questions undermine your team's working relationships and reduce its ability to make high-quality decisions. Rhetorical questions enable you to ask others to be accountable without being transparent about your own views, leading team members to feel insulted, defensive, or discounted. As a result, team members trust you less, withdraw from the discussion, and withhold relevant information that the team needs to make good decisions. (Baer, 2013, para. 5).

Kole (2020, Para. 5), "I often see fiction writers use the rhetorical question in their manuscripts to ramp up tension and get readers more engaged. Or so they think". It is a good idea if rhetorical questions are used in the proper way—captivating readers' hearts and attention without causing negative engagement.

Sometimes rhetorical questions are asked for either silly, or serious reasons. Some presenters use this type of questions in order to get a laugh, or make fun of others- which is impolite, of course, or sometimes rhetorical questions are asked to seek the support of others, or to make the audience nourished, active, and positive instead of being passive and negative.

"There are variety of reasons you might ask a rhetorical question: to get a laugh, to get agreement, to challenge an idea or show it to be absurd. But most speakers we work with use rhetorical questions for a different purpose: whether they realize it or not, they're trying to shift the audience from passive receiver to active participant" (Anonymous, 2018, Para. 3).

There is some warning against using rhetorical questions if they mix things up and clarity vanishes. “if a rhetorical question can mix things up and bring some much-needed variation to your delivery, it’s important not to abuse the device”(Anonymous, 2018, Para.13). Sometimes rhetorical questions are asked to get an answer about things people are familiar with bearing in mind that the answers are clear enough and apparent. This, however, shows that the speaker intends to emphasize an idea or something he has in mind.

Rhetorical questions with obvious answers are asked about well-known facts, or the answer is suggested based on the question’s context. They are used to emphasises [emphasize] an idea or point: are you kidding me? Can birds fly? Is the Pope Catholic? Who knows? (Beqiri, 2018, Para.5).

Mackay, (2017, Para. 1) concludes that in the translation of some holy books, the Bible, for instance, the rhetoric of rhetorical questions lessens or disappears as this type of questions does not exist in certain languages. “The Bible is full of rhetorical questions, but rhetorical questions simply don’t exist in some languages. This can present some unique challenges for Bible translation”. In Islam, for example, the Holy Quran must not be translated literally into other languages, since it loses its eloquence, effect, and influence. What is allowed is ONLY the translation of the meaning of the Suras (Chapters or sections of the Quran), and should be recited only in Arabic, regardless of the individual’s language. The Quran contains many kinds of questions, including the rhetorical ones, which might be different thoroughly from the Bible. Do listeners always agree with presenters on what they say?

Presenters do their best to pull the audience towards their side, and utilize any means by which they draw their attention to the topic discussed. It is likely that listeners almost always agree with the speaker when he asks rhetorical questions even without admitting or declaring that openly. Skillful presenters do that, not beginners, specifically with the elite. Once the audience shows satisfaction and agreement, things go smoothly.

Rhetorical questions are often intended to make the listener agree with the speaker as the answer is obviously yes. Even if the listener does not say the word, they will think it. And once they start agreeing they are more likely to keep doing so.

Is the Pope a Catholic?

Is the sky blue?

Is this a great product? (Anonymous, (n.d.), Para. 2).

Can courtrooms be proper domains for asking rhetorical questions? Well, any place could be proper for such questions provided that the aim is revealing the truth. In courtrooms there seems to be smooth and indirect competitions- though not on the surface- between the magistrate and lawyers. The lawyers do their best to win the case by using flowery words and asking rhetorical

questions to mislead or confuse the jury to set the defendants free. However, the keen and vigilant judge cannot be overtaken by lawyers' methods of introducing things in cunning ways; he knows when to interfere and get things back on the right track.

In thinking about why rhetorical questions might be a uniquely suitable device for courtroom advocacy, it helps to think where the audience starts. And it is fair to say that they start with skepticism. Jurors know that lawyers are there to take a position, and they believe (properly) that it is their role to see through any bias or misdirection that the lawyer is offering. To some extent, a couple of principles are important to keep in mind. (Bahm, 2016, Para.3).

There are certain applications or forms that have a universal layout with limited word count; no way to start asking unimportant rhetorical questions—that is considered impersonal, a waste of time, and effort.

Application essays almost universally have a pretty tight word limit, meaning every word you put down is valuable, and rhetorical questions are a waste of that precious resource. They don't tell a story or convey your passion, and they are, by nature, impersonal. (Heskett, 2017, Para. 3).

The researchers are seasoned and old- handed in the academic arena and have – and still- taught different subjects for different years at university level. They know that sometimes writing a piece of literature needs a lot of effort to get that work done. The most important thing is how to capture readers' attention and keep them follow the sequence of events without boredom. Using “HOOK” questions works in this case. They play major roles in encouraging readers to continue reading.

In writing a novel or short story, the opening sentence is often the hardest thing to write. So experiment with rhetorical questions here. Can you come up with a question that gives the reader a hint of what the story is going to be about, what its major themes are, etc.?(Anonymous, (n.d), Para. 6).

Though play an important role in the way of writing- speeches, short stories, novels, plays, etc.-, rhetorical questions should come naturally, not arbitrarily or randomly.

It's best not to set out with the goal of writing a rhetorical question – that's likely to make them sound forced. Instead, just try to write naturally, just as you would speak, and notice when the rhetorical questions appear. (Anonymous, (n.d), Para. 6).

While presenting a certain topic, presenters should not always expect to hear clear and open answers for their questions; the listener smiles, as a kind of approval, nods as a sign of refusal, or answers, if need be, etc.

Rhetorical questions usually either have obvious answers, no answers, or does [do] not require an answer. Here are some examples:

Are you seriously wearing that?

Do you think I'm that gullible?

What is the meaning of life?

What would the walls say if they could speak? (Drew, (n.d), Para. 5).

Questionnaire Analysis

In order to get more information about Rhetorical Questions, a survey was conducted among (23) Foundation Program students (FY), enrolled at Ibri College of Applied Sciences. The study is conducted by means of a questionnaire that consists of 10 items. The first part contains (5) (agree/disagree) questions, while the second one consists of (5) (yes/ no) questions.

The analysis of the results for the first part of the questionnaire, (agree/disagree) questions, shows that (78.3 %) of the participants agree that rhetorical questions are asked for influence and persuasion, not for getting answers. In addition, (87%) of them agree that rhetorical questions make the audience-people- think deeply about its content. The result of the third question reveals that most of the participants (82.6 %,) believe that rhetorical questions, sometimes, are asked for pure challenge and superiority. What is more, the majority of the students (73.9%) disagree with the statement that, "Rhetorical Questions are bad in all cases; they are mostly asked for making fun of others." In the fifth question, (60.9%) of the participants agree that rhetorical questions are often asked to make the listener bless the speaker's question, as the answer is always in the positive form, while (39.1%) of them disagree. Please refer to figures (1-5).

With regard to the second set of the questions, (yes, no) questions, the results are as follows. The vast majority of the respondents, (95.7%) sometimes ask rhetorical questions. In addition, (56.5%) of them admit that normally, their rhetorical questions are oral, not written, and they ask them just for pleasure and humor. Moreover, (47.8%) of the participants think that asking too many rhetorical questions does not have a negative effect and this does not cause insults or create problems between the presenter and the listener. Only (43.5%) of the students state that if they were judges in courts, they would ask lawyers to not use rhetorical questions, as they, lawyers, mislead, confuse, and misdirect defendants. Finally, (82.6%) of the participants believe that if they were novelists, or short story writers, and they believed that the opening sentence is normally the hardest, they would come up with a hook sentence using rhetorical questions as a way of telling the audience about the content of that literary work.

1. Rhetorical Questions are asked for influence-التأثير-- and persuasion الاقناع, not for getting answers.

23 responses

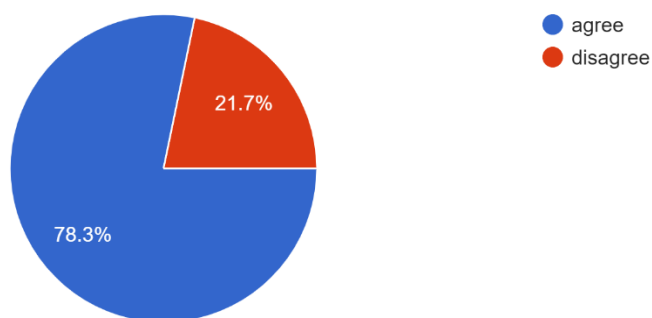


Figure 1

2. Rhetorical Questions make the audience-people- think deeply يفكر بعمق about its content محتوى.

23 responses

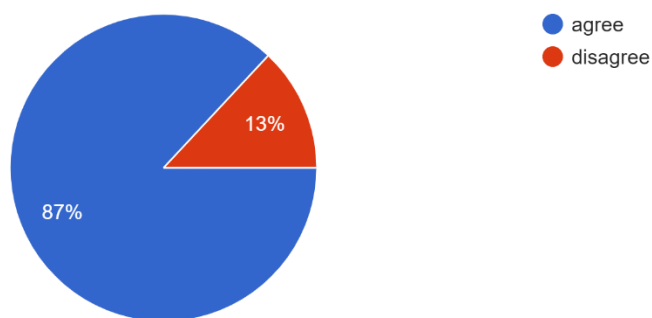


Figure 2

3. Rhetorical Questions, sometimes, are asked for pure challenge—تحدي - and superiority- تفوق

23 responses

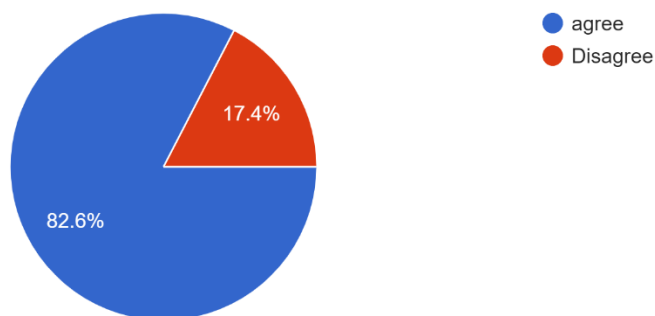


Figure 3

4. Rhetorical Questions are bad in all cases; they are mostly asked for making fun – سخريّة - of others.

23 responses

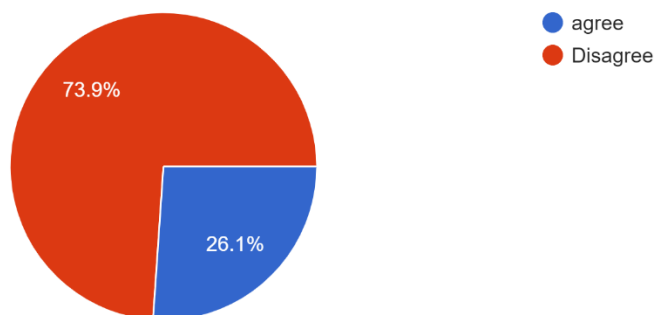


Figure 4

5. Rhetorical Questions are often asked to make the listener bless- يوافق- the speaker's question, as the answer is always in the positive form.

23 responses

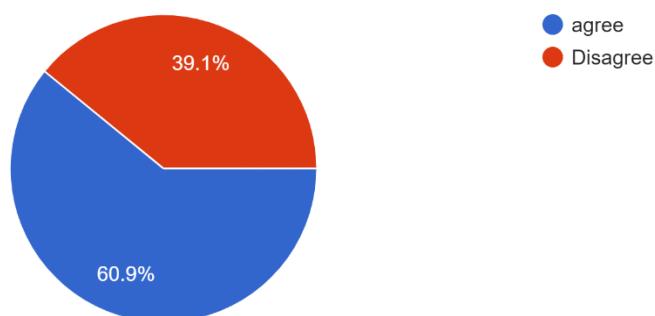


Figure 5

Answer the following questions about yourself. 6. Do you sometimes ask Rhetorical Questions?

23 responses

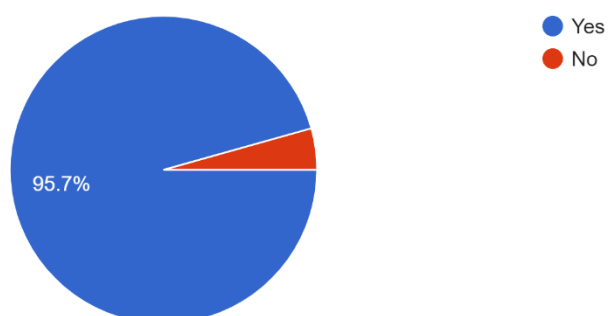


Figure 6

7. Normally, my Rhetorical Questions are oral, not written, and I ask them just for pleasure متعة and humor-دعابة-.

23 responses

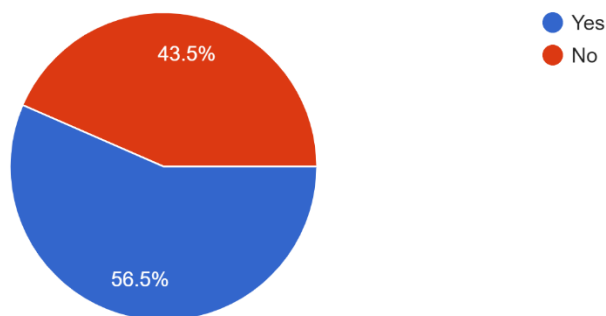


Figure 7

8. Asking too many Rhetorical Questions has a negative effect and might cause insults-اهانة- and create problems between the presenterالمتكلم and the listener.

23 responses

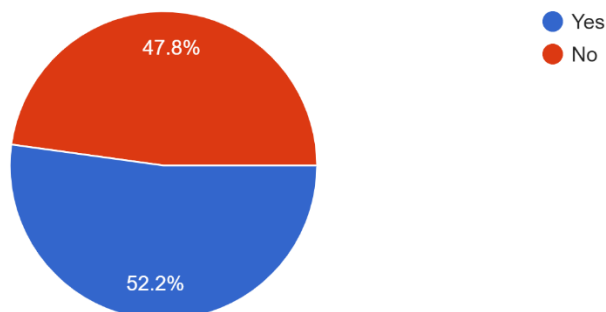


Figure 8

9. If I were a judge- قاضٍ في محكمة- in court, I would ask lawyers- محامون- not to use Rhetorical Questions, as they -lawyers- mislead - يضلّل-, confus...يخادع-, and misdirect - يخرّب- defendants- المتهمين-.
23 responses

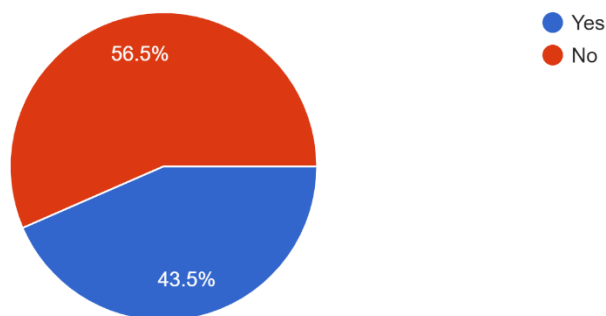


Figure 9

10. If you were a novelist- كاتب روايات-, or a short story writer, and you believe that the opening sentence الجملة الافتتاحية is normally the hardest, w...udience about the content محتوى of that literary work?
23 responses

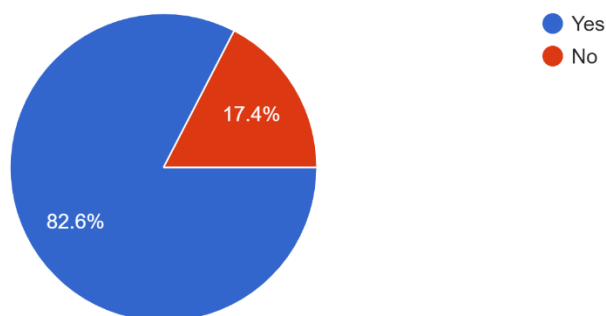


Figure 10

Recommendations

- presenters should adopt all possible ways, including rhetorical questions, to get their audience involved in what is being presented, as this activates and motivates them.
- using rhetorical questions should be utilized as a way of making people, especially students in classrooms, think deeply and critically about the material discussed.
- using rhetorical questions in giving lectures, speeches, or presentations gives the presenter more enthusiasm, zeal, and positive attitude in bridging out the gap with the audience.
- rhetorical questions broaden presenters' horizons and start creating more ideas, depending on the activation and engagement from the audience' side.
- usage of rhetorical questions increases the amount of persuasion from the side of the presenter.
- using rhetorical questions emphasizes the points highlighted by the presenter.
- using rhetorical questions makes the audience more focused and attentive, careful, and vigilant.
- rhetorical questions encourage the presenter to guess, or predict what the audience is thinking of.
- in order to capture the audience' attention, the presenter should use questions that have positive answers.
- it is wise to study the audience well before presentation so as to be careful what kind of rhetorical questions to use; cultural background, age, environment are important here.

Conclusion

Rhetorical questions should be delivered with extreme care; harsh ones may cause problems to the audience. It is wise not to use negative jokes and make fun of the audience, even unintentionally, and that is why the presenter should study ahead the community of people he is dealing with. Some bad presentations make the audience get provoked and angry, and may shout at the presenter and start leaving the domain.

Rhetorical questions, if used properly and appropriately, can consolidate the relationship between the presenter and the audience and this makes them enjoy and share the speech delivered. Remember that dealing with the audience is an art; confidence, mutual respect, and trust that all lead to successful ends.

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About the Researchers

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Amal Allamki is an English Language instructor at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences- Department of English- Ibri College of Applied Sciences, Ministry of Higher Education- the Sultanate of Oman. She holds a Master's Degree in Curriculum and Methods of Teaching English Language. She has been teaching English for EFL undergraduate university students for more than ten years. Her research interests include academic writing, and challenges in EFL education.

Mr. Younes Audeh is the head of the translation committee and a lecturer at the Department of English at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences- Ibri College of Applied Sciences - the Sultanate of Oman. He is an M.A. holder in Applied Linguistics from Indiana University of Pennsylvania- USA. He has been teaching English as an ESL/EFL for a long time. He has taught at a number of colleges and universities in different countries: Jordan, Kingdom of Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and the Sultanate of Oman. His research interest is "academic writing".

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Appendices

Questionnaire

Rhetorical Questions

Hello all,

The researchers are conducting an academic research on "Rhetorical Questions" for one group of Foundation Year Programme (FY), at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences-Ibri College-Sultanate of Oman. It consists of ten questions and may take five minutes, or less to do. Feel free to express yourselves as your names will not be identified. This research is for academic purposes only. Thanks for your cooperation.

Rhetorical Questions

1. Rhetorical Questions are asked for influence and persuasion, not for getting answers.
A) Agree B) Disagree
2. Rhetorical Questions make the audience-people- think deeply about its content.
A) Agree B) Disagree
3. Rhetorical Questions, sometimes, are asked for pure challenge and to show superiority.
A) Agree B) Disagree
- 4) Rhetorical Questions are bad in all cases; they are mostly asked for making fun of others.
A) Agree B) Disagree
5. Rhetorical Questions are often asked to make the listener bless the speaker's question, as the answer is always in the positive form.
A) Agree B) Disagree

Answer the following questions about yourself.

6. Do you, sometimes, ask Rhetorical Question?
A) Yes B) no
7. Normally, my Rhetorical Questions are oral, not written, and I ask them just for pleasure and humor.
8. Asking too many Rhetorical Questions has a negative effect and might cause insults and create problems between the presenter and the listener.
A) Yes B) No

9. If I were a judge in court, I would ask lawyers to not use Rhetorical Questions, as they –
lawyers- mislead, confuse, and misdirect defendants.

A) Yes

B) No

10. If you were a novelist, or short story writer, and you believe that the opening sentence is
normally the hardest, would you come up with a hook using a Rhetorical Question as a way of telling the
audience about the content of that literary work?

A) Yes

B) No