ENTHYMENES

The enthymeme is an ancient concept put forth by Aristotle in his text, On Rhetoric. Simply put, enthymemes are invisible, unstated assumptions about what an audience thinks that are present in texts, especially in texts that are trying to convince you to do something or believe something. Political speeches, letters to the editors, and advertisements are filled with them, but you can also find them in other pieces of writing that aren’t necessarily trying to persuade you to do or think anything. The assumption is generally a value judgment or a belief about the way the world works that the writer or speaker presumes the audience holds. The writer or speaker invokes that assumption – without actually articulating it – and then uses the assumption to support his or her argument. The danger here is that this practice can be manipulative: when we become aware of our assumptions, we sometimes realize that they are illogical, biased, or incorrect. If that is so, then arguments based on them may no longer hold water.

Three key things to remember about enthymemes:

1. **Enthymemes are invisible or unstated.** You can’t point to words spoken or written by the author and say “that’s the enthymeme.”

2. **Enthymemes are a value judgment or a belief about the way the world works.**
   “Women are nurturers,” “people in the middle ages were barbaric and uncivilized,” “adolescents are easily persuaded to do bad things by their peers,” or “elderly people are all hard of hearing” are all possible enthymemes. **An enthymeme is never a fact.** “The current president of the United States is George Bush,” “The University of Minnesota has over twenty thousand undergraduates,” or “There are one hundred senators” would never be an enthymeme.

3. **Enthymemes can be logical or illogical.** A logical enthymeme might be “The more citizens that vote in an election, the more democratic the election will be.” Such an enthymeme is logical: If democracy is “rule by the people,” high voter turnout ensures that the people, and not just a few individuals, are making political decisions. An illogical enthymeme, on the other hand, might be “All white men from rural areas are conservative Republicans.” Since there are, of course, liberal, white men living in rural areas, the claim is falsifiable and thus illogical.

Here’s a piece of text with an enthymeme embedded in it:

In the 1950s, trustees at Ivy League schools voted to eliminate the schools’ geography departments, and within a decade geography departments were a rarity at most public universities and liberal arts colleges.

What is the enthymeme? Is it logical or illogical?