

THE Response Letters of Concerned Students to their Notice to Explain: A Discourse ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This study identified specific pragmatic and rhetorical strategies used by the concerned students in their response letters to the Notice to Explain (NTE). The study sought to reveal student perspectives, concerns, and motivations, explored the reasons behind their language choices, and discern institutional values within the discourse of student conduct. The pragmatic strategies used by the concerned students were mostly Informing, Reporting, and Asserting under the representative speech acts theory of Searle. The rhetorical strategy commonly used was *Demonstrating Ethical Commitment* under Ethos of the rhetorical appeals by Aristotle. The students used a combination of pragmatic and rhetorical strategies in their response letters to the NTEs to be understood and considered by the letter's recipients. These strategies helped the students justify their behavior, manifest remorse, and appeal for consideration while indicating their commitment to ethical conduct. It was found that students who promised better conduct and appealed to empathy and forgiveness received lighter disciplinary measures. It is recommended that students enhance their ability to present facts to strengthen credibility, critical thinking, and persuasive communication. The student conduct committee should also conduct thorough investigations rather than relying solely on NTEs to ensure fairness and accuracy. Guidelines for writing effective response letters should be developed to better analyze a larger sample size for more reliable findings.

KEYWORDS: *Education, Applied Linguistics, Rhetorical, Notice to Explain, Philippines.*

INTRODUCTION

A response letter is a formal written communication in which one replies to a prior message, often providing justifications, clarifications, or explanations. As explained by Coulthard & Johnson (2007), it usually includes denials or expressions of remorse and serves as one's chance to be heard before any disciplinary decision is made. It is typically written in response to a Notice to Explain (NTE), making the two documents inherently connected in disciplinary

proceedings. Since students can violate rules in academic institutions, they can receive NTE from the disciplinary committee to ensure they are given an opportunity to be heard. It is significant for a response letter to reflect the voice of the respondent, perspective, and concerns. Despite this role, many response letters have difficulty addressing the allegations. When they fail to meet the expected standards of coherence and persuasiveness, misunderstandings happen and opportunities for proper defense are missed leading to a potential extensive disciplinary outcome. Others may miss necessary details because of stress, fear of authority, or lack of writing support due to a lack of familiarity and mastery of the medium used in the letter.

Language barriers are another complication considered. Pedersen & Bacon (2024) specified multilingual students in their study, whose writing may be misunderstood or unfairly judged. The study of Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) analyzed politeness and pragmatics in student-to-faculty emails. It offered insight into how non-native speakers create requests and responses. Its highlight is on the language barriers that may restrict the strategic use of politeness and indirectness, which are culturally and linguistically sensitive. These challenges helped examine the pragmatic and rhetorical strategies utilized in student response letters.

The result of this study have implications for both policy and pedagogy. They may guide the planning of clear, culturally sensitive guidelines for evaluating student response letters. The findings can guide the development of training programs for faculty and staff involved in student discipline, promoting consistent, fair, and supportive communication practices. As a result, the study contributes to the advancement of equitable disciplinary processes by highlighting how language functions within institutional power structures and advocating for student-centered approaches to disciplinary communication.

Research Questions

1. What are the pragmatic strategies employed by the concerned students in their response letters to the NTE?
2. What are the rhetorical strategies employed by the concerned students in their response letters to the NTE?
3. How do pragmatic strategies shape the disciplinary outcomes for the concerned students?
4. How do rhetorical strategies shape the disciplinary outcomes for the concerned students?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design. This study employed a qualitative research design using discourse analysis, integrating pragmatic and rhetorical analysis to examine how students crafted response letters to Notices to Explain (NTEs). Pragmatic analysis explored how students conveyed intentions, managed relationships, and used politeness strategies, while rhetorical analysis examined how they structured arguments and employed persuasive appeals such as ethos, pathos, and logos. Combining these approaches enabled a comprehensive analysis of the language strategies used and their possible influence on disciplinary outcomes.

Data Source. The corpus consisted of student response letters submitted for alleged major violations during SY 2022–2023 and 2023–2024, obtained from the archived records of the Office of Student Affairs. Due to limited available records caused by poor documentation and staff turnover, all available letters meeting the inclusion criteria were analyzed. Response letters involving minor offenses, unresolved cases, or cases without sanctions were excluded.

To triangulate the findings, 10 members of the Student Conduct Committee who participated in disciplinary decisions and had reviewed the response letters were selected for in-depth interviews. The interviews explored their interpretations of the letters and their recollections of the corresponding disciplinary outcomes.

RESULTS

Pragmatic Strategies Used in Students' Response Letters to NTEs

Categorized analysis of illocutions applied in selected response letters (RL) to Notices to Explain (NTEs). Drawing from verbatim excerpts, each strategy is classified according to its illocutionary force, which includes representatives, directives, commissives, and expressives. Under representatives are specific strategies, namely informing, claiming, reporting, stating, asserting, describing, assuring, and telling. The illocutions directives, commissives, and expressives have one specific strategy each, and they are suggesting, promising, and deploring, respectively.

Representatives. This is the commonly used strategy by the concerned students. It aims to commit the speaker to the truth of the propositions. This

illustrates that to convey factual information or statements about reality, they apply this the most. Specific strategies are defined and presented below.

Informing provides new information regarding a situation. This information is based on facts that realistically happened. Three notable excerpts show this from the response letters. Aside from RL 18, RL02 and RL17 also employed this strategy especially when RL 02 stated,

It was my mom's 48th birthday on January 13 and she urged me to go with them for the celebration since she already booked an overnight stay in Discovery Samal, and thus I was not present for the scheduled advanced class on the 13th of January at 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM for the neurology concept. (RL02)

The writer in the statement claimed that the writer is involved in the letter admitted their mistakes without denying these in the first place. This is because they believed that it was normal and that they have learned their lessons.

Reporting involves conveying information about an event, action, or situation. Three excerpts were found from the response letters. Aside from RL11, the response letter of RL02 and RL06 also used this strategy. It can be remembered that part of RL02 used Informing, but similarly, the same line can be attributed to reporting. For example,

It was my mom's 48th birthday on January 13 and she urged me to go with them for the celebration since she already booked an overnight stay in Discovery Samal, and thus I was not present for the scheduled advanced class on the 13th of January at 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM for the neurology concept. (RL02)

Stating involves expressing something clearly and directly. It is a factual declaration, though it does not necessarily imply strong conviction or defense. For example, RL11 stated,

Since our clinical instructor announced last meeting that the attendance would be considered as quizzes or "attendance quizzes". (RL11)

This line conveys information through factual information about a change in policy regarding attendance. The act of announcing implies that the instructor believes the information they are providing is true; hence was used as the basis of action by RL11. However, this does not mean that because the teacher announced that the attendance will be considered as a quiz, students should be asking whosoever is available to sign on their behalf.

The student asserted his/her identity and the fact that the behavior resulted in a policy violation. This is a direct assertion of understanding of the action as a policy violation and the specific nature of that violation.

Describing is focused in creating a clear representation of something such as a person, place, object, event, or feeling. This language appeals to the senses. Aside from RL17 that focused on details, RL02 stated not only bare facts but provided additional information that paints a clearer picture of the situation.

It was my mom's 48th birthday on January 13. She already booked an overnight stay in Discovery Samal. The scheduled advanced class on the 13th of January at 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM for the neurology concept. My classmate and close friend, Kent... attendance would be considered as quizzes or "attendance quizzes"...A student who is mostly present, except for the time that I got hospitalized, for all my RLE classes and concept classes...a student who is not misbehaving and disrespectful...nervousness and overthinking for my first unexcused absent. (RL02)

The concerned student was using descriptive language to elaborate on the events, the people involved, the policies, and his/her own feelings and typical behavior. This helps the recipient to better understand the context and nuances of the situation being reported. The goal is to create a more comprehensive and detailed representation of reality as the speaker perceives it.

The speaker is presenting this information as their understanding of the situation. The student tells his/her side of the story, being unaware of the possible actions that the other student could take after obtaining the photos. He continues writing, telling the authority that the photos were transferred to another student's laptop, which could be used for whatever purpose one had.

Directives. Another illocution that surfaced in the analysis are directives, which is specifically employed in the form of suggesting. The writer may subtly tell the recipient what to do. For example, RL04 put forward an idea or a course of action that the student believed should be taken. S/He is suggesting a way to proceed.

Before deciding on the punishment of some of the people in section F, we would like that section D will also go through the exact same process as we did to maintain fairness. (RL04)

The statement's suggestion is based on the principle of fairness, and the speaker is inferring that applying the same process to section D will lead to a fair outcome, drawing a conclusion based on their understanding of fairness and the situation.

Commissives. This illocutionary force is also found in the analyzed corpora. Commissives refer to the speaker expressing their will to do something. The example is found in RL19.

I assure you that both he and I will take extra precautions to prevent such incidents from happening in the future. (RL19)

In this case, the speaker is committing him/herself and another person to "take extra precautions." The phrase, "I assure you", signals the speaker's intention to fulfill the stated action. It is not just a prediction but a pledge. Notice also, that though the other student did not write a response letter, providing commitment regarding a future action, the accused student stood as representative for both of them, "...both he and I...". This speaks about a possible action that the accused might do, informing or helping may be the other student regarding what to do in the future to avoid committing the same mistake.

Expressives. Lastly, statements showing expressives are found in the analysis. Expressives are all about conveying psychological states. This is specifically illustrated in the strategy of deploring as in the following excerpt.

She thinks is a direct attack on her where in fact I am just doing my duties and responsibilities. (RL01)

The phrase, "where in fact I am just doing my duties and responsibilities", reveals the speaker's frustration and perhaps resentment. The implication is that the accusation of a "direct attack" is unfair, leading to feelings of being misunderstood or wrongly accused. The statement focuses on the speaker's *internal state* or feelings about the situation. It is not just a report of what happened but a revelation of how the speaker is *experiencing* the event. The phrase "where in fact I am just doing my duties..." highlights the speaker's perception of their actions as being misinterpreted.

Rhetorical Strategies Used in Student's Response Letters to NTEs

The strategies used by the concerned students in their response letters to NTEs are categorized under three main appeals, namely Logos, Ethos, and Pathos. Each category corresponds to specific strategies, an associated response letter and sample texts.

Logos. Logos was employed by the concerned students, trying to rationalize their behavior by presenting structured arguments and detailed explanations. Under Logos, there are specific strategies, and these include causal relationships, counter arguments and refutations, statistical evidence, and definition and clarification.

Causal Relationship. Another common strategy commonly used in the response under logos is establishing causal relationships. This strategy demonstrates clear cause-and-effect connections in one's reasoning. For example, in the line of RL 01.

I regretfully thought of this wrongdoing.
(RL01)

This implies a cause-and-effect connection between thinking about the wrongdoing and regret. The *cause* is reflecting on the wrongdoing that triggers a response through the phrase, "thought of this wrongdoing," while the *effect*, "I regretfully", is the act of thinking leads to regret.

Counterarguments and Refutations. This specific strategy employed by the two response letters. This strategy addresses and refutes opposing claims. The lines below exemplify this.

She thinks is a direct attack on her where in

fact I am just doing my duties and responsibilities. (RL01)

The statement logically addresses and counters a perceived misunderstanding or accusation. She thinks it is a direct attack on her, and provides details that the subject (*She*) had a different understanding regarding the action of the student (the accused).

Statistical Evidence. This is also evident in the response letter. This strategy incorporates data, statistics, and empirical research to support arguments. Example is the line of RL10.

Since the ratio for an excused absences is 1:1
while for an unexcused absence is 1:4. (RL10)

By providing ratio, the student tried to provide evidence using statistics as to why they committed such misconduct, supporting their reason. However, though the reason is evidence-based using statistics, it is still invalid according to the existing policy.

Definition and clarification. This is used to define rules or policies to argue that the actions were within acceptable boundaries or based on misjudgments. For example, the statement of RL04 says,

Mistakes are made, lessons learned, and
honestly, though paramount, may falter at
times. (RL04)

The statement presents a logical sequence of events and clarifies real human error and growth. The phrase, "Mistakes are made" acknowledges possible human error. Even though humans commit mistakes, there are still good things that can be learned from them.

Ethos. The second rhetorical strategy used is Ethos, and this is employed by most of the concerned students to establish honesty and look at them as responsible individuals who deserve consideration. The specific strategies employed under Ethos include demonstrate ethical commitment, personal anecdotes, transparent communication, and acknowledge opposing views.

Demonstrating Ethical Commitment. This was employed to express reform and reaffirm their dedication to ethical behavior to emphasize that their actions do not reflect their true character. For example, RL 17 which says,

But I understand the concern. Neither I nor
any of my friends would want to jeopardize
ourselves or the integrity of this school.
(RL17)

This statement emphasizes the student's commitment to upholding the school's integrity and avoiding any actions that could harm either him/her or the institution. This demonstrates a sense of responsibility and a desire to maintain the school's reputation. More so, the statement of RL12 falls under the same strategy, which says,

I have taken the time to reflect on my actions
and I am fully prepared to face the
consequences, as outlined by the school's
disciplinary procedures. I pledge to uphold
these standards fervently to safeguard our
school's honor and integrity. (RL12)

This statement strongly emphasizes the speaker's ethical commitment. The student acknowledges his/her responsibility for such actions, shows willingness to accept the consequences, and expresses a clear understanding of the importance of responsible social media use and data security.

Personal Anecdotes. This assisted the student in sharing personal experiences to build credibility and explain the context behind the actions. For example, RL11 stated that,

Add on the fact that I am a student who is
mostly present, except for the time that I got
hospitalized, for all my RLE classes and
concept classes. (RL11)

The student provided a narration to justify the previous attendance record that shows s/he is generally responsible. A student highlighted his/her generally good attendance and behavior, emphasizing that this is an unusual situation for him/her. This personal anecdote aims to portray a responsible and well-behaved student, making the argument more persuasive.

Consistency in Arguments. This is evident in the response letters analyzed. The excerpt that follows is an example.

I take responsibility for my actions and understand the seriousness of the school situation...(RL09)

This line promotes consistency by ensuring the speaker's current statement aligns with their previous acknowledgements, supports their claims of understanding and remorse, avoids contradictions, contributes to a coherent narrative, and strengthens any potential appeals for a favorable outcome.

Transparent Communication. The use of transparent communication enabled the student to openly take responsibility for the actions while demonstrating an understanding of the seriousness of the issue. For example, in RL 10's statement,

This is the first offense that I have done in my entire life as a student and I did this due to the fact I was desperate in decreasing my (internship) extension. (RL10)

It emphasizes honesty, accountability, and the student's character. The student openly admits to making a mistake instead of hiding it. This demonstrates transparency.

Acknowledge Opposing Views. Another specific strategy employed under Ethos is acknowledging opposing views. This is used to recognize alternative perspectives. For example, RL20 wrote,

Though I am a victim as well in this situation. Moreover, I am willing to make amends and apologize to Doc __ personally. (RL20)

The student accepted some responsibility while also positioning him/herself as a victim, possibly to gain sympathy and make the reader realize that despite being a victim, still s/he is willing to apologize.

Use of Expert Opinions. The use of expert opinions is another strategy employed in the response letters. A statement citing authoritative figures or experts in the field falls under this strategy. Just like in the example of RL04, that states,

It is in this spirit of justice and truth that we
humble [humbly] ask for an investigation.
(RL04)

It can be interpreted from above that the student acknowledges their need to seek help from those in authority or experts for investigation. By using the metaphor, "*spirit of justice and truth*", it can be inferred that the students are referring to those people in power.

Pathos. The third rhetorical strategy used by the concerned students is Pathos. This strategy is used to evoke empathy, understanding, and moral alignment from the readers. Concerned students drew on highly expressive language to announce their frustration or personal struggles. By communicating their feelings of pressure or helplessness, they seek sympathy and consideration from the readers.

Emotive Language. Choosing words that carry emotional meaning is a common strategy in the data. For example:

I was very guilty to the point that I was not
able to sleep or eat and was in a state of
thought about ending what I was feeling, but I
know that I have God to comfort me, even if I
have failed Him. He gave me the courage and
strength to voice out the truth for me to have
learned my lessons. I promise that I will not
do it again. (RL03)

This statement is using emotive language. The words, "guilty," "not able to sleep or eat," "ending what I was feeling," "comfort," "courage," and "strength" directly express the student's emotional state. A deep feeling of guilt and distress can be understood, but one can find comfort in his/her faith, which sustains the strength to confess, learn from the mistake, and be willing to renew.

Appeal to Values. Employing this specific strategy reassures the authority figure that the concerned students recognize the severity of their actions, and they are willing to uphold the institution's values. For example, RL08 expressed his/her awareness of moral responsibility and accountability by appealing to the values of fairness and justice.

I understand the importance of honesty and
integrity in our academic environment and I

am committed to upholding these values in the future. I am willing to accept any consequences that may result from my actions and am prepared to take steps to make amends for the harm I have caused. (RL08)

The student emphasized remorse, accountability, and commitment to ethical behavior. S/he is not only admitting mistakes but also demonstrating an understanding of the significance of the actions, willing to face the consequences, and committed to doing better in the future. By using the phrase, “I understand the importance of honesty and integrity in our academic environment...”, the student aligns his/her arguments with the school’s core beliefs and values.

Personal Stories. Students include personal stories to relate to themselves and provide context for their actions. Personal struggles or emotional distress that influenced their decisions are highlighted in the narratives to foster a sense of empathy. For example, in the account of RL05:

It was just that I was under pressure, thinking I would fail since I got a low score on the last quiz, no matter how hard I studied. (RL05)

This portrays a student as a diligent learner who yielded to academic pressure, hoping to be understood. The facts of having a low score are not simply stated but the cause of the behavior is also explained. The source of the stress is attempted to be presented, and the cause of the pressure is explained.

Shared Experiences. The students attempted to validate their actions and reduce their perceived severity by using shared experiences. They highlighted social bonds and shared circumstances to suggest that their behavior was not out of malice but rather a necessity. For example, the statement of RL17 frames the situation as a harmless, normal act rather than a violation, applying camaraderie to justify the actions.

The female in question is my classmate who really needed to use the CR and the female CR was locked for a while. All of us were close that’s why we didn’t mind. (RL17)

Ways in how pragmatic strategies shape the disciplinary outcomes for the concerned students. Two essential themes emerged in the analysis of the

data gathered through in-depth interviews which are managing accountability through explanation and justification and image restoration through remorse and commitment to change.

Managing accountability through explanation and justification. This theme was gathered from the two core ideas of the participants' observations. When students manage accountability by offering explanations and justifications, often by providing context, suggesting alternative viewpoints, or clarifying intentions, they typically receive more serious consequences, such as suspensions ranging from eight to 11 days, and up to 25 hours of community service. Below is the sample utterance of Participants F and D.

From my perspective, it's (letter) direct and easily understood. It's either they justify the behavior, or they will explain or ask for forgiveness. It is not just good if they justify. We depend on the manner of the students' explanation, which is why their value of accepting matters a lot in the committee's decision. There was one case that one did not admit despite the fact that others had already. So the sanction varies. There are 5, 10, or even up to the maximum.

This core idea suggests that while students attempt to be clear and provide the necessary background information regarding the incident, their efforts were interpreted by the conduct committee as attempts to excuse their behavior or minimize their responsibility rather than taking full ownership. As shown in the committee members' reflections, students who emphasize their intent or deny wrongdoing were perceived to be aggravating. For instance, PF highlighted the difference between explaining, justifying, and apologizing, where justification is seen negatively. Similarly, PD and PH emphasized that acknowledgment and remorse carry more weight in disciplinary decisions, with sanctions varying accordingly.

This core idea reflects how students strategically use directive and commissive illocutionary acts to subtly negotiate outcomes without directly denying fault. While this approach avoids justification, it still falls short of full admission of responsibility. As seen in Participant G's observation, "*They are not persuasive but asking not to give heavy punishment,*" the students' efforts are less about contesting the facts and more about mitigating consequences.

Similarly, Participant D describes how students often do not dispute the sanctions but appeal for specific concessions, such as being allowed to graduate or retain scholarships. These utterances highlight that while students recognize the inevitability of punishment, they redirect the conversation toward preserving critical personal goals.

Image restoration through remorse and commitment to change. This theme was gathered from the two core ideas. Students who focused on image restoration tend to receive more lenient sanctions, usually limited to three to five days of suspension and five hours of community service. This suggests that expressions of genuine regret and commitment to improvement are more favorably received by conduct committee. Promising better conduct, and Showing remorse and seeking understanding are strategies that show remorse, reflection, or commitment to change correlate with more lenient consequences, while those that justify or deflect responsibility correlate with extensive penalties. This suggests that the conduct committee considered students who took responsibility and showed remorse for their acts. Promising better conduct is linked to the least severe outcomes with a three (3) to five (5) day suspension and five (5) hours of community service. Below is the sample utterance of Participants H and G.

But there is an impact, especially if they admit to being guilty and regretting. There are times when the sanction given is lesser in terms of years.

Showing remorse and seeking understanding is linked to the least severe outcomes, which was 3-5 day suspension and 5 hours of community service. Expressing regret and trying to connect with the readers who are members of the conduct committee on an emotional level is associated with the mildest disciplinary actions. Below are sample utterances of Participants A and G.

They are preparing to be remorseful to be forgiven.

But there is an impact especially if they say that they are guilty and regretful. Although it is not absolute that there is no consequence. It's just like a way to understand their situation. It's just like appeal to pity, more on understanding them. It can affect less, but they need to accept the consequence of their violation.

The core idea involves the use of expressive and emotive illocutionary acts, where students not only admit fault but also appeal to the emotional sensibilities of the conduct committee. This strategy is consistently linked to the least severe disciplinary outcomes, suggesting that emotional honesty and a desire to be understood are effective in reducing penalties. Participant A notes that students often prepare to appear remorseful in hopes of gaining forgiveness, implying a deliberate but emotionally grounded strategy. Participant G explained that while remorse does not eliminate consequences, it encourages the committee to consider the students' emotional state and personal context, described as a form of "appeal to pity" or an attempt to empathize. This interpretation shows that when remorse is paired with acceptance of responsibility.

DISCUSSION

Pragmatic Strategies Used in Student's Response Letters to NTEs

The findings show that explanation, justification, and clarification are central pragmatic strategies students use to communicate their intentions and manage accountability in response letters to Notices to Explain (NTEs). Through various illocutionary acts, particularly representatives, students presented their version of events, accepted responsibility, and attempted to influence the interpretation of their actions. This supports Hyland (2022) and Barton and Ryan (2021), who argue that institutional discourse relies on strategic language use to establish credibility and accountability.

Among the representative speech acts, students employed informing, claiming, reporting, stating, asserting, describing, assuring, and telling to provide factual accounts, explain circumstances, express emotions, and preserve credibility. These strategies allowed students to justify their actions while demonstrating sincerity and responsibility. This finding is consistent with Coffin and Donohue (2022) on evaluative description and Hyland and Jiang (2021) on stance-taking and epistemic positioning in institutional writing.

Students also used directives by respectfully requesting fair consideration, commissives through promises of future compliance, and expressives by apologizing, thanking, and expressing regret to repair relationships and mitigate the impact of their violations. These findings align with Hyland and Jiang (2021), who emphasized the persuasive role of directives,

and Sari and Dinita (2022), who identified promises as strategic expressions of commitment.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that NTE response letters are strategic communicative acts rather than simple explanations. Students deliberately combined pragmatic strategies to explain their actions, establish credibility, express accountability, and appeal for leniency while seeking more favorable disciplinary outcomes.

Rhetorical Strategies Used in Student's Response Letters to NTEs

The findings show that students strategically employed the rhetorical appeals of logos, ethos, and pathos in their response letters to Notices to Explain (NTEs) to defend their actions, restore credibility, and seek leniency. These rhetorical strategies functioned as deliberate persuasive tools rather than simple writing choices.

Under logos, students used causal relationships, counterarguments and refutations, statistical evidence, and definition and clarification to justify their actions and construct logical, coherent arguments. These strategies strengthened the credibility and persuasiveness of their explanations by appealing to reason and fairness. The findings are consistent with Zare and Talebinezhad (2021), Wu and Allison (2022), and the St. Louis Community College Writing Center (2022), which emphasize that logical reasoning, evidence, and clear explanations enhance persuasive discourse.

For ethos, students established credibility through demonstrating ethical commitment, personal anecdotes, consistency in argument, transparent communication, acknowledgment of opposing views, and appeals to authority. These strategies highlighted accountability, sincerity, and moral responsibility, reinforcing their trustworthiness before the disciplinary committee. This supports Martínez and Kang (2021), Zhao and Llinares (2022), Wodak (2020), Hyland and Jiang (2021), Rawlins (2008), Bitektine and Haack (2015), Reinhart and Spiekermann (2014), and Cialdini (2001), who argue that credibility is strengthened through honesty, consistency, transparency, and ethical positioning.

Through pathos, students sought empathy by using emotive language, appeals to values, personal stories, shared experiences, symbols, and metaphors. These emotional strategies emphasized remorse, personal struggles, and moral

reflection, encouraging the committee to view their actions with greater understanding while reinforcing the sincerity of their appeals. These findings align with Zhang and Li (2021), Safitri et al. (2021), Turner (2020), Brehm (2019), Fisher (1987), and Gibbs (2017), who emphasize the persuasive power of emotional language, shared experiences, symbolism, and metaphor in shaping audience responses.

Ways in how pragmatic strategies shape the disciplinary outcomes for the concerned students. The pragmatic and rhetorical strategies shape the disciplinary outcomes for the concerned students by influencing the conduct committee of the students' real intention in sending response letters to NTE. Hoefer (2016) mentioned that an integrated view of rhetoric complements and extends the model of decision-making. This means that the way the students present and organize their arguments in their letters of explanation and their actual face-to-face questioning influenced the committee's decision regarding their committed wrongdoing. Having this, it can be said that the committee assessed the concerned students' rhetorical and pragmatic strategies to consider their sincerity, accountability, responsibility, and comprehension of their mistakes before deciding on a suitable sanction.

Managing accountability through explanation and justification. The theme of managing accountability through explanation and justification illustrates how students respond to disciplinary actions by explaining or justifying their behavior while attempting to influence sanctions. The findings indicate that explanations perceived as excuses often weaken accountability, whereas those accompanied by responsibility and remorse are viewed more favorably. This supports Kauffman and Lichter (2023), who found that justifications tend to be interpreted as attempts to deflect responsibility, while explanations that acknowledge wrongdoing demonstrate genuine accountability. The study also highlights the importance of sincerity and remorse in disciplinary decisions. Participants observed that students who admitted their mistakes and expressed genuine regret were more likely to receive lenient sanctions, consistent with restorative justice research emphasizing empathy and accountability.

Finally, students often sought reduced sanctions by appealing to personal circumstances, such as graduation or scholarship retention. This pragmatic strategy reflects an effort to lessen consequences without denying responsibility. As noted by Amsden and Connolly (2021), such appeals are common in

high-stakes situations but are generally insufficient unless supported by clear accountability and sincere remorse.

Image restoration through remorse and commitment to change. This theme aligns with recent literature on restorative practices, disciplinary fairness, and accountability in education. The findings show that expressions of remorse and commitments to behavioral change influence disciplinary outcomes because they align with the moral expectations of conduct committees. Consistent with Braithwaite (2023), participants noted that students who acknowledge wrongdoing and accept responsibility are more likely to receive lighter sanctions. Similarly, Evans and Lester (2021) found that admissions of guilt combined with sincere remorse often reduce the severity of disciplinary penalties.

The study also found that students use commissive and expressive illocutionary acts as image restoration strategies. In line with Benoit's (1995) Image Restoration Theory and Lee and Toglia (2022), participants observed that students seek forgiveness by expressing remorse and promising change. However, emotional appeals only mitigate, rather than eliminate, disciplinary consequences. As participants emphasized, remorse is persuasive only when accompanied by accountability and acceptance of the imposed sanctions.

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