Signs, Soul, and Resonance: Teaching *Ayah* as Rhetorical Orientation from the Islamic Tradition

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Introduction

In Arabic, the word *ayah* refers to a verse or line from the Qur'an, the sacred text of Islam, but also carries a broader meaning as a "sign" or "evidence" of Divine presence. Unlike a verse in other traditions, which may primarily serve as a textual unit, *ayat* (plural) function as dynamic indicators appearing in scripture, nature, human interactions, history, and internal states, inviting responses like reflection (*tafakkur*), recognition (*maʿrifah*), or remembrance (*dhikr*). As a rhetorical form, *ayah* structures Divine speech, shapes audience reception through affective and spiritual appeals, and bridges the seen and unseen.

As an embodied sign, *ayah* reshapes rhetorical concepts across multiple arenas. In public memory, *ayat* promotes collective remembrance through practices like communal recitation or ethical witnessing (*shahadah*), embedding Divine signs in shared narratives of the *ummah* (global Muslim community), as seen in protest language surrounding the genocide happening in Palestine to digital *khutbahs*. In rhetorical history, *ayah* challenges Greco-Roman frameworks by centering Divine authorship, which complicates ethos by rooting credibility in Allah's (God's) voice rather than human character, as evident in the Prophet Muhammad's (ﷺ) embodiment of the Qur'an. In interpersonal communication, *ayat* encourage ethical attunement through reflective engagement, advancing dialogue grounded in spiritual purpose. In rhetorical criticism, *ayah* offers a standpoint to analyze texts as Divine invitations, shifting focus from persuasion to moral realignment. The *ummah* as an interpretive community redefines audience, encompassing not only human listeners but also spiritual and intergenerational collectives, united by shared memory and Divine address.

Building on these foundations, *ayah* operates as the architecture of Divine speech, marking the structure of Qur'anic rhetoric through linguistic precision, sonic resonance, and thematic coherence. It also enacts a rhetoric of return, guiding individuals back to God-consciousness within the Islamic view of life as a test (*fitnah*), where every sign prompts realignment, reflection, and ethical action. This orientation transforms rhetorical practice by prioritizing purpose over persuasive perfection.

This resource addresses critical gaps in rhetorical education, which often privileges Western-centric, argument-driven frameworks, marginalizing non-

Western epistemologies like Islamic rhetoric. By introducing *ayah*, it challenges students to rethink persuasion as a call to spiritual and ethical response rather than mere conviction, reimagines audience as a dynamic, spiritually connected community, and foregrounds ethical communication as an act of witnessing Divine signs. These shifts equip students as rhetorical scholars and practitioners to engage diverse traditions, foster inclusive dialogue, and approach communication with heightened ethical awareness. Appendix B facilitates cross-cultural comparisons to Western rhetorical concepts, enhancing students' analytical versatility.

Course Applicability

Undergraduate Courses
History of Rhetoric
Intercultural Communication
Public Speaking
Religion and Public Life

Graduate Courses
Comparative Rhetoric
Rhetorical Theory
Decolonial Rhetorics
Performance Studies
Faith, Ethics, and Social Justice

Key Pedagogical Themes

Divine Signs: *Ayah* serves as both a Qur'anic verse and a Divine sign, rooted in linguistic, spiritual, and theological dimensions. Students explore how *ayat* form the basis of Islamic law (*shari'ah*), belief (*'aqidah*), and ethical guidance, shaping intellectual and moral life.

Guidance Amid Turmoil: *Ayat* act as a rhetorical compass during life's tests (*fitnah*). This theme examines how *ayat* guide through remembrance (*dhikr*), repentance (*tawbah*), and purposeful action, offering a dynamic framework for navigating challenges.

Embodied Rhetoric: *Ayat* are lived through practices like prayer, reflection (*tafakkur*), and moral conduct. Drawing from *hadith*, this theme highlights how Divine signs are inscribed on the body and behavior, bridging text and action.

Orality and Resonance: The Qur'an's oral transmission through recitation, *athan*, *khutbah*, and memorization shapes consciousness and community. Students analyze how *ayat*'s sound and rhythm create rhetorical impact.

Essential Terminology

Ayah (AH-yah): A Qur'anic verse or sign pointing to Divine truth, awakening, or ethical direction. *Ayat* (AH-yat) form the foundation of Islamic law, theology, and reflection.

Tafsir (taf-SEER): Qur'anic exegesis providing linguistic, legal, or theological context for *ayat*.

Hadith (ha-DEETH): Reported sayings or actions of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), offering embodied examples of how *ayat* are enacted.

Shari'ah (sha-REE-ah): Islamic law derived from the Qur'an and Sunnah, with *ayat* as primary sources.

Fitnah (FIT-nah): Trial or tribulation; life as a test, with *ayat* guiding purposeful action.

Shahadah (sha-HA-dah): Bearing witness, extending to an ethical posture of attentiveness to Divine signs.

Tafakkur (ta-fak-KUR): Deep contemplation, sacred engagement with *ayat*.

Dhikr (THIK-r): Remembrance of God, shaping perception and response to *ayat*.

Ummah (OOM-mah): The global Muslim community, a rhetorical audience shaped by shared memory and ivine address.

Balagha (ba-LA-gha): Classical Arabic rhetoric, analyzing the eloquence and beauty of *ayat*.

Primary Sources

Khan, Nouman Ali. "What's an Ayah?" *Bayyinah Institute*, March 6, 2015. Video, YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HKjUgJD0Tw4.

This source supports learning objectives in analyzing non-Western persuasion by introducing *ayah* as a divine sign. It enables discussions on how *ayat* differ from Western rhetorical signs (e.g., enthymeme) and assignments like comparative essays or reflective journals on spiritual literacy, connecting to broader concepts of persuasion and audience in introductory rhetoric courses.

The Qur'an. Translated by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem. *The Qur'an: English Translation and Parallel Arabic Text.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

This *hadith* supports learning objectives in understanding affective rhetoric by framing *ayat* as emotionally resonant. It enables assignments like rhetorical analyses of how *ayat* inspire ethical behavior and discussions on pathos in religious texts, connecting to broader rhetorical concepts of emotional appeal. As a classical text, no publication date is specified.

Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj. *Sahih Muslim*. Hadith 804. Translated by Nasiruddin al-Khattab. Accessed August 6, 2025. https://sunnah.com/muslim:804.

This *hadith* supports learning objectives in understanding affective rhetoric by framing ayat as emotionally resonant. It enables assignments like rhetorical analyses of how ayat inspire ethical behavior and discussions on pathos in religious texts, connecting to broader rhetorical concepts of emotional appeal. As a classical text, no publication date is specified.

Al-Bukhari, Muhammad ibn Isma'il. *Sahih al-Bukhari*. Hadith 5027. Translated by Muhammad Muhsin Khan. Accessed August 6, 2025. https://sunnah.com/bukhari:5027.

This *hadith* supports learning objectives in analyzing communal rhetoric by emphasizing *ayat*'s role in community building. It enables assignments like case studies on Qur'anic transmission and group discussions on how *ayat* foster collective identity, connecting to

rhetorical concepts of audience and communal discourse. As a classical text, no publication date is specified.

Al-Nasa'i, Ahmad ibn Shu'ayb. *Sunan al-Nasa'i*. Hadith 1601. Translated by Nasiruddin al-Khattab. Accessed August 6, 2025. https://sunnah.com/nasai:1601.

This *hadith* supports learning objectives in analyzing embodied ethos by showing the Prophet's enactment of *ayat*. It enables assignments like comparative essays on prophetic versus Western ethos and discussions on embodiment in rhetoric, connecting to broader concepts of credibility and performance. As a classical text, no publication date is specified.

Secondary Sources

Arabic Unlocked. "Quranic Word of the Day: Aayah." *Arabic Unlocked*, December 1, 2020. https://arabicunlocked.com/quranic-word-of-the-day-ayah/.

This source supports learning objectives in analyzing semiotics by exploring *ayah* as both cosmic and textual signs. It enables assignments like comparative essays on *ayatun kawniyyah* versus *ayatun shar'iyyah* and discussions on how signs shape audience perception, connecting to broader rhetorical concepts of semiotics and audience.

Khan, Nouman Ali, and Sharif Randhawa. *Divine Speech: Exploring the Qur'an as Literature.* Dallas, TX: Bayyinah Institute, 2016.

This text supports learning objectives in analyzing rhetorical style through *balagha*. It enables assignments like stylistic analyses of Qur'anic *ayat* and discussions on how eloquence persuades, connecting to broader rhetorical concepts of style and delivery in persuasive discourse.

Abdel Haleem, M. A. S. *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Style.* London: I.B. Tauris, 1993.

This monograph supports learning objectives in analyzing textual coherence in divine rhetoric. It enables assignments like thematic essays on *ayat*'s structural role and discussions on how coherence

shapes audience response, connecting to broader rhetorical concepts of arrangement and audience reception.

Sells, Michael. *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations.* Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 1999.

This work supports learning objectives in analyzing auditory rhetoric through Qur'anic orality. It enables assignments like listening exercises comparing recitation styles and discussions on how sound shapes rhetorical impact, connecting to broader concepts of delivery and performance, with accompanying recitations.

Ibn Kathir. "Tafsir Ibn Kathir." *Quran.com*. English translation, 2025. https://quran.com/1:1/tafsirs/en-tafisr-ibn-kathir.

This platform supports learning objectives in analyzing contextual rhetoric through *tafsir*. It enables assignments like exegetical essays on *ayah*'s situational meaning and discussions on how context shapes interpretation, connecting to broader rhetorical concepts of rhetorical situation and exigence.

Koleno, Sophia. "Between Hope and Death: Shaheed as Equipment for Living amid Palestine's Youth." In *Children and Youth in Armed Conflict: Responses, Resistance, and Portrayal in Media*, edited by T. M. Shah, 13–24. Vol. 35. Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2024. https://doi.org/10.1108/S1537-46612024000035002.

This chapter supports learning objectives in analyzing embodied rhetoric in political contexts. It enables assignments like case studies on *shaheed* as rhetorical resilience and discussions on how *ayat* shape ethical witnessing, connecting to broader rhetorical concepts of ethos and audience in political rhetoric.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the Qur'anic concept of *ayah* as a "sign" differ from a "verse" in other traditions, based on Khan's lecture and Abdel Haleem's translation?
2. Using Appendix A, analyze how specific *ayat* (e.g., 30:20–26) address different audiences or contexts. How does this shape their rhetorical function?

3. Based on the *hadith* from al-Nasa'i, how does the Prophet's embodiment of *ayat* redefine ethos compared to Western notions of speaker credibility?
4. Using *hadith* and *tafsir* sources, explore how *ayat* operate as both textual and ethical signs. How does this dual role influence behavior?
5. How does viewing the Qur'an as Divine speech change the reader's role? What responsibilities does this place on interpreting *ayat*?
6. Using Appendix B, compare *ayah* with a Western rhetorical term (e.g., enthymeme or kairos). What do these comparisons reveal about rhetorical priorities?
7. How does Surah al-Rum (30:20–26) encourage dialogue across disciplines or faiths by framing natural and human phenomena as signs?
8. Using Sells' work and recitation links in Appendix A, analyze how the Qur'an's oral delivery shapes its rhetorical resonance.
9. How does viewing *ayat* as signs to be witnessed influence ethical postures in writing, teaching, or advocacy?
10. How does *ayah* challenge conventional rhetoric focused on persuasion, and what new possibilities does it offer for understanding rhetorical purpose?

Appendix A: Selected Qur'anic Verses and Discussion Prompts

Qur'an 2:252

Text: "These are the revelations of God which We recite to you [Muhammad] with the truth, and you truly are one of the messengers."
Arabic: تِلْكَ ءَايَٰتُ ٱللَّهِ نَتْلُوهَا عَلَيْكَ بِٱلْحَقِّ ۚ وَإِنَّكَ لَمِنَ ٱلْمُرْسَلِينَ
Recitation: https://quran.com/2/252 (Audio)
Key Term: *Ayat* (revelations/signs)
Prompt: How does this *ayah* establish Divine authority? Discuss its rhetorical address to the Prophet and believers.

Qur'an 24:1

Text: "This is a sura We have sent down and made obligatory: We have sent down clear revelations in it, so that you may take heed."
Arabic: سُورَةٌ أَنزَلْنَٰهَا وَفَرَضْنَٰهَا وَأَنزَلْنَا فِيهَآ ءَايَٰتٍۭ بَيِّنَٰتٍ لَّعَلَّكُمْ تَذَكَّرُونَ
Recitation: https://quran.com/24/1 (Audio)
Key Term: *Ayat* (revelations/signs)
Prompt: How does this *ayah* emphasize remembrance (*dhikr*)? Analyze its call to action for the audience.

Qur'an 30:20–26

Text: Describes creation, human diversity, and natural phenomena as signs (see Abdel Haleem 2015 for full text).
Arabic: See Abdel Haleem 2015.
Recitation: https://quran.com/30/20-26 (Audio)
Key Term: *Ayat* (signs)
Prompt: How do these *ayat* frame the world as a rhetorical text? Discuss their interdisciplinary implications.

Qur'an 41:53

Text: "We shall show them Our signs in every region of the earth and in themselves, until it becomes clear to them that this is the Truth…"
Arabic: سَنُرِيهِمْ ءَايَٰتِنَا فِى ٱلْءَافَاقِ وَفِىٓ أَنفُسِهِمْ حَتَّىٰ يَتَبَيَّنَ لَهُمْ أَنَّهُ ٱلْحَقُّ
Recitation: https://quran.com/41/53 (Audio)
Key Term: *Ayat* (signs)
Prompt: How does this *ayah* invite reflection (*tafakkur*)? Analyze its rhetorical appeal to internal and external observation.

Appendix B: Comparison Table for Cross-Traditional Analysis

This table supports Question 6, enabling students to compare *ayah*-based concepts with Western rhetorical terms.

Ayah-Based Concept	Western Rhetorical Counterpart	Prompt
Ayah as sign	Rhetorical situation / enthymeme	How does an *ayah*'s call for reflection differ from an enthymeme's persuasive logic?
Embodied rhetoric	Ethos (lived experience)	How does the Prophet's embodiment of *ayat* redefine ethos compared to human-centric credibility?
Dhikr and *tafakkur*	Reflective writing / critical thinking	How does the Qur'anic call to remember differ from argument-based inquiry?
Balagha	Style / delivery	How does Qur'anic eloquence shape audience reception compared to Western stylistic devices?
Maqam	Kairos (timing/context)	How does one's spiritual or social station affect *ayah* interpretation compared to contextual timing in kairos?