Ethos

Ethos is a fancy word that means the way that the audience of a particular argument perceives you as the writer. You can come across as their enemy, their best friend, a neutral purveyor of information, or anything in between. You are creating your ethos just like you are choosing your audience.

The way that you are conveying your ethos to your reader is usually implicit: you are not going to come out and say that you are their friend or enemy. Instead, you will convey this in the language, the tone of the words you choose, your organization, and your use of sources.

For example, if you are writing about environmentalism and you start out calling your audience a bunch of tree-hugging loons, you are positioning yourself as the enemy. This is going to be a self-defeating strategy because you run the risk that they will stop reading immediately. On the other hand, you could ease into the topic by talking about the dangers of extremism on both sides of the issue and citing unfortunate behavior by both camps, and still get your point across without offending the audience right off the bat. The relationship between your ethos and your audience is the single most important organizing tool for an effective argument.