Since the arrival of the pilgrims and throughout the colonization of North America, the Native Americans have struggled to retain their territory. The land of the Duwamish tribe located in Washington was targeted in the mid-nineteenth century, prompting its leader to react as evident in Chief Seattle’s letter to United States President Pierce in 1855. Through the effective application of compelling pathos, appropriate tone, and thought-provoking juxtaposition, Chief Seattle aims to persuade the President to recognize the detrimental impact of the white men’s lifestyle on the environment and to rectify their harmful ways in order to protect the natural world on which they both live.

Through Seattle’s impassioned and straightforward tone, he is able to substantiate the credibility and sincerity of his character, compelling the audience to not only listen to his stance but act upon it. Chief Seattle opens with saying, “The Great Chief in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. The Great Chief also sends us words of friendship and good will. This is kind of him, since we know he has little need of our friendship in return. But we will consider your offer, for we know if we do not so the white man may come with guns and take our land.” Chief Seattle directly addresses the situation with no ambiguity or embellishment. His foremost display of sensibility greatly appeals to the audience’s ethos which consequently causes them to be more susceptible to receiving his subsequent persuasive claims and arguments later within the letter. Furthermore, Seattle plainly states, “I have seen thousands of rotting buffaloes
on the prairie left by the white man who shot them from a passing train.” Rather than substituting the gruesome scene for a euphemism, Chief Seattle simply and plainly explains his perspective. He sees the men killing the animal. The animals are left dead, used as shooting practice for sheer pleasure and entertainment. This allows not only for easy understanding moreover to convince the audience to recognize the pure and blatant cruelty of their actions in order to incite awareness and ultimately change.

Likewise through the utilization of pathos, Chief Seattle connects his audience personally and emotionally to his message of environmental conservation. In paragraph 3, he remarks, “The earth is not his [the white man’s] brother, but his enemy, and when he has conquered it, he moves on. He leaves his father’s graves and his children’s birthright is forgotten.” The strategic use of pathos in the aforementioned line is intended to induce feelings of intense emotion by considering the white man’s actions from a more familial perspective. Seattle achieves this through targeting their guilt and shame by exposing their sublimable greed, specifying the incredible extents to which they would abandon their heritage and family in order to benefit from the land, thus ultimately guilting them into correcting their current lifestyle. The core of his letter revolves around this emotional appeal where he writes, “Our children have seen their fathers humbled in defeat. Our warriors have felt shame. And after defeat they turn their days in idleness and contaminate their bodies with sweet food and strong drink. It matters little where we pass the rest of our days—they are not many.” This line manipulates the audience’s feelings of pity for the Indians as it portrays them in a relatable light. Failure and defeat is a universal theme, one that everyone will face at least once in their lifetime; consumption of “sweet food and strong drink” is an unhealthy method of coping that is prevalent in both cultures regardless of race. By
making these commonalities between the two parties blatantly apparent, Seattle generates feelings of empathy and pity that combine with the appeal of guilt from prior lines in order to create a moral urgency and obligation for change within the white man.

In like manner, Seattle’s application of juxtaposition allows for the audience themselves to draw conclusions that Seattle subtly suggests throughout the entirety of his letter. Notably, Seattle writes, “The air is precious to the redman. For all things share the same breath—the beasts, the trees, and the man. The white man does not seem to notice the air he breathes. Like a man dying for many days, he is numb to the stench.” The juxtaposition of the two sentences allows for a direct comparison of the Indian and American perspectives, both positive and negative respectively. Seattle makes this comparison in order to draw attention to the damage that their mentality has on their cognitive abilities. He urges them that they are not only physically harming the environment, but also consequently destroying their awareness which essentially desesentives them into mindless beings. Through this, he aims to convince them to correct their habits not just for the benefit of the planet but for their own benefit as well.

After a thorough analysis of Chief Seattle’s usage of rhetorical techniques, it is evident that through the combination of pathos, tone, and juxtaposition he has compiled an effective argument to persuade the President of the United States to be aware of the harmful effects of the nation’s lifestyle and urges the white man to revise their policies to protect and respect the environment.