

RHETORICAL CONCEPTS

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What is Rhetoric?

Rhetoric is the way in which you communicate in everyday life. These communications can be persuasive in nature and can be made of text, images, video, or any other type of media.

Rhetoric is the *art* of language – in particular, persuasive language. It's not just **WHAT** you say, but **HOW** you say it — what words you choose, how you structure your sentences, your understanding of the audience/occasion/purpose for writing or speaking, your appeals to logic, trustworthiness, and emotion (logos, ethos, & pathos), your use of figurative language, and even – in the case of public speaking – your delivery.

Why is Rhetoric Important?

- ▶ Since everyone can use rhetoric, an awareness of its prevalence can be empowering and can help you become a more critical consumer and creator.
- ▶ It helps you as a writer and reader understand the different and interrelated influences surrounding your writing and how it will be received and interpreted.
- ▶ Rhetoric gives you a framework to think critically about your writing and reading choices.
- ▶ Knowing how to use the tools of rhetoric can improve your communication and can help more people to agree with your perspective.
- ▶ Rhetoric is a careful way of channeling your creative energies and incorporating written/visual/audio compositions to create, affirm, and improve the world around us.

What are rhetorical concepts?

During your time as a student of writing, you may hear instructors talk about “rhetorical situations.” This is a term used to talk about any set of circumstances in which one person is trying to change another person’s mind about something, most often via text (like a book, or blog post, or journal article).

These rhetorical situations can be better understood by examining the rhetorical concepts that they are built from, also known as: text, author, audience, purposes, topic, and setting/context.

TEXT

Texts can come in all shapes and sizes, such as those listed earlier. But in this context, text is not limited to something written down. The text in a rhetorical situation could be a film, or a photograph, or a recording of a song or history.

The important thing to ask yourself when faced with a text, no matter what it is, is what is gained by having the text composed in this format/genre. What are the relevant characteristics of a book versus a song? What might an oral history version of a text communicate that a book version would not?

SETTING

Nothing happens in a vacuum, and that includes the text you are trying to understand. It was written in a specific time, context, and/or place, all of which can affect the way the text communicates its message. To understand the rhetorical situation of a text, examine the setting of both audience and author and ask yourself if there was a particular occasion or event that prompted the particular text at the particular time it was written.

AUTHOR

Here the “author” of a text is the creator, the person utilizing communication to try to effect a change in their audience. An author doesn’t have to be a single person, or a person at all – an author could be an organization. To understand the rhetorical situation of a text, examine the identity of the author and their background.

Not only do you want to know what kind of experience they have in the subject, but you’ll also want to explore basic biographical information about them. Where and when did they grow up? How could that affect their perspective on the topic?

AUDIENCE

The audience is any person or group who is the intended recipient of the text, and also the person/people the text is trying to influence. To understand the rhetorical situation of a text, examine who the intended audience is and what their background may be.

An audience's assumptions about the author, the context in which they are receiving the text, their own demographic information (age, gender, etc.) can all affect how the text is seeking to engage with them.

Identify your audience. Audiences may be defined as *known*, *multiple*, or *unknown*. *Known audiences* can include people with whom you're familiar as well as people you don't know personally but whose needs and expectations you do know. You yourself are a known, familiar audience, and you write to and for yourself often. Class notes, to-do lists, reminders, and journals are all written primarily for an audience of one: you. For that reason, they are often in shorthand, full of references and code that you alone understand.

Other known, familiar audiences include anyone you actually know — friends, relatives, teachers, classmates — and whose needs and expectations you understand. You can also know what certain readers want and need, even if you've never met them personally, if you write for them within a specific shared context. Such a known audience might include PC gamers who read cheat codes that you have posted on the internet for beating a game; you don't know those people, but you know roughly what they know about the game and what they need to know, and you know how to write about it in ways they will understand.

You often have to write for *multiple audiences*. Business memos or reports may be written initially for a supervisor, but he or she may pass them along to others. Grant proposals may be reviewed by four to six levels of readers — each, of course, with its own expectations and perspectives.

Thinking about Audience

- *Whom do you want to reach?* To whom are you writing (or speaking)?
- *What is your audience's background — their education and life experiences?* It may be important for you to know, for example, whether your readers attended college, fought in a war, or have young children.
- *What are their interests?* What do they like? What motivates them? What do they care about?
- *Is there any demographic information that you should keep in mind?* Consider whether race, gender, sexual orientation, disabilities, occupation, religious beliefs, economic status, and so on should affect what or how you write. For example, writers for *Men's Health*, *InStyle*, and *Out* must consider the particular interests of each magazine's readers.
- *What political circumstances may affect their reading?* What attitudes — opinions, special interests, biases — may affect the way your audience reads your piece? Are your readers conservative, liberal, or middle of the road? Politics may take many other forms as well — retirees on a fixed income may object to increased school taxes, so a letter arguing for such an increase would need to appeal to them differently than would a similar letter sent to parents of young children.

- *What does your audience already know — or believe — about your topic? What do you need to tell them? What is the best way to do so?* Those retirees who oppose school taxes already know that taxes are a burden for them; they may need to know why schools are justified in asking for more money every few years. A good way to explain this may be with a bar graph showing how property values benefit from good schools with adequate funding. Consider which **STRATEGIES** will be effective — narrative, comparison, something else?
- *What's your relationship with your audience, and how should it affect your language and tone? Do you know them, or not? Are they friends? colleagues? mentors? adversaries? strangers? Will they likely share your **STANCE**?* In general, you need to write more formally when you're addressing readers you don't know, and you may address friends and colleagues more informally than you would a boss.

- *What does your audience need and expect from you?* Your history professor, for example, may need to know how well you can discuss the economy of the late Middle Ages in order to assess your learning; he may expect you to write a carefully reasoned argument, drawing conclusions from various sources, with a readily identifiable thesis in the first paragraph. Your boss, on the other hand, may need an informal email that briefly lists your sales contacts for the day; she may expect that you list the contacts in the order in which you saw them, that you clearly identify each one, and that you briefly say how well each contact went. What **GENRE** is most appropriate?
- *What kind of response do you want?* Do you want readers to believe or do something? to accept as valid your information on a topic? to understand why an experience you once had matters to you?
- *How can you best appeal to your audience?* Is there a particular **MEDIUM** that will best reach them? Are there any **DESIGN** requirements? (Elderly readers may need larger type, for instance.)

PURPOSES

What is the author hoping to achieve with the communication of this text? What do they want from their audience? What does the audience want from the text and what may they do once the text is communicated?

Both author and audience can have purpose and it's important to understand what those might be in the rhetorical situation of the text you are examining. An author may be trying to inform, to convince, to define, to announce, or to activate, while an audience's purpose may be to receive notice, to quantify, to feel a sense of unity, to disprove, to understand, or to criticize. Any and all of these purposes determine the 'why' behind the decisions both groups make.

Identify your purpose. While a piece of writing often has many purposes, a writer usually focuses on one. When you get an assignment or see a need to write, ask yourself what the primary purpose of the writing task is: to entertain? to inform? to persuade? to demonstrate your knowledge or your writing ability? What are your own goals? What are your audience's expectations, and do they affect the way you define your purpose?

Thinking about Purpose

- *What do you want your audience to do, think, or feel?* How will your readers use what you tell them?
- *What does this writing task call on you to do?* Do you need to show that you have mastered certain content or skills? Do you have an assignment that specifies a particular **STRATEGY** or **GENRE** — to compare two things, perhaps, or to argue a position?
- *What are the best ways to achieve your purpose?* What **STANCE** should you take? Should you write in a particular genre? Do you have a choice of **MEDIUM**, and does your text require any special format or **DESIGN** elements?

PAUSE
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NOTES WORKSHEET #2

PAUSE
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PLEASE RECORD YOUR ANSWER UNDER
IN CLASS ACTIVITY #1: Rhetorical Concepts

There are two passages on the next slide . For each passage, please state:

1. Who is the **author** and what do you know about them? (1-2 sentences)
2. What is the **purpose**? (Persuade? Inform? Entertain?) Make sure to state why this text was created. (2-3 sentences)
3. Who is the **audience**? (1-2 sentences)

For all three questions above, please explain how you came to the conclusion of your answer. You can use material from the passage as evidence, as well as your own prior knowledge.

"All the single ladies, all the single ladies
All the single ladies, all the single ladies
All the single ladies, all the single ladies
All the single ladies

Now put your hands up
Up in the club, we just broke up
I'm doing my own little thing
Decided to dip and now you wanna
trip
Cause another brother noticed me...

Cause if you liked it then you should
have put a ring on it
If you liked it then you shoulda put a
ring on it
Don't be mad once you see that he
want it
If you liked it then you shoulda put a
ring on it
Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, o-ohh..."

-BEYONCE

"...I have a dream that one day on the
red hills of Georgia, the sons of former
slaves and the sons of former slave
owners will be able to sit down together
at the table of brotherhood.


I have a dream that one day even the
state of Mississippi, a state sweltering
with the heat of injustice, sweltering with
the heat of oppression will be
transformed into an oasis of freedom
and justice...

And when this happens, and when we
allow freedom ring, when we let it ring
from every village and every hamlet,
from every state and every city, we will
be able to speed up that day when all
of God's children, Black men and white
men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants
and Catholics, will be able to join hands
and sing in the words of the old Negro
spiritual: Free at last. Free at last. Thank
God almighty, we are free at last."

-Dr. Martin Luther King

Here are some sample questions to get you started towards reading rhetorically:

- How does the author organize events, evidence, or arguments throughout the text?
- What stylistic moves does the text do to draw readers in?
- Does the author rely on experts, personal experience, statistics, etc. to develop an argument or communicate an idea? Is this rhetorical approach effective?
- Who might we suggest is the intended audience? How does the author make appeals or cater her message to this audience specifically?




In a writing situation that asks you to effectively communicate a specific idea to a target audience, knowing how to respond will develop your critical reading skills and provide you with effective strategies for writing in multiple genres. Having a rhetorical knowledge of how genres of writing work will also prepare you with tools for generating inquiry-based writing for multiple audiences.

Asking rhetorical questions provokes a process of inquiry-based thinking that is useful for learning how to participate in academic conversations in a way that investigates the decisions writers make when they compose and arrange compositions. As you read, get in the habit of asking rhetorical questions about the composition of texts. This will further guide your prewriting process of brainstorming and frame decisions for how you might compose your own texts. Freewriting can be an initial invention exercise that begins your composing process.

THE RHETORICAL SITUATION

So what is the rhetorical situation? The rhetorical situation are the surrounding factors, details, and events of a speech or other piece of rhetoric/argument. They are the conditions under which the argument is made, and therefore, impossible to ignore or leave unaddressed when performing rhetorical analysis. We typically break down the rhetorical situation into the following points of consideration:

- ▶ **SPEAKER/AUTHOR:** Who is delivering the argument? Who (or what corporation/entity) is behind the speaker? What affiliations or biases does this speaker have? What are the general demographics of this speaker (race, gender, age, etc.)
- ▶ **PURPOSE:** What is the purpose of this speech? Note, the purpose and message are different. The purpose is the *verb* of the argument (to beg, to sanctify, to entertain, to plead/persuade, to undermine, to create distraction). The purpose is related to the delivery of the argument.

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- ▶ **AUDIENCE:** Who is the argument FOR? What details describe this audience? What is the demographic makeup of this audience? What are the affiliations or biases of this audience? What are the vulnerabilities of this audience that could be dialed in to?
 - ▶ **CONTEXT:** What are the big picture, time and date specific details that describe this moment in history? How is the speaker and/or audience related to this context? How is the timing of this argument relevant? What happened just before the delivery? What do we know about the emotions or collective feelings toward relevant subjects during this time?
 - ▶ **EXIGENCE:** What is the impetus for the speaker to speak NOW? The urgency? What is propelling this argument in this particular moment?

**PAUSE
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NOTES WORKSHEET #2

**PAUSE
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**PLEASE RECORD YOUR ANSWER UNDER
IN CLASS ACTIVITY #2: Rhetorical Situation**

Please pick **one song** from your favorite Disney, Pixar, or DreamWorks movie. Then write a paragraph (5 sentences) answering the following questions :

1. Who is the **SPEAKER**?
2. Who is the **AUDIENCE**?
3. What is the **MESSAGE**?
4. What is the **EXIGENCE**?