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Aristotle's Rhetorical Situation

Rhetorical Concepts

Many people have heard of the rhetorical concepts of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* even if they do not necessarily know what they fully mean. These three terms, along with *kairos* and *telos*, were used by Aristotle to help explain how rhetoric functions. In ancient Greece, these terms corresponded with basic components that all rhetorical situations have.

Logos

Logos is frequently translated as some variation of “logic or reasoning,” but it originally referred to the actual content of a speech and how it was organized. Today, many people may discuss the *logos* qualities of a text to refer to how strong the logic or reasoning of the text is. But *logos* more closely refers to the structure and content of the text itself. In this resource, *logos* means “text.”

Ethos

Ethos is frequently translated as some variation of “credibility or trustworthiness,” but it originally referred to the elements of a speech that reflected on the particular character of the speaker or the speech’s author. Today, many people may discuss *ethos* qualities of a text to refer to how well authors portray themselves. But *ethos* more closely refers to an author’s perspective more generally. In this resource, *ethos* means “author.”

Pathos

Pathos is frequently translated as some variation of “emotional appeal,” but it originally referred to the elements of a speech that appealed to any of an audience’s sensibilities. Today, many people may discuss the *pathos* qualities of a text to refer to how well an author appeals to an audience’s emotions. *Pathos* as “emotion” is often contrasted with *logos* as “reason.” But this is a limited understanding of both *pathos* and *logos*; *pathos* more closely refers to an audience’s perspective more generally. In this resource, *pathos* means “audience.”

Telos

Telos is a term Aristotle used to explain the particular purpose or attitude of a speech. Not many people use this term today in reference to rhetorical situations; nonetheless, it is instructive to know that early rhetorical thinkers like Aristotle actually placed much

emphasis on speakers having a clear *telos*. But audiences can also have purposes of their own that differ from a speaker's purpose. In this resource, *telos* means "purpose."

Kairos

Kairos is a term that refers to the elements of a speech that acknowledge and draw support from the particular setting, time, and place that a speech occurs. Though not as commonly known as *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*, the term *kairos* has been receiving wider renewed attention among teachers of composition since the mid-1980s.

Although *kairos* may be well known among writing instructors, the term "setting" more succinctly and clearly identifies this concept for contemporary readers. In this resource, *kairos* means "setting."

Current Elements of Rhetorical Situations

All of these terms (text, author, audience, purpose, and setting) are fairly loose in their definitions and all of them affect each other. Also, all of these terms have specific qualities that affect the ways that they interact with the other terms. Below, you'll find basic definitions of each term, a brief discussion of the qualities of each term, and then finally, a series of examples illustrating various rhetorical situations.

Elements of Rhetorical Situations

There is no singular rhetorical situation that applies to all instances of communication. Rather, all human efforts to communicate occur within *innumerable* individual rhetorical situations that are particular to those specific moments of communication.

An awareness of rhetorical situations can help in both composition and analysis. In the textbook *Writing Today*, Johnson-Sheehan and Paine recommend, “Before you start writing any text, you should first gain an understanding of your rhetorical situation” (12). The rest of this resource will focus on understanding the rhetorical situation. Once you know how to identify and analyze the elements of rhetorical situations, you will be better able to produce writing that meets your audience’s needs, fits the specific setting you write in, and conveys your intended message and purpose.

Each individual rhetorical situation shares five basic elements with all other rhetorical situations:

1. A text (i.e., an actual instance or piece of communication)
2. An author (i.e., someone who uses communication)
3. An audience (i.e., a recipient of communication)
4. Purposes (i.e., the varied reasons both authors and audiences communicate)
5. A setting (i.e., the time, place, and environment surrounding a moment of communication)

These five terms are updated versions of similar terms that the ancient Greek thinker Aristotle articulated over two thousand years ago. While Aristotle’s terms may be familiar to many people, his terminology more directly applied to the specific needs and concerns of his day. This resource uses more current terminology to more accurately identify the kinds of rhetorical situations we may encounter today. But since Aristotle’s work in rhetoric has been so influential, below is a brief discussion of Aristotle’s terms and how they relate to the terms in this resource (text, author, audience, purposes, and setting).

Name _____

Date _____

RHETORICAL PRÉCIS

Purpose: Upon completion of this activity, students will first **consider** the précis through the precise description of each sentence's content, then **comprehend** the précis through the included example, and lastly students will **construct** a précis of their own using either the attached essay or an essay that they are currently reading. **This should take approximately 1 hour to complete.**

A rhetorical précis differs from a summary in that it is a less neutral, more analytical condensation of both the content and method of the original text. If you think of a summary as primarily a brief representation of what a text says, then you might think of the rhetorical précis as a brief representation of what a text both says and does. Although less common than a summary, a rhetorical précis is a particularly useful way to sum up your understanding of how a text works rhetorically (*Reading Rhetorically* 62).

THE STRUCTURE OF A RHETORICAL PRÉCIS

Sentence One: Name of author (and a brief fact to establish credibility), type and title of work, date in parentheses; a rhetorically active verb, and a **THAT** clause containing the major assertion (thesis statement) in the text.

Sentence Two: An explanation of **how** the author develops and supports the thesis. What mode(s) and kinds of evidence does the author use? (Your explanation is usually presented in the same chronological order that the items of support are presented in the work.) Avoid merely summarizing what the author **says**.

Sentence Three: A statement of the author's apparent purpose, followed by an "in order to" or "so that" phrase in which you explain what the author wants the audience to do or feel as a result of reading (or hearing) the work.

Sentence Four: A description of the author's tone and the intended audience and/or the relationship the author establishes with the audience.

THE FINISHED PRODUCT

In her article "Who Cares if Johnny Can't Read?" (1997) Larissa MacFarquhar, a staff writer for the *New Yorker*, asserts **that** Americans are reading more than ever despite claims to the contrary and that it is time to reconsider why we value reading so much, especially certain kinds of "high culture" reading. (2) MacFarquhar supports her claims about American reading habits with facts and statistics that compare past and present reading practices, and she challenges common assumptions **by** raising questions about reading's intrinsic value. (3) Her **purpose** is to dispel certain myths about reading **in order to** raise new and more important questions about the value of reading and other media in our culture. (4) She seems to have a young, hip, somewhat irreverent audience in mind because her tone is sarcastic, and she suggests that the ideas she opposes are old-fashioned positions.

from Bean, John C., Virginia A. Chappell, and Alice M. Gillam. *Reading Rhetorically*, Brief Edition. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2004. P. 63

Name _____

Date _____

Now create a rhetorical précis of your own using an essay you are currently reading for your English class. Use the sentence starters and word banks below to help you.

RHETORICAL PRÉCIS SENTENCE STARTERS

Sentence One (Who/What?) _____, _____
(author's full name) (credibility)

in the _____
(A) (title)

_____ that _____
(B)

Sentence Two (How?) _____ supports his/her _____
(author's last name) (B)

by (see C) _____

Sentence Three (Why?) The author's purpose is to _____
(D)

_____ in order to / so that _____

Sentence Four (To Whom?) The author writes in/uses a (an) _____ tone for
(E)

_____ (audience)

Name _____

Date _____

Word Bank – some possibilities

A	B	C	D	E
article blog book book review column essay editorial	analyzes, analysis, argues, argument, asserts, assertion, claims, defines, definition, explains, explanation, interprets, interpretation, questions, suggests, suggestion, theorizes, theory	Modes: comparing, contrasting, telling, explaining, illustrating, demonstrating, defining, describing, listing Types of Evidence: analogy, hypothetical situations, factual examples, expert testimony, statistics, personal/anecdotal experience	challenge clarify complicate convince deconstruct extend illustrate inform persuade point out show suggest	angry blunt casual discouraged formal humorous neutral provocative sarcastic

*Adapted by Sarah L. Martin from an earlier version created by Micah Jendian.

I know what it says...but what does it *do*?

*The following verbs will be helpful when analyzing what an author is *doing* (the rhetorical moves he/she is making), rather than what he/she is *saying*.

Acknowledges
 Amplifies
 Analyzes
 Argues
 Articulates
 Asserts
 Blends
 Challenges
 Clarifies
 Compares
 Compiles
 Concludes
 Constructs
 Contrasts
 Debates
 Deconstructs
 Defends
 Defines

Differentiates
 Discusses
 Dissects
 Distinguishes
 Establishes
 Evaluates
 Exemplifies
 Explains
 Forecasts
 Gathers
 Generalizes
 Identifies
 Illustrates
 Incorporates
 Inspects
 Integrates
 Interprets
 Introduces

Justifies
 Models
 Navigates
 Organizes
 Outlines
 Persuades
 Predicts
 Presents
 Proposes
 Proves
 Qualifies
 Questions
 Substantiates
 Suggests
 Summarizes
 Theorizes
 Traces
 Uses

Name _____

Date _____

An Author's Tone

*Here are some examples of the kinds of tone an author can take and the different ways that readers can interpret them. Note that by using the negative connotation as opposed to the neutral connotation, a reader can get across his/her opinions of the author in a rhetorically subtle way.

Tone	Neutral Connotation	Negative Connotation
Angry	Irritated, vexed, indignant	Worked up, offended, furious
Biased	One-sided, partial	Warped, twisted, myopic
Blunt	Frank, candid, direct, plain-spoken	Brutal, cruel, tactless, caustic
Casual	Informal, easy-going	Slick, careless, unprofessional
Challenging	Provocative, defiant, questioning	Argumentative, insulting
Humorous	Amusing, funny, jovial, joking	Absurd, ridiculous, ludicrous, silly
Intellectual	Intelligent, knowledgeable	Egghead, pedantic, know-it-all
Neutral	Impartial, unbiased, open-minded, objective	Disengaged, unengaged, amoral, apathetic
Personable	Friendly, good-natured, affable	Chummy, overly-familiar
Sad	Dispirited, discouraged, unhappy	Pitiful, pathetic, bitter
Sarcastic	Satirical, disparaging, scornful, contemptuous	Insulting, offensive, ill-tempered
Thoughtful vs. Thoughtless	Profound, careful, well-reasoned	Imprudent, rash, tactless

Rhetorical Analysis -- Notes and Questions

1. Andrea Lunsford, John Rusczkiewicz, and Keith Walters titled their writing textbook *Everything's An Argument*. And they're right: even something as seemingly objective as the phone book is an argument [extra credit: for what?]. So you can assume that any reading, any advertisement, webpage, movie, etc. that you're exposed to is an argument -- that the creator's purpose is to convince you of something.

2. So: the fundamental question you need to ask: *What's the writer's **purpose**?* (From this point on, I'll use writing as an example to keep from cutting & pasting "advertisement, webpage, movie, etc." in here over and over again.) What does the writer want the readers to do, think, feel, or decide after reading the text?

3. What does the text enable readers to do *while* reading: compare facts, apply information, empathize with a character in a story, implement an action, etc.?

4. Who is the **audience** that the writer is trying to convince? Is the writer addressing one particular group of readers or more than one? How do you know? What does the text imply about readers' knowledge or feelings about the subject? Is the audience composed of insiders about the topic, or outsiders? Why, according to the writer, should the audience be interested in this topic?

5. What is the **context** for the writing? Where and when was it published, and what was going on then that the writing is responding to? What other important things have been said before about the topic of the writing?

6. Writing also a relationship that, like any other, develops and changes over the course of time. (I'm sure you can come up with a book, story, movie, etc., that didn't thrill you at first, but that ended up growing on you.) What sort of relationship does the writer establish with the readers? Does she, for instance, assume at the beginning of the text that the audience will think favorably of her and her text, or resist her and what she has to say? How does this relationship change over the course of time? (See the questions in #19 below regarding structure, and #24 regarding tone.)

Given what you've figured out about the writer's overall argument and audience, the one essential question you will ask is: **Why does the writer make this particular choice? Why does she think it will be effective to do this?** All of the questions below -- except for #34 -- are just variations on this question.

Logos (with what techniques does the writer present the argument as reasonable and logical?)

7. How does the writer know what she's saying is true? What types of evidence does the writer provide: quotes (from experts, from people directly involved in the situation)? primary research (which can include actual experiments, interviews, asking around, etc.)? personal reflection and observation? Does she use

statistics, description? Does she use examples, stories? Are these examples and/or stories appropriate (that is, are they directly to the situation the writer's talking about)? Why do you think she chose these particular pieces of evidence? 7a. Are these information sources likely to be familiar to the audience, or new? How does the writer introduce these sources? Whom does the writer quote approvingly? Disapprovingly? What does she let us know about these people?

8. What other previous knowledge does the audience have about the topic? What attitude does the writer assume the audience takes toward that knowledge? Is the topic a particularly difficult one to deal with (like funeral arrangements or sexual harassment)? What constraints does the writer face based on what's been said about the topic before?

9. What are the major claims (or "main points") that the writer is trying to make? Are there any unstated assumptions behind these claims? (For example, if I am arguing that you should vote for Jones because he is a good family man, the definition of exactly what "a good family man" is might be simply assumed.) Are these assumptions valid, or are they problematic?

10. What kind of evidence or support does the writer give for her major claims? Is there any claim that appears to be weak or unsupported? Which one and why?

11. Are there any flaws in the writer's logic that you can detect? One means of detecting these flaws that you may have already worked with is the logical fallacies – a relatively painless review of which can be found at bookofbadarguments.com. More likely than gaping holes in logic are errors regarding relevance -- that is, including evidence that simply doesn't belong, or evidence that the writer doesn't really connect to her point. How does the writer establish that her evidence actually supports her argument (i.e., what is her **warrant**?) -- or does she assume that you, the reader, automatically agree that this evidence is valid and sufficient?

12. Where does the writer use a lot of detail, and where does she stay relatively general? Why?

13. Two very common logical/rhetorical moves are: a. asserting that phenomenon x is like or unlike phenomenon y; b. asserting that phenomenon x is important, or is not important. Does the writer use either of these very common moves? Why?

14. Many analysts divide up possible arguments into those about questions of *fact* (whether x is true or whether x exists), questions of *value* (whether x is good, bad, or indifferent or whether it is better than y), and questions of *policy* (whether or not we should do x). In practice, most rhetors layer these arguments within each other (ex.: Since Iran is producing weaponry-grade plutonium [question of fact], we should impose an international boycott [question of policy]). What arguments of fact, value, and policy does the rhetor you are analyzing include? What evidence does she give to back up these sub-arguments?

15. Does the writer acknowledge counterarguments? "Counterarguments" can be alternative interpretations or points of view; it can be the writer's own doubts about her argument; or it can be evidence that would seem to contradict or undermine her argument. If she does acknowledge counterarguments, does she deal with them fairly and thoroughly, or does she use any of them as a "straw man"?

16. Can you think of counterarguments that the writer doesn't deal with?

17. A *stasis*, in rhetorical terms, is the point at issue in a particular argument – that is, what the argument is really about. *Stasis shifting* is more commonly known as “changing the subject” (“Why are you asking me about Gov. Christie’s so-called ‘bridge scandal’ when you still haven’t explained Benghazi?”). Does the writer attempt a stasis shift? Why?

18. Does the writer anticipate readers' objections or questions? Does it seem like she is putting forward something that she anticipates a lot of resistance to?

19. How does the order of the writer's points and evidence, or the plot of the story that she is telling us, strengthen her case? Why does the writer start where she does? Why does she finish where she does? Keep in mind that most writers know intuitively that the most powerful positions in a text are the beginning and the end -- why does the writer think the material she's put in these places is the most powerful? OR does the writer not realize this, and have trouble gaining traction at the beginning, or end sort of mumblingly? Also remember what we've learned about the usual functions of introductions and conclusions: Intros often try to establish two things -- the importance of the topic, and the ethos of the rhetor. Conclusions often "open the topic up" and frame it in terms of larger issues (another way of indicating the importance of the topic). Or a conclusion might consist of an emotional appeal (see **pathos**, below). Does the writer do this, or does she do something else with her introduction and conclusion?

20. All things considered, are you persuaded by this writer's thesis and arguments? Why or why not?

Ethos (with what techniques does the writer invite readers' trust?)

21. Who is this writer? What can you tell about him or her from the information in the text? Does he or she have the background to speak with authority on this subject? In considering this question, remember that Aristotle said rhetors need to establish three things regarding their ethos: that they are knowledgeable, of good character, and have the audience's best interests in mind. How does the writer try to establish these things?

22. Exigency: What has happened so that the writer needs to address this particular issue at this particular time? Is there some sense of urgency behind

the text? How does the writer describe the significance of the issue? How does the writer tie the issue to more general issues that are important to us?

23. Why has the writer created this text? Why does she *say* she has? What is her motivation? Is there a difference between what she says about her purpose and motivation, and what the context or circumstances might indicate?

24. Style and tone: How would you characterize the writer's tone of "voice"? Friendly? Serious? Threatening? Does she use "our," "we," "us," and "you"? Who's included in the "we" and the "they" (note that these pronouns do not need to be explicitly supplied for the writer to divide the world into *us* and *them*)? What evidence does the writer show that she and the audience are "us" – that is, belong to the same group? How do these choices help the writer?

25. Does she use specialized terms, slang, or any other sort of "in-group" language? What do the writer's word choices imply about her assumptions about readers? Is she careful to define certain key terms?

26. Does the writer present anything as being normal, "what people do," human nature, etc.? What does this idea about "how people really are" combine with other elements of the writer's persuasion?

27. What's *not* there? What does the writer assume everybody knows? That is, what information does the writer feel she has to supply, and what does she feel she doesn't (because the audience already has it)? And what does the writer assume everybody *believes*? Are there any values or ideas that the writer feels she doesn't have to argue for? Are these assumptions correct?

28. Do you trust this writer? Do you think this writer is deceptive? Why or why not?

Pathos (with what techniques does the writer engage the readers= emotions?)

29. Are there any characters in the text whom the writer encourages you to feel sympathy for? Or sympathy *against*? Or any other emotion? Why?

30. What things or ideas does the writer present as being particularly good or bad?

31. Are there any "God terms" and/or "Devil terms" in the writer's text? Does she use any emotionally charged language, slanted language, or language with strong connotations -- that is, language that evokes strong emotional associations in the reader's mind? Why?

32. How do you react emotionally to the text? What are the particular parts of the text that provoke these emotions? Do you think the writer is trying to manipulate your emotions? How?

33. How does the writer motivate her audience? How does she heighten the audience's perception of its own needs and values?

FINALLY:

34. About each of the questions outlined above, ask yourself: does this choice WORK? Is it effective? If not, what do you think was the writer's mistake? Was the strategy a bad one to have used in the first place, or did she just not execute it well?

Example 3: Grocery List

Finally, consider a simple (and fictional) grocery list. Identifying the basic components of text, author, audience, purposes, and setting reveals that even a simple text like a grocery list has its own specific rhetorical situation. This list was written by an elderly retired woman who sends her husband on an errand to the grocery store.

Text

The text is the grocery list itself. The grocery list is a handwritten list of five items. The list reads, “1% milk, whole wheat bread, non-fat grated mozzarella cheese, cookies for the grandkids (you decide), 8 bananas.” Notice how the varying specificity reflects the author’s varying attitudes of seriousness about what her husband buys. She is specific about everything except the cookies, which she is fine with letting her husband decide.

The grocery list is written on the back of an old receipt in black ballpoint pen ink. The author writes small to get the whole list on the back of the receipt. She relies on her years with her husband to know other specifics that are otherwise omitted from the list (e.g., whether he should get a quart or gallon of milk or whether he should get one or two loaves of bread).

The husband carries along his reading glasses, but even still has difficulty reading the small handwriting on the grocery list. The husband also relies on the conceptual tools he’s developed over decades of marriage to his wife. For instance, he knows that there is no more milk in the refrigerator at home, so he should buy a whole gallon of milk.

Author

Let’s say that this particular list is written by an elderly retired woman who sends her husband on an errand to the grocery store. She gives him a list of things to buy. Her background includes a few decades of marriage to her husband and all the experience (from her perspective) that suggests to her that she needs to give him a list to make sure he doesn’t forget anything.

Audience

The audience for this grocery list is the author’s husband who is an elderly retired man. He runs errands for his wife on occasion. Similar to his wife’s background, this husband has a few decades married to his wife and all the experience (from his perspective) that tells him he doesn’t really need the list his wife wrote him.

Purposes

The author's purposes in writing the list are straightforward. She wants to make sure that her husband does not forget anything that she sends him to the grocery store to buy. Her attitude while writing the list is direct and serious. She doesn't want him to forget anything!

The man who is the audience of the grocery list wants to buy the groceries quickly. While he does not mind running errands for his wife (and wants to be the kind of man who does nice things for his wife), he wants to hurry back and watch a ball game on television. This man's attitude is slightly annoyed because he might miss the start of his game.

Setting

Let's say this grocery list was written a year or so ago. It was written in the small home of the retired couple in Seattle, Washington, USA. It was thrown away in a garbage can outside the grocery store while the husband carried the few groceries back to the car. The community and conversation is narrow and intimate including only the elderly retired woman and her husband . . . that is unless someone different finds the list and discusses it with someone else. At that point, a different community and conversation has begun discussing the text.

Other Analysis

As should be evident from this example, even something as simple as a grocery list has its own rhetorical situation with an author and audience trying to identify their perspectives with each other.

Example 2: Research Paper for a High School or College Class

One of the most common rhetorical situations that people reading this will face or have faced is a research paper for some sort of class. Consider the following fictional example of the rhetorical situation surrounding a research paper written by a 19-year-old female university student from China who is attending her first year of classes at Purdue University in Indiana, USA.

Text

The text in this example is a 12-page research paper that argues for more efficient ways of harnessing hydroelectric power. The paper uses the Xiaolangdi Dam on the Yellow River in China as an example of what could be done better. Alternately, when the student prepares her paper to present at a conference, the text at the future conference would be her actual verbal presentation and any presentation aids she chooses to use (such as a PowerPoint or a handout).

As a paper for class, the medium is a stack of twelve computer-typed white sheets of paper. As a conference presentation, the medium is the author's spoken voice accompanied with a digital PowerPoint display.

As a paper for class, the student uses a computer with a word processing program to actually type the paper. Using a computer not only makes the paper neat and readable, but it is also required. The actual physical tool used to write the text greatly affects how the text is received. She also uses the conceptual tool of research that she's learned in class to help her find the material she needs. As a conference presentation, the student uses a computer and a digital projector to display the necessary images at her presentation. She also uses the conceptual tools of public speaking that she learned in her first-year communication and speech course at Purdue University.

Author

The author for this research paper is a 19-year-old female university student from China who is attending her first year of classes at Purdue University in Indiana, USA. She struggles at times with the mechanics of written English. She is an only child. She is studying agricultural engineering. All this has affected how and what she writes.

Audience

There are two audiences for this paper. The primary and most immediate audience for this paper is the student's instructor. Her instructor is a 25-year-old female PhD student from New Mexico, USA, studying in English at Purdue University. This instructor teaches the first-year writing course that the student is writing the research paper for. The student also hopes that she can eventually develop her paper into a conference presentation, so she writes her paper with both her instructor and a future conference audience in mind.

The instructor has previous experience working with students whose first language is not English. The future conference audience will have had immediate background in the other presentations at the conference.

Purposes

The author has a few different purposes for writing this paper. First and foremost, writing this paper is a class requirement and she must do well on it to get a good grade in the class. Secondly, she has chosen to write her paper about a hydroelectric dam near her home in China because she feels strongly about clean, hydroelectric power. Thirdly, she feels she needs continued practice writing in English (which is not her first language), so she looks forward to the feedback she'll get from her instructor in hopes she can improve the way she writes. Her attitude is hopeful and earnest as she writes the paper. But she is also worried because she fears she may not have enough mastery of the English language to write the paper well.

The instructor wants the student to master certain writing processes and principles and will be reading the paper with these concerns in mind. The future conference audience will likely want to hear more about the impact of different energy sources on the environment. The instructor retains a helpful but expert attitude toward the student's paper. The future conference audience fosters an interested and egalitarian attitude toward the student's presentation. Notice how each of these attitudes can affect the way that the student's research is received.

Setting

Because of the split nature of the student's purposes, the settings for the paper are split as well.

As a research paper, the text is situated within the fifteen-week structure of a typical American university semester. Also, the student's research about hydroelectric dams and the Xiaolangdi Dam in particular reflect the most current information she can locate. When she presents her research at a conference a year or two later, she will need to make sure her research is still up-to-date.

As a research paper, the text occurs within the confines of the curriculum of the student's first-year writing class. As a conference presentation, the text occurs within the specific confines of a presentation room at an academic conference.

As a research paper, the student's text is part of a small conversation between her and her instructor in the small community of a first-year writing class. As a conference presentation, the community and conversation of her text got substantially larger: the community and conversation possibly involve a worldwide community of engineering and agricultural experts, researchers, and professionals.

Other Analysis

Research papers are common texts for students to prepare. It is important for students to be able to see their own writing projects in their own rhetorical situations. When they do so, students will be better able to communicate within the constraints of the rhetorical situations they find themselves in. The last example of a rhetorical situation is about a very common sort of text that many people may not have considered in rhetorical terms.

Example 1: “I Have a Dream” Speech

A lot of what was covered above may still seem abstract and complicated. To illustrate how diverse kinds of texts have their own rhetorical situations, consider the following examples.

First, consider Dr. Martin Luther King’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech. Because this speech is famous, it should be very easy to identify the basic elements of its particular rhetorical situation.

Text

The text in question is a 17-minute speech written and delivered by Dr. King. The basic medium of the text was an oral speech that was broadcast by both loudspeakers at the event and over radio and television. Dr. King drew on years of training as a minister and public speaker to deliver the speech. He also drew on his extensive education and the tumultuous history of racial prejudices and civil rights in the US. Audiences at the time either heard his speech in person or over radio or television broadcasts. Part of the speech near the end was improvised around the repeated phrase “I have a dream.”

Author

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was the most iconic leader of the American Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s. He was an African-American Baptist minister and prominent civil rights activist who campaigned to end segregation and racial discrimination. He gained inspiration from Howard Thurman and Mahatma Gandhi, and he drew extensively from a deep, rich cultural tradition of African-American Christian spiritualism.

Audience

The audiences for “I Have a Dream” are extraordinarily varied. In one sense, the audience consisted of the 200,000 or so people who listened to Dr. King in person. But Dr. King also overtly appealed to lawmakers and citizens everywhere in America at the time of his speech. There were also millions of people who heard his speech over radio and television at the time. And many more millions people since 1963 have heard recordings of the speech in video, audio, or digital form.

Purposes

Dr. King’s immediate purposes appear to have been to convince Americans across the country to embrace racial equality and to further strengthen the resolve of those already involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Audiences’ purposes are not as easily summarized. Some at the time may have sought to be inspired by Dr. King. Opponents to racial equality who heard his speech may have listened for the purpose of seeking to find ways to further argue against racial equality. Audiences since then may have used the speech to educate or to advocate for other social justice issues.

Setting

The initial setting for the speech was on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC on August 28, 1963. The immediate community and conversation for the speech was the ongoing Civil Rights Movement that had gained particular momentum with the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott, which Dr. King helped direct. But the enduring nature of Dr. King's speech has broadened the setting to include many countries and many people who have since read or listened to his speech. Certainly, people listening to his speech for the first time today in America are experiencing a different mix of cultural attitudes toward race than as present in America in 1963.

Other Analysis

Dr. King's speech is an example of a rhetorical situation that is much bigger than its initial text and audience. Not many rhetorical situations are as far reaching in scope as Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech. The following example of a research paper may be more identifiable to students reading this resource.