Effective Writing and the Rhetorical Situation

Inquire: Purpose and the Rhetorical Situation

Overview

When writing an essay, it is important to know why and for whom you are writing. Whether your purpose is to describe, narrate, define, evaluate, or persuade, a good essay will be intentional about stating a purpose related to a specific audience and context. An essay’s purpose is shaped by its rhetorical situation: (1) its writer, (2) its subject or issue being addressed, (3) its purpose, (4) its audience, (5) its form, and (6) its context.

Big Question: How can I use the different components of a rhetorical situation to write effective essays?

Watch: Essay Writing: Get to the Point!

Everyone seems to have one friend who is terrible at telling stories. When he starts a story, you groan because you know he will overwhelm you with details. Many of these details have nothing to do with the point of the story at all. After some time, you find yourself begging your friend to “get to the point already!” Worse than the stories that drag on are the stories that have no point at all.

Essay writing can be the same way. Essays without a clear purpose — or without a purpose at all — can leave readers frustrated. If the purpose is so unclear that the reader can’t find it, they might even quit reading your essay before they get to the end. In order to be sure that your reader doesn’t give up on your essay, you need to make sure that you have a point in writing it and that your point is clear.

Your purpose in writing will be very different, depending on the type of essay you write. Essays can serve all kinds of purposes. They can:
- Describe
- Review
- Analyze
- Inform
- Persuade
- Entertain
- And a host of other things

Your essay’s purpose will also change depending on elements of its rhetorical situation. The rhetorical situation changes depending on:
- Your credibility and expertise as a speaker
Whether you are reading or writing an essay, it is important to analyze its rhetorical situation in order to fully understand the purpose of the essay. You should look at who the speaker is, who the audience is, how the point is made, and what the overall purpose is in the text.

For example, consider how frequently sites like The Onion, which produce satire, are taken seriously as news outlets. Simply evaluating the place of publication would help readers understand that the purpose of the article is not to convey serious news stories. Evaluating the rhetorical situation of any text by looking at the context, speaker, audience, content, and purpose will make you a better reader and a better writer. The more time you invest in establishing what your audience needs from you, the easier it will be to establish your essay’s purpose.

Read: The Basics of Writing: Writer, Message, and Reader

Overview

Communication of any kind, oral or written, involves (1) someone who wants to communicate something (the sender), (2) the message they are trying to communicate (the message), and (3) someone who receives the message (the receiver).

In writing, the sender is the writer or the person with something they want to express. The message is the idea or information they are sharing, and it can take many forms — note, report, essay, email, or text message. The receiver is the person or audience who reads the message.

   Writer —> Message —> Reader/Audience

Successful writing results in the reader having a clear understanding or appreciation for what the writer is trying to communicate. In order for this to happen, the writer must also consider the shared context in which they are writing, as well as the best medium or format for the message.

Know Thyself, Writer

Every written message begins with the writer: the person who is trying to communicate something.

Good writing begins with a clear understanding of what you want to say, as well as the motivation for your communication. Your readers will only understand your written messages when you are clear about what you are trying to say.

Yes, that’s right. It all begins with you, the writer.

Here are some questions to consider before you write something you want others to know and understand.

What is your motivation for writing?
It is important to ask yourself why you are writing in the first place. What is your goal? Are you trying to provide information or educate your audience? Are you hoping to persuade people to change their perspectives or firmly held beliefs?

Are you writing something required by work or school, or are you writing for personal reasons? Are you writing simply to pass along some general information, or are you writing about something you are interested in or care about?

You will generally write more clearly and persuasively about things that are important to you. Your interest will lead to ideas and opinions that are more well-formed. If you care, you will likely be more concerned about stating your thoughts as clearly as possible so that others can understand your message clearly.

Do you know what you’re talking about?

Good writers tend to be honest with themselves and others regarding how much they know about the topic they are discussing. The old adage, "write what you know," is great advice to any writer. If you are well-acquainted with a topic, you will be able to share more specific information and examples. When you are unfamiliar with a topic, you tend to use statements or information that lack the precision necessary for successful communication. If you have a shallow understanding of a topic, it is always best to learn more about it before you write about it.

Why should your audience pay any attention to what you are saying?

There are a number of reasons that people might read what you have to say, but they will only pay close attention if they are convinced of your authority or expertise. In successful written communication, the writer must make it clear that people should pay attention to his or her ideas. Except in areas of technical expertise, the best ways to establish your authority are by (1) sharing well-formed ideas that are stated clearly and with evidence, and (2) describing unique personal experiences or observations.

Know Your Message

After thinking about your role as the writer, the next step is to consider the specific message you want to communicate.

What are you writing about?

One of the reasons many people have trouble getting started with their writing is that they aren't completely clear about their message. What, specifically, do you want to communicate to your audience? If your message is too broad ("Music is good" or "Women should be treated equally"), you will lack direction and focus. You will have difficulty communicating a clear idea. When thinking about your message, ask yourself what is one thought or idea should your reader take away from your writing.

What written form will work best for your message?

Once you know what your message is, it's a good idea to think about the best way to communicate that message in writing. Is it something that can be communicated with only a few words? Then, a text message, quick email, or social media post could work. Do you need to lay a foundation of information so people can understand your message? If so, you'll need to use a lengthier, more formal format such as an essay or report.
Is your message something new to your audience?

When thinking about the form that will work best for your message, consider how much your audience already knows about what you’re saying. Does your audience already know all the basic information they need to understand your message? Do you need to educate your audience before sharing your message?

Know Your Reader/Audience

Equally important in the writing process is your audience, or the person/people who will be reading your message.

Who is going to read your message?

Before you begin writing, ask yourself who will be reading your message. Are you writing to a specific person or narrow audience, or are you writing to a broader public? How much do they know about your topic? Why are you aiming your message at this particular person or group? What are their beliefs? If you are writing to a broader audience, spend time thinking about their education backgrounds, experiences, and interests. This will help you choose the right language and examples in your writing.

What is the audience's motivation?

Just as you, the writer, have a reason or motivation for writing your message, your reading audience also has a reason for reading your message. What do they want to take away from your writing? If they are looking to you for specific information, how will they use that information?

Reflect Poll: Context and Effectiveness

What types things of catch your attention most in advertising?

- Catchy jingles
- Memorable slogans or taglines (such as “Just do it”)
- Specific images
- Meaningful statistics

Expand: Effective Writing and the Rhetorical Situation

Rhetoric and the Rhetorical Situation

In writing, rhetoric is the art of using language effectively to communicate your message or to persuade others. Your language is most effective when all its aspects align with the rhetorical situation in which you are writing.

The rhetorical situation is the overall context for your communication and includes the following elements: (1) writer, (2) subject, (3) purpose, (4) audience, (5) form, and (6) context.

Writer

It’s important to know your role as the writer. Are you writing as a concerned citizen, an employee, a friend telling a story, a blogger giving an opinion, or a student in a class? Your specific role will affect your
voice, tone, and the language you use. It will also have an impact on the types of examples you give and the supporting evidence and details you provide.

Subject
You are writing about a specific subject or issue, and it's important to know as much as you can about it. Gather information about its history, function, and impact on people and culture. Knowing these details will help you narrow your message and find a specific thesis to develop.

Purpose
What is the purpose of your writing? Do you want to persuade your audience? Are you analyzing something? Is your intent to explain or describe? Knowing your purpose will help you decide on the types of information and examples you provide, as well as the best organizational structure for your writing.

Audience
Effective writing addresses the expectations and needs of your audience. It is important to know who your readers are, what they already know about your topic, how well they understand specific terms or vocabulary related to the topic, and how well they can read or process ideas. You will also want to think about their attitudes toward the topic or you as a writer, and how they will use your writing. Finally, does the situation with your audience require more formal communication, or will an informal style be more appropriate?

Form
There are many possible forms you can use for your writing. In the workplace, these forms include email, social media posts, reports, proposals, product summaries, case studies, press releases, white papers, and presentations. In an academic environment, you may be asked to write essays, research papers, and analyses. The form of your writing should fit your message, audience, and purpose. What works well for a marketing social media post would likely not be appropriate for a project report. Also, it's important to keep in mind that many writing forms can contain a variety of media including writing, graphics, images, video, and links.

Context
What is the impact of your writing on the current situation? If you are working on a large project at work, how will your writing affect the project's success? What impact will it have on how others in the company perceive you? How will it be evaluated? If you are writing for coursework, how will your writing affect your grade? What criteria will be used to assess and grade it? If you are evaluating the context of an essay, you will be considering the historical moment at which the text is published as well as where it is published.

The Rhetorical Situation in World War II Advertising
Advertising provides great examples of rhetoric, or writing effectively for persuasion. By analyzing advertisements, we can gain a greater understanding of how rhetorical situations impact our everyday lives.

For example, consider this advertisement calling on women to support the war effort in WWII. While most Americans are familiar with Rosie the Riveter and her bandana, many other advertisements called on women to take jobs that would support the war effort.
Context
Most Americans know quite a bit about the social, political, and economic moment in which this poster was produced. It was distributed from 1942-1945, at a time when women were called on by the federal government to engage in the war effort by filling factory jobs, serving in the military, or growing victory gardens. The campaign ended at the end of the war.

Form
The example is from the iconic and wildly successful campaign that also included Rosie the Riveter. In this instance, the form is a poster that employs written text and imagery. Note how the poster emphasizes different textual statements for greater impact.

Writer, Audience, and Message
We can see right away who the speaker of this text is: the U.S. Civil Service Commission is listed at the bottom as the entity which produced the advertisement. Additionally, the ad suggests that the Civil Service Commission is speaking on behalf of stenographers.

The ad is clearly targeting women, specifically women who feel compelled by a patriotic duty. The ad’s use of a conventionally pretty woman, saluting the reader over a red, white, and blue background shows us the attempt to target such an audience.

The advertisement’s message is that victory in the war is reliant on the fingers of women willing to serve as stenographers.

Purpose
The purpose of the advertisement is perfectly clear: to recruit women to apply for positions that aid in the war effort. It speaks directly to its audience: “Victory waits on your fingers.” In addition, it calls the reader “Miss U.S.A.” and implies that the reader of the poster has the power to “keep ‘em flying.” The ad appealed to a woman’s sense of patriotic duty or responsibility, and it worked.

You can see from this example how considering the rhetorical situation can help us analyze a persuasive text.

Lesson Toolbox
Additional Resources and Readings
An article analyzing the rhetoric of other WWII Art
- Link to resource: https://www.bartleby.com/essay/Post-WWII-Art-Analysis-F3BRD6PMZ6PS

A link offering advice on finding the purpose of your essay
- Link to resource: https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/the_writing_process/invention_starting_the_writing_process.html

A short video explaining the rhetorical situation further
Lesson Glossary

rhetoric: the art of using language effectively to communicate your message or to persuade others

rhetorical situation: the overall context for your communication, including the following elements: (1) writer, (2) subject, (3) purpose, (4) audience, (5) form, and (6) context

Check Your Knowledge

1. An essay’s context is the historical moment at which a text is published as well as where it is published.
   a. True
   b. False

2. Analyzing the rhetorical situation is helpful in both reading and writing essays.
   a. True
   b. False

3. Speaker, audience, and content are mostly separate concepts that do not impact each other.
   a. True
   b. False

Answer Key:

Citations

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