Elements of Rhetorical Situations

There is no one 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.

Also, 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). For this reason, the rest of this resource will focus on understanding rhetorical situations more in terms of analysis. 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).

**Contributors:** Ethan Sproat, Dana Lynn Driscoll, Allen Brizee.
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 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.

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Text

What is a Text?
The word “text” is probably the most fluid term in a rhetorical situation. Usually, the word “text” refers to a written or typed document. In terms of a rhetorical situation, however, “text” means any form of communication that humans create. Whenever humans engage in any act of communication, a text serves as the vehicle for communication. Three basic factors affect the nature of each text: the medium of the text, the tools used to create the text, and the tools used to decipher the text.

Medium of a Text
Texts can appear in any kind of medium, or mechanism for communicating. The plural of medium in this sense is media. Various media affect the ways that authors and audiences communicate. Consider how these different types of media can affect how and what authors communicate to audiences in various rhetorical situations: hand-written, typed, computer-generated, audio, visual, spoken, verbal, non-verbal, graphic, pictorial, tactile, with words, or without words (there are many others, of course). Some varied specific examples of media could include a paper, a speech, a letter, an advertisement, a billboard, a presentation, a poster-board, a cartoon, a movie, a painting, a sculpture, an email, a Twitter tweet, a Facebook post, graffiti, a conversation (face-to-face, on a cell phone, via text messages) . . . this list is nearly endless.

Tools to Make a Text
Every text is made with tools that affect the structure and content of a text. Such tools could be physical tools that range from very basic (such as the larynx, throat, teeth, lips, and tongue necessary for verbal communication) to very complex (such as a laptop computer with graphic-manipulating software). These tools could also be more conceptual tools that range from simple (such as implementing feedback from an instructor) to more complicated (such as implementing different kinds of library and primary research). The tools of communication often determine the kinds of communication that can happen in any given rhetorical situation.

Tools to Decipher a Text
Likewise, audiences have varied tools for reading, viewing, hearing, or otherwise appreciating various texts. These could be actual physical tools that would likewise range from very basic (like the eyes and reading glasses necessary to read) to very complex (like a digital projector and screen to view a PowerPoint presentation). Or they could be conceptual tools that could range from simple (childhood principles learned from parents) to more complicated (a master’s degree in art). The tools that audiences have at their disposal affect the ways that they appreciate different texts.

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Author and Audience

What is an Author?
“Author” is a fairly loose term used to refer to anyone who uses communication. An author could be one person or many people. An author could be someone who uses writing (like in a book), speech (like in a debate), visual elements (like in a TV commercial), audio elements (like in a radio broadcast), or even tactile elements (as is used in making Braille) to communicate. Whatever authors create, authors are human beings whose particular activities are affected by their individual backgrounds.

Author’s Background
Many factors affect authors’ backgrounds. These can include age, gender, geographic location, ethnicity, cultural experiences, religious experiences, social standing, personal wealth, sexuality, political beliefs, parents, peers, level of education, personal experience, and others. All of these are powerful influences on what authors assume about the world, who their audiences are, what and how they communicate, and the settings in which they communicate. Gender, ethnicity, cultural experiences, sexuality, and wealth factors are especially important in analyzing rhetorical situations today. Many professionals in education, business, government, and non-profit organizations are especially aware of these specific factors in people’s lives.

What is Audience?
Like the term “author,” the term “audience” is also a fairly loose term. “Audience” refers to any recipient of communication. Audiences can read, hear, see, or feel different kinds of communication through different kinds of media. Also like authors, audiences are human beings whose particular activities are also affected by their specific backgrounds.

Audience’s Background
The same sorts of factors that affect authors’ backgrounds also affect audiences’ individual backgrounds. Most importantly, these factors affect how audiences receive different pieces of communication; what they assume about the author; and the context in which they hear, read, or otherwise appreciate what the author communicates.

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Purposes
Authors and audiences both have a wide range of purposes for communicating. The importance of purpose in rhetorical situations cannot be overstated. It is the varied purposes of a rhetorical situation that determine how an author communicates a text and how audiences receive a text. Rhetorical situations rarely have only one purpose. Authors and audiences tend to bring their own purposes (and often multiple purposes each) to a rhetorical situation, and these purposes may conflict or complement each other depending on the efforts of both authors and audiences.

Authors’ purposes
In the textbook *Writing Today*, Johnson-Sheehan and Paine discuss purpose more specifically in terms of the author of a text. They suggest that most texts written in college or in the workplace often fill one of two broader purposes: to be informative or to be persuasive. Under each of these two broad purposes, they identify a host of more specific purposes. The following table is not exhaustive; authors could easily have purposes that are not listed on this table.

*Table: Author Purposes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informative</th>
<th>Persuasive</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>to inform</td>
<td>to persuade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to describe</td>
<td>to convince</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to define</td>
<td>to influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to review</td>
<td>to argue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to notify</td>
<td>to recommend</td>
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<tr>
<td>to instruct</td>
<td>to change</td>
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<tr>
<td>to advise</td>
<td>to advocate</td>
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<tr>
<td>to announce</td>
<td>to urge</td>
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<tr>
<td>to explain</td>
<td>to defend</td>
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<tr>
<td>to demonstrate</td>
<td>to justify</td>
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<tr>
<td>to illustrate</td>
<td>to support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Johnson-Sheehan & Paine 17)

Audiences’ purposes
Authors’ purposes tend to be almost exclusive active if only because authors conscientiously create texts for specific audiences. But audiences’ purposes may range from more passive purpose to more active purposes.

*Table: Audience Purposes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>More Passive Purposes</th>
<th>More Active Purposes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>to receive notice</td>
<td>to examine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to feel reassured</td>
<td>to quantify</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to feel a sense of unity</td>
<td>to assess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to be entertained</td>
<td>to make informed decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to receive instruction</td>
<td>to interpret</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to enjoy</td>
<td>to evaluate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to hear advice</td>
<td>to judge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to be inspired</td>
<td>to resist change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to review</td>
<td>to criticize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to understand</td>
<td>to ridicule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to learn</td>
<td>to disprove</td>
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</table>
The Role of Purposes
Authors’ and audiences’ purposes in communicating determine the basic rationale behind other decisions both
authors and audiences make (such as what to write or speak about, or whom to listen to, or what medium to use,
or what setting to read in, among others). An author’s purpose in communicating could be to instruct, persuade,
inform, entertain, educate, startle, excite, sadden, enlighten, punish, console, or many, many others. Like
authors, audiences have varied purposes for reading, listening to, or otherwise appreciating pieces of
communication. Audiences may seek to be instructed, persuaded, informed, entertained, educated, startled,
excited, saddened, enlightened, punished, consoled, or many, many others. Authors’ and audiences’ purposes
are only limited to what authors and audiences want to accomplish in their moments of communication. There
are as many purposes for communicating as there are words to describe those purposes.

Attitude
Attitude is related to purpose and is a much-overlooked element of rhetorical situations. But attitude affects a
great deal of how a rhetorical situation unfolds. Consider if an author communicates with a flippant attitude as
opposed to a serious attitude, or with drama as opposed to comedy, or calmly as opposed to excitedly.
Depending on authors’ purposes, audiences’ specific qualities, the nature of the context, and other factors, any
of these attitudes could either help or hinder authors in their efforts to communicate depending on the other
factors in any given rhetorical situation. Like authors, audiences bring diverse attitudes to how they appreciate
different pieces of communication. The audience’s attitude while reading, listening, observing, or whatnot
affects how they receive and process the communication they receive.

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Setting
Lastly, all rhetorical situations occur in specific settings or contexts or environments. The specific constraints that affect a setting include the time of author and audience, the place of author and audience, and the community or conversation in which authors and/or audiences engage.

Time
“Time” in this sense refers to specific moments in history. It is fairly common knowledge that different people communicate differently depending on the time in which they live. Americans in the 1950s, overall, communicate differently than Americans in the 2000s. Not that they necessarily speak a different language, but these two groups of people have different assumptions about the world and how to communicate based on the era in which they live. Different moments in time can be closer together and still affect the ways that people communicate. Certainly, scientists discussed physics somewhat differently the year after Einstein published his theory of relativity than they did the year before Einstein published his treatise. Also, an author and audience may be located at different times in relation to one another. Today, we appreciate Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* a bit differently than the people who watched it when it first premiered four hundred years ago. A lot of cultural norms have changed since then.

Place
Similarly, the specific places of authors and their audiences affect the ways that texts are made and received. At a rally, the place may be the steps of a national monument. In an academic conference or lecture hall or court case, the place is a specific room. In other rhetorical situations, the place may be the pages of an academic journal in which different authors respond to one another in essay form. And, as mentioned about authors’ and audiences’ backgrounds, the places from which audiences and authors emerge affect the ways that different texts are made and received.

Community / Conversation
In various rhetorical situations, “community” or “conversation” can be used to refer to the specific kinds of social interactions among authors and audiences. Outside of speaking about rhetorical situations, “community” usually means specific groups of people united by location and proximity like a neighborhood; “conversation” usually refers to fairly intimate occasions of discussion among a small number of people. But in regard to rhetorical situations, both of these terms can have much larger meanings. In any given rhetorical situation, “community” and “conversation” can refer to the people specifically involved in the act of communication. For instance, consider Pablo Picasso who used cubism to challenge international notions of art at the time he painted. Picasso was involved in a worldwide “community” of artists, art critics, and other appreciators of art many of whom were actively engaged in an extended “conversation” with differing assumptions about what art is and ought to be. Sometimes, authors and audiences participate in the same community and conversation, but in many instances, authors may communicate in one community and conversation (again, think of Shakespeare four hundred years ago in England) while audiences may participate in a different community and conversation (think of scholars today in any other country in the world who discuss and debate the nature of Shakespeare’s plays). The specific nature of authors’ communities and conversations affect the ways that texts are made while the specific nature of audiences’ communities and conversations affect the ways that texts are received and appreciated.

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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.
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 [w]as present in America in 1963.
Conclusion
Rhetorical situations occur whenever one person attempts to communicate with another person. We could do this activity with a painting, a work of fiction, a political debate, a film, a Facebook status update, a squabble between lovers, a personal journal entry, or any other act of communication. Invariably, all situations involving communication involve at least one of each of the following:

1. a text in a particular medium, made with certain tools, and deciphered with certain tools;
2. an author with a specific background;
3. an audience with an equally specific background;
4. purposes of both author and audience; and
5. a setting in a particular time and place involving a certain community and conversation.

Understanding the factors that shape rhetorical situations make authors and audiences more aware of what goes into different acts of communication. Overall, understanding these factors helps people better understand the differing perspectives of others.