

THE RHETORICAL SITUATION (FULL)

THE RHETORICAL SITUATION AS A TOOL FOR OBSERVING RHETORIC

Let's learn about the rhetorical situation.

The rhetorical situation refers to an analytical scheme for observing all of the most important aspects of a document. Thus, the rhetorical situation is an observation tool.

Every document has the following:

An Author,
An Audience,
An Intended Purpose,
A Medium,
A Genre,
And, a Context

Sometimes, there are other concerns/elements. However, we will discuss those shortly.

The author is the person who has created or is engaged in the “thing” we are observing. The author may also be a speaker, a designer, an actor, a director, etc.

The audience is the person who receives the “thing” we are observing. The audience may be thought about or identified in terms of number, age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, culture, subculture, etc.

The intended purpose of the “thing” is the reason why the thing exists or why the thing is created. You must distinguish “intended” from something that is “unintended.” For example, a watch can be used to tell the time. However, a watch can also be used as a timer for an explosive. Sometimes, a “thing” has unintended uses or consequences. As a rhetorician, we are interested in those.

The medium simply refers to what the “thing” is composed of... ink or print, sound or speech, crayons or digital colors, etc. Oftentimes, the actual physical composition of something is important to understand its importance, purpose, and other aspects of the rhetorical situation. For example, would you make a drinking apparatus out of lead? No. Why? Lead is poisonous. Why not something like glass? Sure. Glass is safe and appropriate. Similarly, if you were giving directions to your home, would you use text-based directions, spoken word directions, or a map? Probably a map? Why? The map is much easier to understand and actually helps to show spatial and geographic directions much better than words.

Genre refers to the classification or category of media to which the “thing” belongs. Genre may refer to any type of print genre such as essays, poetry, reports, letters, emails, white papers, etc. Genre may refer to different forms of music (e.g., pop/rock, hip-hop, metal, classical, musicals, country, etc.). The genre is important to us because certain genres include traditional or common conventions. For example, an essay uses

paragraphs, usually has an introduction and conclusion, a theme or an argument, etc. Similarly, rock music has a four-bar beat, a chordal pattern playing upon a bass line, and vocals set to lyrics. These conventions (and even standards) are important to understanding the “thing” we are observing.

Context refers to the literal time and space/geographic location where something happens. Make a note, not all “spaces” are geographical. Sometimes the context is less about geographic location and more about cultural location. We call these cultural spaces. For example, think about the Mexican culture, which is rich in many wonderful traditions. Mexican culture is indigenous to Mexico. However, Mexican culture also exists in other places. For example, Texas or California both have substantial Mexican communities. Within these “cultural spaces,” we find similar Mexican cultural traditions. However, we also find different or new cultural traditions. Lastly, cultural spaces are not only about ethnicity. Cultural spaces may include subcultures as well. The “punk” subculture is synonymous with punk rock music. This subculture also exists in many geographical locations, including virtual spaces. The subculture permeates all ethnicities, age groups, socio-economic statuses, etc. So, remember to consider geography and cultural spaces when you consider context.

THE RHETORICAL SITUATION AS A TOOL FOR COMPOSING

Just as we may observe things using the rhetorical situation, we may also use the rhetorical situation to help us compose.

For example, if we know about our audience, we can cater or customize our work to the audience’s interests. If we know their interests, we may choose an appropriate genre or medium for the presentation of our content.

Similarly, if we know our intended purpose, we can more easily prepare for the task of creating something. Having a purpose can motivate us. Having a purpose can help us establish goals.

When you create something, start with the following questions:

What is my intended purpose? Or, what is the task?

Who is my intended audience? What do I know about them?

What is my audience’s expectations? What are their needs? What are their desires?

What medium would be appropriate for my purposes?

What genre within the medium might be appropriate for my purposes?

What can I do to create interest in the “thing” that I will create?

How much does my audience know?

Does the audience expect a particular genre?

Do I have any constraints or limitations when dealing with this audience? For example, do they expect a particular type of language or presentation? Do they have certain or needed requirements? Safety? Accessibility?

Can I combine modalities to help me reach my intended audience?

All of these questions are valid.

Take a moment to explore the following item: [CDC's Zombie Preparedness Comic].

Answer the following questions:

Who is the author? What do we know about them?

Who is the audience? How do we know?

What is the purpose? How do we know?

What is the medium?

What is the genre? What things are particular to (or commonly found in) this genre?