

THE RHETORICAL SITUATION (TRIANGULATION)

Everything in the universe can be rhetorical (e.g., actions, reactions, objects (physical and not), artifacts, and even mundane items). Nothing is without its rhetorical situation. In fact, even the most benign thing has some rhetorical properties. Recognizing this idea, a student of rhetoric must practice being able to find how items are rhetorical. To do this, he/she conducts a rhetorical analysis. Now, the starting point of a rhetorical analysis is to examine the rhetorical situation.

THE PRIMARY RHETORICAL SITUATION

Everything has a rhetorical situation. The situation is comprised of the following elements:

- * Author
- * Purpose/Intent
- * Audience
- * Medium
- * Context (Time & Space/Location)
- * Stance

Originally, the Rhetorical Situation was a triangle (simply, the author, audience, and purpose); however, over time, different concerns became more and more apparent to rhetoricians.

AUTHOR

Typically, one cannot have an action or object without an author, creator, designer, speaker, actor, or agent. Even in the case of something created anonymously, an author or creator still exists.

Author: Who created the object, or who acts?

AUDIENCE

Everything has an audience.

Audience: Who is seeing/reading/hearing the object or who is witnessing the action?

PURPOSE

Everything has a purpose, whether that purpose is conscious or unconscious, overt or concealed.

Purpose: What is the reason/intent for the object or the action?

CONTEXT

Every object and every action is create or accomplished at a specific time and in a specific space.

Context has two concerns:

Space: Where is the object? Where does the action take place?

Time: When was the object created? When did the action take place?

MEDIUM

Medium: What is the channel or means of communication (print, online, film, paper, etc.)? What is involved in the action (gesture, body, eye contact, etc.)

STANCE

Stance refers to the author's attitude or behavior towards the topic (and in some cases towards the audience).

When a person expresses an idea, they can express it in a number of ways.
Think of the following phrase: "I'm here, Mom."

Now, think of the different ways you can choose to express this:

- * Straightforward* Sarcastic
- * Friendly
- * Unfriendly
- * Humorous
- * Argumentative
- * Formal
- * Informal, etc.

Stance: What is the stance? What is its position? Does it have a position?

THE SECONDARY RHETORICAL SITUATION

Finding the situation can be difficult, because sometimes a thing has multiple authors, multiple purposes, and multiple audiences. Oftentimes, we refer to this idea by considering a "primary" and a "secondary" within the different elements of the rhetorical situation. Thus, things may have a primary and secondary author, a primary and secondary purpose, a primary and secondary audience, etc.

Example: Vegetables.

Author: Vegetables are grown by farmers.

Purpose: Vegetables are grown to be food for humans.

Audience: All humans eat (or should eat) their vegetables.

Now, consider this:

Vegetables are also grown by individuals who are not farmers (potential secondary author).

Vegetables are also grown to feed animals.

Animals eat vegetables too.

Now, these examples are simplified, but they help to show that things may have multiple authors, audiences, and purposes.

Thus, you should ask of every object and action:

Is there a Secondary Author/s?

Is there a Secondary Purpose/s?

UNINTENDED OR INTENDED CONSEQUENCES

More contemporary theorists suggest that even more concerns are found in everyday objects and actions, and although they might not be part of the rhetorical situation, they undoubtedly may affect it.

Example:

Nuclear materials may provide energy; however, nuclear materials may be used for something more insidious.

Are there unintended consequences of the object/act?