

# 2 WHAT IS THE “RHETORICAL SITUATION” AND WHY SHOULD I CARE ABOUT IT?

## Exploring the Question

Each time we speak and each time we write, the situation is slightly different. The combination of factors that affect communication is labeled the *rhetorical situation* or the *rhetorical context*.

Now you know what the rhetorical situation is. Why should you care about it? For two reasons:

1. Since every communication is more or less effective in meeting a purpose based on the rhetorical situation, noticing the rhetorical situation can help you become a *more effective writer* and a *stronger reader*.
2. Recognizing the rhetorical situation will also help writing and reading be *easier* for you because you'll be prepared to notice similarities and differences as you move from one rhetorical situation to another.

## CONNECT

Before you begin reading, think about all the different kinds of writing you've been assigned in school.

1. What expectations for writing assignments are consistent whether completed for English, science, history, or another class?
2. How do expectations for various kinds of classes vary?

As described in Chapter One, people who don't notice similarities in rhetorical situations may encounter each new writing task with extreme nervousness and confusion about how to begin (McCarthy). Likewise, people who don't notice

differences in rhetorical situations may treat each new writing task as if it were identical to prior writing, which would likely lead to missteps and a lot of revision.

If writing is like a dance, being aware of the rhetorical situation allows the dancer to change from ballet moves to club moves based on what fits the music, the audience, the purpose, and so forth.

Let's look at some of the factors that contribute to the rhetorical situation so you can look good on the dance floor.

## CONNECT

Sometimes the word “rhetoric” is used to mean baloney, as in “That’s just rhetoric.” The implication is that language is being used persuasively to manipulate people, but there is little of substance beyond the language.

If you do an online search for definitions of “rhetoric,” what do you find? Are the definitions connected to one another?

## THE RHETORICAL TRIANGLE AND BEYOND

Often when people begin researching a particular field, they create categories, sub-categories, and criteria that help define what they’re talking about and what matters. You’ve probably noticed this in the way science is

divided into chemistry, biology, physics, and so forth. You probably also know that the animal kingdom is divided into phyla and then into six classes: math, English, social studies.... No! Not *that* kind of class. The animal kingdom is divided into phyla and then into six classes (invertebrates, birds, fish, mammals, amphibians, and reptiles), and each class is divided into orders; each order is divided into families; and so on, until the most specific division of species. All of these divisions are determined by criteria—the factors that are deemed most important.

In 1971, James Kinneavy published *A Theory of Discourse: The Aims of Discourse* with hopes of creating such a system that would help people discuss and research writing and rhetoric. Today, writing and rhetoric are not codified in ways the animal kingdom is, but Kinneavy’s model helped writing studies become a more defined and focused discipline. As writing scholars have considered ways of systematizing writing and rhetoric, they have worked to articulate what matters most, just like scientists studying animals needed to decide which differences are most and least significant to advance understanding. That’s why a whale is categorized as a mammal even though to non-scientists like me, the whale seems more similar to fish than to other mammals.

Since we are actually discussing writing, not animals, it’s helpful to have a basic understanding of factors that writing experts commonly use to discuss the rhetorical situation. Those factors provide ways to discuss, research, and better understand writing even as writing constantly evolves with each new context. Writers able to

recognize how rhetorical situations shift will likely write and read more effectively and efficiently just as scientists who understand criteria used to classify animals will be better prepared to do their work.

At this point, it's a good idea to revisit the multiple kinds of written text we produce and consume in the course of a given day or week. That way we can consider criteria we might use to think productively about writing. See the start of Chapter One for a guide to brainstorming your own list. Here is a short list of alphabetic texts I write or read regularly. I've excluded image- and aural-based texts for the sake of simplicity.

- cell phone texts
- emails
- tweets
- Facebook posts
- grocery lists
- lists of things to do
- notes to prepare for class
- billboards
- road signs
- writing on television news
- research notes
- conference papers
- menus

***the act of identifying kinds of reading and writing and sorting them into classes; classifications, classifying***

I could group these texts in multiple ways. I might put emails, tweets, and Facebook posts together and label this group “online communication to connect with others.” I might put emails, notes to prepare for class, research notes, and conference papers in a group and label it “writing done for work.” I could place grocery lists, lists of things to do, notes to prepare for class, and research notes in a group and title it “informal writing to help myself remember and organize.”

Each kind of writing could potentially belong to more than one group depending on the organizing principles. Furthermore, even when we place kinds of writing in a group, that doesn't mean those types of writing are the same; it simply means that the kinds of writing have something in common.

This “something in common” is often either *purpose* or *audience*. For example, some kinds of writing I do are driven by purposes of communication and connection (texting, Facebook posts) while other kinds have a purpose of helping me

## CONNECT

What other groupings can you create? How would you label each group?

accomplish a task (lists, notes). Some writing is directed to my family and friends, some is directed to my work colleagues or students, and some is directed to myself. Because purpose and audience shape writing so much, it's no accident that these elements arose in the prior chapter that asks, "Why write?"

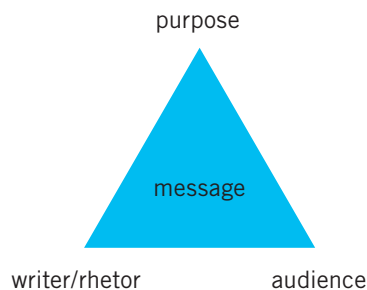
## CONNECT

1. Can you think of other types of writing that change in style and content as the purpose and audience shift? Consider the examples of writing listed above or other kinds of writing that you're familiar with.
2. Google "How to email a professor." In what ways does the advice you find consider audience, purpose, or genre?

Purpose and audience matter even when writing within a single genre (with *genre* referring to a category of writing that has identifiable characteristics regarding content, structure, and style). For example, I write emails to students, friends, colleagues, and other people. Although these emails have many elements in common, as I write to different audiences for a variety of purposes, the content and style of my emails change. Understanding that I need to shift style and content according to whom I'm writing (my audience) and why I'm writing (purpose) is crucial. I could end up composing some very inappropriate emails otherwise.

Chapter One that asks "Why write?" also focuses on writers themselves. A writer's motivation and investment in writing often affects the text that is produced. Our backgrounds and education and homes and stories also influence the ways we write, both in terms of language or phrasing we use and in terms of processes we follow and feelings we have as we write.

These three elements—purpose, audience, and writer—strongly define the *message* that is communicated, so they are often represented as parts of a *rhetorical triangle*—a simple graphic that represents basic criteria used to define a rhetorical situation.



The ideas depicted in the rhetorical triangle are rooted in the work of Aristotle, a scholar in Ancient Greece who offered guidelines for persuasive oral speeches.

Aristotle was an early *rhetorician*—a person who studies how *rhetoric* (persuasion) works. Many of Aristotle’s ideas about oratory have been applied to writing, images, and design, as these modes of communicating have become important sites of persuasion.

Communication tends to be persuasive to a degree even when that is not the main intent in any obvious way. The visual element of the triangle helps expose this persuasive element. The rhetor/writer and the audience member/reader are in two different positions and thus have different views of the message. The writer’s job is to motivate the audience to view the message in a particular way that will fulfill the purpose of the communication.

In order to accomplish this job, the rhetor needs to understand that the audience is in a different position than the rhetor. If the rhetor assumes the audience will see things in the same way as the rhetor, there’s a good chance the purpose won’t be filled. And if the rhetor only repeats what the audience already knows and believes, reading will have served no purpose.

You can see how this works even when I write down a list of things I need at the grocery store. Present Me is the rhetor who writes the list, and Future Me is the audience who will be pushing a grocery cart, inevitably with one squeaky wheel, trying to figure out whether boxes of raisins are sold near the fresh fruit, the canned fruit, or the candy. Present Me is focused but knows that Future Me will be distracted, so Present Me writes a list that can be processed easily and that provides enough information so that Future Me knows what to buy. If Present Me provided only information that was easy for Future Me to recall, Present Me should not have bothered writing. And if Present Me wrote a paragraph or a story about the items needed at the grocery store, Future Me would be really annoyed while trying to find raisins.

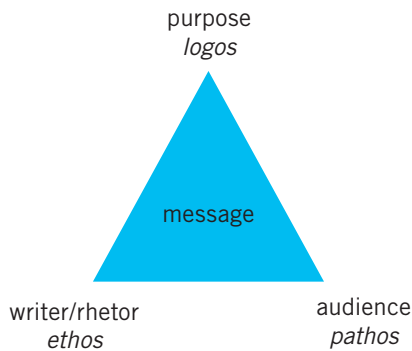
Luckily, Present Me did a good job of serving the purpose of communication by understanding that Future Me would have a very particular perspective at the grocery store and made the message work well for Future Me. Are you wondering exactly what the purpose was? It was buying milk, eggs, and bread so Present Me and Future Me could make French toast during the big storm. French toast with extra raisins.

## CONNECT

1. Can you give another example of how a rhetor/writer manages to fill a purpose by communicating in ways that are sensitive to the perspective or situation of the audience/reader?
2. Can you give an example of a rhetor communicating in a way that seemed unaware of the audience’s perspective and was thus unsuccessful in filling the purpose of communication?

This idea that writers help an audience see a message in a particular way is why all communication can be understood as persuasive to some degree. This viewpoint is reflected in a composition textbook titled *Everything's an Argument*. The authors, Andrea Lunsford and John Ruskiewicz, offer a way of looking at the entire world as a series of communications that shape thinking. That textbook is not as good as this one, but don't tell Lunsford I said so because as I mentioned in Chapter One, she is one of my heroes.

The connection between the rhetorical triangle and persuasion can also be understood by viewing each point in terms of a persuasive element, with all three elements holding the triangle together when a text is rhetorically effective.



## CONNECT

1. How might using appeals to pathos or logos increase ethos? Provide an example.
2. How might appeals to pathos or logos minimize ethos? Provide an example.

## CONNECT

Do a search for images of the rhetorical triangle. What do you find? Is there a particular image you especially like? Why?

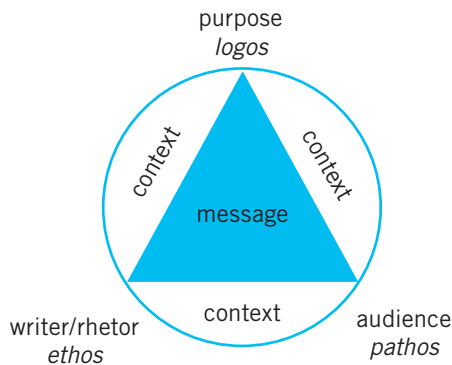
The message should establish that the rhetor/writer can be trusted by appealing to *ethos*; in other words, the text demonstrates the writer's intelligence, integrity, and good will. The audience or reader may be more or less receptive to the message depending on the appeal to *pathos*; in other words, the message can be crafted to affect the emotional state of the audience and make them more likely to see the message from the rhetor's perspective. Finally, appealing to *logos* uses arguments of reason and order to fill the purpose of the message.

When analyzing arguments or other obviously persuasive texts, appeals to ethos, pathos, and logos can be articulated as separate elements, but the three appeals tend to overlap and intersect.

I have a confession to make. I've chosen the labels in the triangles above because those labels seem helpful to me. I added "rhetor" to the "writer" label because it includes

not only writers but also speakers, filmmakers, visual artists, and so forth, but I kept “writer” both because it’s a more familiar word than “rhetor” and because this course focuses on *writing*. I also chose which label to put on top. That was instinct, not rational decision-making. Even foundational concepts may be framed in various ways depending on purpose.

The rhetorical triangle is often pictured inside a circle that suggests a fuller context.



This context can be understood in an overwhelming number of ways, so fasten your seatbelt:

- all that has been written or said on the subject prior to this communication;
- elements of shared language, shared values, and shared genres;
- the immediate occasion and conditions that enable communication;
- the constraints that limit the communication that is possible or that is likely to be effective;
- and literally any other element that shapes the writer, the audience, the purpose, or the message.

Whew. It’s even trickier because the context for writing and the context for reading are different—at times extremely different. Furthermore, a message might have many writers or many audiences (Grant-Davie). Even though considering context is almost like wrapping your mind around infinity, it is both possible and useful to focus on specific elements of context that can help us be more effective and efficient writers and readers.

## THE OCCASION: AN OVERLY BRIEF EXPLANATION

In a 1968 essay, Lloyd Bitzer focused on the way particular situations call for spoken or written language that responds to the situation and affects it in some way. The *exigence* is the reality that the discourse aims to shape or change.

For example, I write a text message to make lunch plans because I know I will be passing through the town where my good friend works. I write this textbook because Writing about Writing approaches to teaching college writing are widely used, and professors are looking for textbooks that support student learning. I write a toast because my sister is getting married and has asked me to say a few words. In each case, the rhetorical act of writing “functions ultimately to produce action or change in the world” as “it performs some task,” with language used to shape “reality through the mediation of thought and action” (Bitzer 3–4). An act of speaking or writing is likely to be more effective if *kairos*—appropriate timing—is in place. If I write a toast before my sister has decided to get married or after the wedding has occurred, I have missed the kairotic moment, and my toast will probably not be appreciated and will not lead to the drinking of champagne.

Reading also occurs for a reason or is elicited by a particular situation. Maybe your phone buzzed, so you read a text message. It probably was not me trying to make lunch plans, but if it was, let me know, because that would be an amazing miracle, wouldn't it? Maybe your professor assigned this chapter, so you're getting a huge kick out of it as you do every time you are required to read something. Maybe you are going to hear (rather than read) my toast because my sister heard you are awesome and invited you to her wedding.

In each case, the exigency implies an audience of those who are able to respond to the rhetor. The audience for my text message is my friend who can consider meeting me for lunch. One audience for this textbook is professors, believe it or not, because they are the ones who decide whether to assign this book in their classes. A second audience is you, the students, because I hope to help you approach writing with thoughtful awareness (and professors will only assign the book if they believe it may have such influence). The audience for my wedding toast is my sister, her spouse, and the guests who are holding flutes of champagne waiting for my remarks to come to a close as a signal it is time to clink glasses and drink.

### All that has been written or said on the subject prior to this communication

An occasion may be more complex than what is suggested with my small examples, but thinking in terms of exigence and kairos can be tremendously helpful in academic reading and writing. As a reader, pay attention to what scholars are



responding to. As a writer, make the exigence and kairos for your own writing clear to your readers.

Because reading and writing are cyclical activities as scholars respond to one another, you sometimes need to offer a full and complex explanation rather than a brief gesture toward exigence. When writing in academic genres, it is typical to first see what others have written and then place one's own research in the context of earlier findings.

This dynamic may make more sense if you consider a long text conversation that enacts a cycle of reading and writing. It would be odd to reply to a group text conversation without having some familiarity with the prior remarks. You might end up repeating something or going off track or even eventually getting kicked out of the group chat because you hold the conversation back instead of moving it forward. To think about it in terms of that triangle we recently bonded over, if you write in a group chat or in an academic setting without having some sense of what has already been said, you aren't really noticing the position of your audience. If you don't notice the audience's position, it is unlikely you will be able to reach them.

As you recognize how complex communication is, you can feel proud of all the writing and reading you do effectively and also begin realizing that it's okay to struggle with writing and reading on a regular basis. Although it's complicated, learning some of these behind-the-scenes secrets will hopefully help you analyze rhetorical situations in ways that can help you learn.

Some of the most common ways composition teachers help students think about contexts involve discourse communities and genres. I don't want you to miss out, so let's get into those topics next.

## DISCOURSE COMMUNITIES

Although writing is often pictured as an individual practice involving a writer sitting alone with a laptop or pen and paper, writing is always social. We write using language and conventions we have learned within a culture—within a group of people who communicate with one another.

A community of people with shared communication practices can be called a *discourse community*. I will complicate this basic definition in a moment, but it can be helpful to start with a simple example before noticing the gray areas.

For several years, I worked in restaurants as a server. During this time, I learned certain words and phrases that eventually felt natural to me as I became more

immersed in the work (these words and phrases associated with a discourse community are called a *lexis*). “Behind ya” was a phrase I used when I wanted another server or worker to be aware I was right there. We used this regularly to avoid calamity when carrying big trays of drinks and food. Other phrases were related

## CONNECT

When thinking about discourse communities, it’s often helpful to think about learning to speak in a new context, noticing when another person hasn’t quite grasped how to speak within a particular context, or recognizing how noticeable it can be when habits from one communication context are used in a different communication context. In other words, it’s often easiest to recognize discourse communities by noticing when the boundaries are transgressed in some way.

Can you think of instances that fit any of these situations?

to a particular system we had of ringing in food orders, such as PLU (Price Look Up), which referenced a number coding system for most of the foods on the menu.

“Laurie please” meant that I was needed, either because an order for one of my tables was ready or because the cook had a question. Sometimes at family parties, my brother would use this phrasing to get my attention because four members of my family worked at the same restaurant chain; my brother brought the restaurant lexis into our family discourse community, and it was a fun and funny gesture because it wasn’t as natural there.

To some degree, the phrase “discourse community” is inaccurate when describing the workplace because “discourse” focuses on language, but using

the language effectively was simply one part of the community. I also needed to learn how things were to be done in a particular restaurant—trays were used to serve drinks, appetizers were served before salads, ramekins were used for tartar sauce, ketchup was kept on all the tables, and so forth. To learn the customs, I trained with experienced servers, attended “pre-meal” meetings at the start of each shift, completed additional trainings for all restaurant workers, and took exams to test me on my knowledge. To this day, I can tell you that a plate of nachos at that particular restaurant included 64 chips (eight tortillas were each cut into eight parts and then deep fried for each plate of nachos).

Because most communities combine language practices with other kinds of practices, the phrase “discourse community” is sometimes replaced with “**community of practice.**” The latter phrase takes the focus off of spoken or written discourse, though discourse is still *part* of a community of practice.

Are you with me so far? Here is a quick review:

- writing is always social!
- a discourse community is a group of people who share language practices

- a community of practice is a group of people who share language practices and other conventions

Now I am going to complicate the ideas, though I am going to rely on the term “discourse community” from here on out because I am going to focus on language and communication. Scholars who seriously investigate discourse communities need a clearer definition of the terms in order to set parameters for their arguments. If I am researching a subject, even something like “dogs,” I need to clearly define what I mean by “dog” in order to conduct and communicate my research in ways that others can use.

One researcher who has established criteria for defining a “discourse community” is John Swales. Swales wrote in 1990 that discourse communities have six criteria. Many teachers use these criteria to help students identify and understand the way communication operates within a particular discourse community:

1. A discourse community has a broadly agreed set of common public goals.
2. A discourse community has mechanisms of intercommunication among its members.
3. A discourse community uses its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback.
4. A discourse community utilizes and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims.
5. In addition to owning genres, a discourse community has acquired some specific lexis.
6. A discourse community has a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discursal expertise. (Swales, *Genre*, 24–27)

Recently, John Swales revisited his thinking about discourse communities and he created a slightly new list. I paraphrase his revisions in italics just below. Part of the reason I share the versions published in 1990 as well as 2017 is to show that even ideas published, read, cited, and used by a lot of people can undergo revision.

## CONNECT

Think of a time when you felt like an “outsider” or when you noticed someone else seemed like an “outsider,” whether online or in real life.

1. What signs showed outsider status?
2. To what degree did this outsider status change as the individual became part of the community of practice? Did the individual need to change in some way for this to happen?

1. A discourse community has a broadly agreed set of goals; *these goals may or may not be explicitly stated, and there may be sets of differing goals for different segments of a single community.*
2. A discourse community has mechanisms of intercommunication among its members; *these mechanisms may be digital; some kind of communication is necessary for a set of people to be defined as a “community.”*
3. A discourse community uses its participatory mechanisms to provide information and feedback; *members communicate in order to keep the community functioning or help it grow; communication helps things to get done.*
4. A discourse community utilizes and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims; *the word “possesses” is unnecessary, though a particular community might refine a genre in a particular way.*
5. In addition to owning genres, it has acquired some specific lexis; *the lexis of a community develops over time and often includes abbreviations.*
6. A discourse community has a threshold of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discursal expertise; *the newer members of a discourse community gradually advance into full membership.*
7. A discourse community develops a sense of “silential relations” (Becker 1995); *some things can go unsaid because they are assumed.*
8. A discourse community develops horizons of expectation; *the community develops a value system to evaluate work, and a history and ongoing patterns lead to expectations of when and how things will happen.* (Swales, “Concept of Discourse Community”)

It is worth reading the full article (available online in *Composition Forum*) to hear more about how Swales thinks about discourse communities, but I am going to turn from defining what a discourse community is to thinking about why so many of us who teach writing find the concept useful.

If all writing is situated in a particular context, and contexts constantly change, it is difficult to discuss contexts in a useful way. Recognizing and describing discourse communities, however, allows us to make the complicated world of context more manageable. Noticing discourse communities helps us see that many contexts for communication have patterns—such as particular forms, language practices, guidelines, and so forth—that enable or encourage some behavior while restricting or discouraging other behavior.

## CONNECT

I have mentioned the importance of recognizing disciplinary similarities and differences several times. When has it been helpful to notice similarities or differences in writing you've completed for school?

At the very least, then, paying attention to discourse communities can help writing teachers and students notice the way expectations are likely to change from one classroom to another. Each discipline can be considered a discourse community, and that is why writing expected in a biology course, a music theory course, and a developmental psychology course is likely to differ, sometimes in drastic ways.

Paying attention to discourse communities can also help us connect how writing is similar across many classrooms. Most academic writing involves evidence-based thinking that responds to earlier research in the field, and most professors expect writing to be clear and concise. The larger discourse community of the university is a way of recognizing such common expectations.

More broadly, an awareness of discourse communities can help us think about ways that communities may be healthy and supportive or unhealthy and oppressive. Often, a single discourse community may have both healthy and unhealthy elements, or a single element might welcome some people and make others feel unwelcome.

If we return to the restaurant where I worked in my twenties, I can describe a conduct and policy manual that all workers were responsible for studying and abiding by, a menu that servers and kitchen workers needed to understand, logos and signs that helped customers identify the restaurant and key components like restrooms and smoking/non-smoking sections. (Yes, we used to have smoking sections in restaurants, as if smoke would be contained.) I made notes for myself when I took customer orders, and I translated these notes into the restaurant computer so that bartenders and kitchen workers could prepare food. All of these elements of communication helped the restaurant run smoothly, helped me learn how to do my work when I was new, and helped the restaurant fill its mission of serving good food at reasonable prices.

If you turned a critical eye to that restaurant, however, you might notice some other patterns. Almost all of us who worked there were white. An Asian immigrant who spoke little English washed dishes, and three immigrants who spoke English as a second language did prep work in the kitchen. All of the text inside and outside the restaurant—from policy manuals to menus to signs—was in English. The restaurant was in a Massachusetts town with a largely white population, so the lack of diversity wasn't odd, but the choices to keep all restaurant texts solely in English advantaged some workers and disadvantaged others, welcomed some clientele and discouraged others from eating there.

Most servers and hostesses were female. Most bartenders were male. The manager and the three assistant managers were male. The kitchen workers were almost all male, though there was one exception when I first started working there, and she impressed me because she was a young woman in a realm that seemed to be a male space. I cannot associate these gender patterns with particular texts of that discourse community, either because it was long ago or because the divisions of labor rested on unspoken assumptions. The patterns likely matched national trends of the time, and they make me curious. Why is it that many workplace roles seem divided along gender lines, even when such a dynamic is not an explicit goal of this restaurant or, perhaps, most work spaces? And how was the discourse community affected by the unplanned way that divisions of labor in this particular restaurant tended to fall along gender lines?

I did not analyze any of these dynamics when I was actually part of the discourse community. I also didn't analyze economic class divisions, disabilities, sexuality, age, or other common ways of categorizing cultural identities. My point is that the discourse communities that we belong to may intentionally support a wider sense of fluidity, diversity, and welcome; they may legislate particular roles for particular kinds of workers; or they may fall somewhere in between, unintentionally welcoming some members in some roles while not providing access for others—often those who are in marginal rather than mainstream positions.

If my restaurant discourse community example doesn't make sense to you, let me offer another example: The movie *Elf*. In this comedy, Buddy is a human raised by elves, so he belongs to a North Pole discourse community with very particular kinds of texts, belief systems, means of communication, and purposes. When he travels to New York City, he encounters an entirely different discourse community. Poor Buddy does not understand that he is in a new discourse community, so he continues to behave as if he is in his North Pole community, and a lot of very funny episodes ensue.

**Great illustrative,  
concrete examples**

In some of these episodes, Buddy is excluded because he does not know how to fit into the New York City discourse community. He gets thrown out of a toy store, thrown out of an office building, and relegated to the mailroom of his dad's company because his communication and his behavior tend to confuse, annoy, and offend others.

The operation of discourse communities is far more complex throughout the movie, but the point remains. When we communicate in ways that fit one discourse community but not another, we run the risk of exclusion. The problem may be that we need to learn a new kind of discourse, or the problem may be that the discourse community is more exclusive and unwelcoming than it ought

to be. People who learn English as a second language or who speak in a regional or ethnic dialect may be especially vulnerable to exclusion. Often an expectation of “standard English” is used to welcome some people and bar others from access.

Sometimes students tell me that their high school friends speak in a local dialect and label those who resist that style as “uppity,” “snooty,” or “fake.” Those same students notice that the use of their regional or family dialect in their college classes may lead to assumptions that they are unintelligent, local “hicks,” or uneducated. Personally, when I first entered college and my new classmates teased me about my Boston accent, I coped by gradually changing the way I spoke to minimize my accent. This change didn’t seem like a loss to me at the time, but when I was working in Pennsylvania almost twenty years later and had a colleague who had kept her Boston accent, I was jealous. My new friend sounded like members of my family, and I realized I was sad that I no longer sounded like my family or the friends I grew up with.

Rigid adherence to “standard English” is thus a catch-22, compelling many of us to either conform to or resist languages considered appropriate in school, **with either choice involving a loss.** *Code switching* is a coping mechanism that involves changing dialects when moving from one situation to another. This approach allows people to belong to several discourse communities in ways that follow the norms of each. If I had used my Boston accent with my family and childhood friends and shed it outside of those communities, that would be considered code switching.

Another strategy is to seek opportunities for *code meshing*. This strategy involves bringing a variety of dialects together, an approach that conforms in some ways to expectations of a discourse community while challenging expectations in other ways. In the Introduction, I told of a colleague who used both academic language and African American vernacular English in a conference presentation. Making such decisions may be more difficult when new to a discourse community, when less certain of expectations, and when seeking a sense of belonging.

In a writing course that encourages attention to discourse communities, your professor may be interested in opportunities for you to bring various ways of speaking and writing together. Consider when and how discourse communities may be open to diverse dialects rather than upholding rigid expectations or using speech patterns to perpetuate stereotypes.

## CONNECT

1. Can you think of a movie that depicts a discourse community? How can you tell it’s a discourse community?
2. What dialects are you aware of in your own life? To what degree are these dialects stigmatized in negative ways?
3. Can you think of an example of code meshing that worked effectively?

As you begin noticing the discourse communities in which you participate, whether in school or in other parts of your life, you will hopefully be able to learn to adjust your approaches to communication to fit new spaces. I hope you may also notice how communication practices within a discourse community might be improved. Understanding discourse communities involves not only adapting your own practices to fit but also considering how the discourse community itself might be more inclusive.

## GENRES

One criterion for identifying a group as a “discourse community” is the use of shared genres of writing. A *genre* is a category of writing with identifiable characteristics of content, organization, and style. Genres might be used to communicate information, improve the community, and acclimate new members to the discourse community.

Again, because understanding a full context for communication can be overwhelming, looking at patterns allows writers to grapple with the context. Genres are part of not only a single discourse community but often span many discourse communities. Paying attention to genres, then, is another way of helping writers move from one discourse community to another, bringing some expertise along and noticing how more learning or adaptation might need to occur.

In the discussions of discourse communities above, I mentioned many genres from the restaurant setting—a policy manual, menu, signs, and so forth. If you took just one of these genres, such as a menu, you could likely list the typical content that is included, typical organizational elements, and stylistic guidelines. You may even be able to generate criteria to evaluate whether or not a menu is effective.

To the degree that commonalities among menus exist across restaurants, we can identify genre conventions. Because different restaurants are different discourse communities, however, menus are also likely to vary. Some might serve all-Italian food, or all-vegan dishes, or pub food that fits the big-screen sports decor. Some restaurants might have a menu in a single paper sheet while some might offer many pages of colorful illustrations or a leather-bound wine list separate from the food menu.

## CONNECT

Choose a genre you read or write as an expert—perhaps an Instagram post or notes taken during class.

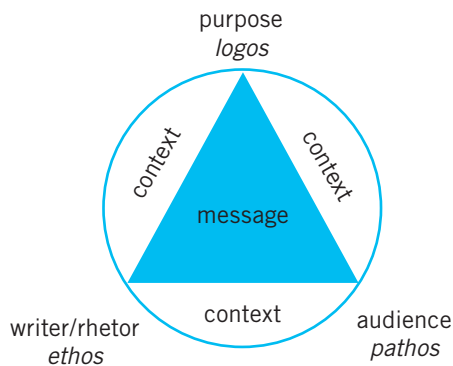
1. What criteria might you use to evaluate whether a particular instance of this genre was well done or not?
2. How might developing criteria for less familiar genres be helpful?



Genres thus give many hints about what to expect as we read and as we write, just as a single discourse community can be analyzed to help us better communicate. Considering both genre and discourse community provides us with an even better sense of the way context affects what we are reading or writing.

## RECAPPING THE RHETORICAL SITUATION

At this point, I am going to loop back to the rhetorical triangle and bring it together with the contextual elements we have discussed.



First, when **analyzing a message**, always pay attention to the original three elements to whatever degree you can:

- Who is the writer (or rhetor/speaker)?
- To what audience is the message being directed?
- What purpose or purposes is the message serving?

As far as context, any message is communicated within an **occasion**, so if you can understand the **exigence** and **kairos** that led to communication, it will help you discern the purpose. Notice how the communication is responding to and building on what has come before, whether in terms of content and information, conventions associated with a discourse community, genre conventions, or even larger cultural assumptions. Every communication is connected to earlier communications.

When possible, use your knowledge of the **discourse community** to better understand the message, and use the message to better understand the discourse

community. While many messages are communicated within a discourse community, some messages are communicated across or between discourse communities. Most messages fall into **genres** as well, so if you are familiar with a genre, you can better understand how the message is functioning by noting how it fills some genre conventions and deviates from other genre conventions. You can also use the message to better understand how a genre operates to allow some kinds of communication and discourage other kinds of communication.

When **crafting a message** rather than analyzing one, be sure to understand that your audience needs to be motivated to see a new perspective, so make it easy for your audience to hear you and be sure to tell them something they do not already know. If the exigence isn't obvious, tell your audience—why are you communicating? what are you responding to? how are you bringing something new to the conversation?

If information needs to be recapped in order for you to add to a conversation, do so while giving credit to those who have already contributed to thinking about a topic. Such a dynamic shows your audience that you are worth listening to, both because you have done your homework and because you are building on others' ideas without claiming their work as your own.

Also be aware of discourse community conventions and genre conventions. Both allow clearer communication, and your audience is more likely to listen if you show that you can fill expectations. However, if your sense of a discourse community or genre is that it is overly restrictive, consider challenging or stretching expectations. If you feel uncertain about taking such risks because you are new to a discourse community or the stakes are high, ask for input and support from an expert.

Paying attention to rhetorical situations should help you communicate more effectively and efficiently, so if you are overwhelmed with the more complex ways of thinking about context, at the very least pay attention to why in the world someone is bothering to speak, write, or otherwise communicate. What is the purpose?

## FROM “RULES” TO “GUIDELINES”

Recognizing that all writing is situated involves more sophisticated understandings of conventions.

I regularly ask students what rules they learned about writing during high school. The list is often long and interesting, including items such as “Do not use ‘I’” and “Do not start a sentence with ‘But’ or ‘And.’” I ask students where and when they violate these rules. How do they write when brainstorming? taking

notes? writing on social media? texting? I also wonder whether they have seen professional writers violate rules that were taught in high school classes.

If you've seen any of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies, you might remember that The Pirate's Code is "more of a guideline, really." That's how I like to think about writing rules. They tend to be "more of a guideline, really."

In other words, sometimes a rule applies and sometimes it does not. Yes, that's confusing, yet it's unavoidable because if the rhetorical situation changes, the writing is likely to shift right along with it.

In order to cope with this confusing situation, I often look at models of writing from a) the discourse community I'm writing within and b) the genre I'll be writing in. For example, when I needed to request travel funding for a conference or complete a self-evaluation, I looked at how other faculty from my department had written their documents. My specific information was different, but I understood the kinds of information I should include and how to organize the information based on these samples.

In classroom or work situations, it is also smart to talk with teachers or bosses about guidelines and conventions. I provide several tips about academic conventions in Chapter Three that will not be universally helpful but will at least give you some guidelines to start from. Such foundations allow you to gradually adjust approaches for specific situations. When students ask me whether they can use "I" or how many sentences should be in a paragraph, I know they are taking their past experiences with academic writing and trying to figure out what is similar and what is different in this situation. In other words, those students are transferring what they have learned about writing so that the new writing task is at least somewhat familiar, even if it might be different in

## CONNECT

1. As an individual or as a class, generate a list of rules that you've been taught in various situations of school writing. What do you notice about these "rules"?
2. Have you ever noticed that most writing rules apply in some situations but not others? What increased your awareness of these shifts?
3. Have you ever laughed about a person who was texting or using social media for the first time and didn't seem to understand conventions in those spaces? What are some examples? What's similar about that situation and the kinds of conventions that teachers articulate about school writing? What's different?

## CONNECT

1. When is it okay to judge another person by their dialect, spelling, use of grammar conventions, and so forth?
2. When is such judgment inappropriate?
3. In what situations is it appropriate or inappropriate to correct the way another person speaks?

my flexible attitude toward the use of “I” and my appreciation of the occasional high-impact one-sentence paragraph.

I now suddenly feel pressure to write a high-impact one-sentence paragraph, but I’m sorry: I got nothing.

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## Extending the Conversation

To think more about the question “What is the ‘rhetorical situation’ and why should I care about it?” I have gathered together three selections reprinted here and seven readings or videos you can find online. Each piece overlaps with my initial approach to the question in some way, but each piece also extends the chapter question with a particular focus. As we answer questions that may seem simple at first, complexities and nuances develop that call for more exploration.

For each text reprinted here, I tell you why I included it, provide some background about its initial publication, and offer hints that may guide your reading,