



# RHETORICAL SITUATIONS & CHOICES

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**W**hat is rhetoric? Rhetoric refers to the ability to communicate effectively and with a purpose. So what is a rhetorical situation? It's the context in which you create a composition. To put it simply, as a writer, you have a specific purpose and an audience. You need to know what you want to say; you also need to know your readers' expectations and accommodate them in some way. For example, when you write a review of a restaurant on yelp.com, you know that Yelp readers want to know your opinion of the meal; they also expect specific details about the individual dishes, service, and ambience you experienced.

Thinking about the rhetorical situation before you begin composing can help you make all sorts of important decisions about your composition, including what level of vocabulary to use (simpler words for an audience of middle schoolers than for a college-educated audience), what kinds of examples to use (more technical examples for an audience of experts than for an audience of laypeople), and what kind of color scheme to use (high-contrast color scheme for people who have color blindness if you anticipate they might be part of your audience).

In 1968, Lloyd Bitzer, a communications scholar, first articulated the modern concept of a rhetorical situation. He identified three aspects of rhetorical situations:

- **The exigence:** The motivation for the writer or composer. For example, our exigence for writing this chapter is that we want college students to understand the importance of rhetorical situations in their own reading and writing. In this book, we use the term “purpose” to convey the idea of exigence.
- **The audience:** Whoever will receive the message conveyed by the writer or composer. Our audience right now is you, students in a college writing course.
- **The constraints:** The situational factors that a writer or composer must take into account. One of our constraints is that a textbook relies on the written word, so although we might want to explain rhetorical situations to you through an interpretive dance, we are instead using written words.

You consider rhetorical situations all the time, even if you are not consciously aware of doing so. When you make choices about the way you tell a story about a snowboarding adventure you had—perhaps including more colorful language and slang when you tell the story to your friends and then choosing more formal language when you tell the story to your insurance agent—you are responding to a particular rhetorical situation. There is no one “right” way to tell the story of your adventure; the way you tell the story depends on your audience. Likewise, your purpose in telling the story makes a difference. If you are telling the story to illustrate that you are an adrenaline junky, you may highlight the level of risk or danger involved in snowboarding, but if you are telling the story to convince a nervous friend to try snowboarding, you might emphasize that you avoided injury on your adventure by taking a few precautions and using high-quality equipment.



## WRITE

List all the rhetorical situations you've participated in today. Think about every time you communicated, whether verbally, nonverbally, in writing, by text, or by other means. When you have a complete list, choose one situation and write a paragraph in which you identify the purpose, the audience, and the constraints.

Already today, you've probably been involved in several rhetorical situations. If you think of rhetorical situations broadly to include any communication event, then any interaction you had this morning with roommates, family, fellow public transportation riders, or the barista at your favorite coffee shop counts. Think about how you communicated differently with these different people. You might have been more polite with some, more direct with some, or more verbose with some. You may not have even realized you were making choices in your level of politeness, directness, or verbosity because you probably understand the concept of rhetorical situations instinctively.

In this book, we will constantly ask you to think explicitly about the rhetorical situations you find yourself in so that you can be more deliberate about the choices you make in your day-to-day interactions and in your writing. As you think about rhetorical situations, we will ask you to consider your purpose, your audience, your use of rhetorical appeals, and your choice of modes and media. In other words, we will ask you to think carefully about rhetorical choices.

# Understanding Rhetorical Situations & Choices

## Purpose | Why Are You Composing?

Every time you write—or compose anything, in any genre—you do so for a reason. You might be trying to convince someone to change her mind about something or take action. You might be telling a story to build rapport with someone or entertain him. You might be giving someone information to help her make a decision. Or you might have another purpose.

There are many reasons to write, and sometimes these reasons overlap. As writers, we often have several purposes for creating a single text. Let's look at a possible example. Let's assume that you love farmers' markets and want to establish one in your town. Your purpose is to start up a weekly local farmers' market. To make this happen, you need to (1) present your idea to others and (2) persuade them that it's worth acting upon. You expect that some people will object. In this context or rhetorical situation, you have more than one purpose. To persuade others, you need to explain your idea, say what's great about it, provide supporting statistics, and tell a persuasive story about how a similar plan succeeded in a neighboring town. You also have more than one audience. Some people will agree with you 100 percent; others won't be so sure; still others—maybe grocery store owners or city planners—will reject your idea altogether.

## Audience | Whom Are You Composing For?

Every time you compose, you do so for multiple audiences: a primary audience, which is your intended reader, and a secondary audience, which is other people who might end



up reading what you wrote. For example, we are writing this book for you, students, so you are our primary audience; however, writing instructors and writing program administrators are likely also going to read this book. Audiences are made up of people—and people can be easily bored, pressed for time, or generally disinterested. You need to grab their attention and keep it. Let's look at an example: Imagine you are traveling across the country and want to tell stories of your adventures (your purpose) to your friends, family, and even strangers interested in travel (your audience). You decide that the best way to reach your audience is to create a blog where you can write about your experiences, show maps and photos, and connect to other social media sites. That is what the world-traveling blogger Gilad Hizkiyahu (who also calls himself Giladhiz) decided to do (see p. 8).

Gilad clearly understands his audiences (his primary audience of travelers and a secondary audience of folks like us who happened upon his blog while looking for examples) and wants them to stick with him. To this end, he does the following:

- Provides a photo of himself and an “About the Author” section so that readers can make a personal connection with him
- Addresses his readers directly: “So, dear friends and accidental surfers, allow me to begin with the reasons that brought me to plan and go on that trip”
- Writes in a casual, readable, and humorous style, meant to hook his readers and keep them interested in his ongoing adventures
- Structures his post with subheadings to guide readers, and provides options for navigating content and for e-mailing or connecting by social media

## CHECKLIST | Composing with a Purpose

As you begin to compose, ask yourself:

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Why am I writing? What do I want to communicate? And to whom?                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> If I'm trying to convince someone of something, what are the best ways to do so for my particular readers?                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> What do I want my audience to believe or do after reading my composition?                           | <input type="checkbox"/> If I'm trying to build rapport with someone, how can I share something about myself or my experiences to help my readers relate to me? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Is what I'm communicating objectionable or controversial to anyone? If so, how will I address this? | <input type="checkbox"/> If I'm helping someone make a decision, what information does my reader need, and how can I communicate it clearly?                    |

## Rhetorical Appeals | Ethos, Pathos, and Logos

Regardless of what your purpose is, you need to get your audience on board. Even when persuasion is not your primary goal, it is always part of what you're doing, no



## ▶ TRAVEL BLOG

Gilad Hizkiyahu (also known as Giladhiz), from *Gilad Is Doing South America*.

Credit: Photos and content by Gilad Hizkiyahu, with permission.

## WRITE

When you write, do you think of who will read your writing? When you compose a status update on social media, do you think of who will experience what you've created? Write about a time you considered your audience in writing a status update on Facebook, Twitter, or another social media platform.

## Prologue - The beginning

[Gilad's Profile](#) • [About this blog](#) • [Home](#)

Trip Start

Herzlia, Israel

Herzlia, Israel

Monday, October 11, 2010

Like One person likes this. Be the first of your friends.

### Prologue - The beginning.

This really isn't an interesting part of my journey. . . This part is meant for those of you who wish to know me a little bit better, for some friends who hasn't been in close touch with me lately and for others who just happen to have too much free time and nothing better to do at the moment.

### Mellow excitement

If you were about to embark on a 7 months journey around South America, rafting through rapid rivers, exploring the jungle, diving with sharks, climbing icy mountains, dancing (or watching other people dance) at the famous Brazilian carnival and partying wildly at night – how would that make you feel? I assume "mellow" would not be one of the ways to describe your feelings. And yet, I'm pretty convinced that this is how I feel at the moment.



Just chilling. . .

But I jump ahead... first of all – thank you all for navigating your browsers to my Blog. If you've read all the way down to this line – I assume you're the "reader" kind of person rather than the "browser" type who's looking for anchor words or just looking at the pretty pictures... so from now on I'll consider my writing as a kind of a monologue, knowing that there's someone out there who actually listens to me babble.

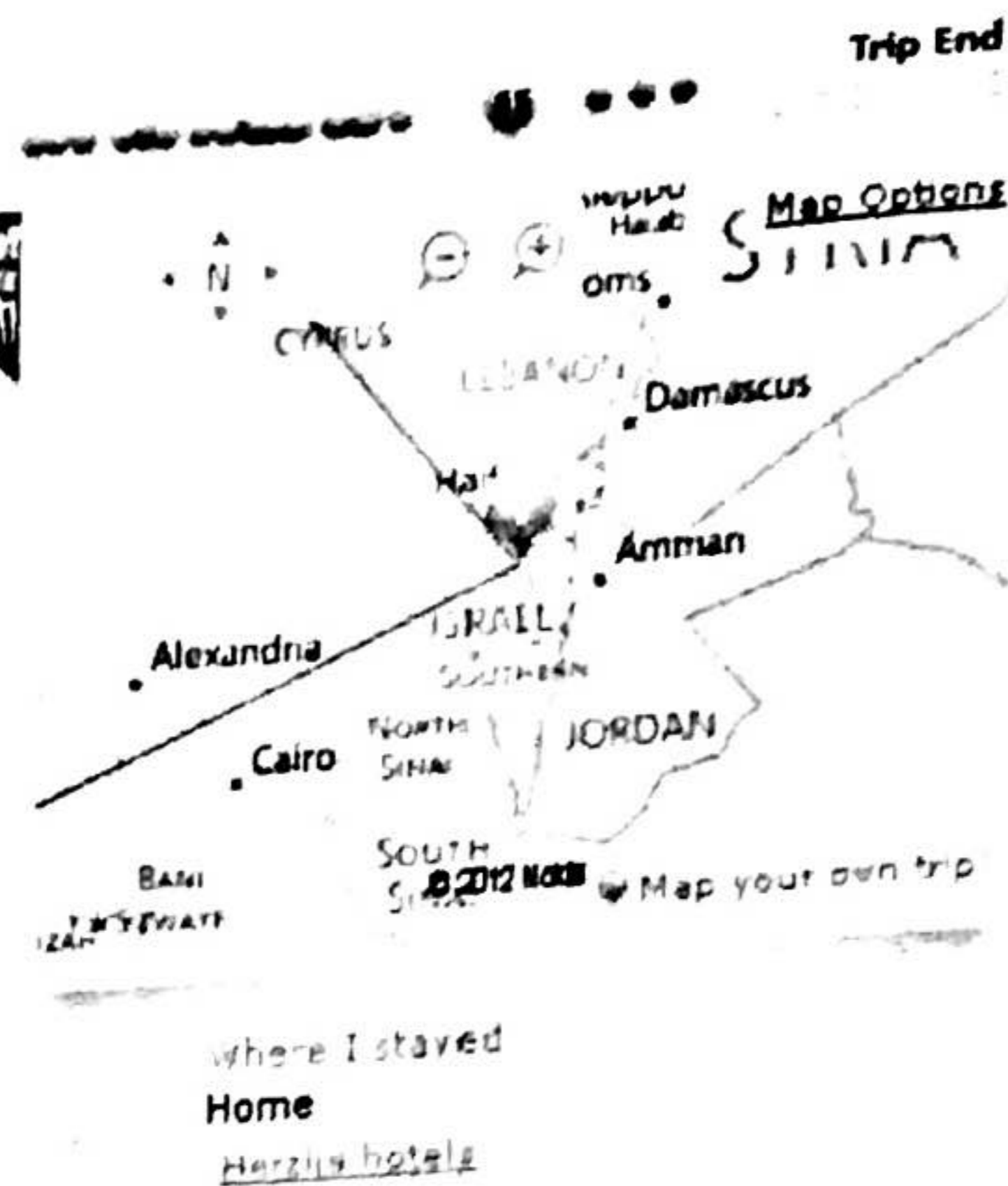
So, dear friends and accidental surfers, allow me to begin with the reasons that brought me to plan and go on that trip.

### Reason #1

#### Coincidence

I still have no idea how it happened. One day I was in a middle of a long term relationship (3 year), living in a rented apartment in [Ramat Gan](#), working at a place I'd rather not mention – while studying for my MBA degree.

The next day I found myself alone, mourning the loss of a dead-end relationship (which ended like a train crash – unexpected derailling and crashing into the mountain side instead of going through a dark tunnel) And on the next day – I graduated my MBA, giving me even more free time for myself, alone. Lo and behold – at the very next day I decided to dump my promising career and quit, surprising many of my colleagues who were convinced I would reach a high position in my organization, as I was a highly valued (and well rewarded) employee. Hmm...

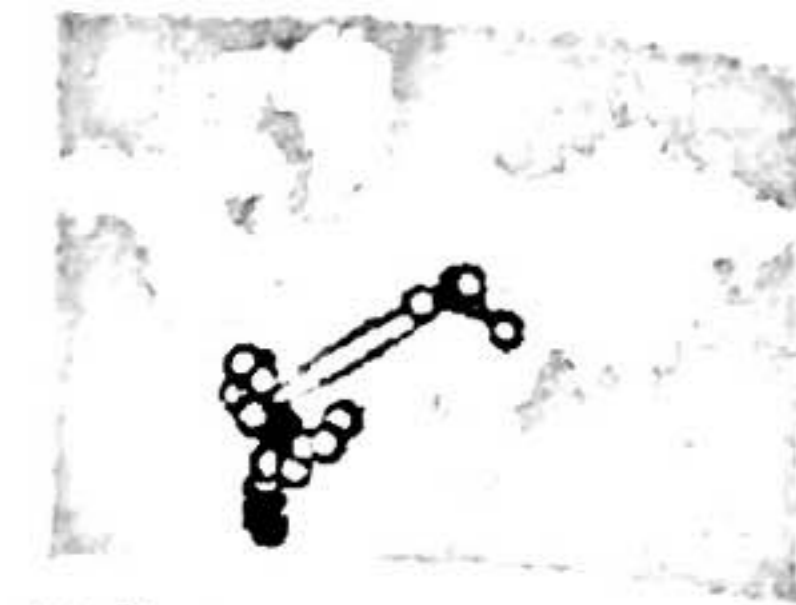


Gilad Hizkiyahu



Send a message  
Add as favorite  
Get email updates  
Turn on my story  
Share  
RSS

About this Blog  
Gilad is doing South America



Start your own travel blog

matter what. We persuade our audiences by using what are called *rhetorical appeals*. Aristotle identified three rhetorical appeals. They are often used in combination:

- **Ethos** is the credibility, authority, and trustworthiness the writer or composer conveys to the audience.
- **Pathos** is an appeal to an audience's emotions or values.
- **Logos** is the logic and connection of facts and evidence to the point being made.

## Modes & Media

What do we mean by mode? When you want to communicate an idea to an audience, you have to decide whether to express it in writing, visually, through sound, or in



some other way. Do you want to write down your idea? Express it visually with paint on canvas? Or tell the story orally? Whichever method of expression you choose is the composition's mode.

There are many modes, but for the purpose of this book, we work with three modes: **written or text-based, visual, and audio**. The term *multimodal* refers to more than one mode used in a composition. For example, a photo essay usually uses two modes (text and visuals), while a TED talk might use three modes (visuals and text on slides and the audio delivery of the speech).

**What do we mean by media?** Media is how the composition is delivered to its audience. Will your audience read your piece in a book (print), or will they read it in an e-book (digital)? Will your audience watch your TED talk by going to the TED Talk Web site (digital), watch you deliver it on stage (face-to-face), or read a transcript of it (print)?

For the purpose of this book, we work primarily with three types of media: **print, digital, and face-to-face**. Media, though, also includes film, television, software, MP3, and more.

A particular mode can be delivered in multiple media. For example, an audio essay could be recorded either on an old-fashioned tape recorder or digitally. An obituary might be printed in a newspaper or published online.

The modes of Gilad's blog, *Gilad Is Doing South America*, are both written and visual, and the medium is digital. A simple way to distinguish mode from medium is to think of mode as the "how" and medium as the "delivery system." A separate concept is genre, which we will cover in Chapter 2. For now, keep in mind that the genre—in Gilad's case, a blog—is what the composer presents as a final product.

## WRITE

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Go back to the paragraph you wrote from page 6 about a rhetorical situation you were involved in earlier today. Write another paragraph in which you discuss the mode and media choices you made and why you made them. How might the situation have unfolded differently if you had made different choices?

## CHECKLIST | Composing for an Audience

As you begin to compose, ask yourself:

- Who is my audience in terms of demographics?  
How do they identify in terms of gender? What is their age range? Where do they live? What do they like? Do they have particular religious beliefs? Are they from a particular social class? Are they of a particular race or ethnic background?
- What is my audience's stake in the issue I'm presenting? Do they care? Why or why not?
- What does my audience value? Will my message be in line with—or contradictory to—their values? How can I present my message so that my audience will consider it? And perhaps even be persuaded by it?
- What level of education does my audience have?  
What kind of language will best reach them?
- Who is my primary audience, and what do they need to know?
- What possible secondary audiences might read this, and how do I need to take them into account?



# Reading Rhetorical Situations

In your classes, you might have heard your professors say that the course emphasizes critical reading. This might even be noted on the course syllabus. Reading the rhetorical situation of a text is an important aspect of critical reading. It allows you to dig beneath what is being said to understand the choices the writer made when composing.

Reading rhetorically is an active way to read. You are interacting with the text, noticing and asking questions about the assumptions the composer made. For example, if you are reading a letter to the editor arguing that a homeless shelter should be closed because it is expensive to operate, you might notice that the writer's argument hinges on the assumption that a homeless shelter should not cost the public so much to operate. That means the writer must believe that there is an appropriate amount of money that could be spent on housing the homeless. You might also ask where the writer got his or her information about how much the shelter costs to operate. Are the figures current? You might also ask about other perspectives, such as those of the homeless people who rely on the shelter or the people who are employed by the shelter.

Initially, when you pick up something to read, you probably read it to understand the message the writer is trying to convey. For example, if you read a Yelp review of a nearby restaurant, you might read it to see whether the writer says you should eat there. However, if you were to read this review rhetorically, you would examine how the writer got her point across. You wouldn't only be concerned with whether you want to eat at the restaurant, but you would dig into how the author convinced or failed to convince you to eat at that restaurant. To read something rhetorically, you read to understand not just what the writer is telling you, but also how the writer conveys information and makes her point. When reading rhetorically, you might ask who the composer is, why this is being written (purpose), whom the composer is addressing (audience), and how language is used to convey the message or appeal to the audience.

## Reading to Understand Purpose

Knowing why a piece was written helps you understand how you might experience that piece and what you can reasonably expect to get from it. Is the purpose to persuade you about an issue? Help you make a decision? Provide a constant stream of belly laughs? Share a story? Knowing that a Yelp review about a restaurant is intended to help you make a decision about whether to eat at the establishment keeps you focused on looking at the reasons the writer gives for eating there rather than lingering on a clever turn of phrase.



## Reading to Understand Audience

Understanding for whom the piece is written helps you determine what extra information you might need to digest the text. Are you the intended primary audience? If not, how does the piece pertain to you? If the audience of a piece about a landslide is a geologist, you might need to look up some terms to understand the information. What additional resources will you need to understand or relate to the piece?

## Reading to Understand Rhetorical Appeals

Consider who the writer is. Is it someone qualified to write about the subject? Is the Yelp reviewer someone who eats out a lot? Once you've determined that the writer is credible (*ethos*), read to see how the writer establishes that credibility. Is credibility established through the level of information or details provided? Through the language used? Is it established because the writer has written numerous pieces about the subject? Another thing to consider is how the writer connects with you (*pathos*). Are you hooked? Is it because of the emotion used to help you feel the situation? Consider your reactions to the text and why you continue to read or view it. Finally, ask yourself how the author makes his case (*logos*). Is it supported with evidence? Are ideas organized in a particular way to help you consider the question at hand?

## Reading to Understand Modes & Media

Why has the writer chosen to use text? Is it because that's the most efficient way to convey the information to her intended audience? Did the writer include pictures? Ask yourself why the visuals were included. Perhaps the Yelp review you're examining incorporates a photo of the delicious onion soup dumplings to illustrate the unique qualities of the chef. This might help convince you to try the restaurant more than if just words were used. If you are listening to a podcast about the homeless, you might ask how listening to the story affects you. Did the writer choose to record words so you could hear the voices of the homeless?

In addition to examining the modes used, read to understand the choices made in media. Is the piece available digitally so that it can be accessed anywhere there is an Internet connection? You might want to access a Yelp review from your computer at home when planning a trip or when you land in an unfamiliar city and are starving, seeking some comfort food for dinner.

While reading rhetorically might seem like a lot of work, it ultimately helps you gain a better understanding of the decisions the composer has made. This not only helps you discern the messages in a seemingly difficult text, but it also helps you consider the ways you might deliver your own messages. Throughout the text, you will see numerous guided readings that illustrate ways to read rhetorically.





# Reading Academic Texts

You've probably been reading for most of your life and probably read countless texts every day—road signs, text messages, food labels, and more. But reading complex academic texts such as textbooks, peer-reviewed journal articles, and scholarly books requires a special set of skills. When you read road signs, you are simply reading for information. Academic texts, however, usually make an argument of some sort; if you simply read them for information, you might miss the point. For example, if you read the previous material about reading rhetorical situations and just took away that it includes noticing purpose, audience, appeals, and modes and media, you would be missing the point that understanding the rhetorical situation helps you see why a writer made certain decisions.

Here are some strategies you can use to make these complex texts more digestible:

## Previewing

Rather than diving in to read from the beginning, it can be helpful to skim through a complex text from beginning to end to get a sense of its organization and purpose. Skimming will help you understand what the topic is and what argument is being made. For example, simply skimming through to read the headings can help you see whether a text will cover both a problem and a solution or only discuss the problem.

## Looking for Key Terms

As you preview, you may notice that some technical terms are used in the headings or are in bold or italics in the text. Since these terms are being emphasized, you should make sure you comprehend them or you will have trouble making sense of the text once you begin reading it more closely. Identify key terms and be sure to look up definitions if you are unsure of what they mean. For example, if you see the word *hegemony* several times in your skimming and aren't absolutely certain what it means, you should look it up because it is clearly essential to an understanding of the text.

## Identifying Knowledge Claims & Evidence

After you skim the text, you will need to read it at least once, slowly and carefully. As you read, notice the difference between facts and knowledge claims. A fact is something that is uncontested; a knowledge claim is open to debate. For example, it is a fact that millennials spend more time reading on the Internet than reading books; it is a knowledge claim that this is problematic. Once you identify something as a knowledge claim, you want to search for the evidence that supports that claim. For example, in the 1968 article mentioned earlier, Lloyd Bitzer makes a knowledge claim that some

rhetorical situations are so dramatic that we "can predict with near certainty" what the response will be.\* He then supports that claim with a discussion of the rhetorical response to President Kennedy's assassination.

## Considering the Composer's Perspective

Many people have written about farmers' markets, but consider how different an article on farmers' markets written by an economist might be from an article written by a city planner. The economist will likely be considering the economic impact on communities, consumers, large-scale farmers, or small farmers, while the city planner will more likely be thinking about how weekend farmers' markets impact traffic patterns and put pressure on a community's parking options. Understanding the perspective of the composer will help you understand why particular knowledge claims are made and not others.

## Annotating the Text

One way to force yourself to read slowly and deliberately is to annotate the text you are reading. Annotating is different from highlighting, which is simply noting important words or sentences in the text. Annotating means making notes directly on the text (this can be done by writing on a hard copy or using software to add notes to a digital copy). With highlighting, you are limited to noting what the author has said; annotating allows you to summarize the writer's ideas in your own words, which is a good way to understand and remember them. Additionally, you might want to ask questions, write down definitions of words you looked up right next to the words themselves, and write down connections or contradictions you notice between the text you are reading and other texts.

## Annotated Example | Reading an Academic Text

Following is an example of an academic text: an assignment to create a bibliography that you might get from your instructor. This assignment sheet is from Elizabeth's second-semester composition course. The annotations in the margins (in black) show you how you might read the assignment using the strategies we've described.

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\*Bitzer, Lloyd F. "The Rhetorical Situation." *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1968, pp. 1-14.



## ASSIGNMENT Elizabeth Kleinfeld, *Create a Bibliography*

▼ The following annotations are ones that you might make as a student while critically reading this assignment so that you can complete it successfully.

This is an assignment sheet that gives step-by-step instructions for completing the assignment.

The term “peer-reviewed” comes up 5 times in this short document. It must be a key concept that I will need to understand to complete the assignment.

### Composition 201 Metropolitan State University of Denver

After you have conducted general research on your topic and have a sense of the issues, subtopics, agreements, and disagreements discussed by people committed to your topic, you are ready to delve more deeply into your topic. Peer-reviewed journal articles are a good place to do research when you are ready to move beyond what the general public knows about your topic and find out what experts are discussing. Showing that you’re knowledgeable about experts in the field helps you establish your ethos as a researcher.

1. Find 14 peer-reviewed journal articles on your topic. If you are not sure if your articles have been peer-reviewed, ask me or a librarian for help.
2. For each article, do the following:
  - a. Read the entire article. Journal articles are not “quick reads,” so be sure you have plenty of time and are in a space where you can concentrate. I highly recommend that you annotate as you read.
  - b. Write a bibliographic entry in MLA or APA format.
  - c. Write a one-paragraph summary of the main argument or point the article makes and the support offered. This should be a well-developed paragraph of at least five sentences. Journal articles make complex arguments, so you will not be able to do an article’s main argument justice in fewer than five sentences. All quotations and paraphrases should include in-text citations.
  - d. Write a one-paragraph discussion of how the article aligns with, departs from, extends, or complicates what other sources on the bibliography say. Again, this should be a well-developed paragraph, with some examples to support your assessment. All quotations and paraphrases should include in-text citations. Note that you may not end up using all of these articles as sources in your research paper. That’s normal—most researchers consult many more sources than they end up using. You may also end up using or consulting non-peer-reviewed journal articles; that’s fine, but **ONLY** peer-reviewed journal articles should appear on your annotated bibliographies.

Readers who are not crystal clear on what “peer-reviewed” means will not be able to understand this text.

A knowledge claim made by this text is: “Peer-reviewed journal articles are a good place to do research when you are ready to move beyond what the general public knows about your topic and find out what experts are discussing.” This is then supported with the evidence that this type of research “helps you establish your ethos as a researcher.”

Credit: Elizabeth Kleinfeld.

## CHECKLIST | Reading Academic Texts

Are you reading an academic text, such as an assignment or a scholarly essay?  
Keep the following questions in mind.

- Purpose.** Is the writer trying to convince you of something? Is the writer sharing a story? Is the writer giving you information? You might even notice other purposes that we haven't mentioned here, such as entertaining you. Is the writer reporting, telling a story, entertaining, and persuading all at the same time? Don't worry. Sometimes purposes for writing or composing overlap.
- Audience.** Who seems to be the author's primary audience? Secondary audience? How do you know? Why do you think someone would read (view, listen to, etc.) the text? How does the author capture and sustain audience attention?
- Rhetorical appeals.** How does the author use the rhetorical appeals—ethos, pathos, and logos—to reach his or her audience? How does the author convey credibility? What kinds of evidence does the author offer to support the point of the piece?
- Modes & media.** What choices has the writer made about mode (how to convey an idea)? If multiple modes are used, how do they interact with each other? What choices has the writer made about media? For example, has the writer made the piece available in print form or digitally? How do the writer's choices about modes and media reflect his or her purposes and audiences?

### PRACTICE

## Reading Any Text Rhetorically

Locate three texts you have read today—maybe a text message, an advertisement, and an assignment sheet or other text for one of your courses. For each one, identify the purpose, audience, rhetorical appeals, and mode and media. Is reading these texts through a rhetorical lens different from how you read them in the first place? Write one paragraph for each piece to explain.

