

## **Teaching Audience, Purpose, and Context & Building Rhetorical Awareness**

While different kinds of writing share common features and goals, each kind of writing is unique because it responds and emerges to/from a particular situation. Each piece of writing has a purpose, an audience, and a particular context that shapes how one writes and how that writing is received by others. Helping students gain the skills needed to identify these factors of a rhetorical situation will equip them with the ability to critically analyze different kinds of communication as well as produce writing that achieves goals in relation to an intended audience.

### **In Class Activities**

#### Identifying the Rhetorical Situation<sup>1</sup>

1. Begin class by asking students to respond to these questions: What is writing? What do we need to consider when we write? Make a list on the board. Add to student definitions, explaining the various factors that shape a text and the audience's engagement with a text: purpose, audience, context, and genre. Give a personal example of how you've considered these factors when you communicate and how they've influenced the shape of your piece of communication. Ask students to get into small groups and look at a short text. Assign each group a "factor" (purpose, audience, context, genre), ask them to describe that factor, and then share it with the class. The teacher records the factors on the board, mapping out the rhetorical situation.

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2. Ask students to analyze and compare the rhetorical situations found on the Internet, like a movie review or a YouTube clip. Using texts with similar content but different intended audiences and/or purposes may be most effective.

#### Understanding that Writers Make Choices<sup>1.5</sup>

Provide students with definitions of the three appeals (logical, emotional, and ethical). Ask them to brainstorm some of the strategies writers use to make these appeals. To help them identify some strategies, ask them to read the following scenario and ransom letter, then do the "fill in the blank" exercise. Each student will read their fill-in-the-blank paragraph after they finish. Discussion follows. (The "ransom note" can also prompt good discussion about genre conventions and genre awareness.)

This is the situation:

I've decided to kidnap Bob's precious poodle, Buffy, for ransom. I'm behind on the mortgage payments, my yacht payments are also overdue, and I desperately need money. It is well known that Bob is one of the wealthiest people in Affluent City (and that's saying a lot since Affluent City is the wealthiest town in America), so I've targeted him as my future source of money. It is also well known that he adores his pet poodle. My friend knows him and said he's completely obsessed with the dog. He brushes and fluffs her hair every night before bed, brings her to the pet salon every week for a fresh manicure (pink polish only!), and never, except for when he has his nightly tubbies, lets her out of his sight. I've never met Bob, although one time his Mercedes cut me off in traffic, causing me to hit the brakes

and spill my drink; the stain still glares at me from the floor of the car. What a jerk. Total ass. The kidnapping part has been completed. It was a huge challenge, but I pulled it off. Now I have to write a ransom note. Here's what I came up with.

Ransom Note:

If you ever want to see your precious Buffy alive again, leave one million dollars by the blue garbage can at 123 Ransom Rd. at midnight. Come alone. Do not call the police. Do not look around when you drop off money. Keep your head down. If you disobey any of these commands, you're a goner. So is Buffy.

PS I bet you wish you didn't take nightly tubbies like a little baby. Wah-wah.

Fill in the blank:

The rhetor uses \_\_\_\_\_ (rhetorical strategy/strategies) in an effort to achieve \_\_\_\_\_ (purpose). This strategy/strategies is \_\_\_\_\_ (persuasive and/or not persuasive) to \_\_\_\_\_ (intended audience(s)) because \_\_\_\_\_ .

### Learning Appeals through Advertisements<sup>1</sup>

Ask students to bring a magazine to class and analyze the emotional appeals in a couple of full-page ads. Then classify those ads by types of emotional appeal, and determine whether they can connect the appeals to the subject or target audience of the magazine. Ask them to compare their results with their classmates and discuss their findings. For Tanya Rodrigue, 2019.

instance, do the ads in newsmagazines like Time and Newsweek appeal to different emotions and desires from the ads in publications such as Cosmopolitan, Sports Illustrated, and National Geographic?

### Identifying and Characterizing Audience and Purpose<sup>2</sup>

1. As a pre-writing exercise, ask students to identify their intended audience and to describe the primary characteristics of that audience. Remind them to keep their intended audience's characteristics in mind as they compose and revise their written text.

2. Ask small groups of students to analyze a particular audience and then develop "rules of thumb" that a writer should follow when addressing that audience.

3. Include at least one writing assignment for which the intended audience is not the course instructor

4. As a pre-writing exercise, ask students to describe their purpose—what do they want the audience to understand, feel, and/or do?

### Analyzing Texts to Understand Audience and Purpose<sup>2</sup>

Ask students to analyze the characteristics of three arguments that were written for three different audiences. Analysis could include the following: types of evidence, types of appeals, word choice, tone, format. Students then draw conclusions on the effectiveness of the arguments based on their analysis.

### Writing Texts to Understand Purpose and Audience<sup>2</sup>

1. Ask students to play a role as they respond to a peer's writing. For example, if the general audience is the people of O'ahu, ask each student to respond to the writer from a different point of view: ethnic group of O'ahu, geographical location of O'ahu, age group, gender, occupation, socio-economic class, etc. As they role play, students explain the audience characteristics that lead to their response.

2. Students choose a single topic and write multiple texts that address various audiences and purposes. Each text "ups the ante" by addressing a more sophisticated audience. For example, the audience could move from non-specialists to specialists and the purpose could move from presenting information to presenting an argument.

3. Have students write texts that achieve the same purpose but are written for different audiences. Example: students write two texts that explain a complex concept; one text is written to middle school students, the other to peers who have learned/know the concept. By selecting a non-specialist and a (semi) specialist audience, students practice interpreting specialist knowledge for non-specialists.

4. Ask students to write texts aimed at the same audience but achieve a different purpose. Example: students write two texts to their professor: one text is an email thank you for attending a department party and the other is an email request for a letter of recommendation.

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### **Out of Class Assignments**

#### Learning and Using Rhetorical Appeals<sup>1</sup>

For this assignment, students choose a commercial that heavily relies on a specific appeal (ethos, pathos, logos). The task is to take up the existing content and argument as presented in the video or image, and imagine what it would be like if a different rhetorical appeal was heavily used. Students recreate the video (using the video editor program, Animoto) emphasizing a different rhetorical appeal. In addition to the video, students write a two-page reflection paper (12 font, double-spaced) that explains their process for recreating the original argument and creating a new argument using a different appeal. Students also explain how and why your new argument is persuasive, how it functions differently than the original, how it might be more or less persuasive than the original to the original's intended audience, and how might this new argument target a different audience than the original.

#### Teaching Rhetorical Analysis<sup>1</sup>

In this assignment, students conduct a rhetorical analysis of a New York Times op-ed (you could use any genre for this assignment), writing a 3-5 page essay geared toward a specific audience. The instructor will identify three articles students can choose from. The instructor should help students understand that when performing a rhetorical analysis, it is important not only to focus on the main message and the context in which a text was produced and received but also *how* the composer creates their intended message through the use of various strategies. Such

analysis is helpful in evaluating whether or not the composer achieves his or her rhetorical purpose. The student's job is to explore a writer's rhetorical strategies and discuss the ways in which these strategies work to construct an argument and achieve the writer's purpose. Students will analyze the effectiveness of rhetorical strategies, showing the reader what ways the argument is persuasive and where it may fall short.

This is NOT a traditional thesis-driven essay. Students are not taking a stance on an issue and making an assertion about this issue. Rather, students are closely exploring how the writer is building an argument, the strategies and factors involved in doing so, and his/her purpose in making this argument. Although students are not writing a "traditional" argument, they are in fact making an argument, as they will have a specific opinion on how the writer constructs his/her argument and to what extent the argument is persuasive.

Here are questions to guide students in conducting a rhetorical analysis:

- What is the purpose or intention of the argument?
- Who is the intended audience? What values does the audience hold that the author or speaker appeals to?
- What rhetorical appeals and strategies are used to construct this argument?
- What are the genre characteristics and what does the genre tell you about the argument and rhetorical choices made?
- Who is the writer? What ethos does he/she create, and exactly how does he/she do so?

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- What facts, logic, and evidence are used in the argument? Are they persuasive? Do they work to build the argument being made? How are they arranged and presented in the argument?
- What are the contexts—social, political, historical, cultural—for this argument? Whose interests does it serve? What occasion gives rise to the need or opportunity for this argument (exigence)?
- How does the language or style of the argument work to persuade an audience?
- What features of the argument make it more or less persuasive?
- What parts, strategies, or features are most and least appealing or compelling? Why?

References:

<sup>1</sup>Tanya Rodrigue's assignments

<sup>1.5</sup>Tanya Rodrigue's assignments adapted from Kerry Dirk's "Navigating Genres" in *Writing Spaces*. Web. 2010.

<sup>2</sup>University of Hawaii at Manoa. "Ideas for Teaching Audience and Purpose in Foundations Written Communication Courses." Handout. Web. 8 Oct. 2015.