

The Rhetorical Situation in College Composition II

We live in a world filled with language. Language imparts identity, meaning, and perspective to our human community. Writers are either polluters or part of the cleanup team. Just as the language of power and greed has the potential to destroy us, the language of reason and empathy has the power to save us. Writers can inspire a kinder, fairer, more beautiful world, or incite selfishness, stereotyping, and violence. Writers can unite people or divide them.

Change writers hope that readers will join them in what Charles Johnson calls 'an invitation to struggle.' Whereas writers of propaganda encourage readers to accept certain answers, writers who want to transform their readers encourage the asking of questions. Propaganda invites passive agreement; change writing invites original thought, open heartedness, and engagement. Change writers trust that readers can handle multiple points of view, contradictions, unresolved questions, and nuance. If, as André Gide wrote, 'Tyranny is the absence of complexity,' then change writers are founders of democracies.

--Mary Pipher *Writing to Change the World*

In this class, you will explore persuasion through the theoretical lens of rhetoric, which is the art of persuasion. Rhetoric helps us to advocate for the things that we need and value. It also influences how we think and see the world. We engage in a persuasive interaction any time we read a billboard, watch a commercial, or participate in an election cycle. In those circumstances, we are members of the audience, receiving and digesting a message. At other times, we are the speakers and we are actively seeking to influence an audience.

Sometimes the stakes for an argument are low, like the daily arguments with our children about doing their homework or trying to convince a spouse to load the dishwasher. At other times, the stakes can be high. We may need to convince a judge that we should have primary custody of our children or convince a school to provide disability accommodations for our child. We may need to convince an aging parent to move closer so that we can support them better or prove that we are the best candidate for a job.

This term, you will use persuasive writing to practice presenting ethical, carefully considered, logical arguments that advocate for a change in your community. You will identify a community problem, critically examine that problem, and then propose the best possible solution to address that problem. Students who have recently moved, are deployed, or feel disconnected from the town they live in sometimes worry about how they will write about a community issue. With that in mind, we will define community loosely. While we often think of our physical community first, like the town, county, state, and country that we live in, a community can also be understood as a group of people with shared values, beliefs, priorities, or even interests. In a work community, everybody collaborates to advance the mission of the company. In a sporting community, the shared value can be the success of a team. In a spiritual community, members connect

around shared beliefs. In our learning community, we share the goal of advancing understanding, regardless of what discipline we want to get a degree in.

Shared values are often what help to define a community; however, within any community, one can expect to find both common ground and areas of disagreement. Take this class as an example of a specific community. In the CM220 learning community, most students and the instructor can agree that writing has value. Students share the common goal of working toward a degree. However, some students may feel like writing is going to be minimal in their career whereas other students believe writing will be essential. The points of disagreement give rise to a persuasive opportunity--the opportunity to prove why students should care about persuasive writing.

When a writer needs to enter a persuasive conversation, she can start by considering the rhetorical situation, which has five key elements: **the text, writer, audience, purpose, and context**. Let's look at your first reading of the term, "Really? Writing? Again? Yes. Writing. Again." by Guptill (2016) through the lens of the rhetorical situation. Guptill's (2016) chapter is attempting to convince students that persuasive writing is important in a variety of contexts.

Guptill is the **writer** or the one who has to convince students that the work is valuable and relevant. Students are the **audience**. To effectively engage students, Guptill has to understand their priorities and provide information that feels practical and relevant to the student both now and in their future roles as engaged citizens, family members, and professionals. She does this by citing a survey that indicates that 89% of employers want to see "more" emphasis on effective communication (Association of American College and Universities as cited in Guptill, 2016), talking about the pay-off students will experience from developing writing skills, and explaining how writing can help students demonstrate their knowledge in college courses. The **text** is a book chapter. The **purpose** is to motivate students to take the course seriously and empower students by giving them information that will help them strengthen their writing skills. Finally, the **context** is the classroom.

What we just reviewed gives us a surface understanding of the rhetorical situation. Let's drill down into this more and focus on audience. When we consider audiences, we can examine them at a group or individual level. Sometimes we have a lot of knowledge about the priorities of our audience and sometimes, especially in academic exercises, we have to rely on our imaginations.

Each audience member shows up with a wealth of experience that is influenced by his background, culture, choices, and priorities. We refer to each individual's unique story and the perspectives that arise from that story as **situated knowledge**. You carry situated knowledge too and your situated knowledge can be explored by seeking the **story-behind-the-story** in any given situation. When we bring each individual perspective together, we have a rich variety of experiences and perspectives that can be used to create a shared understanding of an issue. This range of situated knowledge on a topic can be used to gain a complex understanding of the issue, possible solutions, and the implications of those solutions.

Let's use an imagined audience to get a sense of how situated knowledge and priorities can influence the way students think and what the instructor must consider when trying to persuade students of the value of persuasive writing. John, Eric, and Alice are members of the CM220 writing community. Each brings their own situated

knowledge to the work and ideas in the class. Their situated knowledge influences how they think about the course, what their priorities are, and what they will value most as they complete the course.

John is here to study business because he wants to open a restaurant when he graduates. John believes that he will have to write to finish his degree, but his requirements for writing will be limited once he becomes a restaurant owner. He's not looking forward to the course.

Eric is studying nursing and wants to work as a nurse and help patients with heart disease. He believes that he will have to do a lot of writing because he will have to document information about each patient and communicate that information clearly. He thinks most of his writing will be informative, so he is a bit skeptical about the relevance of persuasive writing to his career.

Alice wants to become a crime scene investigator when she graduates. She believes that she will have to use writing extensively to illustrate critical elements of a crime scene. She has heard that her reports could be used in court and she could be asked to testify to defend her conclusions, so she is especially interested in learning how to write effectively and convincingly.

To persuade John, Eric, and Alice that College Composition II will be beneficial in the long run, the instructor needs to figure out the story-behind-the-story that influences how they think about writing. The story-behind-the-story can help us tap into that person's situated knowledge. One of the best ways to find out the story-behind-the-story is to start with key questions. What does the teacher need to learn to understand each community stakeholder's perspective on the issue of writing? What is their background in writing? How have those experiences shaped how they think about writing? Once she has that information, she can think about how persuasive communication is relevant to each student.

What would create a need for persuasive communication for John? Say John opens a taco restaurant. He may want to create a commercial that motivates people to try it. John can apply the rhetorical situation to make sure the money he spends on advertising is well spent. His rhetorical **text** will be a commercial, which means he can use music, actors, and written words to convey his message. Next, he has to think about his role as the **writer**. This is a brand new restaurant, so he can't rely on reviews and word-of-mouth. He has to find some way to entice people to his restaurant based on novelty and what his restaurant adds to the community. His **purpose** will be to showcase the restaurant and get new patrons. As he thinks about purpose, he needs to consider his **audience**. Does this audience want something new or exotic? These considerations will influence what he chooses to showcase in his commercial. Finally, he thinks about the **context**. What does the community already have and what does it want? How can his commercial demonstrate that this restaurant fits well with the community it is situated in?

Let's turn to Eric. He has to convince a patient to follow a doctor's recommendation. Eric works in a cardiac ward at a hospital and has been counseling Elsa, who recently had a heart attack. Elsa eats a lot of highly processed foods and doesn't exercise. She feels overwhelmed about the idea of completely changing her diet and starting an exercise regimen. Eric somehow has to motivate her to make these necessary changes. Eric is the **writer** and his **text** is a conversation. Elsa is the

audience. Eric's **purpose** is to convince her that the difficulty of making these changes and going through the transition to a new lifestyle is in Elsa's best interest. To convince Elsa, Eric needs to find the story behind Elsa's resistance to change. He can ask her questions to better understand her relationship with food. Knowing this will empower Eric to provide her information that addresses that backstory. If he discovers that food is a major source of comfort for her, he may need to recommend non-food based comfort tools to replace food. Alternatively, he may offer resources and recipe sites that follow the dietary guidelines while still maintaining some of the comfort food features, like replacing the deep fryer with an air-fryer. Eric needs to get to know his patient and understand the resistance that this patient is going to raise before he can advocate for a solution. The **context** may be to Eric's benefit because he is talking with her in a hospital ward, which demonstrates the urgency of her health condition.

Finally, let's consider Alice, who has become a Crime Scene Investigator and has to appear in court to provide evidence in a trial for a crime that she helped to investigate. Her conclusions are being used in the prosecution of a crime. The **text** is her testimony and the documents she wrote in the initial investigation. Alice is the **writer**. Her **audience** is the judge and jury, but she will be questioned by a defense attorney and a prosecutor who may prove to be one of the toughest audiences. The defense attorney's job is to undermine her investigative conclusions, so she has to present herself as credible, careful, and accurate. Her **purpose** is to provide evidence that convinces the jury that her conclusions were accurate and valid. The **context** will largely be established by the attorneys and the information they present before and after her testimony.

As you can see, each persuasive situation starts with a need to communicate. Once the need to persuade is established, you can use the rhetorical situation to figure out how to proceed. The participants (both writer and audience), the environment (context), the purpose of the communication, and the best method of communication (text) work together to ensure a successful argument.

In this class, you will practice using the rhetorical model to advocate for a change in your community. You will be the agent for a positive change. In the process, you will deepen your understanding of a community issue and hopefully gain new insights. As you can see from the scenarios above, the solution is often not the first one that we thought of. John may have wanted to start by opening a sushi restaurant, but when he surveyed community members and looked at what already existed in the community, he realized there was no demand, so he adjusted his ideas and decided to open a taco restaurant. Eric wanted Elsa to shift to a Mediterranean diet, but after he talked with her, he realized that her dietary changes would have to be more gradual, and she may need a nutritionist to work with her directly as she makes the changes. By considering her story-behind-the-story, he was able to come up with a solution that was feasible for both of them. This highlights the negotiation involved in effective persuasion. In Alice's case, negotiation may be detrimental. She has to appear certain and clear. Alice may have a lot of highly specialized knowledge and terms to explain her ideas, but she needs the information to be meaningful to a jury that has little understanding of her work. As a result, she has to figure out how to explain it in layman's terms. By doing so, she deepens her understanding of the scientific process that she uses and the limitations that she needs to consider when drawing conclusions.

As you can see, persuasive communication is less about winning than it is about discovery. While we may have a very clear goal in mind, we have to be open to learning new information and seeing things in a new light. We have to ask critical questions to get to the story-behind-the-story and to expose the areas of disagreement. We need to seek out perspectives that challenge our own so that we can round out our understanding of an issue and increase the effectiveness of our argument.

References

Pipher, M. (2006). *Writing to change the world*. New York: Riverhead Press.