THE RHETORICAL SITUATION

In Units 1 and 2, you were introduced to the Rhetorical Situation. This is a term used to talk about any set of circumstances in which one person is trying to change another person's mind about something, most often via text (like a book, or blog post, or journal article).

This week, we will take our understanding of the rhetorical situation deeper by looking at the rhetorical concepts that they are built from. The philosopher Aristotle called these concepts logos, ethos, pathos, telos, and kairos – also known as text, author, audience, purposes, and setting. These elements work together to make a strong argument.

Text/Content (Logos)

Texts can come in all shapes and sizes, such as those listed earlier. But in this context, a text is not limited to something written down. The text in a rhetorical situation could be a film, photograph, recording of a song, historical document, PowerPoint presentation, speech, face-to-face conversation, etc. The important thing to ask yourself when faced with a text is: What is gained by having the text composed in this format/genre? What are the relevant characteristics of a book versus a song? What might an oral history version of a text communicate that a book version would not? What expectations or conventions do I need to follow when using this method to communicate? Logos is also referred to as the evidence or logic of the argument.

Author (Ethos)

Here the "author" of a text is the creator, the person utilizing communication to try to effect a change in their audience. An author doesn't have to be a single person or a person at all – an author could be an organization. To understand the rhetorical situation of a text, examine the identity of the authors and their background. Not only do you want to know what kind of experience they have in the subject, but you'll also want to explore basic biographical information about them. Where and when did they grow up? How could that affect their perspective on the topic?

When we talk about ethos, we are often referring to the credibility of the author. Does the author convey a complex understanding of the issue? Does the author take into account multiple viewpoints? Does she ignore important evidence or does she respectfully engage with evidence that may challenge her position? Has the author carefully considered the options and outcomes associated with her argument and made a fair, ethical case to convince you?

Audience (Pathos)

The audience is any person or group who is the intended recipient of the text, and also the person/people the text is trying to influence. To understand the rhetorical situation of a text, examine who the intended audience is and what their background may be. An audience's assumptions about the author, the context in which they are receiving the text, and their own demographic information (age, gender, etc.) can all affect how the text is seeking to engage with them.

Purpose (Telos)

What is the author hoping to achieve through the communication of this text? What do they want from their audience? What does the audience want from the text and what may they do once the text is communicated? Both author and audience can have a purpose, and it's important to understand what those might be in the rhetorical situation of the text you are examining. An author may be trying to inform, to convince, to define, to announce, or to activate, while an audience's purpose may be to receive notice, to quantify, to feel a sense of unity, to disprove, to understand, or to criticize. Any and all of these purposes determine the 'why' behind the decisions both groups make.

Timing (Kairos)

Nothing happens in a vacuum, and that includes the text you are trying to understand. It was written in a specific time, context, and/or place, all of which can affect the way the text communicates its message. To understand the rhetorical situation of a text, examine the setting of both audience and author and ask yourself if there was a particular occasion or event that prompted the particular text at the particular time it was written. If you are the speaker, consider how the timing is right for the change you are discussing and how you could use that information to strengthen your argument.

Critically Thinking About the Rhetorical Situation

When using the rhetorical situation, the emphasis we place on each part will vary. If we are writing a resume (text), we may want to be meticulous about how we organize and format the text while carefully considering the expected standards for the job industry we are applying to (setting). We would be very careful in our selection of skills and professional experience to highlight because it will be critically considered by employers. We would use concise language and bullet points in the resume to draw attention to our assets, and we would probably write multiple drafts and have someone check them over to make sure there are no errors.

By contrast, if we are talking with our child about a new family rule we have decided to implement, we may naturally gravitate to the couch (setting) and know that we are going to be having a conversation (text). We may spend more time thinking about what is important to our child and how we can frame the new rule in a way that motivates our child to follow it (pathos). We may also need to keep in mind our credibility (ethos) with the child. Did we recently have a big argument, or have things been pretty good so our child is already likely to be more open to our suggestions? If we recently had an

argument, we may need to be more careful in how we present things. When we provide evidence (logos) to support the need for the rule, we may need to provide examples to show that the rule change is warranted.

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