

Unit 3: An Agent For Change

This week you will read from two different texts. The first set of readings focuses on the rhetorical situation and how to write a strong thesis statement. The second two texts for this week come from the Purdue Global Academic Success Center and include a podcast on argumentative writing and an overview of how to identify a topic, establish research questions, and then use the research questions to create a preliminary thesis.

Unit 3 Reading Part 1: The Rhetorical Situation

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 The text in a rhetorical situation could be a film, photograph, recording of a song, historical document, PowerPoint presentation, speech, face-to-face conversation, etc.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.

This text has been adapted from the original text by Jeffrey, R. (2015) Rhetorical concepts. About writing: A guide.

<https://openoregon.pressbooks.pub/aboutwriting/chapter/rhetorical-concepts/>

Part 2: How to Write a Thesis Statement

Writing a strong thesis is essential to a well-written argument. Yet many students express worry when they have to write a thesis statement. Some of the most common frustrations students express when writing a thesis statement include:

1. Coming up with a thesis statement before I even have a draft written.
2. Realizing that my thesis statement will not work for the type of paper I need to write.
3. Deciding I need to change my thesis statement after I have written a draft.
4. Having no idea how to write an effective thesis statement.

The good news is that there are solutions for each of these frustrations. Learning to write an effective thesis, whether informative or persuasive, will make the writing process much less frustrating and improve one's writing immensely.

What is a thesis statement?

Also known as a central argument, a thesis statement should be a complete sentence which identifies the paper's topic, expresses the main point of the paper, and asserts a key point about that topic.

Essentially, the thesis is what the paper will “prove” using evidence. The thesis statement often includes main points to give the reader a preview of the body paragraphs or evidence.

Many writers like to create an informal outline or generate research questions prior to developing a thesis statement. As long as your final draft winds up having a thesis statement that reflects the main point of all of your body paragraphs, you can start with your draft thesis statement and change it when you feel it is necessary for your assignment and for your own writing process. This unit will provide your first opportunity to come up with a thesis, and there will be many opportunities to revise and enhance your thesis in upcoming units.

Effective Thesis Statements

An effective thesis statement can do the following:

- Identify a problem and list the solution(s).
- Take a stand on a controversial issue.
- Make a claim (do not simply ask a question).
- Include both a claim and a reason for the claim.

Informative vs. Persuasive Thesis Statements

Depending upon the purpose of your assignment, a thesis statement may be informative or persuasive. An informative thesis statement will express a point that is not disputable, while a persuasive thesis will make a point that is debatable. When writing a persuasive essay, you will want to prove to your audience why they should agree with you by providing credible evidence to support your claim.

Take a look at the following thesis statements. Are they informative or persuasive?

1. Some school districts are adopting year-round calendars in hopes of improving student test scores.
2. The Northside School District should adopt a year-round calendar so students will retain more of what they learn.
3. Legislators passed the No Child Left Behind Act hoping to reduce achievement gaps and help all students perform at a proficient level. The first and third examples are informative, while the second example makes a debatable proposal and is therefore persuasive. Words like “should,” “should not,” “need to,” and “must,” or “must not” can signal that the argument is persuasive.

Research Question to Thesis Statement

A good way to generate a thesis statement is to begin with research questions about your topic. Research questions are questions you would like to answer through your research. These questions can help you limit your topic and provide you with a focus for a paper or argument. The questions should be appropriate to the subject and limitations of the assignment. Note how the example below moves from a broad topic, education, to a research question, “how can student performance be improved in public schools?”, to a thesis

statement that takes a clear position on the issue, “Adopting an all year school schedule will improve student performance.”

Pick the Most Effective Thesis Statement

Let’s say you need a thesis statement that will address the following question:
How can Chicago high school athletes be persuaded to not use anabolic steroids to boost their performance in competitive sports?

1. Anabolic steroids may build muscle mass and increase athletic performance, but cause life-threatening health problems in teenagers.
2. The Athletes Training & Learning to Avoid Steroids (ATLAS) program should be adopted by all Chicago high schools because traditional drug abuse education programs are not effective.
3. I believe that Chicago can reduce anabolic steroid use in high school students by adopting the ATLAS program in place of the existing traditional education programs.

Responses:

1. Try again. This might be appropriate for a strictly informative essay, but no clear argument is made in the statement. Just providing information may not influence the actions of teenagers who are considering using anabolic steroids.
2. Nice work! This thesis statement takes a specific approach to the problem by suggesting the adoption of a successful program that goes beyond telling teenagers the consequences of steroid use.
3. Try again. Although this statement is specific in its argument as to what should be done in response to the identified problem, the use of first person is not necessary and creates a conversational tone that is not appropriate for formal/academic writing.

A Three-Point Thesis Statement

One type of thesis that works well for both persuasive and informative writing is the three-point thesis statement. An example of a “three-point” thesis statement that asserts a point and previews the main ideas of the paper would look like this:

The parents of children with a genetic predisposition towards obesity can help their children avoid obesity by controlling the children’s diet, providing regular exercise, and promoting an active lifestyle.

This statement identifies the topic, asserts a key point about that topic, and lets the reader know the three main supporting points for that thesis.