

WHAT IS RHETORIC?

Rhetoric is a method for understanding how communication happens.

Rhetoric developed in the western Mediterranean area over 2,000 years ago as political systems became democratic and as legal institutions came into being. People saw that audiences were moved by some speeches while other speeches not only failed but achieved the exact opposite of what their composers had hoped.

Some people—*rhetoricians*—started systematically studying why some speeches were more effective than others.

The result of the rhetoricians' studies was rhetoric. Rhetoric has developed over the centuries to consider writing and all other kinds of texts meant to communicate.



PURPOSE

The earliest rhetoricians realized that composers need to have purposes. This might seem so obvious as to be useless, but if composers cannot articulate their purposes in detail, then they cannot decide exactly what they need to say (or write) and in what order. (For example, one young woman went to court to appeal a ticket for driving through a red light. It was only after her appeal was denied that she realized her purpose needed to be persuading the judge that—truthfully—she didn't even know there was an intersection and a traffic light; instead, she had described how a truck was blocking the light and so a view of the intersection. The judge had assumed she knew there was an intersection and had told her she needed to stop, whether or not she could see the light.)

AUDIENCE

Rhetoric hinges on the understanding that writers (and composers of any kind of text) address audiences. Audiences are not mindless and automatically under a composer's sway; instead, audiences come to texts with understandings, beliefs, values, and ideas. Using rhetoric, composers consider the relationships they can build with audiences so that audiences will want to listen and engage with the composer around the matter at hand.

CONTEXT

Where and when do composer and audience meet? Is it face to face or through an essay? Late Saturday night or early Monday? How will recent events influence an audience's attitude? Rhetoricians recognize that composers need to consider the contexts of communication because the contexts shape how audiences attend and respond.

STRATEGIES

Once composers have a sense of audience, purpose, and context, they can begin making all the particular strategic decisions—big and small—that shape a composition. Composers need to consider how a choice of a particular word, just as much as a choice of what example or story comes first in a text, is likely to affect an audience's attitude toward a purpose.



RHETORICAL SITUATIONS

The combination of audience, purpose, and context makes up what rhetoricians (starting in the twentieth century) call **the rhetorical situation**. This term helps us keep in mind that communication is not a simple transfer of information but is rather an interaction of real, complicated people within the real, complex events of lives and cultures.

Even classrooms are rhetorical situations, where writing an essay involves people with different cultural and educational backgrounds: students and teachers. How do you use the audiences, purposes, and contexts of classrooms—and the strategies available to you—to learn to communicate as you hope?



THIS HANDBOOK

This book is about helping you discover as much as you can about your audiences, purposes, and contexts so that you can use the available strategies of writing (and also, to a lesser extent, of visual and oral communication) to construct the connections you want to build with your audiences.

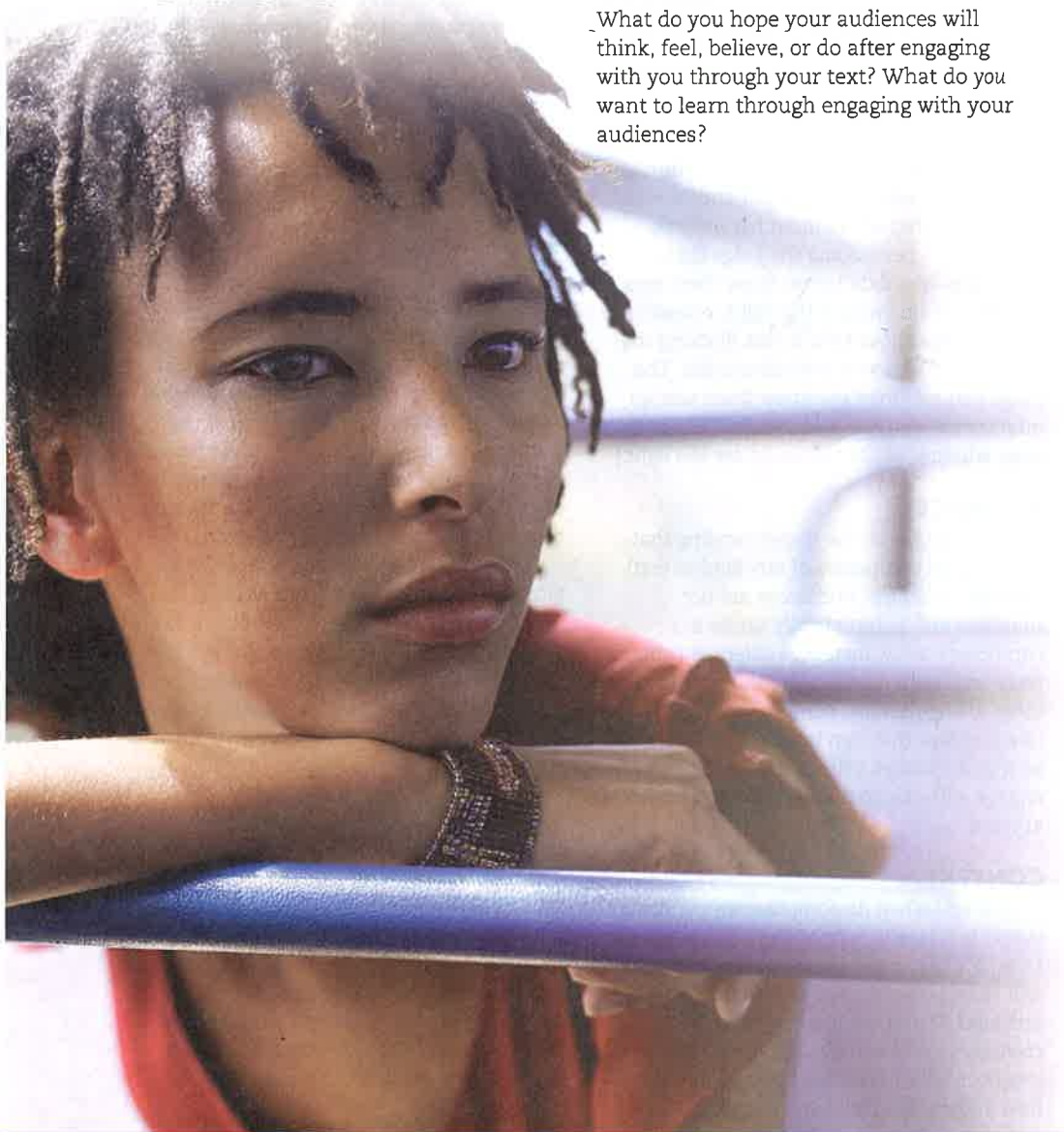


WHAT IS RHETORIC?

PURPOSE

**WHAT DO YOU WANT TO HAPPEN
AS A RESULT OF YOUR COMPOSING
EFFORTS?**

What do you hope your audiences will think, feel, believe, or do after engaging with you through your text? What do you want to learn through engaging with your audiences?



PURPOSE IS NOT THESIS

A thesis is the idea—usually with reasons—you hope readers take away from argumentative writing. But when you compose such writing, you hope readers will do something with that idea: Do you hope they will write to their national or state political representatives, buy energy-saving light bulbs, or think differently about religion or women's lives?

Purposes take into account the emotions and possible actions of readers as well as their thoughts.

PURPOSES ARE NEVER SIMPLE—AND SHOW ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT AUDIENCES

Here are some purposes for composing:

"I hope that my paper will encourage readers to feel angry enough about teacher salaries in this district that they will join the demonstration to be held at the state capitol next month."

"Seeing my poster, my audience (I hope!) will look more carefully at how we treat pets, knowing there is a relation between pet abuse and child abuse."

"I want my readers to be happy that women's rights have advanced so much in the last century and to understand why it's important to protect those rights. I want them to see the connection between what happened in the last century and the improved health and lives of their mothers, sisters, daughters, and themselves."

Thinking about purpose, you think about what your composing needs to do, and you start thinking concretely about how to do it. Notice, too, that each of these purposes shows the composer making assumptions about what an audience already thinks or believes, as when the third assumes the audience doesn't know the history of women's rights and its connections to today's situation.



IMAGINING PURPOSE

As with audience, you need to imagine your purpose as closely as you can: If you picture for yourself exactly the response you hope the text you are composing brings about, you will be more likely to compose texts that appeal in concrete and engaging ways to audiences.

What emotions should your composing arouse or dampen in your audience?

Are you working to build connections with individuals by themselves or to bring people together?

Are you hoping people will take specific action—or quietly consider an issue in more depth?

→ Considerations of purpose weave throughout the rest of this book, but if you want specific help with purpose, see page 15, and pages 250–253.

WHAT IS RHETORIC?
AUDIENCE

**WHO WILL BE READING, VIEWING,
OR HEARING WHAT YOU COMPOSE?
WHAT ASPECTS OF YOUR AUDIENCE
MATTER TO WHAT YOU HOPE TO
ACHIEVE?**

That a text you are composing has to be shaped for other people is the central concern of rhetoric.



Perhaps the need to think about your audience when you compose seems obvious to you, but the understanding that we write and compose texts for others does not come with birth or, often, before college.

Before college, most writing education focuses on grammar, research, and the logical structures of writing. Before college, most people move in fairly small circles of friends and family, and so their communications are informal and relaxed: Most often, people in high school know well the people to whom they are writing and speaking. After high school, when we go to college, start working to support ourselves, and start taking more active roles in our communities, we have to learn how to communicate with people we may not know as directly.

We need, in other words, to build upon what we learned about writing in high school: We need to start thinking about the wide range of people who read, view, or hear what we compose and about how those people are likely to respond to the many choices we make while composing.

AUDIENCES ARE NEVER FULL, REAL PEOPLE

Even when you are talking with your mother or best friend, you are addressing only some part of that person. Your mother is your mother, after all, and so you speak to her as *mother*; she may also be a boss, an employee, a sister, a daughter—but when **you** talk with her, you most often probably only address that part of her that is *mother*.

Likewise, when you write work memos, the memos go to your boss and co-workers insofar as they have the role of *boss* and *co-worker*; you do not address the sides of them that are *parent*, *churchgoer*, or *novel reader*.

In addition, people have rich emotional and intellectual lives and different cultural backgrounds. When you compose texts for others, you focus on a particular topic and hope your audience will pay attention to your concerns. What emotions might others have around your topic—and how can you compose to arouse or to dampen those emotions? What possible opinions and values might your audiences hold on your topic—and how can you compose to focus their attentions on some particular aspect they might not have considered before or are likely to dismiss?

Audiences, in other words, are always a bit imaginary, in that you ask them to step into the roles and beliefs that the purposes and contexts of your composing require. You call audiences into being from where they really are.

→ Because the consideration of audience is so important, a whole part of this book is focused on shaping writing for audiences. See pages 246–253.

WHAT IS RHETORIC?

CONTEXT

**WHERE ARE YOUR READERS AT THE
MOMENT THEY ENGAGE WITH THE
TEXT YOU ARE COMPOSING?**

**WHAT IS GOING ON AROUND
THEM? HOW ARE THE PLACE AND
TIME LIKELY TO AFFECT HOW THEY
READ?**

How can you take those circumstances into account while composing so that the text fits its context and reaches its readers?



LOCAL AND IMMEDIATE CONTEXTS

When you write an essay for a class, the teacher has to respond to your essay as well as to the essays of everyone else in your class. Teachers respond to your work usually at night or on the weekend, at home. How is this likely to shape how your teacher reads?

When you write a memo at work, your boss or co-workers will receive the memo amid a pile of other paperwork, in the middle of distracting days. How is this likely to shape how they read?

When you design a flyer for a campus event, it goes up on walls or telephone poles alongside hundreds of others; it has to attract the attention of people who are hurrying by, ten feet away. How is this likely to shape how they read?

When you design a website for a non-profit organization, readers will probably read it alone, at their computers. How is this likely to shape how they read?

Each of these circumstances, describing the particulars of how audiences come to texts, can help you consider composing. What do you need to do to show a tired, weary-eyed teacher that you've done what an assignment asked? How can you compose a memo so that your busy boss and co-workers will understand exactly what you need them to understand? What photographs and words—and what sizes, and how many—can help you attract the eyes of a passing poster audience? What words, colors, and photographs can help you take advantage of the intimacy of a computer screen reader?

The more you can imagine the time and place in which someone will read your text, the more you can shape the text to fit when and where the text will be read.

LARGER CONTEXTS

What are the values and concerns of your time and place? What has happened recently—in your town or country or in the world—that might affect how someone responds to a text?

For example, after September 11, 2001, no one could write an editorial about travel or world events without taking September 11 into account. It was a long time before people felt it was appropriate to tell jokes and be humorous about politics or world events.

But also imagine that your town is struggling over whether to allow Wal-Mart to build a megastore or over how to find funding to keep the hospital open or the factory from shutting down. If you were to write a letter to the editor about a need for more school funding or for a new stoplight on your corner, taking into account those larger community concerns shows readers that you understand the consequences of what you argue—and so readers are more likely to listen.

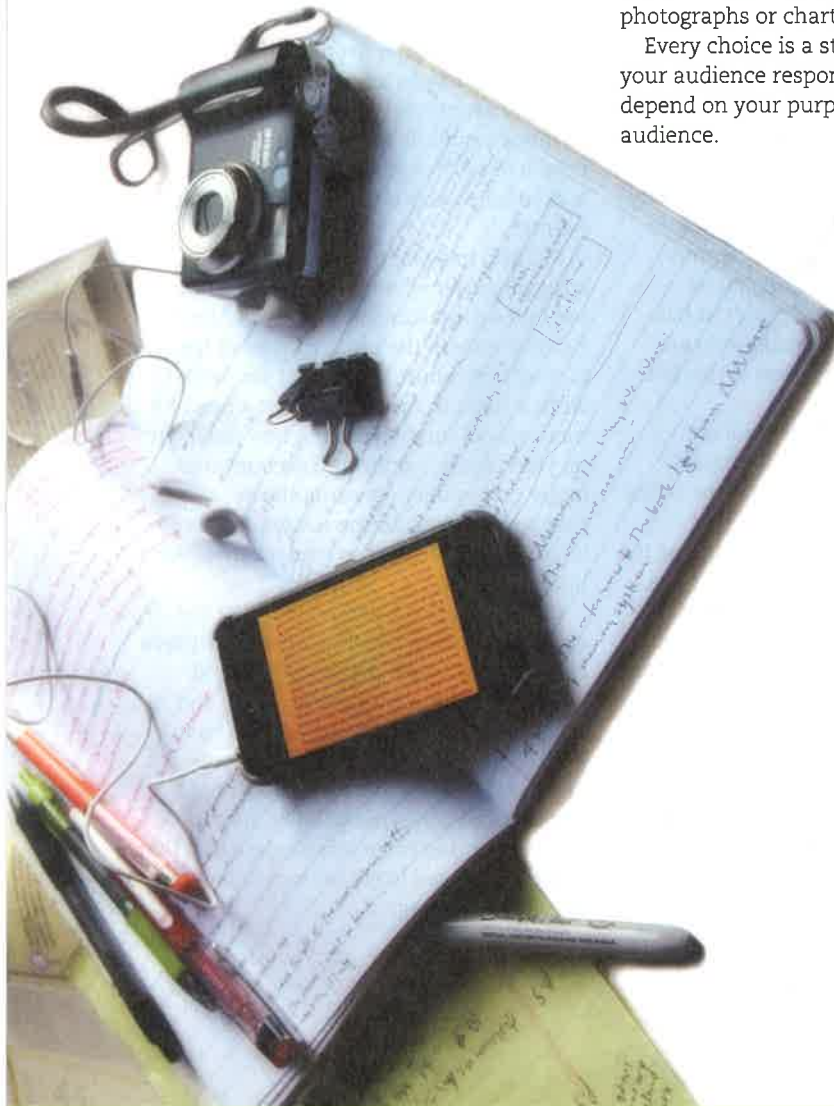
Composing texts while mindful of the larger contexts in which your readers move can help you figure out the beliefs and values that shape how readers read and the mood your readers are likely to have. Considering all these details helps you understand how and why readers might respond and helps you build bridges to readers—and so helps you shape a text that readers are more likely to read, understand, and want to engage.

WHAT IS RHETORIC? **STRATEGIES**

WHAT ARE THE CHOICES YOU CAN MAKE AS YOU COMPOSE A TEXT?

What words, tone of voice, or colors will you choose? What should come first? What examples will you use? Will you use photographs or charts? Which typefaces?

Every choice is a strategy affecting how your audience responds. Your choices depend on your purpose, context, and audience.



IN TERMS OF STRATEGIES,

becoming an effective composer of texts involves your ability to:

1 IDENTIFY THE WIDEST POSSIBLE RANGE OF CHOICES—OF STRATEGIES—AVAILABLE TO YOU IN YOUR RHETORICAL SITUATION.

When you first start considering a text you have to compose (or even when you are partly into composing it), if you list every choice you could make, you'll see how much room there is for you to experiment with possibilities; you're more likely, therefore, to achieve your purposes. (You'll also probably realize the impossibility of listing every possible strategy—but it's useful to try.)

2 SHAPE CHOICES TO ADDRESS YOUR AUDIENCE, GIVEN YOUR PURPOSE AND CONTEXT.

If you want your audience to write to their congressional representatives to support a bill funding more space exploration, don't begin with a discussion of where the money should come from: That starts your readers thinking about why space exploration might be too expensive. Start instead with a discussion of the wonders of space, and then describe the medical and industrial advances resulting from space exploration; your audience is more likely to approach your request with a positive point of view.

You can consider every possible strategy in light of how your readers are likely to respond, and how your choice will shape their attention and thus their receptiveness to your purpose.

THE STRATEGY OF ARRANGEMENT

In the example of space exploration, the strategy we discussed is arrangement. Arrangement is about what comes first in a composition, and what follows.

For some rhetorical situations, audiences expect certain arrangements. When you write a business letter, the letter starts with a date and a greeting, and then discusses the matter at hand, with (often) a final paragraph suggesting what the next actions should be. Scientific papers are usually arranged with an abstract first, then a description of experimental method, then a description of the results of the experiments, then a discussion of the results, and finally a list of other papers consulted during the research.

➔ Because arrangement is such a crucial strategy in composing, a whole part of this book is devoted to it; see pages 193–244.

THE STRATEGY OF MEDIUM

Sometimes you enter a composing situation with all choices open to you, including that of the medium. If, for example, you have been asked to help a nonprofit organization improve its outreach to teenagers, would you recommend composing webpages or brochures, organizing a fair or school visits, or handing out printed T-shirts at the mall? Each of these media engages with the audience in different ways, and so can help you achieve your purpose in different—and differently effective—ways.