

The Rhetorical Situation: Understanding Audience and Context

After studying this chapter, you will be able to:

- LO1** Identify the five elements of the rhetorical situation, and use these elements to analyze a written argument.
- LO2** Use these five elements to analyze a visual argument.
- LO3** Use these five elements to analyze an online argument.
- LO4** Use these five elements to create your own written argument.
- LO5** Analyze the audience of an argument.

You are probably beginning to realize by now that argument does not take place in a vacuum. Instead, a situation occurs that raises questions in people's minds and motivates them to discuss and argue in an attempt to resolve the issues and problems that emerge. For example, the price per barrel of crude oil goes up and issues emerge: How can the United States become less dependent on foreign oil? What are viable alternate energy sources? How effective are hybrid cars? Professor Lloyd Bitzer calls a situation that motivates issues and argument a *rhetorical situation*, because it stimulates discussion and encourages change. Rhetorical situations existed for the Declaration of Independence in 1776 when the issue was independence and its authors declared that the North American colonies should be independent from Great Britain, and for Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address that he delivered in 1863 at the site of a famous Civil War battle. The issue was national unity. The time, place, and existing circumstances of these rhetorical situations provided the motivation for the authors of these documents to write them.¹

¹Lloyd Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 (January 1968): 1-14.

Five elements, according to Bitzer, are present in every rhetorical situation, and they can be analyzed.

In this chapter, we focus on the rhetorical situation as readers, creators of visual and multimedia argument, and writers employ it. Analyzing the rhetorical situation is an important critical reading strategy: it can be used as a tool for analysis throughout the reading process; it can be employed in a similar way to gain a fuller understanding of visual argument; and it is a potent critical thinking strategy that can help the writer plan and write a better argument.

Analyze the Rhetorical Situation When You Read an Argument

LO1 Identify the five elements of the rhetorical situation, and use these elements to analyze a written argument.

According to Bitzer, a rhetorical situation has five elements. We rearrange the elements in order to form the acronym TRACE, from the initial letters of these five elements, to help you remember them: the *text*, the *reader* or audience, the *author*, the *constraints*, and the *exigence* or cause. Now look at each of them to see how they can help you read, understand, and evaluate writing that presents an argument.

Text. The text is the argument. Whether it is written, visual, or spoken, the text will have characteristics you can analyze. These include the type of text (essay, letter, book, image, contest, debate, etc.), the content of the text, and the format, organization, argumentation strategies, language, and style that are employed by the author.

Reader. The potential reader or audience for the text ideally must care enough to read or otherwise take in the text and pay attention. An audience might change its perceptions as a result and, perhaps, will mediate change or act in a new way. A rhetorical situation invites such audience responses and outcomes. Most authors have a targeted or intended reading audience in mind. You may identify with the targeted audience, or you may not, particularly if you belong to a different culture or live in a different time. As you read, compare your reactions to the text with the reactions you imagine the targeted or intended reading audience might have had.

Author. The author writes or develops an argument to convince a particular audience. You can analyze the author's position, motives, values, and degree of expertise. If you do not have direct information about the author, you will need to infer or guess at much of this information as you consider the argument text.

Constraints. Constraints include the people, events, circumstances, and traditions that are part of the situation that constrain or limit a targeted audience and cause them to analyze and react to the situation in a particular way. Constraints also include the beliefs, attitudes, prejudices, interests, and habits that influence the audience's perceptions of the situation. The author brings another set of constraints to the situation. These include the author's character, background, available resources, and style. The limits

inherent in the type of text being produced, whether written, spoken, or visual, can also provide constraints. Constraints may draw the author and audience together, or they may drive them apart. They influence the amount of common ground that will be established between an author and an audience. Look at the cartoon in Figure 2.1 for an example of constraints that are driving people apart. The constraints in this example are the basic assumptions about who governs in this family. What would you say are the father's constraints in this situation, and how do they differ from those of the rest of the family?

Here are some additional examples of constraints: (1) An audience feels constrained to mistrust the media because it thinks reporters exaggerate or lie. This constraint may cause this audience to be cynical and suspicious of an essay written by an editor that praises reporters for always writing the truth. (2) Another essay, by a famous biologist, presents the global environmental and overpopulation crisis in such catastrophic and frightening terms that a particular audience is constrained, through fear, to shut out the argument and refuse to consider it. (3) Some voters have lost their faith in political leaders. When they are mailed brochures that argue in favor of particular candidates and that ask them to support these candidates with donations, their constraints cause them to throw these materials away without looking at them.

As these examples demonstrate, a constraint can include a specific attitude or assumption on the part of an author or an audience. In addition, constraints also include those external factors—from formal rules or laws to informal social norms or traditions—that play a role in shaping these attitudes and assumptions. Here are

Figure 2.1 Constraints in the Form of Basic Assumptions Driving People Apart

SOURCE: © The New Yorker Collection
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"Because this family isn't ready to hold democratic elections—that's why!"

two more examples of constraints that may be closer to you: (1) You parked your car in a no-parking zone because you were late to class, and the police feel constrained by law to give you a ticket. You have different constraints, and you write to the hearings board that more and closer parking should be available to students to help them get to class on time. The hearings board has its own constraints, and will probably turn down your plea. (2) You believe everyone should share the household chores equally, and the person you live with disagrees. Both of you are constrained by your past experiences in living with other people, possibly by traditions that influence your ideas about gender roles in this type of division of labor, and also by perceptions about who has the most time to spend on the chores. Both parties may have to work hard to create the common ground necessary to resolve this issue. Notice how the constraints present on both sides in these examples influence the way the audience and the arguer react to the rhetorical situation and to the issues it generates.

Exigence. Exigence is the part of the situation that signals that something controversial has occurred or is present and that a problem needs to be resolved by some response from an audience. Here are some examples of exigence for argument: people become suspicious of genetically engineered foods because of negative newspaper reports; a third-world country threatens to resume nuclear testing; a football player is badly injured in a game and the fans of the opposing team cheer in delight. In all cases, something is wrong, imperfect, defective, or in conflict. Exigence invites analysis and discussion, and sometimes a written response to encourage both individual public awareness and discourse about problematic situations.

Study the following set of questions. They will help you analyze the rhetorical situation and gain insight into its component parts when you are the reader.

Text. What kind of text is it? What are its special qualities and features? What is it about?

Reader or audience. Who is the *targeted audience*? What is the nature of this group? Can they be convinced? What are the anticipated outcomes? If you are reading a historical document—for example, the Declaration of Independence—you might ask further: How did the readers at the time the text was written differ from other readers of the time or from modern readers? Were they convinced? Did they act on their convictions?

Now consider how you, *as a reader*, compare with the targeted audience and ask: *Am I typical of one of the readers the writer anticipated? What is my initial position? What are my constraints? Do I share common ground with the author and other audience members? Am I open to change? Does this argument convince me? Am I motivated to change my mind or modify the situation? How?*

Author. Who is the author? Consider background, experience, education, affiliations, and values. What is motivating the author to write?

Constraints. What special constraining circumstances will influence the reader's and the author's responses to the subject? Think about the people, events, circumstances, and traditions that are already in place along with the beliefs, attitudes, prejudices, interests, habits, and motives held by both

the author and the reader that may limit or constrain their perceptions. Do the constraints create common ground, or do they drive the reader and author apart?

Exigence. What happened to cause this argument? Why is it perceived as a defect or problem? Is it new or recurring?

The student essay reprinted below addresses policies regarding cell phone use. Read the essay first and then read the analysis of the rhetorical situation that follows it. This analysis provides an example of how readers can use the rhetorical situation to help them understand argument.

BEFORE YOU READ: What are your opinions about the cell phone policies in your classes?

ESSAY #1 LET'S BAN THE CELL PHONE BAN*

Ava Guterrez

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Over the last few semesters, I have repeatedly found myself face-to-face with professors who have issued the same classroom commandment: check your cell phones at the door.

The first time I encountered this rule, I was confused. Hand in my cell phone? Why? Was the professor worried that students' phones would ring nonstop, thereby interrupting her lecture? Or was she concerned that students would simply tune her out, losing ourselves in our screens instead of focusing on the material at hand?

I don't mean to suggest that concerns like these aren't valid. Professors have a right to expect that students will be attentive. But a blanket cell phone ban—imposed without any input from students—is a mistaken way

to address these concerns. There are, after all, a number of ways to enlist students in a voluntary solution to the problems posed by cell phones. For example, students can simply be asked to turn phones off once they come into a classroom. Or failing this, they can be required to firmly put away their phones in pockets or backpacks.

Indeed, the fact that this cell phone ban leaves no room for commonsense compromise is what makes it so troubling. As students, we are told over and over that college is the place where we must take responsibility for our own education. Given this, it is surprising that so many instructors would institute a policy that seems designed to take responsibility away from students.

*"Let's Ban the Cell Phone Ban" by Ava Guterrez. Reprinted with permission of the author.

5 When I asked one of my professors to explain his own no-cell-phone-in-the-classroom rule, he replied that such a policy helps students “take greater responsibility for their education.” But in my opinion, this policy actually does the opposite. By making a decision that affects students without soliciting input from them, rules like the cell phone ban convey the message that instructors—not students—are really in charge. Rather than encouraging students to take ownership over their own

educations, this policy tells them that their real job is simply to follow rules laid down by others.

A far more reasonable approach would be to involve students in a conversation with their instructors about what the proper limits on cell phone access should be. Rather than forcing students to surrender their cell phones on command, this type of compromise would give students the opportunity, as well as the responsibility, to set reasonable limits for themselves.

For Discussion:

What is the issue? What is the author’s position on the issue? What reasons and evidence are given to support the author’s position? What is your position on this issue? How much common ground do you share with your instructors on this issue?

Here is an analysis of the rhetorical situation for “Let’s Ban the Cell Phone Ban.”

► Example of an Analysis of a Rhetorical Situation from the Reader’s Point of View

Text. This is an argumentative essay that provides reasons and personal experience to prove that professors should not implement a cell phone ban.

Reader or audience. The targeted readers are professors and students in classes where this policy has been implemented. The author expects the students and professors to identify with her and agree that this ban should be abolished.

Author. The author is a sophomore majoring in communications who was a student in several classes in which the cell phone ban had been put into effect.

Constraints. The author is constrained by the belief that students should be considered co-equals with professors when it comes to formulating class policy. She is also constrained by the idea that students can learn despite the potential disruption cell phones might cause. She expects her readers to hold the same beliefs.

Exigence. The student took several classes in which this cell phone ban was imposed.

Now consider how an understanding of the rhetorical situation can help you analyze images.



Arguing Like a Citizen

Take another look at the essay, "Let's Ban the Cell Phone Ban." In order to see how the argument made in this piece connects to the issue of citizenship, look at the sample analysis below. In what ways does the discussion here provide you with a starting point for "arguing like a citizen"? And how might you answer the questions that accompany this discussion?

Thinking Like a Citizen

- Why do I care about this issue?
As a college student, I have a considerable stake in the argument being made. In very immediate ways, my course grade—and by extension my overall academic record—could well depend on whether I comply with policies like a cell phone ban.
- Who else cares about this issue?
The other major stakeholder group is the instructors who teach these courses. As the people tasked not only with creating classroom cell phone policies, but also with ensuring that such policies help further legitimate academic goals, instructors need to think about where the lines around cell phone use in the classroom should be drawn.
- What different perspectives on this issue might others have?
While students would likely base their views on the relative inconvenience of a cell phone ban, instructors need to think about the impact this issue would have on the quality of their classroom teaching.

Arguing Like a Citizen

- How does this issue affect my daily life?
Because this issue bears so directly on my work in the classroom, it could be said to have an enormous impact on my day-to-day life as a student. Most immediately, it could affect whether I choose to bring a cell phone to class. Additionally, if I were to bring a cell phone to class, it could also impact the way I participate in classroom activities and discussions.
- What are the key problems or questions this issue raises for me?
The key challenge posed by a mandatory cell phone ban relates to the impact such a policy would have on my participation in classroom discussions. Would I focus on the material at hand just as closely if my cell phone were more accessible to me?

Acting Like a Citizen

- Where could I go in my community to see an example of this debate being waged?
This issue could be argued in any number of campus venues, from college newspaper editorials to classroom conversations between instructors and students to casual conversations among classmates outside of class.



Arguing Like a Citizen (*continued*)

- What concrete action could I take to change or improve the way this issue is debated? *Given how relevant this issue is to students and instructors alike, the discussion over it would benefit most from a forum that brings all of the stakeholders together. Toward this end, this issue could be explored as a story in a campus newspaper, or posted as a question to be debated on a college Web site.*

Activity

Now use this same framework to analyze the argument presented in the essay “A Defense of Grade Deflation.” What key issue does it address? What larger argument about this issue does it make? And how can you use the questions outlined above to connect this argument to the question of citizenship?

Analyze the Rhetorical Situation When You View a Visual Argument

LO2 Use these five elements to analyze a visual argument.

In our visual culture, natural disasters are the subject of extensive news coverage. The images photographers have sent back from disaster zones highlight not only the damage inflicted but the efforts to lend assistance. In Figure 2.2, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden offers assistance to residents of Natori, Japan, following the tsunami that devastated that country’s northeastern coastline in 2011. Look at the image, read the caption that accompanies it, and consider the questions in the margin. Then read the following analysis of the rhetorical situation of the image and notice how much more you learn about this photo and its possible effect on an audience.

► Example of an Analysis of the Rhetorical Situation from the Viewer’s Point of View

Text. This is a photograph from the tsunami zone in Japan. It is printed in an American newspaper. It depicts U.S. Vice President Joe Biden speaking to residents of Natori, Japan.

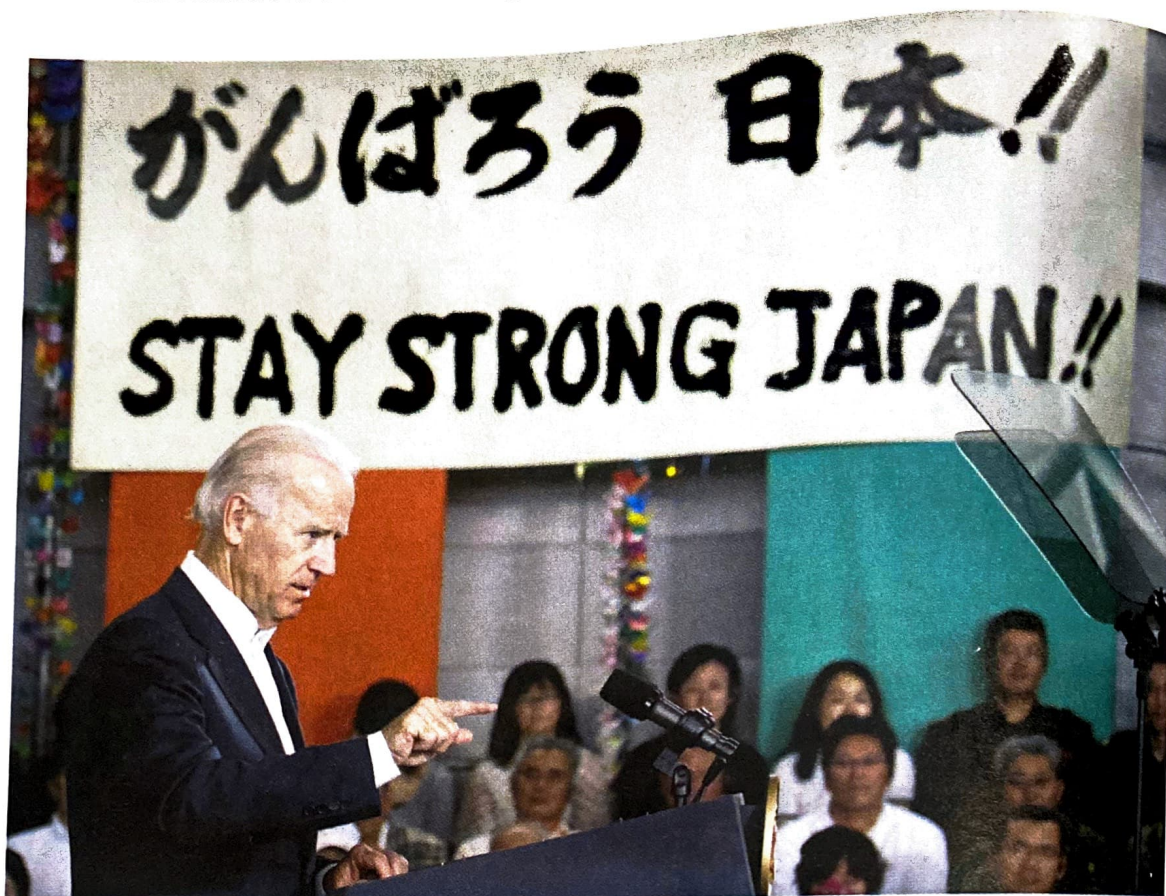
Viewer or audience. The targeted viewers are people in the United States, but also in other parts of the world, who read this newspaper either online or in print. The photographer expects the audience to be interested in what is going on in Japan in general, but also to show an interest in natural disasters of this sort. The photographer would expect a sympathetic audience who shares his humanitarian values.

Photographer or artist. This photographer works for Getty Images, a major source of digital images used by the news media.

Figure 2.2

Photograph of Vice President Joe Biden delivering a speech to Japanese citizens following the tsunami in August 2011

This image appeared as a stand-alone image in a national United States newspaper. View this photograph as an argument. How is it different from many of the images of natural disasters you have seen on television or in newspapers? How does it affect you as a viewer?



Constraints. The artist is constrained by the idea that natural disasters often bring out the best impulses in people to lend assistance. At times, good and generous acts as well as unexpected cooperation can occur in the midst of such events. He expects viewers to accept these constraints when they view his photograph, which will result in common ground with his audience.

Exigence. The aftermath of a devastating tsunami has caused great suffering among Japanese citizens.

Now, let's consider how an understanding of the rhetorical situation also helps you analyze the kinds of arguments you encounter online.

LO3 Use these five elements to analyze an online argument.

Analyze the Rhetorical Situation When You Encounter an Argument Online

In Chapter 1, you learned a series of steps for analyzing online argument. The same steps can also help you understand how the concept of the rhetorical situation applies to these arguments.



Analyzing Online Argument: TRACE

Text

- What issue does this text explore? What claims does it make?
- What genre or form does the text take (i.e., Web site, video, email, social media post, etc.)?
- What multimedia elements (written, visual, graphic, video) does it include?

Reader

- Who is the target viewer or audience?
- What opportunities for viewer feedback does this text provide?

Author

- Who is the author or producer of this text?
- What information about the author does the text include?

Constraints

- What does this information tell you about the author's perspective or bias?
- How does the text's genre or form affect the argument being made?
- How do the multimedia elements included affect the argument being made?

Exigence

- What issue or event motivated the author to create this text?

Now let's look at how this revised TRACE model can be used to analyze a specific example of online argument. The BP/Horizon oil spill that occurred in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 is considered by many to be one of the worst environmental catastrophes in American history. This spill, which released an unprecedented amount of oil into the Gulf, raised serious questions regarding our country's energy needs, our current energy consumption practices, and the effect of both on the overall health of the environment. Look at the Web site on page 52. What stands out to you about the images presented? What message about oil drilling, energy consumption, and the environment do they seem designed to convey? How does the written text, which accompanies these images, influence or reinforce this message? How is this message further affected by the links to other sources that this site includes? Once you have answered these questions, read the following analysis of the rhetorical situation presented by this Web site, and see whether you would add any further observations or interpretation.

continued

Analyzing Online Argument: TRACE (continued)

home - Blog - News - The BP Oil Spill - One Year Later

The BP Oil Spill: One Year Later

April 20, 2011 marks the one-year anniversary of the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. The disaster cost eleven people their lives and eventually releasing nearly five million barrels of oil into the marine ecosystem.

Enter your E-mail address
First name US Zip
Keep in touch

Donate today
Gift and estate planning

Read the report
Deepwater Horizon - One Year On
Publication

Text

This is a Web site that highlights the environmental damage from the 2010 BP/Horizon oil spill in the Gulf. It was created by the environmentalist organization Greenpeace and is part of its larger campaign to raise awareness about threats to the global environment. It includes visual imagery that details the environmental damage inflicted by the spill, and documents Greenpeace's efforts to commemorate this event, as well as written text that describes the spill as a "disaster that cost eleven people their lives" and released "nearly five million barrels of oil into the marine ecosystem."

Viewer or Audience

The targeted viewers for this text are people in the United States and, perhaps more particularly, Americans who live in those areas affected by the oil spill. The creators of this Web site expect the audience to be aware of the spill and the extent of the damage it has caused, and also to have concerns about the potentially long-lasting effects the spill might have. The creators would expect a receptive audience, given the widespread news coverage this oil spill received.

Author

The author(s) of this Web site are the people who work for Greenpeace, an environmental advocacy organization.



Analyzing Online Argument: TRACE (continued)

Constraints

The authors are constrained by their belief that oil companies pose a threat to environmental safety. Unless they are checked by environmental organizations, the authors believe oil companies are liable to deny responsibility for their actions. Evidence of this belief can be seen in the ways this Web site uses written and visual elements to convey its concerns about the effects of the oil spill. The audience is constrained by their own skepticism concerning the motives of such companies, a suspicion fueled in part by the media coverage of the BP Horizon oil spill.

Exigence

An oil rig collapses in the Gulf of Mexico, resulting in the release of millions of gallons of oil. The U.S. government attempts to work with BP to contain the spill, but for several months these efforts fail to stem the flow of oil into the Gulf, resulting in severe environmental damage.

Activity

Choose an example of an online argument. Then use the TRACE model outlined above to analyze the rhetorical situation.

Use the Rhetorical Situation When You Write an Argument

LO4 Use these five elements to create your own written argument.

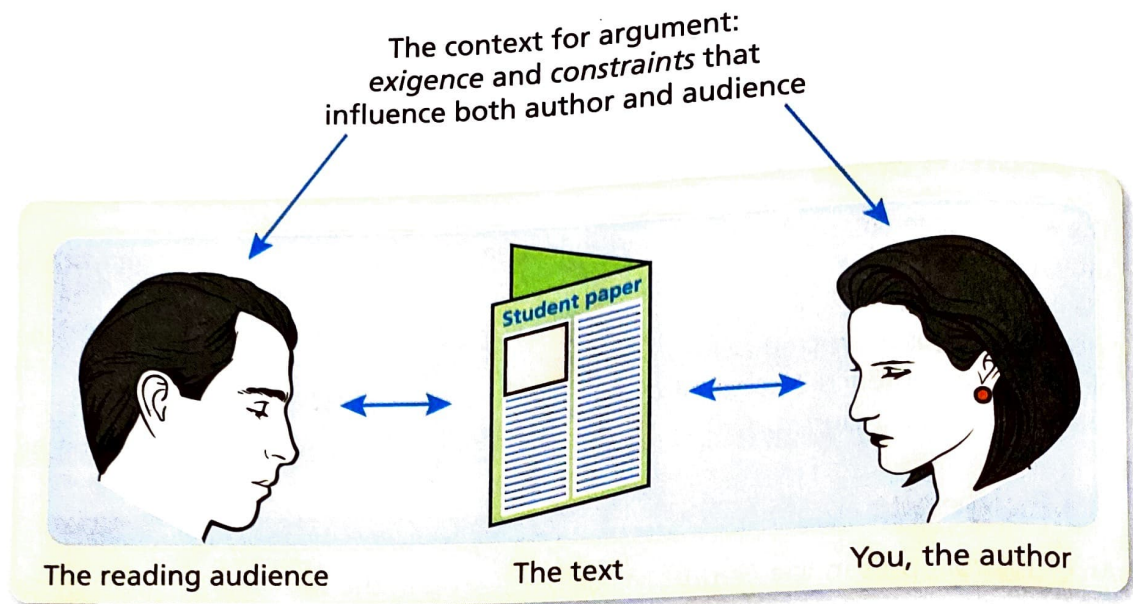
As a writer, you can use the rhetorical situation to help you think critically and make decisions about your own writing. All five elements of the rhetorical situation are important considerations for writers. Three elements are in place before you begin to write. They are the *exigence*, the *reader or audience*, and the *constraints*. When you begin to write, the other two elements are added: you, the *author*, and the *text* that you create. Figure 2.3 provides a diagram of these five elements.

Now consider each of the five elements from the writer's point of view. Use TRACE to help you remember the elements. As a writer, however, you will think about them not in the order presented in the mnemonic but in the order suggested in the previous paragraph.

What Is the Exigence?

The exigence of a situation will provide an author with the motivation to write about an issue. Issues often emerge from real-life events that signal something is wrong. One student found a topic when a relative who had spent time in jail could not get employment after he was released. Another student from a country outside of the United States became interested in intercultural differences and decided to

Figure 2.3 The Five Elements of the Rhetorical Situation That the Writer Considers While Planning and Writing Argument



write about the relative value of retaining her own culture or assimilating with a new one. Yet another student discovered an exigence when she read a negative article about Barbie dolls and remembered her positive experiences with them when she was younger.

Such occurrences can cause the writer to ask the questions associated with exigence: *What issues, including problems or defects, are revealed? Are these new issues or recurring issues? How severe is the problem or defect?*

Who Is the Reader or Audience?

In order to be productive, arguments must create common ground and achieve some definable audience outcomes. To do this, a writer needs to analyze the audience's present opinions, values, and motives, and show as often as possible that the author shares them. Both audience and author must cooperate to a certain degree for argument to achieve any outcomes at all.

To help you understand your audience, ask: *Who are my readers? Where do they stand on my issue? How can I establish common ground with them? If they disagree with me, will they be willing to change or modify their views, or not?*

What Are Some of the Constraints?

Remember that constraints influence the ways in which both you and your audience think about the issues. What background, events, experiences, traditions, values, or associations are influencing both you and them? If you decide to write to convince an audience that has no experience with criminals to hire people with criminal records, what are their constraints likely to be? How hard will it be for them to adopt your views? On the other hand, if you are an international student who is comparing your culture with the American culture to decide how

much to change and adapt to American ways, and your audience is only familiar with its own culture, what will you do to help them see this problem as you see it? If you are writing for an audience that is mostly male and has no experience with or memories of Barbie dolls, what constraints would you run into if you tried to convince them that Barbie dolls are an important part of children's experience?

To help you understand the constraints held by both you and your audience, ask: *How are our training, background, affiliations, and values either in harmony or in conflict? Will constraints drive us apart or help us build common ground? If they drive us apart, what additional information can I provide to build common ground and bring us closer together? Where will my argument appear? Will it be a paper for an instructor, a letter to a supervisor, a letter to an editor, or a post in an online chatroom? Each medium has its own requirements.*

You are in a position now to think about the remaining two elements of the rhetorical situation: you, the *author*, and the *text* you will write.

Who Is the Author?

You will now need to think of yourself as an author of argument. You may have selected one or more issues to write about at this point. Before beginning your research, reflect on what you already know about your issue and what you still need to learn. Draw on your own experience, if you have some that applies. For instance, one student might think about her relative's experiences in prison and imagine a better life for him, another might feel out of place in America and wonder how much he should change, and yet another student recalls her Barbie dolls and looks back with pleasure on the many hours she spent playing with them. Make brief notes on this experience to use later in your paper. If you have no direct experience to draw on, research, reading, and critical thinking will provide the material for your paper.

To better consider your role as the author, ask these questions: *Why am I interested in this issue? Why do I perceive it as a problem? Is it a new or old issue for me? What is my personal background or experience with this issue? What makes me qualified to write about it? Which of my personal values are involved? How can I get more information? What is my purpose and perspective? How can I make my paper convincing?*

How Should the Text Be Developed to Fit the Situation?

Your text (paper) may be written in response to an assignment in your argument class, in which case it should meticulously follow the assignment requirements. You might also write a paper for another class, a proposal at work, or a letter to the editor of a newspaper, to name a few possibilities.

Questions such as the following will help you decide what your completed argument text might look like: *What is the assignment? What final form should this paper take? Should I use an adversarial or a consensual style? How can I build common ground? Should I state the issue and my position on it right away, or should I lead up to it? How can I make my position original and interesting? What types of support should I use? How will I conclude my argument?*

► Example of an Analysis of a Rhetorical Situation

When You Are the Writer

Exigence: *What is motivating you to write on this issue?* You neglected to turn in two early assignments in a course, and you suddenly realize that the zeroes you received then will lower your final grade from a B to a C. If you get a C, you will lose your scholarship. You decide to write to your instructor to find a way to raise your grade.

Reader or Audience: *Who is going to read this?* Your instructor (the audience) has already announced a policy of no late work. Nothing has been said about extra-credit work, however. You will try to establish common ground with the instructor by proposing an extra-credit project that will benefit not just you, but the entire class. You will describe in detail a successful experience you had with online research on your paper topic. The class is struggling with online research, the teacher wants the students to learn it, she does not have much time to teach it, and you can help fill the gap.

Constraints: *Will your values and attitudes drive you and your instructor apart, or will they help you develop common ground?* The instructor will have time constraints in class and may be unwilling to give you class time for your project. To address that constraint, you decide to ask for only five minutes, and you offer to prepare handouts that describe your online research in a way that will benefit your classmates.

The instructor may also have constraints about replacing missed assignments with extra-credit work. If one student is allowed to do this, she reasons, will all the others want to also? You point out that the project you are proposing is more difficult than the early assignments you missed and probably few, if any, students will want to follow your example.

You create common ground with your instructor by showing you are serious about the course and its standards. You decide to admit to your bad judgment when you failed to complete assignments, to point out that you have done well since then, and to commit to completing the remaining assignments carefully and on time. You also explain the importance of the extra-credit work to your future as a student. Without your scholarship, you will have to drop out of school. You know that you and your teacher share a desire to keep students in school. You and your instructor have common ground on that matter as well.

Author: *What do you know? What do you need to learn?* You are the author. You have read the class policies in the syllabus and know you have to work with them. You know you have computer expertise that many others in the class lack. You need to learn how to present what you know both orally and in written handouts to help the rest of the class.

Text: *What should your argument look like?* You will write a one-page proposal to your instructor in which you describe in detail what you would like to present to the class about online research. You ask that this assignment be used to raise the zero grades you received earlier in the course. You attach a second page that shows a sample of the handouts you will prepare for the class.

The class activities and writing assignments at the end of this chapter will help you use the information about the rhetorical situation that you have learned in this chapter. Before you turn to the activities and writing assignments, however, you will need additional information to help you think about and analyze an audience for an argument paper.

Conducting an Audience Analysis

LO5 Analyze the audience of an argument.

The purpose of argument is to bring about some change in an audience. Here are several additional considerations to help you understand your audience and plan your argument strategies to bring about change.

Determine the Audience's Initial Position and Consider How It Might Change

As part of your planning, speculate about what you would regard as acceptable audience outcomes for your argument. Think particularly about the degree of common ground you initially share with your audience because it is then easier to plan for audience change. There are several possibilities for initial audience positions and possible changes or outcomes.

- ▶ **A friendly audience.** You may be writing for a friendly audience, one that is in *near or total agreement with you* from the outset. The planned outcome is to *confirm this audience's beliefs and strengthen their commitment*. You can be straightforward with such an audience, addressing them directly and openly with your claim at the beginning, supported with evidence that they can accept. Political rallies, religious sermons, and public demonstrations by special-interest groups, such as civil rights or environmental groups, all serve to make members more strongly committed to their original beliefs. When you write for a friendly audience, you will achieve the same effect.
- ▶ **An undecided audience.** This audience either mildly agrees with you or mildly opposes you. They *may possess no clear reasons* for their tendencies or beliefs. Possible outcomes in this case usually include (1) *final agreement* with you, (2) *a new interest* in the issue and a commitment to work out a position on it, or (3) *a tentative decision* to accept what seems to be true for now. To establish common ground with this kind of audience, get to the point quickly and use support that will establish connections.
- ▶ **A neutral audience.** Other audiences may be *neutral on your issue, uncommitted and uninterested in how it is resolved*. Your aim will be to *change the level of their indifference* and encourage them to take a position. You may only be able to get their attention or raise their level of consciousness. As with other audiences, you will establish common ground with a neutral audience by analyzing their needs and by appealing to those needs.

- A hostile, resistant audience.** A hostile audience, which may fully disagree with you, may also be closed to the idea of change at all, at least at first. Anticipated outcomes for such audiences might include *avoiding more hostility* and *getting people to listen and consider possible alternative views*. It is always possible that a hostile audience will have their minds *changed* or at least *compromise*. If all else fails, sometimes you can get a hostile audience to *agree to disagree*, which is much better than increasing their hostility.
- An unfamiliar audience.** When you do not know your audience's position, it is best to *imagine them as neutral to mildly opposed* to your views and direct your argument with that in mind. Imagining an unfamiliar audience as either hostile or friendly can lead to extreme positions that may cause the argument to fail. Imagining the audience as neutral or mildly opposed ensures *an even tone* to the argument that *promotes audience interest and receptivity*.
- A linked audience.** Linked audience refers to a reader not directly connected to or immediately participating in the discussion of a given issue, but who does have an interest in some issue that is related. This is often the case for arguments online, where the discussion of a given issue will frequently include references or links to discussions of similar issues. Imagine a neutral and unfamiliar audience that is sufficiently interested to seek additional information and perspectives regarding the issue. Supply links that will satisfy their needs and encourage them to respond positively to the argument you are making.

Think of your relationship with your audience as if it were plotted on a sliding scale. At one end are the people who agree with you, and at the other end are those who disagree. In the middle are the neutral audience and the unknown audience. Other mildly hostile or mildly favorable audiences are positioned at various points in between. Your knowledge of human nature and argument theory will help you plan strategies of argument that will address all these audience types and perhaps cause them to change their initial position on the sliding scale.

Analyze the Audience's Discourse Community

Besides analyzing your audience's initial position and how it might change, it is also useful to identify the audience's *discourse community*. An audience's affiliations can help define the nature of the audience itself. Specialized groups who share subject matter, background, experience, values, and a common language (including specialized and technical vocabulary, jargon, or slang) are known as discourse communities.

Consider discourse communities composed of all scientists, all engineers, or all mathematicians. Their common background, training, language, and knowledge make it easier for them to connect, achieve common ground, and work toward conclusions. The discourse community itself creates some of the common ground necessary for successful academic inquiry or for other types of argument.

You are a member of the university or college discourse community where you attend classes. This community is composed of reasonable and educated people who share common backgrounds and interests that enable them to inquire into matters that are still at issue. You are also a member of the discourse community

in your argument class, which has a common vocabulary and common tasks and assignments. Outsiders visiting your class would not be members of this community in the same way that you and your classmates are. To what other discourse communities do you belong?

Compare argument in your class with argument at home, at work, or with your friends. The strategies for connecting with others, building common ground, and arguing within the context of each of your discourse communities can vary considerably. With some reflection, you will be able to think of examples of the ways you have analyzed and adapted to each of them already. You can improve your natural ability to work with audiences by learning several strategies for analyzing and adapting to both familiar and unfamiliar audiences.

Analyze and Adapt to a Familiar Audience

In working with a familiar audience, ask questions such as the following to learn more about them:

- ▶ Who are the members of your audience and what do you have in common with them?
- ▶ What are some of the demographic characteristics of this audience? Consider number, age, organizational affiliations, interests, and college majors.
- ▶ What is the present position of audience members on your issue, and what audience outcomes can you anticipate?
- ▶ What experience do audience members have with your issue? Ask about their knowledge and background, including both positive and negative experiences and obstacles.
- ▶ What beliefs, values, motives, goals, or aims about your issue do you share?

Construct an Unfamiliar Audience

Sometimes you will not be able to gather direct information about your audience because these readers will be unfamiliar to you and unavailable for study. In this case, you will need to draw on your experience for audience analysis. To do so, imagine a particular kind of audience, a *universal audience*, and write for them when you cannot collect direct audience information.

Chaim Perelman, who has written extensively about the difficulty of identifying the qualities of audiences with certainty, developed the concept of the universal audience.² He suggests planning an argument for a *composite audience*, one with distinct individual differences but also important common qualities. This universal audience is educated, reasonable, normal, adult, and willing to listen. Every arguer constructs the universal audience from his or her own experiences, and consequently the concept of the universal audience varies somewhat from individual to individual and culture to culture.

The construct of the universal audience can be useful when you write papers for your other college classes. It is especially useful when the audience is largely

²See Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, for additional details on the universal audience.

unknown and you cannot obtain much information about them. Imagine writing for a universal audience on those occasions. Your professors and classmates as a group possess the general qualities of this audience.

CONSTRUCT YOUR OWN UNIVERSAL AUDIENCE

Choose an issue and create a composite portrait of the hypothetical or universal audience you aim to address. What preexisting views on this issue does this audience hold? What constraints operate on this audience? What attitudes or assumptions influence their views? What factors influence these attitudes and assumptions? Then, based on this profile, speculate about how this audience would influence your specific strategies for making your argument.

When you complete the analysis of your audience, go back through the information you have gathered and consciously decide which audience characteristics to appeal to in your paper. You will then be in a position to gather materials for your paper that will be convincing to this particular audience. You will develop reasoning and support that audience members can link to their personal values, motives, beliefs, knowledge, and experience. Similarly, you need to show the same care in adapting to the needs of a universal audience. Since this audience is reasonable, educated, and adult, reasoning and support must be on their level and should also have broad applicability and acceptance. The universal audience inspires a high level of argumentation. *Careful research, intelligent reasoning, and clear writing style are requirements for this audience.*

Use your understanding of the rhetorical situation to help you read and to help you get ideas and plan your own argument writing. It can be useful at every stage when you are reading, thinking, and writing about issues. The Summary Chart of the Rhetorical Situation (page 421) provides a brief version of the elements of the rhetorical situation as it applies to both reading and writing. Use it as a quick reference worksheet as you read or plan and write argument.

Review Questions

1. What are the five elements in the rhetorical situation? Use TRACE to help you remember. (LO1)
2. How can you use the rhetorical situation to analyze an argument essay? How can you use the rhetorical situation to analyze an image? How can you use the rhetorical situation to analyze an argument online? How can you use the rhetorical situation during the planning phase of writing a paper? (LO2, LO3, LO4)
3. Why is the audience important in argument? What types of positions might an audience initially hold? What possible outcomes are associated with arguments directed to each of these audiences? (LO5)
4. What is a discourse community? To what discourse communities do you belong? How does a discourse community help establish common ground for its members? (LO5)
5. What is the universal audience? What are the special qualities of this audience? Why is it a useful idea? (LO5)

Exercises and Activities

A. Class Discussion: Analyzing the Discourse Community for an Essay

Read the following essay by Will Harrel. Then answer the questions for discussion that follow the essay.

BEFORE YOU READ: How do you understand the term “grade deflation”? In your experience, does this term describe a widespread problem within higher education?

ESSAY #2 A DEFENSE OF GRADE DEFLATION*

Will Harrel

Will Harrel is a student at Princeton University and a contributing writer to the *Daily Princetonian*, the campus newspaper.

While Princeton’s diverse student body rarely unifies around a single issue, nearly every student seems to have rallied against grade deflation. This forces advocates of the policy—well, the few that exist—to always be on the defensive, addressing only the apparent negatives of grade deflation without discussing the benefits. I’ll begin this defense of grade deflation by once again discussing the negatives, but I will conclude by finally going on the offensive.

One common complaint is that grade deflation compounds students’ stress. While added pressure about grades does entail added stress, this pressure encourages students to work harder and learn more. Low standards breed low results, and grade deflation is an excellent way to increase standards. If a student knows he has a guaranteed A, he has no incentive to work harder for a better grade. It’s certainly nice to relax or party, but the purpose of a university is to teach, not to entertain, so

Princeton’s policies should focus on maximizing academics, not leisure. Rather than studying hard, if we want to breeze through college without much depth, receiving a high GPA and a diploma with honors, we could always go to Harvard. In the long run, however, knowledge and study skills are more useful than a high GPA. After a few years, achievement beyond graduation matters more than anything else.

Another major complaint is that grade deflation hurts our job and graduate-school prospects. While some employers and graduate schools are certainly unfamiliar with Princeton’s grading system, admission rates and job placements have actually risen slightly since grade deflation was instituted, as demonstrated by statistics in the “Grading at Princeton” pamphlet. From 2004 (the last class without grade deflation) to 2009, even accounting for the economic downturn, the percentage of seniors with full-time jobs in hand actually grew slightly, from

*“A Defense of Grade Deflation,” by Will Harrell, from *The Daily Princetonian*, March 2, 2010, © 2010. Reproduced by permission of the author.

29.4 percent to 29.6 percent. Both medical-school and law-school acceptance rates also grew, from 92.0 percent to 93.0 percent, and 25.9 percent to 34.5 percent, respectively. Moreover, Princeton sends out a letter with every transcript explaining the grading system, and employers and graduate schools know that GPAs from different schools have different meanings. For instance, MIT has a GPA scale from 5.0 to 0.0, and nobody would compare that GPA to a 4.0 scale side-by-side. Something like MIT's scale might actually be a useful next step for Princeton to clearly differentiate its grading scheme and increase awareness about grade deflation beyond Princeton.

On a slightly more trivial note, I've heard complaints that grade deflation renders the A-plus obsolete. While no statistics are released, Paolo Esquivel's 2009 article, "A-pluses in a time of grade deflation," mentions many examples of people with multiple A-pluses, and I know that at least two of my friends have also received A-pluses in stereotypically difficult courses. While receiving this ultimate mark is certainly difficult, it is definitely attainable.

5 Now that I have addressed the negatives of grade deflation, I must also discuss the two major benefits. First, it differentiates students more clearly in the top of the class. When everybody receives A's, employers and graduate schools have difficulty distinguishing between the good and the excellent students. In 2001, 91 percent of Harvard seniors graduated with honors, prompting former dean and acting president of Harvard Henry Rosovsky to say, "Honors at Harvard has just lost all meaning. The bad honors is spoiling the good." This absurd "honors inflation" was certainly beneficial to the students in the 50th through 91st percentiles range, but those in the top of the class were not rewarded for their hard work. Instead,

they were clumped together with mediocre students. The bottom 9 percent of the class were essentially outcasts.

Princeton's goal should not be handing out diplomas with honors but rather should be educating students and rewarding exceptional students for exceptional work. We have a 4.0 scale, so why would we only use 1 or 2 points of it? Grade inflation is excellent at highlighting the worst students, because so few students get low grades. By providing rigorous grading standards, Princeton highlights the best, not just the worst. For instance, because of the transcript letter, employers know that a Princeton student with a 3.7 GPA is an excellent student, and students are still being hired at similar or better rates. While grade deflation makes a 3.7 difficult, it is certainly achievable, and those who are able to achieve it are rewarded.

The other major benefit of grade deflation is its consistency across classes and departments. There are still certainly many kinks to be fixed in the soft quota system, but it is an excellent step in the right direction. The beauty of the system is that departments can assign a higher proportion of A grades to more competitive courses in order to maintain consistent standards across classes and departments. This allows me to place very little weight on the difficulty of grading when choosing my courses, because I know that our grades will be based on our abilities, not the professor's arbitrary grading standards. Grade deflation discourages people from gaming the system and taking "easy" courses in which everybody gets an A. Coupled with the new pass/D/fail policy changes, these effects now encourage students to take courses that excite them, not just ones that promise A's. While the current system is not completely flawless, the harms are negligible, and the benefits are great.

For Discussion:

Who are the members of the discourse community for this essay? In your view, how would different people in this community respond to the claims made by the author?

B. Writing Assignment: Analyzing the Rhetorical Situation in Written Argumentation

Write a 300- to 400-word paper in which you explain the rhetorical situation for “A Defense of Grade Deflation” by Will Harrel. Answer the following questions using TRACE.

1. How would you describe the text itself?
2. How would you characterize the reader or audience that the author may have had in mind while writing the essay? To what degree do you identify with this audience?
3. What do you learn about the author?
4. What are some of the possible constraints that might have influenced the author? What constraints influence you as you read this essay?
5. What is the exigence for this essay?

C. Group Work: Analyzing the Rhetorical Situation in Visual Argument

The two images on pages 64 and 66 are visual arguments that memorialize historic events. They may not appear at first to be visual arguments until you learn something about the history and original rhetorical situations in which they were situated. Both are photographs, and they are accompanied by enough explanation to help you understand the rhetorical situations in which they occurred. This will allow you to evaluate their effectiveness as visual arguments, both now and when they first appeared.

Form small groups, view each image, read the written commentary and essays that provide information about the photos, and answer the “For Discussion” questions that follow them. Then answer the following questions about their rhetorical situations. Refer back to the example of the analysis of the rhetorical situation from the viewer’s point of view on pages 49–50, if you need to recall its details.

1. *Image.* What type of image is it? What are its qualities and features? What is it about?
2. *Viewer or audience.* Who do you think was targeted as the most appropriate audience at the time each photo was taken? Who might still regard each of these photos as a compelling visual argument?
3. *Photographer.* What do you know about the photographer, and what may have motivated that individual to take the photo? What might have been the intended result?

4. *Constraints.* What constraints influenced the photographer? Consider the influential events, circumstances, and traditions already in place at the time each photo was taken. Consider, also, the possible beliefs, attitudes, motives, and prejudices of the photographer. How about your constraints? Do any of your beliefs, attitudes, or prejudices seem to match those of the photographer, or are they different? Do the possible constraints you have identified create common ground between yourself and the photographer, or do they drive you apart?
5. *Exigence.* What motivated the photographer to take each of these photos? What happened? Was it perceived as a defect or problem? If yes, why? Was it new or recurring?

Image 1:**Rosa Parks Rides in the Front of the Bus**

Rosa Parks riding a Montgomery, Alabama, bus in December 1956, after the Supreme Court outlawed segregation on buses.

Look at the image and read the essay that follows. It explains the history of this photograph and will provide you with the information you need to analyze the rhetorical situation.



This photograph was taken in 1956 early in the civil rights movement in Alabama when the issue was segregation in public facilities. Until this time, African American people were required to sit only at the back of public buses. A new national ruling gave them the right to sit wherever they wanted to sit. In the photograph, Rosa Parks, an African American civil rights activist, tests this new ruling by taking a seat in the front of the bus with a white man seated behind her. This is a famous photograph. It appears on the walls of buses in New York City and has come to symbolize change brought about by the movement for civil rights that continued into the next decades.

BEFORE YOU READ: What more would you like to know about the history of civil rights and racial segregation in the United States? How might this historical context affect how you view the Rosa Parks photograph?

ESSAY #3 THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

The Library of Congress

The following excerpt is part of the project entitled "The African American Odyssey," a historical overview of African American history created by the Library of Congress.

The post-war era marked a period of unprecedented energy against the second class citizenship accorded to African Americans in many parts of the nation. Resistance to racial segregation and discrimination with strategies such as civil disobedience, nonviolent resistance, marches, protests, boycotts, "freedom rides," and rallies received national attention as newspaper, radio, and television reporters and cameramen documented the struggle to end racial inequality. There were also continuing efforts to legally challenge segregation through the courts.

Success crowned these efforts: the Brown decision in 1954, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act in 1965 helped bring about the demise of the entangling web of legislation that bound

blacks to second class citizenship. One hundred years after the Civil War, blacks and their white allies still pursued the battle for equal rights in every area of American life. While there is more to achieve in ending discrimination, major milestones in civil rights laws are on the books for the purpose of regulating equal access to public accommodations, equal justice before the law, and equal employment, education, and housing opportunities. African Americans have had unprecedented openings in many fields of learning and in the arts. The black struggle for civil rights also inspired other liberation and rights movements, including those of Native Americans, Latinos, and women, and African Americans have lent their support to liberation struggles in Africa.

For Discussion:

If you had no knowledge about the larger historical struggle for civil rights, how would this affect your understanding of the rhetorical situation in which the Rosa Parks photograph is situated? And how does this historical context help you better understand the rhetorical situation here? Does this context help you analyze this photo as a visual argument?

Image 2:**Auschwitz Victims of Medical Experiments**

Auschwitz Exhibit at Jerusalem's Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial

This is a photograph of an Israeli soldier in Jerusalem, Israel, who is viewing historical photographs at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial Museum of Jewish victims from Auschwitz. Photojournalist David Silverman, who works for Getty Images and has been based in Israel and the West Bank since 1991, took this photo the week before the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.



The photographs in this exhibit were taken in the early 1940s during World War II at the Auschwitz concentration camp. The issues related to this image are anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, genocide, and the desire on the part of the Nazis, who ran this camp, to create a so-called master race. More than a million Jews died in the gas chambers at Auschwitz, were the victims of deadly medical experiments, or died of other causes such as starvation. Analyze the rhetorical situation for this image. How does this analysis help you perceive this image as a visual argument? What conclusions can you draw about the Holocaust, the Nazi death camps, and the individuals imprisoned there?

D. Before You Write on Your Issue: Applying the Rhetorical Situation

The worksheet on page 67 will help you understand the rhetorical situation for any issue you have selected to write about and have already tested to see whether it is arguable. Complete the worksheet by yourself. You are working with limited information, so you may need to guess at some of the answers.

E. Writing Assignment: Writing a Letter to a Specific Audience

Read the following rhetorical situation and write a letter in response to one of the four individuals in the prompts that appear immediately after it. Do not confer with other members of the class. Make sure at least some students write in response to each of the four prompts.

The Rhetorical Situation

You are enrolled in a freshman English class and your teacher allows you to be absent five times before she gives you an F for the course. If you are tardy to class three times, it counts as an absence. You have been absent five times and tardy to class twice. Your parents are angry with you for missing class so

Worksheet 1

Rhetorical Situation

1. Exigence

What is motivating you to write on this issue? What happened? Why is it compelling to you?

2. Reader or Audience

Who is going to read this? Where do you think they might stand on your issue right now? What are the chances of establishing common ground? What is the best approach to change their minds?

3. Constraints

How do you think your training, background, affiliations, values, and attitudes about your issue are either in harmony or in conflict with those of your audience? What constraints can you use to build common ground?

4. Author

What is your position or perspective on your issue? What do you already know? What do you need to learn? How can you be convincing?

5. Text

What are you writing? What should it look like? What specifications do you need to follow? Review the assignment for your paper.

much, and they say that if you fail English you will have to get a job and start paying rent to live at home. Your teacher has explained that if you are tardy or absent from class one more time, she is going to fail you. You really want to do better; you are determined to change your ways.

On the way to class you have a blowout on the freeway. You pull over to change the tire and when you get the spare from the trunk, it is flat. This is not your fault, as you have just had your car serviced and the tires checked. A fellow motorist pulls over and helps you, but by the time you get a good tire on your car and drive to class, you are forty-five minutes late. You enter the classroom as quietly as you can. Your best friend raises her eyebrows. Your teacher gives you a stern look. You feel terrible.

The Writing Prompts

1. You are too embarrassed to talk to your teacher. Write her a letter to explain what happened and ask her for another chance.
2. Your parents are too angry to talk to you. Write them a letter to explain what happened and to ask their forgiveness.
3. You are very upset with the tire company. Write them a letter to explain what happened and ask for a reimbursement.
4. You do not have time to talk to your best friend after class. Write her a note to explain what happened and tell her what you intend to do about it.³

³I am indebted to Samantha Masterton for this assignment.

You and your classmates should now read some of these letters aloud. When you read them, do not divulge who the intended audience is. Ask the other students to guess who the intended reader of the letter is. Continue doing this until you have a sampling of all four letters and the class has guessed to whom each has been written.

Discuss the Results

What clues helped you surmise the audience for each letter? How are the letters different from each other? In your discussion, consider how each audience influenced the purpose for writing each letter, the tone of each letter, and the type and level of vocabulary used in each letter.

F. Class Discussion and Writing Assignment: Analyzing Your Class as an Audience

Learn more about your class as an audience by answering the questions listed here.

1. How many students are in your class? What are some of the qualities and features you have in common?
2. Consider some of the demographics of your class (ask for a show of hands to answer some of these): How many are traditional college-age students (18–22 years old), and how many are older, new, or returning students? Count the number of men and the number of women. How many are international students, and what countries do they represent? How would you describe the cultural diversity in the class? How many in the class agree that their heritage or native culture influences their personal life? How many are first-years and sophomores? How many are juniors and seniors? How many work part time? How many work full time? What are some of the types of work represented in class?
3. What college majors are represented in your class?
4. What are some of the groups class members belong to that are important to them? Consider political, religious, social, and living groups. Ask for students to volunteer this information.
5. What are some of the special interests and hobbies of class members? Make a list.

Using this class survey data, write as full a description of your classroom audience as you can. Which of the issues that you have considered writing about would immediately interest them? Why? Which would they find less interesting? Why? What could you provide in your paper to increase their interest?