As you read, consider the following questions:

- What rhetorical situation gave rise to Grant-Davie's article—that is, why did he write it in the first place? Who is his intended audience? Who else has been talking about this problem/question? What text(s) is he responding to?
- How does the article move from its introduction through the defining work it does to its concluding example? Why is it divided into sections?
- Can you use the examples Grant-Davie gives to help you find examples of rhetorical situations and their components (*exigence, rhetors, audience,* and *constraints*) in your own life?

Ken Burns's documentary film, *The Civil War*, has mesmerized viewers since 1
it first aired on PBS in 1990. Among its more appealing features are the interviews with writers and historians like Shelby Foote and Barbara Fields, who provide the background information and interpretation necessary to transform battles, speeches, and letters from dry historical data into a human drama of characters, intentions, and limitations. In effect, their commentaries explain the rhetorical situations of the events, pointing out influential factors within the broader contexts that help explain why decisions were made and why things turned out as they did. Their analyses of these rhetorical situations show us that some events might easily have turned out otherwise, while the outcomes of other events seem all but inevitable when seen in light of the situations in which they occurred. When we study history, our first question may be "what happened?" but the more important question, the question whose answer offers hope of learning for the future as well as understanding the past, is "why did it happen?" At a fundamental level, then, understanding the rhetorical situations of historical events helps satisfy our demand for causality—helps us discover the extent to which the world is not chaotic but ordered, a place where actions follow patterns and things happen for good reasons. Teaching our writing students to examine rhetorical situations as sets of interacting influences from which rhetoric arises, and which rhetoric in turn influences, is therefore one of the more important things we can do. Writers who know how to analyze these situations have a better method of examining causality. They have a stronger basis for making composing decisions and are better able, as readers, to understand the decisions other writers have made.

When we study history, our first question may be "what happened?" but the more important question, the question whose answer offers hope of learning for the future as well as understanding the past, is "why did it happen?"

Scholars and teachers of rhetoric have used the term *rhetorical situation* since Lloyd Bitzer defined it in 1968. However, the concept has remained largely underexamined since Bitzer's seminal article and the responses to it by Richard Vatz and Scott Consigny in the 1970s. We all use the term, but what exactly do we mean by it and do we all mean the same thing? My purpose in this essay is to review the original definitions of the term and its constituents, and to offer a more thoroughly developed scheme for analyzing rhetorical situations. I will apply the concept of a rhetorical situation to reading or listening situations as well as to writing or speaking situations, and to what I call "compound" rhetorical situations—discussions of a single subject by multiple rhetors and audiences.[1]

Bitzer defines a rhetorical situation generally as "the context in which speakers or writers create rhetorical discourse" (382).[2] More specifically he defines it as "a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence" (386).[3] In other words, a rhetorical situation is a situation where a speaker or writer sees a need to change reality and sees that the change may be effected through rhetorical discourse. Bitzer argues that understanding the situation is important because the situation invites and largely determines the form of the rhetorical work that responds to it. He adds that "rhetorical discourse comes into existence as a response to situation, in the same sense that an answer comes into existence in response to a question, or a solution in response to a problem" (385–86). Richard Vatz challenges Bitzer's assumption that the rhetor's response is controlled by the situation. He contends that situations do not exist without rhetors, and that rhetors create rather than discover rhetorical situations (154). In effect, Vatz argues that rhetors not only answer the question, they also ask it.[4]

Scott Consigny's reply to Bitzer and Vatz suggests that each of them is both right and wrong, that a rhetorical situation is partly, but not wholly, created by the rhetor. Supporting Vatz, Consigny argues that the art of rhetoric should involve "integrity"—the ability to apply a standard set of strategies effectively to any situation the rhetor may face. On the other hand, supporting Bitzer, he argues that rhetoric should also involve "receptivity"—the ability to respond to the conditions and demands of individual situations. To draw an analogy, we could say that carpentry has integrity inasmuch as carpenters tackle most projects with a limited set of common tools. They do not have to build new tools for every new task (although the evolution of traditional tools and the development of new ones suggest that integrity is not a static property). Conversely, carpentry might also be said to have receptivity if the limited set of tools does not limit the carpenter's perception of the task. A good carpenter does not reach for the hammer every time.

Looking at these articles by Bitzer, Vatz, and Consigny together, we might define a rhetorical situation as a set of related factors whose interaction creates and controls a discourse. However, such a general definition is better

understood if we examine the constituents of situation. Bitzer identifies three: exigence, audience, and constraints. Exigence is "an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be" (386). A rhetorical exigence is some kind of need or problem that can be addressed and solved through rhetorical discourse. Eugene White has pointed out that exigence need not arise from a problem but may instead be cause for celebration (291). Happy events may create exigence, calling for epideictic rhetoric. Bitzer defines the audience as those who can help resolve the exigence: "those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change" (387), while constraints are "persons, events, objects, and relations which are parts of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence" (388).

Bitzer's three-way division of rhetorical situations has been valuable, but to reveal the full complexity of rhetorical situations, I think we need to develop his scheme further. I propose three amendments. First, I believe exigence, as the motivating force behind a discourse, demands a more comprehensive analysis. Second, I think we need to recognize that rhetors are as much a part of a rhetorical situation as the audience is. Bitzer mentions in passing that when a speech is made, both it and the rhetor become additional constituents of the situation (388), but he does not appear to include the rhetor in the situation that exists *before* the speech is made. And third, we need to recognize that any of the constituents may be plural. Bitzer includes the possibility of multiple exigences and constraints, but he seems to assume a solitary rhetor and a single audience. In many rhetorical situations, there may be several rhetors, including groups of people or institutions, and the discourse may address or encounter several audiences with various purposes for reading. The often complex interaction of these multiple rhetors and audiences should be considered. What follows, then, are definitions and discussions of the four constituents I see in rhetorical situations: exigence, rhetors, audiences, and constraints.

6

Exigence—The Matter and Motivation of the Discourse

Bitzer defines rhetorical exigence as the rhetor's sense that a situation both calls for discourse and might be resolved by discourse. According to this definition, the essential question addressing the exigence of a situation would be "Why is the discourse needed?" However, in my scheme I propose that this question be the second of three that ask, respectively, what the discourse is about, why it is needed, and what it should accomplish. I derive the logic for this order of questions from the version of stasis theory explained by Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor, who argue that the stases provide a natural sequence of steps for interrogating a subject. This sequence proceeds from questions of fact and definition (establishing that the subject exists and characterizing it) through questions of cause and effect (identifying the source of the subject and its consequences) and questions of value (examining its importance or quality) to questions of policy or procedure (considering what should be done about it)

("The Stases in Scientific and Literary Argument" 428–31; "The Rhetoric of Literary Criticism" 78–80). Sharon Crowley, too, has suggested stasis theory as a good tool for analyzing rhetorical situations (33).

What is the discourse about? This question addresses the first two stases, fact and definition, by asking what the discourse concerns. The question may be answered at quite a concrete level by identifying the most apparent topic. A speech by a politician during an election year may be about mandatory school uniforms, Medicare, an antipollution bill, the fight against terrorism, or any of a host of other topics. However, what the discourse is about becomes a more interesting and important question, and a source of exigence, if asked at more abstract levels—in other words, if the question becomes "What fundamental issues are represented by the topic of the discourse?" or "What values are at stake?" Political speeches often use specific topics to represent larger, more enduring issues such as questions of civil rights, public safety, free enterprise, constitutionality, separation of church and state, morality, family values, progress, equality, fairness, and so forth. These larger issues, values, or principles motivate people and can be invoked to lead audiences in certain directions on more specific topics. A speech on the topic of requiring school uniforms in public schools may engage the larger issue of how much states should be free from federal intervention—an issue that underlies many other topics besides school uniforms. In the first episode of *The Civil War*, historian Barbara Fields draws a distinction between the superficial matter of the war and what she sees as the more important, underlying issues that gave it meaning:

> For me, the picture of the Civil War as a historic phenomenon is not on the battlefield. It's not about weapons, it's not about soldiers, except to the extent that weapons and soldiers at that crucial moment joined a discussion about something higher, about humanity, about human dignity, about human freedom.

On the battlefield, one side's ability to select the ground to be contested has often been critical to the outcome of the engagement. In the same way, rhetors who can define the fundamental issues represented by a superficial subject matter—and persuade audiences to engage in those issues—is in a position to maintain decisive control over the field of debate. A presidential candidate may be able to convince the electorate that the more important issues in a debate about a rival's actions are not the legality of those specific actions but questions they raise about the rival's credibility as leader of the nation ("He may have been exonerated in a court of law, but what does the scandal suggest about his character?"). Attorneys do the same kind of thing in a courtroom, trying to induce the jury to see the case in terms of issues that favor their client. Granted, these examples all represent traditional, manipulative rhetoric—the verbal equivalent of a physical contest—but I believe the same principle is critical to the success of the kind of ethical argument Theresa Enos describes, where the aim is not victory over the opponent but a state of identification, where writer and reader are able to meet in the audience identity the writer has created within the discourse (106–08). In these kinds of argument, establishing

acceptable issues would seem to be an essential stage, creating an agenda that readers can agree to discuss.

I am proposing stasis theory be used as an analytic tool, an organizing principle in the sequence of questions that explore the exigence of a situation, but defining the issues of a discourse also involves determining the stases that will be contested in the discourse itself. The presidential candidate in the example mentioned above is abandoning the stasis of definition and choosing instead to take a stand at the stasis of value. Asking what the discourse is about, then, involves identifying the subject matter or topic at the most obvious level, but also determining issues that underlie it and the stases that should be addressed—in short, asking "what questions need to be resolved by this discourse?"

Why is the discourse needed? The second question about exigence addresses both the third and fourth stases (cause and value). It addresses cause by asking what has prompted the discourse, and why *now* is the right time for it to be delivered. This aspect of exigence is related, as Bill Covino and David Jolliffe have observed, to the concept of *kairos*—"the right or opportune time to speak or write" (11, 62). Exigence may have been created by events that precede the discourse and act as a catalyst for it; and the timing of the discourse may also have been triggered by an occasion, such as an invitation to speak. A presidential speech on terrorism may be prompted both by a recent act of terrorism but also by a timely opportunity to make a speech. In the case of letters to the editor of a newspaper, the forum is always there—a standing invitation to address the newspaper's readership. However, letter writers are usually prompted by a recent event or by the need to reply to someone else's letter.

While addressing the stasis of cause, the question "why is the discourse needed?" also addresses the value stasis in the sense that it asks why the discourse matters—why the issues are important and why the questions it raises really need to be resolved. The answer to this question may be that the issues are intrinsically important, perhaps for moral reasons. Alternatively, the answer may lie in the situation's implications. Exigence may result not from what has already happened but from something that is about to happen, or from something that might happen if action is not taken—as in the case of many speeches about the environment.

What is the discourse trying to accomplish? Finally, exigence can be revealed by asking questions at the stasis of policy or procedure. What are the goals of the discourse? How is the audience supposed to react to the discourse? I include objectives as part of the exigence for a discourse because resolving the exigence provides powerful motivation for the rhetor. The rhetor's agenda may also include primary and secondary objectives, some of which might not be stated in the discourse. The immediate objective of a presidential campaign speech might be to rebut accusations made by a rival, while a secondary objective might be to clarify the candidate's stance on one of the issues or help shape his image, and the broader objective would always be to persuade the audience to vote for the candidate when the time comes.

Rhetor(s)—Those People, Real or Imagined, Responsible for the Discourse and Its Authorial Voice

Bitzer does not include the rhetor as a constituent of the rhetorical situation before the discourse is produced, although he includes aspects of the rhetor under the category of constraints. Vatz only points out the rhetor's role in defining the situation, yet it seems to me that rhetors are as much constituents of their rhetorical situations as are their audiences. Their roles, like those of audiences, are partly predetermined but usually open to some definition or redefinition. Rhetors need to consider who they are in a particular situation and be aware that their identity may vary from situation to situation. Neither Bitzer nor Vatz explores the role of rhetor in much depth, and an exhaustive analysis of possible roles would be beyond the scope of this essay, too; but in the following paragraphs, I will touch on some possible variations.

First, although for syntactic convenience I often refer to the rhetor as singular in this essay, situations often involve multiple rhetors. An advertisement may be sponsored by a corporation, written and designed by an advertising agency, and delivered by an actor playing the role of corporate spokesperson. Well-known actors or athletes may lend the ethos they have established through their work, while unknown actors may play the roles of corporate representatives or even audience members offering testimony in support of the product. We can distinguish those who originated the discourse, and who might be held legally responsible for the truth of its content, from those who are hired to shape and deliver the message, but arguably all of them involved in the sales pitch share the role of rhetor, as a rhetorical team.

Second, even when a rhetor addresses a situation alone, the answer to the question "Who is the rhetor?" may not be simple. As rhetors we may speak in some professional capacity, in a volunteer role, as a parent, or in some other role that may be less readily identifiable—something, perhaps, like Wayne Booth's "implied author" or "second self"—the authorial identity that readers can infer from an author's writing (70–71). Roger Cherry makes a contrast between the ethos of the historical author and any persona created by that author (260–68). Cherry's distinction might be illustrated by the speech of a presidential candidate who brings to it the ethos he has established through his political career and uses the speech to create a persona for himself as president in the future. Then again, a rhetor's ethos will not be the same for all audiences. It will depend on what they know and think of the rhetor's past actions, so the "real" or "historical" author is not a stable "foundation" identity but depends partly on the audience in a particular rhetorical situation. Like exigence, then, audience can influence the identity of the rhetor.

Rhetors may play several roles at once, and even when they try to play just one role, their audience may be aware of their other roles. A Little League baseball umpire might, depending on his relationship with local residents, receive fewer challenges from parents at the game if he happens also to be the local police chief. The range of roles we can play at any given moment is certainly constrained by the other constituents of the rhetorical situation and by the identities we bring to the situation. However, new rhetorical situations

change us and can lead us to add new roles to our repertoire. To use Consigny's terms, rhetors create ethos partly through integrity—a measure of consistency they take from situation to situation instead of putting on a completely new mask to suit the needs of every new audience and situation; and they also need receptivity—the ability to adapt to new situations and not rigidly play the same role in every one.

Audience—Those People, Real or Imagined, with Whom Rhetors Negotiate through Discourse to Achieve the Rhetorical Objectives

Audience as a rhetorical concept has transcended the idea of a homogenous body 17
of people who have stable characteristics and are assembled in the rhetor's presence. A discourse may have primary and secondary audiences, audiences that are present and those that have yet to form, audiences that act collaboratively or as individuals, audiences about whom the rhetor knows little, or audiences that exist only in the rhetor's mind. Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca point out that unlike speakers, writers cannot be certain who their audiences are, and that rhetors often face "composite" audiences consisting either of several factions or of individuals who each represent several different groups (214–17).

In Bitzer's scheme audience exists fairly simply as a group of real people 18
within a situation external to both the rhetor and the discourse. Douglas Park has broadened this perspective by offering four specific meanings of audience: (1) any people who happen to hear or read a discourse, (2) a set of readers or listeners who form part of an external rhetorical situation (equivalent to Bitzer's interpretation of audience), (3) the audience that the writer seems to have in mind, and (4) the audience roles suggested by the discourse itself. The first two meanings assume that the audience consists of actual people and correspond to what Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford have called "audience addressed" (Ede and Lunsford 156–65). Park's third and fourth meanings are more abstract, corresponding to Ede and Lunsford's "audience invoked." Park locates both those meanings of audience within the text, but I would suggest that the third resides not so much in the text as in the writer before and during composing, while the fourth is derived from the text by readers. Since writers are also readers of their own texts, they can alternate between the third and fourth meanings of audience while composing and rereading; so they might draft with a sense of audience in mind, then reread to see what sense of audience is reflected in the text they have created. In some instances writers may be their own intended audiences. One example would be personal journals, which writers may write for themselves as readers in the future, or for themselves in the present with no more awareness of audience as separate from self than they have when engaging in internal dialogue.

Instead of asking "Who is the audience?," Park recommends we ask how a 19
discourse "defines and creates contexts for readers" (250). As an example of such a context, he offers Chaïm Perelman's notion of the universal audience, which Perelman defines in *The New Rhetoric* as an audience "encompassing

all reasonable and competent men" (157). Appealing to the universal audience creates a forum in which debate can be conducted. Likewise, Park argues, a particular publication can create a context that partly determines the nature of the audience for a discourse that appears in it.

Like the other constituents of rhetorical situations, the roles of rhetor and audience are dynamic and interdependent. As a number of theorists have observed, readers can play a variety of roles during the act of reading a discourse, roles that are not necessarily played either before or after reading. These roles are negotiated with the rhetor through the discourse, and they may change during the process of reading (Ede and Lunsford 166–67; Long 73, 80; Park 249; Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 216; Phelps 156–57; Roth 182–83). Negotiation is the key term here. Rhetors' conceptions of audiences may lead them to create new roles for themselves—or adapt existing roles—to address those audiences. Rhetors may invite audiences to accept new identities for themselves, offering readers a vision not of who they are but of who they could be. Readers who begin the discourse in one role may find themselves persuaded to adopt a new role, or they may refuse the roles suggested by the discourse. I may open a letter from a charity and read it not as a potential donor but as a rhetorician, analyzing the rhetorical strategies used by the letter writer. In that case I would see my exigence for reading the letter, and my role in the negotiation, as quite different from what the writer appeared to have had in mind for me.[5]

Rhetorical situations, then, are not phenomena experienced only by rhetors. As Stephen Kucer and Martin Nystrand have argued, reading and writing may be seen as parallel activities involving negotiation of meaning between readers and writers. If reading is a rhetorical activity too, then it has its own rhetorical situations. So, if we prefer to use *writing situation* as a more accessible term than *rhetorical situation* when we teach (as some textbooks have—e.g., Pattow and Wresch 18–22; Reep 12–13), we should not neglect to teach students also about "reading situations," which may have their own exigencies, roles, and constraints.

Constraints—Factors in the Situation's Context That May Affect the Achievement of the Rhetorical Objectives

Constraints are the hardest of the rhetorical situation components to define neatly because they can include so many different things. Bitzer devotes just one paragraph to them, defining them as "persons, events, objects, and relations which are parts of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence." Since he assumes that rhetors are largely controlled by situations and since he observes "the power of situation to constrain a fitting response" (390), his use of the term *constraints* has usually been interpreted to mean limitations on the rhetor—prescriptions or proscriptions controlling what can be said, or how it can be said, in a given situation. A rhetor is said to work within the constraints of the situation. However, this commonly held view of constraints as obstacles or restrictions has obscured the fact that Bitzer defines constraints more as aids to the rhetor than

as handicaps. The rhetor "harnesses" them so as to constrain the audience to take the desired action or point of view. This view of constraints seems useful, so I see them as working either for or against the rhetor's objectives. I refer to the kind that support a rhetor's case as positive constraints, or assets, and those that might hinder it as negative constraints, or liabilities.

Bitzer goes on to divide constraints along another axis. Some, which he 23
equates with Aristotle's inartistic proofs, are "given by the situation." These might be "beliefs, attitudes, documents, facts, traditions, images, interests, motives and the like"—presumably including beliefs and attitudes held by the audience. Other constraints, equivalent to Aristotle's artistic proofs, are developed by the rhetor: "his personal character, his logical proofs, and his style" (388). To paraphrase, Bitzer defines constraints very broadly as all factors that may move the audience (or disincline the audience to be moved), including factors in the audience, the rhetor, and the rhetoric. Such an all-inclusive definition would seem to threaten the usefulness of constraints as a distinct constituent of rhetorical situations, so I propose excluding the rhetor and the audience as separate constituents and making explicit the possibility of both positive and negative constraints. I would define constraints, then, as all factors in the situation, aside from the rhetor and the audience, that may lead the audience to be either more or less sympathetic to the discourse, and that may therefore influence the rhetor's response to the situation—still a loose definition, but constraints defy anything tighter.

With the rhetor and the audience excluded from the category of constraints, 24
it is tempting to exclude the other artistic proofs too, thereby simplifying the category further by drawing a distinction between the rhetorical situation and the discourse that arises from it. However, clearly the situation continues after the point at which the discourse begins to address it. A rhetor continues to define, shape, reconsider, and respond to the rhetorical situation throughout the composing process, and at any given point during that process, the rhetor may be highly constrained by the emerging discourse. If we are to be coherent, what we have already written must constrain what we write next.

If constraints are those other factors in rhetorical situations, besides rhetors 25
and audiences, that could help or hinder the discourse, what might they be? I have already included the emerging text of the discourse as a constraint on what a rhetor can add to it. To this we can add linguistic constraints imposed by the genre of the text or by the conventions of language use dictated by the situation. Other constraints could arise from the immediate and broader contexts of the discourse, perhaps including its geographical and historical background. Such constraints could include recent or imminent events that the discourse might call to readers' minds, other discourses that relate to it, other people, or factors in the cultural, moral, religious, political, or economic climate—both local and global—that might make readers more or less receptive to the discourse. Foreign trade negotiations, a domestic recession, a hard winter, civil disturbances, a sensational crime or accident—events like these might act as constraints on the rhetorical situation of an election campaign speech, suggesting appeals to make or avoid making. Every situation arises

within a context—a background of time, place, people, events, and so forth. Not all of the context is directly relevant to the situation, but rhetors and audiences may be aware of certain events, people, or conditions within the context that *are* relevant and should be considered part of the situation because they have the potential to act as positive or negative constraints on the discourse. The challenge for the rhetor is to decide which parts of the context bear on the situation enough to be considered constraints, and what to do about them—for instance, whether the best rhetorical strategy for a negative constraint would be to address it directly and try to disarm it—or even try to turn it into a positive constraint—or to say nothing about it and hope that the audience overlooks it too.

Some of my examples have complicated the roles of rhetor and audience, as but all so far have looked at discourses in isolation and assumed that situations are finite. It seems clear that a situation begins with the rhetor's perception of exigence, but when can it be said to have ended? Does it end when the exigence has been resolved or simply when the discourse has been delivered? I favor the latter because it establishes a simpler boundary to mark and it limits rhetorical situations to the preparation and delivery of discourses, rather than extending them to their reception, which I consider to be part of the audience's rhetorical situation. Also, as I have tried to show, exigence can be quite complex and the point at which it can be said to have been resolved may be hard to identify. The same exigence may motivate discourses in many quite different situations without ever being fully resolved. Major sources of exigence, like civil rights, can continue to motivate generations of rhetors.

To say that a rhetorical situation ends when the discourse has been delivered still leaves us with the question of how to describe discourse in a discussion. Dialogue challenges the idea of rhetorical situations having neat boundaries. When participants meet around a table and take turns playing the roles of rhetor and audience, are there as many rhetorical situations as there are rhetors—or turns? Or should we look at the whole meeting as a single rhetorical situation? And what happens when the participants in a discussion are not gathered together at one place and time, engaged in the quick give and take of oral discussion, but instead debate a topic with each other over a period of weeks—for example, by sending and replying to letters to the editor of a newspaper? To look at a meeting as a single rhetorical situation recognizes that many of the constituents of the situation were common to all participants, and it emphasizes Bitzer's view that situations are external to the rhetor; whereas to look at each person involved in the discussion as having his or her own rhetorical situation—or each contribution to the discussion having its own situation—would seem to lean toward Vatz's view that rhetorical situations are constructed by rhetors. Both views, of course, are right. Each rhetor has a different perspective and enters the debate at a different time (especially in the case of a debate carried on through a newspaper's editorial pages), so each addresses a slightly different rhetorical situation; but the situations may interlace or overlap extensively with those addressed by other rhetors in the discussion. It may be useful, then, to think of an entire discussion as a compound rhetorical situation, made up of a

group of closely related individual situations. Analyzing a compound situation involves examining which constituents were common to all participants and which were specific to one or two. For example, some sources of exigence may have motivated all participants, and in these common factors may lie the hope of resolution, agreement, or compromise. On the other hand, the divisive heat of a debate may be traced to a fundamental conflict of values—and thus of exigence—among the participants.

Examples of this kind of compound rhetorical situation can be found when- 28
ever public debate arises, as it did recently in the editorial pages of a local newspaper in a rural community in the Rocky Mountains. The debate was sparked when the newspaper printed a front-page story about a nearby resort hotel, Sherwood Hills, that had erected a 46-foot, illuminated Best Western sign at the entrance to its property. Such a sign on a four-lane highway would not normally be remarkable, but the setting made this one controversial. Sherwood Hills lies hidden in trees at the end of a long driveway, off a particularly scenic stretch of the highway. There are no other residences or businesses nearby, and the area is officially designated a forest-recreation zone, which usually prohibits businesses and their signs. Several months earlier, the resort owners had applied to the county council for a permit and been told that some kind of sign on the road might be allowed, but the application had not been resolved when the sign went up.

The newspaper ran several stories reporting the resort owners' rationale 29
(they felt they had applied in good faith and waited long enough) and the council members' reaction (they felt indignant that the owners had flouted the law and were now seeking forgiveness rather than permission). The newspaper also berated the resort owners' actions in an editorial. What might have been a minor bureaucratic matter resolved behind closed doors turned into a town debate, with at least 15 letters to the editor printed in the weeks that followed. From a rhetorical perspective, I think the interesting question is why the incident sparked such a brushfire of public opinion, since not all controversial incidents covered by the newspaper elicit so many letters to the editor. Looking at the debate as a compound rhetorical situation and examining its constituents helps answer that question.

The rhetors and audiences included the resort owners, the county council, 30
the county planning commission, the Zoning Administrator, the newspaper staff, and assorted local citizens. Their debate was nominally about the sign—whether it was illegal (a question at the stasis of definition) and what should be done about it (a question at the policy stasis). These questions were sources of exigence shared by all participants in the debate. However, even greater exigence seems to have come from questions at the stasis of cause/effect—what precedent might the sign create for other businesses to ignore local ordinances?—and at the stasis of value—were the sign and the act of erecting it without a permit (and the ordinance that made that act illegal) good or bad? For most of the letter writers, the debate revolved around the issue of land use, one of the more frequently and hotly contested issues in the western United States, where the appropriate use of both public and private land is very much open to argument.

Critics of the sign generally placed a high value on unspoiled wilderness. For them the sign symbolized the commercial development of natural beauty and challenged laws protecting the appearance of other forest-recreation zones in the area. Those in favor of the sign, on the other hand, saw it not as an eyesore but as a welcome symbol of prosperity erected in a bold and justified challenge to slow-moving bureaucracy and unfair laws, and as a blow struck for private property rights. Underlying the issue of land use in this debate, then, and providing powerful exigence, was the issue of individual or local freedom versus government interference—another issue with a strong tradition in the western U.S. (as in the case of the "sagebrush rebellions"—unsuccessful attempts to establish local control over public lands). The tradition of justified—or at least rationalized—rebellion against an oppressive establishment can of course be traced back to the American Revolution, and in the 1990s we have seen it appear as a fundamental source of exigence in a number of antigovernment disputes in various parts of the nation.

Exigence and constraints can be closely related. For the critics of Sherwood Hills, the breaking of the law was a source of exigence, motivating them to protest, but the law itself was also a positive constraint in the situation, giving them a reason to argue for the removal of the sign. Certainly the law constrained the council's response to the situation. On the other hand, the law was apparently a less powerful constraint for the owners of Sherwood Hills and for many of their supporters who felt that the law, not the sign, should be changed. For many on that side of the debate, the tradition of rebelling against what are perceived to be unfair government restrictions provided both exigence and a positive constraint. The feeling that private property owners' rights had been violated was what motivated them to join the discussion, but it also gave them an appeal to make in their argument. The rhetor's sense of exigence, when communicated successfully to the audience, can become a positive constraint, a factor that helps move the audience toward the rhetor's position.

Precedents always create constraints. In the Sherwood Hills debate, several participants mentioned comparable business signs, including one recently erected at another local resort, also in a forest-recreation area. The existence of that sign was a positive constraint for supporters of the Sherwood Hills sign. However, it was also a negative constraint since the other resort had followed the correct procedure and received a permit for its sign, and since the sign was smaller and lower than the Sherwood Hills sign, had no illumination, and had been designed to harmonize with the landscape.

Other constraints emerged from local history. The highway past Sherwood Hills had recently been widened, and the dust had not yet settled from the dispute between developers and environmentalists over that three-year project. Even before the road construction, which had disrupted traffic and limited access to Sherwood Hills, the resort had struggled to stay in business, changing hands several times before the present owners acquired it. The sign, some supporters suggested, was needed to ensure the new owners' success, on which the prosperity of others in the community depended too. The owners were also praised as upstanding members of the community, having employed local

people and contributed to local charities. Two letter writers argued from this constraint that the community should not bite the hand that feeds.

This analysis of the Sherwood Hills sign debate as a compound situation only scratches the surface, but understanding even this much about the situation goes a long way toward explaining why the incident generated such an unusual wave of public opinion. The conclusion of a compound rhetorical situation may be harder to determine than the end of a single-discourse situation, particularly if the subject of discussion is perennial. This particular dispute ended when the exchange of letters stopped and the Sherwood Hills owners reached a compromise with the county council: Both the sign and the ordinance remained in place, but the sign was lowered by ten feet.

As my discussion and examples have shown, exigence, rhetor, audience, and constraints can interlace with each other, and the further one delves into a situation the more connections between them are likely to appear. However, while the boundaries between the constituents will seldom be clear and stable, I do think that pursuing them initially as if they were discrete constituents helps a rhetor or a rhetorician look at a situation from a variety of perspectives. My efforts in the preceding pages have been to discuss the possible complexities of rhetorical situations. Teaching student writers and readers to ask the same questions, and to understand why they are asking them, will help them realize their options, choose rhetorical strategies and stances for good reasons, and begin to understand each other's roles.[6]

Notes

1. I thank *Rhetoric Review* readers John Gage and Robert L. Scott, whose careful reviews of earlier drafts of this essay helped me improve it greatly.
2. Bitzer's definition does not distinguish *situation* from *context*. The two terms may be used interchangeably, but I prefer to use *context* to describe the broader background against which a rhetorical situation develops and from which it gathers some of its parts. I see situation, then, as a subset of context.
3. In "The Rhetorical Situation" and "Rhetoric and Public Knowledge," Bitzer uses the terms *exigence* and *exigency* synonymously. I have used *exigence* in this essay mostly for reasons of habit and consistency with the original Bitzer/Vatz/Consigny discussion. I consider it an abstract noun like *diligence*, *influence*, or *coherence*. While cohesion can be located in textual features, coherence is a perception in the reader. In the same way, exigence seems to me to describe not so much an external circumstance as a sense of urgency or motivation within rhetors or audiences. It is they who recognize (or fail to recognize) exigence in a situation and so the exigence, like the meaning in literary works, must reside in the rhetor or audience as the result of interaction with external circumstances. Although Bitzer calls those circumstances exigences, I prefer to think of them as *sources* of exigence.
4. This fundamental disagreement between Bitzer and Vatz parallels the debate within literary theory over the location of meaning: whether meaning exists in the text, independent of the reader, or whether it is largely or entirely brought by the reader to the text. Bitzer's view looks toward formalism, Vatz's toward reader-response theories, and mine toward the position that meaning is a perception that occurs in the reader but is (or should be) quite highly constrained by the text.
5. Taking poststructuralist approaches to the roles of rhetor and audience, Louise Wetherbee Phelps and Robert Roth further challenge any assumption of a static, divided relationship between the two. Phelps uses Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of heteroglossia to deconstruct the idea of