

Analyzing the Rhetorical Situation

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn how awareness of the rhetorical situation can and should impact the drafting process, leading you to a deeper understanding of yourself and your writing. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. [What Is the Rhetorical Situation?](#)
2. [Meta-Awareness and the Rhetorical Situation](#)
3. [Practicing Meta-Awareness](#)

1. What Is the Rhetorical Situation?

The **rhetorical situation** encompasses a writer's purpose, presumed audience, personal background, and cultural-historical context, as well as how that context influences that writer's writing choices.

Readers use the rhetorical situation to deepen their understanding of written work. They rely on empirical evidence, reason, and guesswork to discern the writer's purposes, presumed audience, and more. This enables them to engage with the written work and increases their critical awareness.

In turn, writers can make use of the rhetorical situation to prepare and evaluate their writing projects, and to increase their self-awareness.



TERM TO KNOW

Rhetorical Situation

In writing, the conditions and environment in which a text is composed, including the writer's purpose, audience, background, and cultural-historical context, as well as how those factors influence the composition.

2. Meta-Awareness and the Rhetorical Situation

Although the writing process may sometimes seem overly structured and formulaic, it is a process that you, the writer, can control completely. You should reflect on the process to understand the choices you make as you participate in it. This is a type of self-awareness that is referred to as **meta-awareness**.

"Meta" is the act of thinking about your own thinking. In the context of writing, "meta" means self-reflection on your writing, and on your writing process. Whenever writers think about the rhetorical situation of their work, they perform a "meta" act. After all, what is writing but a writer's thoughts, made concrete? Meta-awareness is a key component of effective brainstorming and prewriting.

To perform meta-analysis, writers should focus on their work and ask themselves questions about it:

1. What are my biases?
 - a. *How do I avoid, embrace, or explain them?*
 - b. *If I haven't done so, should I?*
 - c. *Have my biases led me to faulty reasoning?*
2. What are my assumptions about this topic?
3. Who is my intended audience?
 - a. *What language, approach, and style will persuade them?*
 - b. *Have I deliberately alienated my audience?*
 - c. *If so, what is the value of doing this?*
4. What is my purpose in writing this, and what do I want my audience to know or do after reading it?
5. Which context influenced my writing choices?
6. Is there anything in my background that draws me to this topic or thesis?
7. Is anything happening in my surroundings, personal life, etc., that motivates my interest in, and thoughts about, this topic?
 - a. *If there is, how can I use this information in my essay?*
 - b. *If there is not, how can I show the relevance of my topic?*



HINT

Alienating members of an audience can cause them to be uncomfortable, or it can galvanize them. Both of these responses can be useful, depending on your purpose.



TERM TO KNOW

Meta-Awareness

In writing, a writer's consciousness of how the elements of the rhetorical situation have influenced that writer's composition.

3. Practicing Meta-Awareness

Read the following paragraph from a draft essay on food choices and corporate culture. It was taken from the middle of the essay, so you will be unaware of some of the context. However, as you read, try to guess the rhetorical situation in which it was written.

I've done a lot of traveling, and one thing I've learned is that it's best to avoid businesses that cater exclusively to non-locals. In places like the Turnpike Travel Plaza, it's clear that those in charge of planning were perfectly aware of the captive nature of their customers, and it's also clear that they weren't particularly interested in developing lasting relationships with those customers. If they were, they would have built more options into the services and products they offer. But since everyone involved understands that there aren't any other options, they didn't, and most of us don't complain.

Do you think that the writer of this paragraph is managing her biases? What if you knew that the writer avoids fast food and mass-produced food? Would it affect your analysis of the rhetorical situation if you were provided with additional context, like if the paragraph began with a scene in which the writer prepared an omelet in a Burger King parking lot, while passersby stared? Is the tone of the paragraph preachy?

It's important for the writer to avoid a preachy tone so that readers are not alienated, especially if her intended audience isn't limited to people who share her views on food. A less-preachy tone could help the writer to reach a wider audience, including readers who are tired of being lectured about their food choices.

All writers are influenced by their backgrounds and cultural contexts, which factor into their topic choices and what they write about those topics.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** Suppose that the writer of the sample paragraph grew up in a rural area where home-cooked food was the only food option. What if her parents made it a priority to know where their food came from since they were involved in food production? That kind of background would impact the writer's view of fast food and chain restaurants (like the one in the Turnpike Travel Plaza). She would need to avoid alienating potential readers who might have, say, happy childhood memories of trips to fast-food restaurants.

The writer of the sample paragraph should develop meta-awareness of her background and address it in the essay, to manage any perception of bias by readers. The writer needs to present her views on food choices and the corporate environment in which many people currently make their choices, in a balanced way.



BIG IDEA

It's easier to describe meta-awareness than to accomplish it. It's developed through a continuous process, one that does not end in complete awareness. However, by beginning and pursuing the process, you can increase your meta-awareness in an ongoing way.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that **the rhetorical situation** is comprised of the factors that influence a writer's composition. You also learned about the concept of **meta-awareness as it relates to the**

rhetorical situation, and the ways in which **practicing meta-awareness** can expand writers' understanding of their writing and rhetorical situations.

Best of luck in your learning!

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TERMS TO KNOW

Meta-Awareness

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Rhetorical Situation

In writing, the conditions and environment in which a text is composed, including the writer's purpose, audience, background, and cultural-historical context, as well as how those factors influence the composition.