

The Rhetorical Situation

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the components that make up the rhetorical situation, and why they are important to oral communication. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. What Is the Rhetorical Situation?

In the classical tradition, the art of public speaking is called rhetoric; the circumstances in which you give your speech or presentation create the **rhetorical situation**. By understanding the rhetorical situation, you can gauge the best ways to reach your listeners and get your points across.

Your understanding of the rhetorical situation will help you employ various strategies to guide your listeners as they perceive and interpret your message. Likewise, your awareness of the overall process of building a speech will allow you to take it step by step and focus on the immediate task at hand.

The rhetorical situation involves three elements:

- Context
- Audience
- Purpose

These elements help define where we are, who we are with, and why we are communicating. As you will recall from Unit 1, strong **self and social awareness skills** can ensure you account for these elements and take them into consideration as you plan and deliver your message.



TERM TO KNOW

Rhetorical Situation

The circumstances in which a speech or presentation is given; includes the context, audience, and purpose of the communication.

1a. Context

In the rhetorical situation, context involves the overall environment in which your speech occurs. Your speech is not given in a space that has no connection to the diverse rest of the world.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you are going to be presenting a speech in class, your context will be the familiar space of your classroom. Other contexts might include a business conference room, a restaurant

where you are the featured speaker for a dinner meeting, or a podium that has been set up outdoors for a sports award ceremony.

The time of your speech will also relate to people's natural patterns of behavior.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you give a speech right after lunch, you can expect people to be a bit sleepy. Knowing this, you can take steps to counter this element of the context by making your presentation especially dynamic, such as having your audience get up from their seats or calling on them to answer questions at various points in your speech.

You can also place your topic within the frame of reference of current events.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you are presenting a speech on the importance of access to health care for everyone, and you are presenting it in October of an election year, the current events that exist outside of your speech may be used to enhance it. Your listeners might be very aware of the political climate, and relating your topic to a larger context may effectively take into consideration the circumstances in which your readers will use, apply, or contemplate your information.

1b. Audience

The receiver (i.e., the listener or audience) is one of the basic components of communication. Without a receiver, the source (i.e., the speaker) has only themselves to send the message to.

By extension, without an audience you can't have a speech. Your audience comes to you with expectations, prior knowledge, and experience; each member has a reason for being part of that audience. Your audience members will also likely have a wide range of characteristics like social class, gender, age, race and ethnicity, cultural background, and language that make them unique and diverse.

When preparing a speech, ask yourself:

- What kind of audience will you be speaking to?
- What do you know about the audience's expectations, prior knowledge, or backgrounds?
- How does the audience plan to use your information?

Giving attention to this aspect of the rhetorical situation will allow you to gain insight into how to craft your message before you present it.

1c. Purpose

The purpose of your speech is central to its formation. You should be able to state your purpose in one sentence or less, much like an effective thesis statement in an essay.

A speech or oral presentation may be designed to inform, demonstrate, persuade, motivate, or even entertain. These purposes can sometimes overlap.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Your purpose may be to persuade, but the audience after lunch may want to be entertained, and your ability to adapt can make use of a little entertainment that leads to persuasion.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that **the rhetorical situation**, or the circumstances in which you give your speech or presentation, consists of three components: **context**, **audience**, and **purpose**. These components shape your message by providing you with insight into how it may be best received.

Best of luck in your learning!

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