

# An Overview of the Rhetorical Situation



**THE THREE ELEPHANTS IN THE ROOM:  
THE WRITER, THE AUDIENCE, AND THE PURPOSE**

It's essential to consider the overall purpose of the writing that you do. Knowing the purpose of your writing helps you make the correct, and most effective, rhetorical choices.

Watching the Eagles game one Sunday, I was surprised to hear the commentators mention "rhetoric." One of the players from UCAL-Berkeley had a degree in rhetoric, and John Madden couldn't figure out what that was. Ha, ha. They made fun of it for some minutes. ("Isn't rhetoric just what we do all the time? Isn't it just 'talking'?" )

Well, in a way, it is. He wasn't far from it. Actually, rhetoric is defined as the "art of speaking or writing effectively." So rhetoric isn't "just talking," it's talking well. As in, making a speech and getting people to comprehend fully what you are trying to explain to them, or getting people to listen to you and agree with you. Or getting them to vote for you. Or getting them on your side. Or getting them to donate money to your cause. And by the same token, rhetoric isn't just writing, it's writing well.

And that's what we'll try to accomplish in this class. Figuring out strategies for writing well given several unique purposes. You will learn to understand the writing situation that helps you determine your rhetorical choices—the choices you can make that will make your writing most effective, so that it fully communicates your message.

Most writing textbooks advise students who want to write effectively to become aware of the "rhetorical situation" (that word again). The rhetorical situation is, simply, those factors present at the time of writing which effect communication and therefore those factors which writers must be aware of if they're to write well. The rhetorical situation involves three key players: the WRITER, the AUDIENCE, and the PURPOSE of the writing.

## **THE WRITER**

Who are you? What persona do you want to project in your writing? Do you want your readers to see you as someone who's serious, someone who's laid back, someone who has a cause, someone who has a beef, someone who is intensely involved, someone who maintains objective distance? Who are you in this paper? If you're not there at all, pick something else to write about, until you have a topic you want be involved with. How will you project this person to the reader, since we only have the words on the page to help us know you? What kind of "voice" do you want to use? Will it be intimate and personal, warm and funny, clever and ironic, glib, self-deprecating? Will you use formal language, casual language, street language, slang, professional jargon? It may be decided for you by the assignment at hand. If so, you want to maintain the appropriate voice in your writing, and the first step is figuring out who the voice will be in your paper. It's usually the voice of a piece of writing that makes the biggest impression on the reader. It's what gives us the impression there's a human being behind those typeset letters. We connect with the human being, not the million dollar words or the correct grammar, although it's nice when those are there, too.

## **THE AUDIENCE**

Another important piece of the puzzle, the rhetorical situation, is figuring out who will be reading your paper. Who is your target audience? This can make a huge difference when it comes to both the style and the content of your paper. If I'm writing a piece about the Richard Thompson concert I saw last week (I wish), then what I write is partly determined by who my audience is. If I'm writing for a young audience, I might focus on reviewing not only the musical aspect of the concert but the general atmosphere, describing the "scene." My style would probably be casual and I might use a lingo or references familiar to a younger crowd. But if I'm writing for the *Wall Street Journal*, I might go for more of a business angle. What kind of profit has the tour produced? How are Thompson's records selling? And my style would be more objective, certainly no slang. On the other hand, if I'm writing for *Acoustic Guitar* (a monthly magazine), I might focus on the instruments Thompson is currently playing—the types of guitars, their unique sound—or I might focus on his playing style, or his style through the years. If I'm writing for the *ASCAP Newsletter* (representing songwriter's union), I might discuss Thompson's new record label (supposing he had one) or his recording contract, his publishing rights or royalties, whether he's been a successful act over the years or recently.

## **THE PURPOSE**

Any time you sit down to produce a piece of writing, you have to ask (1) who am I in this piece, (2) who am I writing to, and (3) what is nature of my message—what am I trying to accomplish by communicating this message? In other words, what is my purpose—am I trying to be expressive, objective, or persuasive?

# WRITING WITH AN EXPRESSIVE PURPOSE

If you have an expressive purpose you want to reveal or share something about yourself. You are inviting the reader into your heart and mind to share in your thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and experiences. If you chose to approach the topic of “freedom” with an expressive purpose, you may have tried to describe your feelings about this word—what it means to you personally. Or you may have remembered an event or a person that helped you define your concept of freedom. If your purpose was expressive, your overriding mission was get yourself and your experiences—your feelings and attitudes—onto that paper. You may have felt like you were trying to bare your soul, more or less. And though you may have wondered if in the end it would be interesting to readers who don’t know you well, you did it anyway, with a hope that this reader might be able to relate to the feelings, thoughts, and experiences you described. When you write expressively there’s always a hope involved; you hope that reading about your experiences will be beneficial to your readers in some way. Maybe there’s a lesson you’ve learned, an insight you’ve had, a unique way of looking at the world you want to share, a quirky but engaging perspective this experience has given you. Maybe you have a desire to influence others in some way by relating your experience, but you don’t want to argue or persuade.

If you had an expressive purpose for the “freedom” assignment, You may have written something like:

- Freedom came like a whirlwind that year when I met Jim.
- Nance seemed to be pretty disappointed that I wasn’t just like her. Even though we were roommates, I could tell we’d never be friends. More than ever, I realized I needed the freedom to live in my own space.
- Learning to ride a bike was probably my first taste of the joyous kind of freedom that comes when we break through long standing boundaries.

All of these topics invite personal, expressive stories that come from the writer’s recent or remembered experience. These topics are ready to be recalled and related into vivid, descriptive, engaging prose that readers can consume with interest because they are human, too. You may write something they can relate to, and that they appreciate hearing from another person. You may be the one to give voice to a feeling someone previously had trouble articulating.

The rhetorical strategies you use to develop expressive essays tend to be description and narration, because both help readers see things the way you see them and share your experiences. The style that’s usually appropriate for expressive writing is the “1st person” (I, me, my, myself, etc.) because you *want* the reader to focus on you. The first person point of view helps you achieve that.

Here’s a simple example to show how point of view can subtly shift a reader’s attention. Consider the difference between these two statements:

- [1] I thought his speech was horrible.
- [2] His speech was horrible.

[1] In the first statement, the 1st person point of view, or the “subjective style,” places the emphasis on what the *writer* thinks, and no justification is really necessary; the reader is probably willing to extend the benefit of the doubt because everyone’s entitled to an opinion, and expressive essays are all about sharing opinions, thoughts, feelings, experiences, etc.

[2] In the second statement, the third person point of view, or the “objective style” places the emphasis is on the speech, and if the writer doesn’t provide justification, the reader is bound to lose patience with the writer who just likes to mouth off opinions that sound objective without backing them up. So the writer has to EXPLAIN—the speech was horrible BECAUSE it went on too long, was composed of cliché after tired cliché, was full of empty, undeliverable promises, and seemed targeted at people who aren’t intelligent enough to ask simple, critical questions, like, “If you are pro-education, why have you consistently voted to lower the budget for educational programs that might help bring experienced teachers to inner-city schools?” So this 3rd person point of view, this “objective style,” which requires us to EXPLAIN, to provide explanatory detail, is more appropriate for an objective purpose.

# WRITING WITH AN OBJECTIVE PURPOSE

When you write with an objective purpose, you are usually trying to *explain, analyze, inform,* or objectively *interpret* something (you can subjectively, or expressively, interpret things, as well). If you had decided on an objective purpose for the “freedom” assignment, you might have arrived at a topic like one of these:

- Conformity is a prison; freedom is the frontier.
- Freedom is the natural state of humanity, and any government which constrains this natural freedom is dehumanizing and unjust.

These topics invite the reader to follow along as the writer *explains* what is meant by the idea expressed. The paper will likely stay focused on the ideas discussed, and rarely, if ever, get personal.

Other objective kinds of topics that “explain” might be:

- What does moral freedom mean?
- What is the value of freedom to a slave?

Another objective purpose is to *inform*. Consider this topic:

- The existentialists believe that external value systems (organized religion, secular ethics, etc.) are inherently arbitrary and therefore meaningless; they argue that the only way to cope with the terrifying prospect of complete moral freedom is for individuals to define and assume their own code of responsibility.

Another objective purpose is to *interpret*:

- Freedom, like the song says, is “just another word for nothin’ left to lose.” To be free is to be free of all constraint, including moral constraint.

In each case, you are maintaining some objective distance from your topic, and the purpose of your writing has shifted from expressive to expository—from writing that’s focused on you, the writer, to writing that’s focused on ideas, subject matter. Notice the absence of 1st person references in these examples. They are all written in the 3rd person to keep attention on the subject matter and not on the writer.

Several developmental strategies in addition to narration and description can help you develop objective, expository content in your writing. They are fully explained in *The Bedford Guide* (chapter 18, pp. 304-322):

- Illustration—use examples
- Comparison/Contrast—discuss similarities and/or differences
- Classification/Division—break down your topic into categories, kinds, or types
- Definition—discuss the meaning of a term (usually abstract ones that are open to individual interpretation)
- Cause and Effect Analysis—discuss causes or reasons and consequences or results
- Process Analysis—discuss the steps involved in reaching a goal
- Analogy—create an extended comparison (i.e. “Freedom is a frontier—it’s exciting, boundless, full of surprises, and challenging. It’ll rough you up sometimes, but it’s all worth it.)

# WRITING WITH A PERSUASIVE PURPOSE

When you write with a persuasive purpose you're trying to convince your readers to change their minds about something. You may even be trying to get them to act in a way they wouldn't have before. Sometimes it's not enough to simply express or explain your point of view—you want to change somebody's mind or their behavior. Both of these goals may be very difficult to reach. Just try to think of the last time you convinced someone that you were right in a disagreement. Wasn't it hard? Parents fight this good fight all the time, trying to convince their children to listen to them. Only tyrants, abandoning right for might or crass manipulation, fail to struggle with the need to be persuasive, with the need to convince through logic and reasoning.

Persuasion is a powerful life skill. And when you think about it, you're bombarded with persuasive messages every day in the form of advertisements. Politicians advertise themselves. Buy me, vote for me. It's an endless mantra in America. Which are the ads that break through? Which are the ones that actually persuade us in some way? The ones that least annoy you? The ones that seem to speak to you personally? The ones that entertain your libido? Chances are that your reasons for being persuaded by an advertisement have very little to do with logical reasoning or evidence! Because that's not what an ad tries to do. Ads persuade us by making us *feel*, not think, a certain way; they work to suspend our critical thinking. We sometimes oblige by checking our brains at the front of the set. The whole process is irrational and manipulative, and sometimes very degrading. Yet we have learned to live with this kind of mindless persuasion every day, because advertising drives our entire economy.

The better news is that as Americans we also live in a free (supposedly), democratic (supposedly) society in which issues can be and are (sometimes) debated, and rational arguments are put forth by responsible people who have the public interest in mind. And it's the citizen's duty to consider these arguments and decide which is the more rational and sane, which has the stronger logical stance, and the most compelling evidence. The citizen has the last say on the wisest course of action; we speak with our votes.

If you can understand an argument, if you can recognize when you ought to be persuaded and when you ought not be persuaded, then you can construct one as well. Or perhaps it's the learning to construct a sound argument that best teaches you how to recognize one.

In either case, when you write persuasively, you are attempting to blend the expository mode (explaining, informing, analyzing, interpreting) with an argumentative strategy—stating your claim, defending it with logical reasoning and various kinds of evidence, anticipating counterarguments and refuting them. You are always focused on readers who disagree with you, trying to find convincing evidence that will persuade them to change their minds, trying to ease them down a new road with a logical line of reasoning.

An argumentative topic based on the “freedom” assignment may have sounded something like this:

- Freedom is every living person's birthright.
- American citizens today are too quick to trade in their liberties in the name of law and order, seeking a sense of security that can't be legislated.

These topics are each debatable in some way. The writer tries to win the debate through logical reasoning and evidence, resorting to emotional appeals only as a supplement to sound reasoning, never as the main show.