

The Rhetorical Situation

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When you or I or anyone writes, this general idea is true: **you say something to someone for some purpose.** With very few exceptions, people write to communicate, and they write for a reason. Writing does not happen in a vacuum or bubble; our writing is constantly motivated and influenced by what we wish to accomplish, with whom we wish to communicate, and what is happening in the world around us:

- I write a shopping list for myself so I can remember what to buy at the store.
- A presidential candidate makes a speech about the economy in Minneapolis to persuade voters to vote for her.
- You write an e-mail about your lack of funds to your rich uncle so he'll give you money.
- You write an essay about kinship in a particular South American indigenous people group to your Anthropology professor to demonstrate your learning and to make a good grade.

Rhetoric is the study of language as social action; that is, closely examining the specific methods by which writers try to persuade others to think, do, or feel something. This is important work, because in many situations language is often the only way we have to make change in the world. An employee at a corporation, for example, can't simply decide she's going to be paid more money. Instead, she needs to express her reasons and persuade her supervisors that she is a valuable member of the business and should be better compensated. She needs to communicate well **in order to** get a pay raise.

When you are analyzing a piece of writing, it helps to understand the **rhetorical situation**, or the situation in which that writing is produced. It's a more academic way of thinking about the "5 W's" of journalism (who, what, when, where, and why):

- *Speaker:* Who is the writer? How does the writer establish credibility?
- *Text:* What is the substance of the message itself? What is it trying to tell us or make us believe?
- *Audience:* What audience does the writer have in mind? How does the writer pay attention to readers?
- *Purpose:* What is the point of delivering the message? To teach? To delight? To persuade? To move an audience to action?
- *Context:* To what is the speaker responding? What time? What place?

It's also important to keep in mind that there's more than one way to think about all these components. For example, the *audiences* can be multiple — a particular person *and* a group of people, or the *purposes* can be multiple as well — to teach, to delight, and to persuade.

