

# Elements of Rhetoric

A key component of rhetorical analysis involves thinking carefully about the “rhetorical situation” of a text. You can think of the rhetorical situation as the context or set of circumstances out of which a text arises. Any time anyone is trying to make an argument, one is doing so out of a particular context, one that influences and shapes the argument that is made. When we do a rhetorical analysis, we look carefully at how the rhetorical situation (context) shapes the rhetorical act (the text).

We can understand the concept of a rhetorical situation if we examine it piece by piece, by looking carefully at the rhetorical concepts from which it is built. The philosopher Aristotle organized these concepts as author, audience, setting, purpose, and text. Answering the questions about these rhetorical concepts below will give you a good sense of your text’s rhetorical situation – the starting point for rhetorical analysis.

We will use the example of President Trump’s inaugural address (the text) to sift through these questions about the rhetorical situation (context).

## Author

The “author” of a text is the creator – the person who is communicating in order to try to effect a change in his or her audience. An author doesn’t have to be a single person or a person at all – an author could be an organization. To understand the rhetorical situation of a text, one must examine the identity of the author and his or her background.

- What kind of experience or authority does the author have in the subject about which he or she is speaking?
- What values does the author have, either in general or with regard to this particular subject?
- How invested is the author in the topic of the text? In other words, what affects the author’s perspective on the topic?
- *Example of author analysis for the rhetorical situation: (President Trump’s Inaugural Address) President Trump was a first-term president and someone who had not previously held political office. He did not yet have experience with running the country. He is, however, a wealthy businessman and had a great deal of experience in the business world. His political affiliation is with the Republican Party – the conservative political party in America.*

## Audience

In any text, an author is attempting to engage an audience. Before we can analyze how effectively an author engages an audience, we must spend some time thinking about that audience. An audience is any person or group who is the intended recipient of

the text and also the person/people the author is trying to influence. To understand the rhetorical situation of a text, one must examine who the intended audience is by thinking about these things:

- Who is the author addressing?
  - Sometimes this is the hardest question of all. We can get this information of “who is the author addressing” by looking at where an article is published. Be sure to pay attention to the newspaper, magazine, website, or journal title where the text is published. Often, you can research that publication to get a good sense of who reads that publication.
- What is the audience’s demographic information (age, gender, etc.)?
- What is/are the background, values, and interests of the intended audience?
- How open is this intended audience to the author?
- What assumptions might the audience make about the author?
- In what context is the audience receiving the text?
- *Example of audience analysis for the rhetorical situation: (President Trump’s Inaugural Address) Inaugural addresses are delivered to “the American people”; one can assume that all Americans are the intended audience. However, Americans were divided at the moment of President Trump’s election, with some voters very happy that he was elected and others upset by it. Those opinions tended to split along party lines: Republicans tended to support Trump, whereas Democrats were critical of him. Republicans may be making the assumption that President Trump would be a great leader; Democrats were likely making the assumption that he would be a bad leader. As a candidate, President Trump (like all political candidates) spent most of his time in speeches trying to rally his base of supporters (his audience – Republican voters). In the inaugural address, he knows that his intended audience, his Republican base, is watching and listening with support. But there may be others who are watching his speech who are not a part of the intended audience, and as president, he likely wishes to engage and to reach out to even the Democrats who rejected him.*

## Setting

Nothing happens in a vacuum, and that includes the creation of any text. Essays, speeches, photos, political ads – any text – was written in a specific time and/or place, all of which can affect the way the text communicates its message. To understand the rhetorical situation of a text, we can identify the particular occasion or event that prompted the text’s creation at the particular time it was created.

- Was there a debate about the topic that the author of the text addresses? If so, what are (or were) the various perspectives within that debate?
- Did something specific occur that motivated the author to speak out?
- *Example of setting analysis for the rhetorical situation: (President Trump’s Inaugural Address): The occasion of President Trump giving this speech is his*

*election to the presidency. All presidents are expected to give a speech at their inauguration, therefore, the newly elected President Trump was required to give one.*

## Purpose

The purpose of a text blends the author with the setting and the audience. Looking at a text's purpose means looking at the author's motivations for creating it. The author has decided to start a conversation or join one that is already underway. Why has he or she decided to join in? In any text, the author may be trying to inform, to convince, to define, to announce, or to activate. Can you tell which one of those general purposes your author has?

- What is the author hoping to achieve with this text?
- Why did the author decide to join the “conversation” about the topic?
- What does the author want from their audience? What does the author want the audience to do once the text is communicated?
- *Example of purpose analysis for the rhetorical situation: (President Trump's Inaugural Address): President Trump's purpose in the inaugural address was to set the tone for his presidency, to share his vision with Americans, and to attempt to unite the country and prepare it for moving forward with his agenda.*

## Text

In what format or medium is the text being made: image? written essay? speech? song? protest sign? meme? sculpture?

- What is gained by having a text composed in a particular format/medium?
- What limitations does that format/medium have?
- What opportunities for expression does that format/medium have (that perhaps other formats do not have?)
- *Example of text analysis for the rhetorical situation: (President Trump's Inaugural Address) Inaugural addresses are expected for each president. They are delivered in Washington DC – always in the same spot. The tone is formal. Inaugural addresses generally lay out a vision for the incoming president's term.*

### A Note about Audience:

## What is the Difference between an Audience and a Reader?

Thinking about audience can be a bit tricky. Your audience is the person or group that you intend to reach with your writing. We sometimes call this the intended audience – the group of people to whom a text is intentionally directed. But any text likely also has an unintended audience, a reader (or readers) who read it even

without being the intended recipient. The reader might be the person you have in mind as you write, the audience you're trying to reach, but they might be some random person you've never thought of a day in your life. You can't always know much about random readers, but you should have some understanding of who your audience is. It's the audience that you want to focus on as you shape your message.