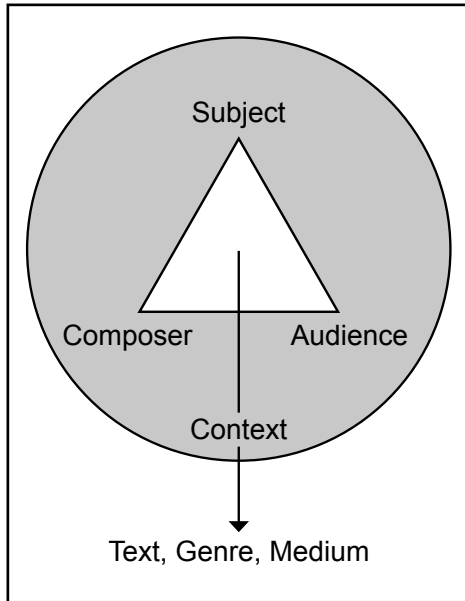


Rhetorical Situation



Definition

Some might say that the rhetorical situation, an expression coined by Lloyd Bitzer, is the most important concept in writing.

According to Bitzer, all writing occurs within a rhetorical situation, and every rhetorical situation has three components.

First, a rhetorical situation includes what he calls an “exigence,” or occasion for writing. More specifically, such an occasion carries with it both a sense of urgency and a promise that through writing, a composer can make a change to that situation.

Second (and while it may seem obvious), a rhetorical situation includes an audience that can be influenced by or react to the writing.

Third, a rhetorical situation by definition has constraints, and they come in two forms. An author may bring certain constraints to the writing: for example, certain beliefs that influence how the author understands a given issue. Likewise, there are constraints associated with the situation itself: for instance, the frame of mind of the audience or the environment in which they hear or read a text. Both of these constraints are part of the rhetorical situation because they can influence the audience’s response and the writer’s potential to make change.

Importance in the Field

Although scholars disagree on which comes first—the writing or the rhetorical situation—they agree that effective writers use the concept of the rhetorical situation throughout their composing processes. They use it as a way to frame a writing task, for example. And they use it as they compose, to be sure that their writing keeps its intended focus.

In sum, the rhetorical situation is the situation in which we all write—be it a text message, a resume, a research project, or a poster.

Resources

Atwill, Janet. “The Rhetorical Situation as a Site of Critique and Invention.” Annual Convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. San Antonio. March 2004. Presentation.

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Vatz, Richard E. “The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation.” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 6.3 (1973): 154–161.

