Rhetoric and Multimodality

When we talk about “effective” or “successful” texts, we’re talking about rhetoric. Texts need to be created for a purpose, to persuade an audience toward change in some way; rhetoric is the study of making texts that effectively persuade an audience toward change. Echoing that old philosophical question—if a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?—if a text doesn’t induce change, then it isn’t rhetorically successful. Successful multimodal persuasion is what this book is about.

You’re probably familiar with some forms of persuading others to take action in favor of an author’s viewpoint, such as when an advertisement tries to persuade us to choose a particular political candidate, a new summer outfit, a different brand of toothpaste, a recycling option, or a party to attend. Sometimes this change is more subtle and the action is less explicit, such as when we read a novel to better understand the human condition (or simply to relax), or—as in the Recovery.gov example in the previous chapter—when we explore a government Web site to learn more about how our taxes are spent and who they benefit.

As readers, we can choose whether to act based on how effectively a text persuades us. Let’s think about a musical example. While a musician probably has many hopes for a song—that it speaks to people and is artistically meaningful, for example—one hope is that listeners will enjoy the song enough to purchase it. Whether listeners buy it depends on a lot of things: whether they like the song’s lyrics, whether the song speaks to them in some way, whether they have the money, what format the song is available in, what technology they have for listening to the song, etc. The song’s author had to think through all of these possibilities when creating and distributing the song. In the end, the author has created a text that asks readers to make a choice. A particular listener’s choice may be to do nothing (not to listen to or buy the song), but that’s still a choice.

Our reactions typically depend on how well an author is able to address the rhetorical situation. The rhetorical situation is the set of circumstances in which an author creates a text. Authors have to pay attention to four factors: their intended audience, their purpose for communicating, the context in which their text will be read, and the genre they choose for their text if they want to be effective communicators.
Rhetorical Analysis

Understanding the situation in which an author composed a text can help us better understand a text’s meaning and make judgments about its effectiveness. Who was the author? Why did he or she compose this text? When and where was it composed? Whom did the author want to reach? Why is the text in this particular form? Thinking through the rhetorical situation like this is called rhetorical analysis. A **rhetorical analysis** is a method of describing the context in which an author wants to communicate his or her purpose or call for action to the intended audience in a genre. Below, we offer the five areas to address—audience, purpose, context, author, and genre—and offer some questions to consider when performing a rhetorical analysis.

![Figure 2.2 A Parody Video for Rhetorical Analysis](image)

Cheryl decided to parody (right) Psy’s “Gangnam Style” video (genre, left) for her friend’s (audience) birthday (context) because her friend’s last name sounds similar to Gangnam (purpose).

**Audience**

The audience is the intended readership for a text. There may be more than one intended audience, and there may also be more than one actual audience. Consider a pop-country song playing over the sound system at a mall. The songwriter’s intended audience is likely
pop-country fans, and her secondary audience may be country or pop-music fans. Yet, in this context, the actual audience is anyone who happens to hear it.

In a rhetorical analysis, your job is to pay attention to the intended primary and secondary audiences. While it is not necessarily your job to consider how the text will function if read by those outside the intended audience, doing so can sometimes be illuminating.

When analyzing audience, consider these questions:

- Who is the intended audience?
- Who might be the secondary audience(s)?
- What values or opinions do the primary and secondary audiences hold? Does the author appeal to these values or opinions in any way?

Figure 2.3 ix: visualizing composition: Audience

Work through this interactive discussion for more practice with audience. Visit bedfordstmartins.com/writerdesigner to complete this tutorial.

Purpose

Describing a text’s purpose may sound somewhat simplistic, yet it is important to consider a range of possible intentions—while there may be a large-scale purpose, there often are also secondary purposes. For example, a billboard for a local steakhouse has the primary purpose of attracting new clientele, but it may have the secondary purpose of solidifying existing customers’ opinion of the restaurant as a fun-loving family establishment.
When analyzing purpose, consider these questions:

- What do you consider to be the overall intention for the text? What leads you to this conclusion?
- Might there be one or more secondary intentions? Why do you think so?

![Image](Cheryl E. Ball, Rhetoric and Technical Communication, Michigan Technological University. ceball@mtu.edu. http://www.human.mtu.edu/~cebball)

**Figure 2.4** *ix: visualizing composition: Purpose*

Work through this interactive discussion for more practice with *purpose*. Visit [bedfordstmartins.com/writerdesigner](http://bedfordstmartins.com/writerdesigner) to complete this tutorial.

**Context**

Context can be quite broad, though it generally refers to additional information about a text, such as where the text is located (in an academic journal at a library, for example, or in the advertising section of a free weekly), how it is meant to be read (while sitting at a desk with one's full attention on the pages, or at a quick glance while flipping through a newspaper), or what surrounds it (similar academic journal articles, other advertisements, an article about dining in Seattle).

When analyzing context, consider these questions:

- What is the medium (print, CD, app, the Web, video, etc.)? Why do you think the author chose this particular medium over another one?
- Where did you find the text? What was the publication venue (book, newspaper, album, television, etc.)?
- What were the historical conventions for this type of text? What materials, media, or publishing venues were available at the time?
- What are the social and cultural connotations within the text? What colors, pictures, or phrases are used? What technologies does the text use?
- How will readers interact with this text? Will they read it on their phone or tablet while walking down the street? on a desktop computer in a public library? on a laptop in their backyard?

**Figure 2.5 ix: visualizing composition: Context**

Work through this interactive discussion for more practice with context. Visit bedfordstmartins.com/writerdesigner to complete this tutorial.

**Author**

Sometimes authorship will be quite clear—say, in the case of a signed letter to the editor—whereas at other times you will have to make an informed guess and rely on the implied author. Consider, for example, a newspaper advertisement for Starbucks. A team of graphic designers (the actual author) composed it, yet the audience assumes Starbucks (the implied author) is the one sending the message. There are other texts, such as a flyer for a concert, for which you likely will have no idea who the actual author is, but you can probably say a lot about the implied author based on the design of the text.
When analyzing authorship, consider these questions:

- How does the author (implied or actual) establish personal credibility? Do you trust this source? Does it matter?
- How does the author (implied or actual) come across?
- Does the author (implied or actual) have a certain reputation? Does the text work to support this reputation, or does it work to alter this reputation?
- If you know who the actual author is, can you find any historical or biographical information that will help you understand his or her credibility, character, and reputation?

**Figure 2.6 Wikipedia Home Page**

Wikipedia is renowned for its multiply authored and edited encyclopedic entries.

---

**Genre**

You’ve probably heard the term *genre* used to talk about static categories of texts in broad terms (sometimes related to the medium of a text), such as newspapers, albums, or movies, or in more specific terms—horror movies, romantic comedies, Westerns, and so on. Generally speaking, audiences expect something from newspapers that they do not expect from movies, and they expect something from horror movies that they do not expect from romantic
comedies. This traditional understanding of genre helps us recognize how to group similar texts and understand their communicative purpose.

However, genres aren’t just static categories; they can morph according to the local culture, the historical time period, the author of the text, the audience for the text, and many other influences. Think about the two maps we looked at in Chapter 1 and how different they are. Yet we’re still able to recognize them both as maps, even though the genre conventions for an interactive online map and a print map may differ slightly. Genres are dynamic, but most genres have formal features that tend to remain the same in each use. These features are the genre conventions, or audience expectations, in the text. (We’ll talk more about genre and genre conventions in Chapter 3.)

When analyzing genre, consider these questions:

- How might you define the genre of the text? Consider both a broad definition and a more specific definition.
- In what ways is the text similar to other texts within this genre?
- What key features make it part of the genre you’ve identified?

**Is There a Right Answer?**

You may never know everything there is to know about the author’s intended purpose or audience. Additionally, there isn’t always (or ever) a “right” answer when analyzing a text. What we can do is learn how to analyze texts so that we can better guess, hypothesize, or even create a theory about how a text works and why.

Rhetorical analyses can result in texts of their own (such as papers, presentations, or multimodal projects), but they can also function as research for your own projects. If you can analyze how a text works, you can often apply that understanding to the design of your own text.

Now that we’ve described the types of questions to consider when performing a rhetorical analysis, we’re going to put these terms to action by analyzing the home page of the Washington State University Web site. This analysis can help illuminate how particular design choices are made in particular situations. Our goal is to figure out what types of design choices were used by the author to effectively convey the text’s purpose to the audience. To achieve this goal, we also need to understand a bit about the genre and context for this particular text.