

8.

BACKPACKS VS. BRIEFCASES

Learning Objectives

- Explain what the rhetorical situation is
- Analyze the rhetorical situation of a specific argument

First Impressions

Imagine the first day of class in first-year composition at your university. The moment your instructor walked into the room, you likely began analyzing them and making assumptions about what kind of teacher they will be. You might have noticed what kind of bag they are carrying—a tattered leather satchel? A hot-pink polka-dotted backpack? A burgundy briefcase? You probably also noticed what they are wearing—trendy slacks and an untucked striped shirt? A suit? Jeans and a T-shirt?

It is likely that the above observations were only a few you made. You might have also noticed your instructor's shoes, their jewelry or tattoos, whether they wear a wedding ring, how their hair is styled, whether they stand tall or slump, how quickly they walk, or maybe even if their nails are done. If you don't tend to notice any of these things about your instructors, you certainly do about the people around you—students you are assigned to work with in groups, your work colleagues, or a prospective date. For most of us, many of the people we encounter on a given day are subject to this kind of quick analysis.

Now as you performed this kind of analysis, you likely didn't walk through each of these questions one by one, write out the answer, and add up the responses to see what kind of person you are interacting with. Instead, you quickly took in the information and made an informed—and likely somewhat accurate—decision about that person. Over the years, as you have interacted with others, you have built a mental database that you can draw on to make conclusions about what a person's looks tell you about their personality. You have

become able to analyze quickly what people are saying about themselves through the way they choose to dress, accessorize, or wear their hair.

We have, of course, heard that you “can’t judge a book by its cover,” but, in fact, we do it all the time. Daily, we find ourselves in situations where we are forced to make snap judgments. Each day, we meet different people, encounter unfamiliar situations, and see different kinds of media that ask us to do, think, buy, and act in all sorts of ways. In fact, our saturation in media and the images it presents is one of the reasons why learning to do rhetorical analysis is so important. The more we know about how to analyze situations and draw informed conclusions, the better we can become about making savvy judgments about the people, situations, and media we encounter.

Implications of Rhetorical Analysis

Media is one of the most important places where this kind of analysis needs to happen. Rhetoric—the way we use language and images to persuade—is what makes media work. Think of all the media you see and hear every day: Twitter, television shows, web pages, billboards, text messages, podcasts. Even as you read this chapter, more ways to get those messages to you quickly and in a persuasive manner are being developed. Media is constantly asking you to buy something, act in some way, believe something to be true, or interact with others in a specific manner. Understanding rhetorical messages is essential to help us become informed consumers, but it also helps us evaluate the ethics of messages, how they affect us personally, and how they affect society.

Take, for example, a commercial for men’s deodorant that tells you that you’ll be irresistible to women if you use this product. This campaign doesn’t just ask you to buy the product, though. It also asks you to trust the company’s credibility, or ethos, and to believe the messages they send about how men and women interact, about sexuality, and about what constitutes a healthy body. You have to decide whether you will choose to buy the product and how you will choose to respond to the messages that the commercial sends.

Or, in another situation, a Facebook group asks you to support health care reform. The rhetoric in this group uses people’s stories of their struggles to obtain affordable health care. These stories, which are often heart wrenching, use emotion to persuade you—also called pathos. You are asked to believe that health care reform is necessary and urgent, and you are asked to act on these beliefs by calling your congresspersons and asking them to support the reforms as well.

Because media rhetoric surrounds us, it is important to understand how rhetoric works. If we refuse to stop and think about how and why it persuades us, we can become mindless consumers who buy into arguments about what makes us value ourselves and what makes us happy. For example, research has shown that only 2% of women consider themselves beautiful (“Campaign”), which has been linked to the way that the fashion industry defines beauty. We are also told by the media that buying more stuff can make us happy, but historical surveys show that US happiness peaked in the 1950s, when people saw as many advertisements in their lifetime as the average American sees in one year (Leonard).

Our worlds are full of these kinds of social influences. As we interact with other people and with media, we are continually creating and interpreting rhetoric. In the same way that you decide how to process, analyze, or ignore these messages, you create them. You probably think about what your clothing will communicate as you go to a job interview or get ready for a date. You are also using rhetoric when you try to persuade your parents to send you money or your friends to see the movie that interests you. When you post to your blog or tweet something, you are using rhetoric.

In fact, according to rhetorician Kenneth Burke, rhetoric is everywhere: “Wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric. And wherever there is ‘meaning,’ there is ‘persuasion.’ Food eaten and digested is not rhetoric. But in the meaning of food, there is much rhetoric, the meaning being persuasive enough for the idea of food to be used, like the ideas of religion, as a rhetorical device of statesmen” (71–72). In other words, most of our actions are persuasive in nature. What we choose to wear (tennis shoes vs. flip-flops), where we shop (Whole Foods Market vs. Wal-Mart), what we eat (organic vs. fast food), or even the way we send information (snail mail vs. text message) can work to persuade others.

Chances are you have grown up learning to interpret and analyze these types of rhetoric. They become so commonplace that we don’t realize how often and how quickly we are able to perform this kind of rhetorical analysis. When your teacher walked in on the first day of class, you probably didn’t think to yourself, “I think I’ll do some rhetorical analysis on her clothing and draw some conclusions about what kind of personality she might have and whether I think I’ll like her.” And yet you probably were able to come up with some conclusions based on the evidence you had.

However, when this same teacher hands you an advertisement, photograph, or article and asks you to write a rhetorical analysis of it, you might have been baffled or felt a little overwhelmed. The good news is that many of the analytical processes that you already use to interpret the rhetoric around you are the same ones that you’ll use for these assignments.

The Rhetorical Situation; or, Discerning Context

One of the first places to start is context. Rhetorical messages always occur in a specific situation or context. The president’s speech might respond to a specific global event, like an economic summit; that’s part of the context. You choose your clothing depending on where you are going or what you are doing; that’s context. A television commercial comes on during specific programs and at specific points of the day; that’s context. A billboard is placed in a specific part of the community; that’s context, too.

In an article called “The Rhetorical Situation,” Lloyd Bitzer argues that there are three parts to understanding the context of a rhetorical moment: exigence, audience, and constraints. Exigence is the circumstance or condition that invites a response; “imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be” (304). In other words, rhetorical discourse is usually responding to some kind of problem. You can begin to understand a piece’s exigence by

asking, “What is this rhetoric responding to? What might have happened to make the rhetor (the person who creates the rhetoric) respond in this way?” The exigence can be extremely complex, like the need for a new Supreme Court justice, or it can be much simpler, like receiving an email that asks you where you and your friends should go for your road trip this weekend. Understanding the exigence is important because it helps you begin to discover the purpose of the rhetoric. It helps you understand what the discourse is trying to accomplish.

Another part of the rhetorical context is the audience, those who are the (intended or unintended) recipients of the rhetorical message. The audience should be able to respond to the exigence. In other words, the audience should be able to help address the problem. You might be very frustrated with your campus’s requirement that all first-year students purchase a meal plan for on-campus dining. You might even send an email to a good friend back home voicing that frustration. However, if you want to address the exigence of the meal plans, the most appropriate audience would be the person/office on campus that oversees meal plans. Your friend back home cannot solve the problem (though she may be able to offer sympathy or give you some good suggestions); the person who can change the meal plan requirements is probably on campus. Rhetors make all sorts of choices based on their audience. Audience can determine the type of language used, the formality of the discourse, the medium or delivery of the rhetoric, and even the types of reasons used to make the rhetor’s argument. Understanding the audience helps you begin to see and understand the rhetorical moves that the rhetor makes.

The last piece of the rhetorical situation is the constraints. The constraints of the rhetorical situation are those things that have the power to “constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence” (Bitzer 306). Constraints have a lot to do with how the rhetoric is presented. Constraints can be “beliefs, attitudes, documents, facts, traditions, images, interests, motives” (306). Constraints limit the way the discourse is delivered or communicated. Constraints may be something as simple as your instructor limiting your proposal to one thousand words or something far more complex like the kinds of language you need to use to persuade a certain community.

So how do you apply this to a piece of rhetoric? Let’s say you are flipping through a magazine, and you come across an advertisement that has a large headline that reads, “Why Some People Say ‘D’OH’ When You Say ‘Homer.’” This ad is an Ad Council public service announcement (PSA) to promote arts education and is sponsored by Americans for the Arts and the National Association of Music Merchants, the trade association of the international music products industry. Since you want to understand more about what this ad means and what it wants you to believe or do, you begin to think about the rhetorical situation. You first might ask, “What is the ad responding to? What problem does it hope to address?” That’s the exigence. In this case, the exigence is the cutting of arts funding and children’s lack of exposure to the arts. According to the Ad Council’s website, “The average kid is provided insufficient time to learn and experience the arts. This PSA campaign was created to increase involvement in championing arts education both in and out of school.” The PSA is responding directly to the fact that kids are not getting enough arts education.

Then you might begin to think about to whom the Ad Council targeted the ad. Unless you’re a parent, you

are probably not the primary audience. If you continued reading the text of the ad, you'd notice that there is information to persuade parents that the arts are helpful to their children and to let them know how to help their children become more involved with the arts. The ad tells parents that “the experience will for sure do more than entertain them. It'll build their capacity to learn more. In fact, the more art kids get, the smarter they become in subjects like math and science. And that's reason enough to make a parent say, 'D'oh!,' For Ten Simple Ways to instill art in your kids' lives visit AmericansForTheArts.org” (“Why”). Throughout the text of the ad, parents are told both what to believe about arts education and how to act in response to the belief.

There also might be a secondary audience for this ad—people who are not the main audience of the ad but might also be able to respond to the exigence. For example, philanthropists who could raise money for arts education or legislators who might pass laws for arts funding or to require arts education in public schools could also be intended audiences for this ad.

Finally, you might want to think about the constraints or the limitations on the ad. Sometimes these are harder to get at, but we can guess a few things. One constraint might be the cost of the ad. Different magazines charge differently for ad space as well as placement within the magazine, so the Ad Council could have been constrained by how much money they wanted to spend to circulate the ad. The ad is also only one page long, so there might have been a limitation on the amount of space for the ad.

Instead of using the terms exigence, audience, and constraints, some professors may use the terms purpose, audience, and occasion, which mean essentially the same thing. To analyze, you consider why the argument is being made (purpose/exigence), to whom it is directed (audience), and what other factors influence it (occasion/constraints). A TED Talk, for example, is a lecture given to an audience of educated people who have chosen to attend the lecture. The purpose of TED Talks is to entertain and educate to an audience of people who are likely to be receptive to what the speaker is saying but who will nonetheless expect the speaker to provide convincing evidence. The occasion also creates expectations and limitations: a TED Talker must be engaging and can speak only for a certain amount of time. The audience won't expect the speaker to provide extensive and dry evidence for the argument, nor will they expect to see formal citations of previous research in a TED Talk.

Another way to analyze is to think about the “rhetorical triangle,” which consists of writer, reader, and purpose. An analysis using the rhetorical triangle would ask similar questions about audience as one using the rhetorical situation, but it would also ask questions about the writer and the purpose of the document. Asking questions about the writer helps the reader determine whether she or he is credible and knowledgeable. For example, the Ad Council has been creating public service announcements since 1942 (“Loose lips sink ships,” anyone?) and is a nonprofit agency. They also document their credibility by showing the impact of their campaigns in several ways: “Destruction of our forests by wildfires has been reduced from 22 million acres to less than 8.4 million acres per year, since our Forest Fire Prevention campaign began” and “6,000 children were paired with a mentor in just the first 18 months of our mentoring campaign” (“About”). Based on this information, we can assume that the Ad Council is a credible rhetor, and whether or not we agree with the rhetoric they produce, we can probably assume it contains reliable information. Asking questions about the

next part of the rhetorical triangle, the purpose of a piece of rhetoric, helps you understand what the rhetor is trying to achieve through the discourse.

The rhetorical situation and rhetorical triangle are two ways to begin to understand how the rhetoric functions within the context you find it. The key idea is to understand that no rhetorical performance takes place in a vacuum. One of the first steps to understanding a piece of rhetoric is to look at the context in which it takes place. Whatever terminology you (or your instructor) choose, it is a good idea to start by locating your analysis within a rhetorical situation.

Implications of Rhetorical Analysis; or, Why Do This Stuff Anyway?

So you might be wondering, if you know how to do this analysis already—you can tell what kind of person someone is by their clothing or what a commercial wants you to buy without carefully listening to it—why do you need to know how to do more formal analysis? How does this matter outside a college classroom?

Well, first of all, much of the reading and learning in college requires some level of rhetorical analysis: as you read a textbook chapter to prepare for a quiz, it is helpful to be able to distill the main points quickly; when you read a journal article for a research paper, it is necessary to understand the scholar's thesis; when you watch a video in class, it is useful to be able to understand how the creator is trying to persuade you. But college is not the only place where an understanding of how rhetoric works is important. You will find yourself in many situations—from boardrooms to your children's classrooms or churches to city council meetings where you need to understand the heart of the arguments being presented.

Studying rhetoric can also help you develop your own skills. Just as a painter will study other painters to learn to paint, or a pianist will listen to successful pianists to learn how to play better, you'll study different texts to learn how to write arguments more effectively. Students often ask to see examples or models of what they're supposed to write. They hope that, by studying a successful essay, they can produce something similar. Most professors agree, but when they present models, they want students to analyze how the writing works; they don't want students to view the sample writing as a template—something to emulate closely. Good writing always requires that you consider your audience's needs, so when you study other texts as models, thinking about the rhetorical situation can help you develop a more sophisticated understanding of how to write.

One final example: in November 2000, Campbell's Soup Company launched a campaign to show that many of their soups were low in calories and showed prepubescent girls refusing to eat because they were "watching their weight." A very small organization called Dads and Daughters, a group that fights advertising that targets girls with negative body images, contacted Campbell's explaining the problems they saw in an ad that encouraged young girls to be self-conscious about their weight and asked Campbell's to pull the ad. A few days later, Campbell's vice president for marketing and corporate communications called. One of the dads said that "the Vice President acknowledged he had received their letter, reviewed the ad again, saw their point, and

was pulling the ad,” responding to a “couple of guys writing a letter” (“Media”). Individuals who understand rhetorical analysis and act to make change can have a tremendous influence on their world.

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Key Takeaways

- Understanding how arguments work requires understanding the rhetorical situation
- Analyzing how successful arguments work can improve your ability to persuade others