Rhetorical situation (especially genre)

ENG 108, Bradley Dilger, Fall 2014 ~ http://dtext.org/

Like many of the concepts we will use this semester (and hopefully beyond), above all rhetorical situation provides a framework for thinking about the contexts in which we write in a specific, structured manner. The concept goes back to the ancients, but was first named by Lloyd Bitzer in an essay with that title (*Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1, 1968). Since then many scholars have published works which take issue with support, critique, extend, revise, or otherwise engage it.

There are a wide variety of ways to define rhetorical situation; here's one based on the *Norton Field Guide to Writing* (3/e):

- **Purposes:** Why write? What are the primary and secondary reasons for writing? How are the elements of purpose related? What space and time constraints are present?

- **Audiences:** Who are we writing for? Do we know? Are there multiple audiences? Is the text directed toward one audience but also intended for others? How will the text move between or circulate among its audiences?

- **Genres:** What typical rhetorical moves are made with this text? In what ways is it persuasive? What other genres interact with this one? What specific, recurring contexts are these genres designed to engage and transform?

- **Stances:** What tones, attitudes, and approaches are embedded in the text? How does the text frame the issues, information, and other text it draws upon?

- **Media:** What specific technological frameworks will be used for the text? How are they constrained or flexible? How do they interact with others?

(If you compare these definitions to the *Field Guide,* you'll see I've made them plural.)

This semester, we are highlighting *genre* because of its particular importance for writing and the connections we can make to scholarship which uses genre for invention—the process of figuring out what you are going to write. For many researchers, more than any other element of rhetorical situation, genre also helps us consider, "How much control over this writing do I have? How and why is control shared with others?"

Writing researchers who work in rhetorical genre studies like to say that genres are *typified rhetorical ways of interacting within recurring situations.* Let's unpack each of those:

- **Typified:** genres are developed over time, through practice, and represent the consensus of groups of writers with shared interests and/or goals. They are never arbitrary, but designed for specific purposes, and shaped with those purposes in mind.

- **Rhetorical:** genres are built for persuasion—influencing the ways others think, and/or shaping their actions. This persuasiveness can take many forms, and it can be implicit or very direct.

- **Interacting:** genres are social. They arise from social action, and shape it too. Writers often shape genres in collaboration with other writers. Genres often work in concert with other genres.

- **Recurring situations:** genres are tied to specific contexts many people face again and again. Genres help people respond to those situations, often in a manner which causes profound change—sometimes to the person (we call this "learning"), sometimes to the genre (we call this "revision"), and sometimes to the situation (we call this "getting things done").

Note the circular or dialectical relationships here: genres shape the way we write, and the way we write shapes genres, both in individual situations (when we tweak an existing genre to meet our needs) and over time (as commonly accepted genre conventions or features change in response to repeated pressure from readers and writers). This can make genre hard to understand, and researchers are still developing techniques which allow us to understand how genres (and writing in general!) work in the communities in which they are engaged.

Ways to use rhetorical situation

- *In reading:* try to fill in the elements of the rhetorical situation as you read. Imagine what the writers were thinking about their tasks as they wrote.

- *As a heuristic:* filling in known elements of the rhetorical situation for a writing task can help you make decisions about unknowns.

- *To guide research:* seek information about discrete elements of the rhetorical situation and they ways they are related. What might appear to be background could be very important!

- *In revision:* ask readers to chart the rhetorical situation as they see it in your work—then compare their take on your writing with yours. If there are gaps, ask questions to figure out why, and discuss ways to move your work closer to their reading.

Further reading

For now … see more on our course web site before too long.

- For more in-depth from the *Field Guide,* see the copy I have on reserve at HSSE, or visit http://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/write/fieldguide/index.asp

- For an update on Bitzer, see Jenny Edbauer's "Unframing Models of Public Distribution"—look for it on Google Scholar or ask me for a copy. Edbauer suggests a more flexible and dynamic ecological approach which I think many contemporary rhetoric scholars have adopted, and she summarizes Bitzer too.

- We'll talk a lot more about genre, both in connection with Kerry Dirk's essay "Navigating Genres," Thomas Deans's engagement with it (see for example pp 60–64 and pp 125–133) and other texts. (Note also that Dirk takes up Bitzer in depth.)

- Clay Spinuzzi has written quite a bit about genre, and speaks of the methods he and many other scholars use as "writing and genre research" or WAGR (pronounced "wager"). See his blog for lots more: http://spinuzzi.blogspot.com/