

## 13.1: Rhetorical Situation

### Learning Objectives

1. Label and discuss the three main components of the rhetorical situation.

In the classical tradition, the art of public speaking is called rhetoric; the circumstances in which you give your speech or presentation are the rhetorical situation. By understanding the rhetorical situation, you can gauge the best ways to reach your listeners and get your points across. In so doing, you'll make the transition from your viewpoint to that of your audience members. Remember that without an audience to listen and respond to you, it's really not much of a speech. The audience gives you the space and time as a speaker to fulfill your role and, hopefully, their expectations. Just as a group makes a leader, an audience makes a speaker. By looking to your audience, you shift your attention from an internal focus (you) to an external (them/others) emphasis. This "other-orientation" is key to your success as an effective speaker.

Several of the first questions any audience member asks himself or herself are, "Why should I listen to you?" "What does what you are saying have to do with me?" and "How does this help me?" We communicate through the lens of personal experience and it's only natural that we would relate what others say to our own needs and wants, but by recognizing that we share in our humanity many of the same basic motivations, we can find common ground of mutual interest. Generating interest in your speech is only the first step as you guide perception through selection, organization, and interpretation of content and ways to communicate your point. Your understanding of the rhetorical situation will guide you as you plan how to employ various strategies to guide your listeners as they perceive and interpret your message. Your awareness of the overall process of building a speech will allow you to take it step by step and focus on the immediate task at hand.



Figure 13.1.1: The rhetorical situation involves where we are, who we are with, and why we are communicating. photolibrarian – Red Oak, Iowa, Courtroom, Judge Hayzlett – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

The rhetorical situation involves three elements: the set of expectations inherent in the context, audience, and the purpose of your speech or presentation (Kostelnick, C. and Roberts, D., 1998). This means you need to consider, in essence, the "who, what, where, when, why, and how" of your speech from the audience's perspective.

### Context

As we consider the rhetorical situation, we need to explore the concept in depth. Your speech is not given in a space that has no connection to the rest of the world. If you are going to be presenting a speech in class, your context will be the familiar space of your classroom. Other contexts might include a business conference room, a restaurant where you are the featured speaker for a dinner meeting, or a podium that has been set up outdoors for a sports award ceremony.

The time of your speech will relate to people's natural patterns of behavior. If you give a speech right after lunch, you can expect people to be a bit sleepy. Knowing this, you can take steps to counter this element of the context by making your presentation

especially dynamic, such as having your audience get up from their seats or calling on them to answer questions at various points in your speech.

You can also place your topic within the frame of reference of current events. If you are presenting a speech on the importance of access to health care for everyone, and you are presenting it in October of an election year, the current events that exist outside your speech may be used to enhance it. Your listeners might be very aware of the political climate, and relating your topic to a larger context may effectively take into consideration the circumstances in which your readers will use, apply, or contemplate your information.

## Audience

The receiver (i.e., listener or audience) is one of the basic components of communication. Without a receiver, the source (i.e., the speaker) has only himself or herself in which to send the message. By extension, without an audience you can't have a speech. Your audience comes to you with expectations, prior knowledge, and experience. They have a purpose that makes them part of the audience instead of outside playing golf. They have a wide range of characteristics like social class, gender, age, race and ethnicity, cultural background, and language that make them unique and diverse. What kind of audience will you be speaking to? What do you know about their expectations, prior knowledge or backgrounds, and how they plan to use your information? Giving attention to this aspect of the rhetorical situation will allow you to gain insight into how to craft your message before you present it.

## Purpose

A speech or oral presentation may be designed to inform, demonstrate, persuade, motivate, or even entertain. You may also overlap by design and both inform and persuade. The purpose of your speech is central to its formation. You should be able to state your purpose in one sentence or less, much like an effective thesis statement in an essay. You also need to consider alternate perspectives, as we've seen previously in this chapter. Your purpose may be to persuade, but the audience after lunch may want to be entertained, and your ability to adapt can make use of a little entertainment that leads to persuasion.

## Key Takeaway

The rhetorical situation has three components: the context, the audience, and the purpose of the speech.

## References

Kostelnick, C., & Roberts, D. (1998). *Designing visual language: Strategies for professional communicators*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

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