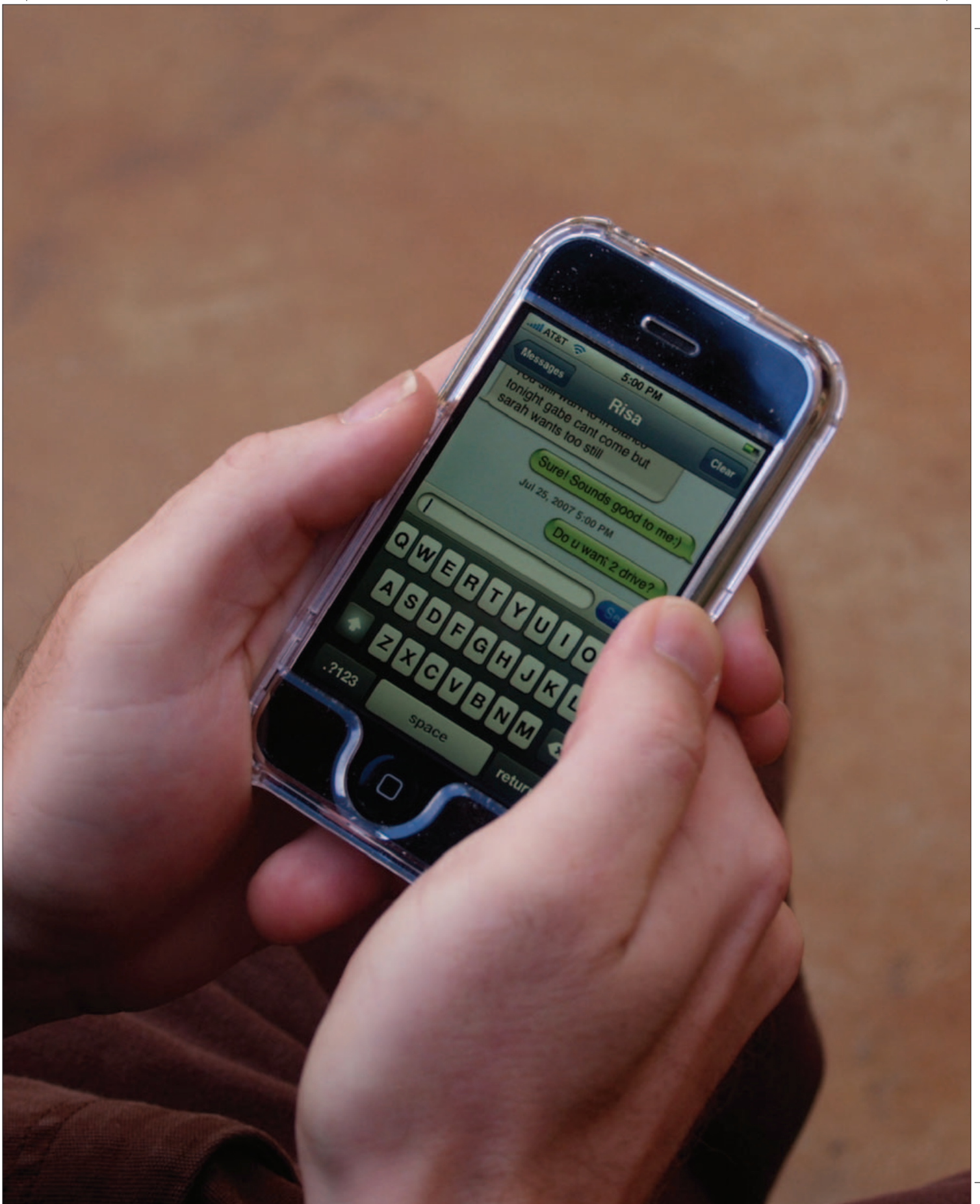


ENTERING THE CONVERSATION: THE RHETORICAL SITUATION

Too often, the word *rhetoric* refers to empty words, implying manipulation, deception, or persuasion at any cost. But as you'll learn in this book, rhetoric and rhetorical situations are not negative and not manipulative. They are everywhere—as pervasive as the air we breathe—and play an essential role in our daily life as we work to get things done efficiently and ethically. The following three chapters define rhetoric and the rhetorical situation and show you how such situations shape the writing process. You'll begin to develop your rhetorical skills as you work through these chapters, but you'll continue to sharpen them all through your college career and into the workplace. The important point to remember is this: you're probably already pretty good at using rhetoric. So let's build on what you know—and go from there.



UNDERSTANDING THE RHETORICAL SITUATION



Rhetoric Surrounds Us

Every day, you use rhetoric. You use it as you read course syllabi and assignments, the directions for hooking up your stereo system, and your mail, as well as emails, newsgroup postings, and instant messages. You also use it as you write: when you submit written assignments, answer quiz questions in class, leave notes for your roommate, and send text messages to your friends. Every day, you are surrounded by rhetoric and rhetorical opportunities. In fact, you've been participating in rhetorical situations for most of your life.

WRITE FOR FIVE

1. Take a few minutes to list the kinds of writing you do every day. Include all instances when you write down information (whether on paper, white board, chalk board, or computer screen). Beside each entry, jot down the reason for that type of writing. Be prepared to share your answers with the rest of the class.
2. Consider five of the types of writing you identified in the first activity. Who is your audience for these different kinds of writing? In other words, to whom or for whom are you writing? What is your purpose for each kind of writing? What do you hope to achieve?

The Purposeful Use of Language and Images

Rhetoric is the purposeful use of language and images. That definition covers a great deal of territory—practically every word and visual element you encounter any day. But it’s the word *purposeful* that will guide you through the maze of words and images that saturate your life. When you use words or images to achieve a specific purpose (such as explaining to your supervisor why you need next weekend off), you are speaking, writing, or conveying images rhetorically.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle coined an authoritative definition of *rhetoric* over 2,500 years ago: “rhetoric is the faculty of observing in any given situation the available means of persuasion.” Let’s take this definition apart and examine its constituent parts.

The faculty of observing in any given situation . . .

“Rhetoric is the faculty [or ability] of observing.” Notice that Aristotle does not call for you to overpower your audience (your readers or listeners) with words or images, **nor does he push for winning an argument.** Instead, he encourages you (as a **rhetor**, or user of rhetoric) to observe. For Aristotle, and all of the rhetorical thinkers who have followed, observation is primary. Before you say or write something, you need to observe, to take the time to figure out what kind of rhetorical situation you’re entering. To whom are you speaking or writing? What is your relationship to that person or group of people? What is the occasion? Who else is listening? What do you want your language to accomplish? By answering these questions, you are establishing the elements of the “given situation.”

. . . the available means . . .

When you consider “the available means,” you evaluate the possible methods of communication you might use. You want to choose the one that will best accomplish your purpose. In other words, should you deliver your message orally (in person or over the telephone), in writing (using email, instant messaging, paper, or a Web page), or via film, video, still images, other visuals, or music?

The spoken word is sometimes most appropriate. If you and a good friend have had an argument, you might not want to put your feelings into writing; it might be better if you simply pick up the telephone and say, “I’m sorry.” If you’re attending a funeral, you’ll want to offer your condolences directly to the bereaved, even if you’ve already sent a card or flowers. However, if your professor expects you to submit a three-page essay recounting your experiences with technology (a technology autobiography), you cannot announce that you’d rather “tell her” your story. **The only means available in this situation is the written word.** Or is it? **She might be impressed if you prepared an electronic presentation.** An essay exam calls for a written response, as do most applications. When you applied to college, you most likely filled out pages of forms, wrote at least one short essay, and took at least one written aptitude exam. If you applied to a performing arts program, chances are that you had to submit a video or audio recording along with your written application. And you may even have had to perform live before faculty members. When you want to invite friends and relatives to celebrate an event, such as a birthday or

bat mitzvah, you might telephone them, email them, write them a note, or send out formal invitations, depending on the circumstances. Whatever your daily life brings, you employ a seemingly endless variety of available means of communicating.

. . . of persuasion

The last phrase in Aristotle’s definition of *rhetoric* is “the available means of persuasion.” Persuasion is not a zero-sum game, with the winner taking all. Think of **persuasion as a coming together, a meeting of the minds**. Ideally, persuasion results in both you and your audience being changed by the experience. When both parties are changed, however slightly, the rhetorical interaction isn’t one-sided: both sides are heard, and a **decision is made that benefits the sender and the receiver(s) of the original message**.

Aristotle tells us that rhetoric’s function is not simply successful persuasion; rather, it is to “discover the means of coming as near such success as the circumstances of each particular case allow.” If your purpose is to get your way, you’ll sometimes succeed. But if **getting your way** is your only persuasive **purpose**, you’re in for a long **string of disappointments**. Thinking about persuasion in broader terms will not only make you a better writer and speaker but also encourage you to use what you know about rhetoric to achieve a wide range of goals.



Persuasive writers (and speakers) have a clear sense of the rhetorical situation, the context in which they are communicating. No two situations are ever exactly the same. Every situation has both resources (positive influences) and constraints (obstacles) that affect the rhetorical transaction. Those resources and constraints include whatever else has already been said on the subject; when, where, and through what medium the transaction between writer and audience takes place; and the writer’s relationship with the audience, the writer’s credibility (or believability), and the appropriateness of the message in terms of both content and delivery. Thus, every rhetorical situation calls for you to observe the available means of persuasion as well as the contextual resources and constraints that will affect your persuasive success.

ANALYZING THE RHETORICAL SITUATION

Choose two of the following situations and note their similarities and differences in terms of speaker or writer, purpose, audience, and available means. Be prepared to share your answers with the rest of the class.

1. It’s time for you to bring your spouse and children together to discuss the destination for next summer’s family vacation.
2. For the first time, your rent check will be late. You need to explain the reason to your landlord in order to avoid the usual late fee.
3. Your manager needs you to draft a letter to customers explaining a price increase.
4. Your professor has assigned a three-page technology autobiography for Monday.
5. You and your fiancé need to show proof of citizenship to obtain a marriage license.

Recognizing and Analyzing the Rhetorical Situation

You encounter rhetoric—and rhetorical situations—throughout every day, from the minute you turn on the morning news to the moment you close your textbook and turn off the light. To develop your skills of persuasion, you need to be able to recognize the elements of rhetorical situations and gauge your rhetoric accordingly.

A **rhetorical situation** is the context a rhetor enters in order to shape an effective message that can resolve an exigence and reach an intended audience. A rhetorical situation creates a call for change (an exigence), but that change can be brought about only through the use of language, whether visual, written, or spoken text. For instance, by asking a question, your instructor creates a call for change in the classroom. The question just hangs there—until someone provides a fitting response. If the company you work for loses online business because its Web site is outdated, that problem can be resolved only through appropriate use of text and visuals. Once the fitting response comes into being, the call for change (“I need an answer” or “We need to update our Web site”) is either partially removed or disappears altogether; then it is satisfied.

Often, a rhetor quickly recognizes the inherent exigence of the rhetorical situation; it may be as obvious as a teacher’s question. At other times, the rhetor needs to examine all the factors and decide exactly what constitutes the rhetorical situation and then the exigence. If a company is losing online business, the reason may well be that its Web site is outdated. But the problem could also be that employees aren’t responding in a timely fashion to Web-based inquiries or orders. It could be that competing products have taken business away. Or there may have been a slump in the economy, causing a drop in online business in general. Correctly pinpointing the exigence is crucial to a successful response.

ANALYZING THE RHETORICAL SITUATION

Working with several classmates, create a narrative based on the rhetorical situation diagram on the facing page. First, you’ll need to think of an exigence, a rhetor, a message, and an audience. Then, you’ll embody these elements in the context of a story told either graphically (through photos or images clipped from magazines or newspapers, graphics from other sources, or your own drawings) or verbally (through words). Be prepared to share your graphical or verbal narrative with the rest of the class and to explain it in terms of the elements of the rhetorical situation diagram.

Sample analysis of a rhetorical situation

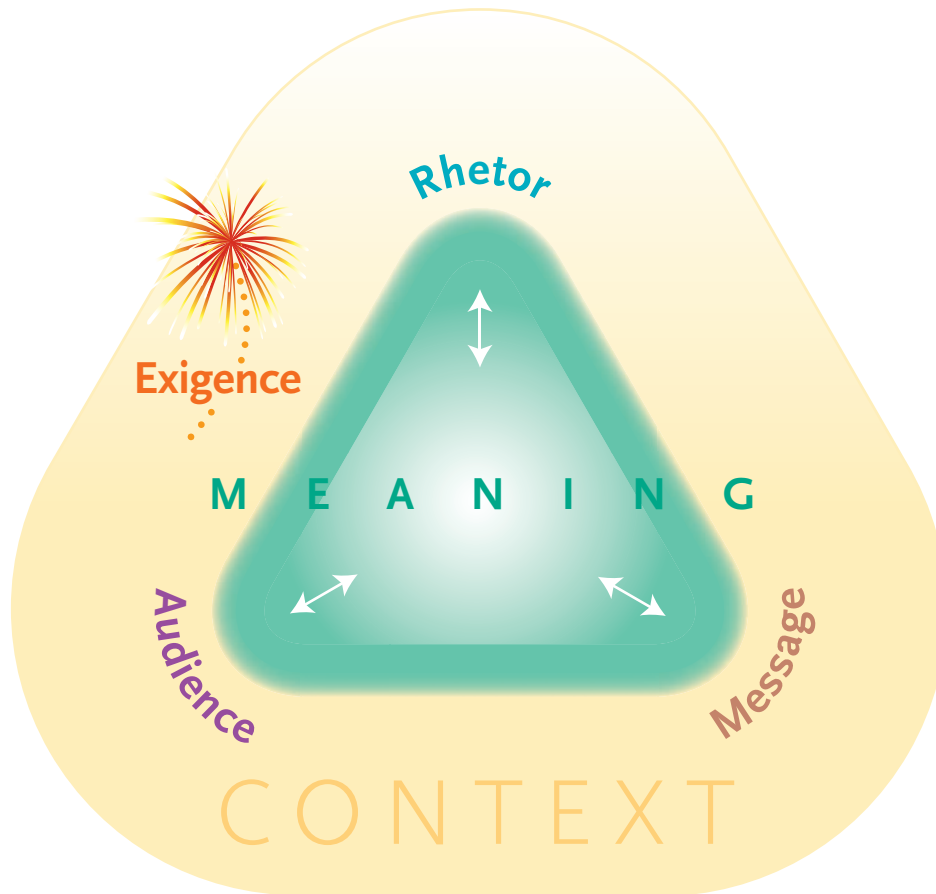
If the idea of a rhetorical situation still seems unfamiliar, consider wedding announcements (or invitations). You’ve probably received or seen announcements of weddings or commitment ceremonies that are some variation on the one



RHETOR The rhetor (also called speaker, writer, or sender) is the person who identifies (or creates) the exigence and prepares a fitting rhetorical response, a response that forwards his or her purpose.

MESSAGE The rhetor uses language and the available means of communication to shape and send a message that is appropriate to the rhetorical situation and that will fulfill his or her purpose.

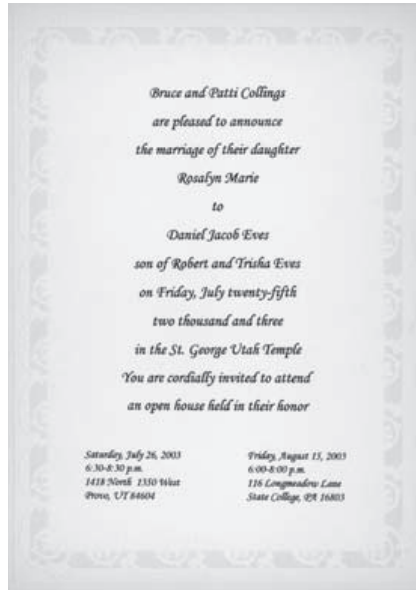
AUDIENCE The rhetor also needs to consider the nature and disposition of the audience, the person(s) who will read, hear, or see the message within a specific context. The audience may be able to act on the message to resolve the exigence; therefore, the audience may be able to help the rhetor achieve his or her rhetorical purpose.



EXIGENCE To shape a fitting response to a rhetorical situation, the rhetor identifies a call for change, the exigence. In a rhetorical situation, that exigence can be resolved only through a response using language.

CONTEXT The context (the setting in which the rhetorical transaction takes place) can affect the success of any communication. The context for a rhetorical situation includes resources (positive influences and available means that contribute to the rhetor's message) and constraints (obstacles that could inhibit the resolution).

All wedding announcements embody the elements of the rhetorical situation.



shown here. Such an announcement is rhetorical: it conveys a purposeful message from a sender to a receiver. In doing so, it embodies every element of the rhetorical situation: exigence, purpose, sender, message, receiver, and context.

In this case, Rosalyn Marie Collings and Daniel Jacob Eves were married, which created an exigence. Bruce and Patti Collings, Rosalyn's parents, felt a need to respond to that exigence, so they sent out a message announcing the marriage. Their message arrived in two forms, print and visual: a formal announcement and a color photograph of the couple. And Bruce and Patti clarified the rhetorical purpose of their message by inviting people to a celebratory open house. The meaning of this wedding announcement, like the meaning of any message, resonates within a specific context. First, the announcement is for a wedding, a joyous celebration that includes gift giving and food. Second, it's a joyous affair for specific people. All the receivers of the message know the newlyweds or their parents; otherwise, they'd be puzzled to receive it. The context also includes the two open houses. Intended receivers will know that the marriage took place in Utah, the home of both families, and that the couple are graduate students in Pennsylvania, where many of their friends live. Having two open houses allows receivers in each state to attend the one more conveniently located for them.

ANALYZING THE RHETORICAL SITUATION

For each of the rhetorical situations below, try to identify the exigence, sender, receiver, message, and context.

1. You've just received an email from a guy you met at summer camp several years ago, and you want to catch up with him.

2. You have won a full scholarship to college, and you need to ask your mom and dad for a car loan.
3. You've been asked to make a toast at a reception celebrating your parents' or grandparents' wedding anniversary.
4. You need to request permission to enroll in a class that is required for your field of study but is already full.

The decision to engage

Rhetorical situations may call for your attention, as when you receive a wedding announcement, or they may arise from your interpretation of some event. For instance, if you're in the market for a new car, you might be tantalized by an advertised price for a car that interests you, only to arrive at the dealership and discover that the marked price is different. If the price discrepancy catches your attention—so much so that you want to enter the rhetorical situation—then that's your exigence.

You'll next have to decide if you want to attempt to change the situation rhetorically. If you choose to say something about the discrepancy, you'll have to decide on your purpose, the type of message you want to send, how to send it, and to whom. You'll also need to take into consideration the constraints on your message: perhaps the advertised car had higher mileage than the one on the dealer's lot, or perhaps the advertised price had a time limit. If you want to enter the rhetorical situation, you'll need to shape it in a way that allows you to send a message. If you're annoyed by the price discrepancy but walk away because you don't want to negotiate with the car dealer, then you've actively perceived the rhetorical situation and been an audience for a message. But you have chosen not to act rhetorically.

As you go through your **daily life, you'll encounter rhetorical situations** that you'll decide to enter—and some that you'll decide to pass by. You may be a witness to an accident (someone who perceives a rhetorical situation) and volunteer to testify (an active rhetor); you might identify an old friend from a newspaper photograph (an active audience) and decide to email him (an active rhetor); you might hear a song on the radio (an active audience) and decide to perform it (an active rhetor); or you might begin introducing yourself to people in an online chat room (active perceiver, audience, and rhetor). Whatever the situations are, whether they are spoken, printed, online, or delivered in some other way, it will be up to you to **decide how or whether you want to act on them.**

As a responsible rhetor, you need to understand the elements and the limits of any rhetorical situation you decide to enter.

- You identify or establish the exigence that impels you to enter the situation: What is it that tugs at me? Why do I feel the need to speak, write, take a photo, share an image?
- You connect the exigence with your purpose, asking yourself: What is it that I want to and can accomplish with rhetoric? How can words or visuals alleviate or eliminate that exigence? For example, if you want the car dealer

to sell you the car at the lower price, you need to discuss the lower, advertised price.

- Knowing that the purpose depends also on the nature and disposition of the audience, you carefully consider the composition of that audience: Who is the audience? What are they like? What opinions do they hold? What are their feelings about this exigence? How will they react to my message? In terms of the sale price of the car, will you be dealing with the dealership's owner, who wrote the newspaper ad, or with a salesperson, who works on commission? **Different audiences have different needs and expectations, some of which can be met by a responsible rhetor.**
- You also want to keep in mind whatever else has already been said on the subject. For example, if the local newspaper has recently run a story on bait-and-switch advertising, you'll want to keep that in mind. If the car dealership runs a series of television commercials, bragging that it guarantees the lowest prices or that it stands by its advertising, then, as a responsible rhetor, you'll want to use this information.
- You know that you should shape a fitting response to the situation, whether that fitting response is spoken, written, or sent electronically. Coloring the text of the message will be your tone, which projects an attitude to the intended audience. For example, a positive declaration of belief in the car dealer's written or televised guarantees might be the most fitting and productive way to respond to the car pricing exigence. **When shaping a fitting response, you need to be fully aware that you can come only as close to persuasion as the rhetorical situation allows.** A responsible rhetor cannot do or expect more.



YOUR WRITING EXPERIENCES

1. When was the last time you felt compelled to write to someone? Write for five minutes about what you wrote, to whom, and why. Also identify the means of communication you used: handwriting or word processing, sent through the mail or electronically (email or text messaging). As you look back on it, what were the elements of that rhetorical situation? How did you make your response a fitting one, even if you did so unconsciously?
2. Think of a time you identified an exigence but didn't respond. Write for five minutes, describing that exigence and explaining why you didn't write or speak in response to it. If you could do it over, how might you respond? How would you take into consideration each element of the rhetorical situation, coming as close to persuasion as conditions allowed?
3. What have you learned from reading this section that you didn't know when you started? How might the information given about the rhetorical situation help you? Is there a rhetorical situation that is tugging at you now? If you decide to enter that rhetorical situation, how will you do so? How will you take into consideration each element of the rhetorical situation?



Protests are common responses to political exigencies.

Identifying and Shaping Reasons to Write

The photograph records a moment in the women’s suffrage movement. In 1917, a group of women stood in front of the White House, holding banners that urged President Woodrow Wilson to support their cause. These women, representing all the women and men active in the nation’s suffrage movement, sent the following message to a specific audience (the president): “Mr. President, how long must women wait for liberty?” That message was an authentic response to a rhetorical exigence: women did not have the right to vote. The purpose of the message was to win that right to vote—a right African American men had gained in 1870 but American Indian men and women would not gain until 1924.

What is exigence?

A **rhetorical exigence** is a problem that can be resolved or changed by discourse (or language). The problem of women not having the right to vote was eventually addressed in 1920, by the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.” Clearly, resolution of this problem came about through written discourse. The women in the suffrage movement worked successfully within the constraints of a rhetorical situation.

All effective discourse arises from a reason to use words or visuals. All successful rhetoric (whether verbal or visual) is an authentic response to an exigence, a real reason to send a message. You’ve undoubtedly had many real reasons to write. You, too, have set out to resolve a problem, using words or visuals. Maybe you and your partner have had an argument, and now you’re both angry.

An e-greeting can be an appropriate response to an emotional exigence.



That's a problem. To resolve that problem, you might compose an email, plan what you'll say over the phone, put together a visual apology of some sort, maybe even send an e-greeting. Your audience is your partner, and your purpose is to restore your good relationship. The medium through which you deliver your message—spoken or written words, prose or poetry, original or borrowed visuals—is up to you. You'll want to deliver your message in a way that seems most appropriate. However, if you're not close to a computer, chances are you won't be able to send an e-greeting. If you and your partner are too angry to speak, you're probably better off using written words or visuals. It all depends on the elements of the specific rhetorical situation.

An exigence is a problem . . .

A rhetorical exigence is a problem. Exigencies can be political or social problems, such as the denial of voting rights to women. Exigencies can also be emotional problems, such as an argument with your partner. But exigencies are not limited to the political, social, or emotional realm; they can also be financial, religious, educational, or psychological. **As long as a problem can be resolved only through discourse, it is a rhetorical exigence.**



Every day, people respond to problems that can be resolved only through the use of words or images. Exigencies for writing (or speaking or creating visuals) extend far beyond those created by academic assignments. In fact, every time you respond to (or consider responding to) a rhetorical problem, you've recognized or created an exigence. Whether you're texting in a chat room, following newspaper reports of your city council's spending patterns, listening to your children arguing, or reading personal ads, you can recognize a call for a rhetorical response.

A personal ad represents a social exigence in need of a response.

The MEETING PLACE

Brought to you by The Santa Fe New Mexican

Look for The Meeting Place in the Classifieds every Sunday and Friday in Pasatiempo.

Females seeking Males

SEEKING MATCHES
Attractive, athletic, all country girl looking who has 36, seems sophisticated, able to discuss various issues, who is as respectful, looking for someone to go to. Good dancer a must! **21-2281**

SINCERITY & HONESTY...
Are they too much to ask for? Eyes are 54, 57, hair brown, in shape, healthy, seeks male stable, for dancing, being witty and doing out together. **22-2171**

LIVE ARCH
Attractive, fun, intelligent, smart, playful, beautiful, energetic, adventurous **22-2171**
meeting **22-2171**, possible above the, for dancing, playing, laughing, music, recognition possible **22-2171**

OPEN...
In seeking a gentleman, 40-50, who's strong, well rounded, stable, fun blue, fun and outgoing. For his 27, is attractive, intelligent, fun, energetic, low stress, music and slow dancing. **22-2171**

HARDLY MAN WANTED
Engaging **22-2171**, 36, tall, **22-2171**, enjoys being outdoors, mountain, nature, movies, singing and dancing, healthy man, 35-40, with nice sense of humor, **22-2171**

CIRCLE THIS AD
Positive, affectionate **22-2171**, who loves laughing, having fun, likes adventure, music, hiking, dancing, singing, traveling, **22-2171**, 30-40, good sense of humor, **22-2171**

YOU'RE READING THIS AD
You're an attractive, intelligent, open-minded person who has fun to be with. And you happen to be single. So are the thousands of other people who read these ads. So why not get to know them? Place an ad and start meeting who you want to meet. We'll keep all your info when you have messages. Just call the Membership line to find out how!

IF NOT NOW, WHEN?
Place Jewish girlfriend, is interested in seeking a gentleman, who she, who sees the glass as half full. Involvement, intelligence and humor a

COULD IT BE ME?
Funky **22-2171**, 44, tall, hairy guy, likes being outdoors, camping, traveling, lots of laughs. Seeking fun-loving **22-2171**, 30-40, great sense of humor, intelligent, who likes to dance, music, and companionship first, possible **22-2171**

TAKE A CHANCE
Smart, all round, energetic, outgoing, looking for someone who is fun, intelligent, who is as respectful, looking for someone to go to. Good dancer a must! **21-2281**

LET'S MEET
Charismatic man of 40, 42, a great sense of humor, generous heart, loving, affectionate, and supportive. **22-2171**, 42, 5'11", 170 lbs, brown hair, brown eyes, **22-2171**

ALOT TO OFFER
Honest, open, fun loving, culturally progressive, headstrong **22-2171**, 51, 5'7", clean, outgoing, clean, energetic, playing music, running, hiking, yoga, traveling. **22-2171**

CIRCLE THIS AD
Positive, active **22-2171**, 30, smart and outgoing, great sense of humor, intelligent, who is as respectful, looking for someone to go to. Good dancer a must! **21-2281**

LET'S MEET
Engaging **22-2171**, 36, tall, **22-2171**, enjoys being outdoors, mountain, nature, movies, singing and dancing, healthy man, 35-40, with nice sense of humor, **22-2171**

COULD IT BE ME?
Smart, intelligent, creative, humorous **22-2171**, 32, 5'11", enjoys traveling, music, reading, sports, **22-2171**

CHOCOLATEY KISSES
Attractive, athletic **22-2171**, 36, tall, **22-2171**, enjoys being outdoors, mountain, nature, movies, singing and dancing, healthy man, 35-40, with nice sense of humor, **22-2171**

SANTA FE BLONDE
Smart, 40, enjoys the outdoors, museums, ballet, traveling, concerts, being with friends, seeking **22-2171**, 40-50, who is as respectful, looking for someone to go to. Good dancer a must! **21-2281**

REASSURANCE MAN
Charismatic and professional, smart, together, energetic, part timer, all inclusive. Personal work done, and a business. Seeking someone who is fun, intelligent, who is as respectful, looking for someone to go to. Good dancer a must! **21-2281**

IS IT YOU?
22-2171, 18, seeks very fun, outgoing female, who enjoys art, music and sports, to share interests and good times. **22-2171**

ROCK AN!
22-2171, 40, 5'7", 170 lbs, single, fun, outgoing, intelligent, multi-dimensional **22-2171**, 30-50, likes the outdoors, dancing, singing, playing, **22-2171**

LET'S PARTY!
22-2171, 25, enjoys club, parties, hanging out with friends, **22-2171**

COULD IT BE ME?
22-2171, 30, seeks intelligent, athletic female, 30-40, who enjoys sports, travel and spending time with her special someone. **22-2171**

RU MESS RIGHT?
Looking for a lady **22-2171**, 47, brown hair, average build, smart, creative, outgoing, outgoing, outgoing, doing out, if she needs to, call **22-2171**

MALES seeking Females

WHY NOT CALL?
22-2171, 32, multiple degrees, some kind in a special field, **22-2171**, 30-40, who is as respectful, looking for someone to go to. Good dancer a must! **21-2281**

NEW TO AREA
Very smart, **22-2171**, 30, 5'11", 170 lbs, is a single, fun loving, intelligent, who is as respectful, looking for someone to go to. Good dancer a must! **21-2281**

GRIN WITH CARE
22-2171, 37, 5'11", 170 lbs, **22-2171**, 30-40, who is as respectful, looking for someone to go to. Good dancer a must! **21-2281**

PROSPECTIVE COMPANION
22-2171, 31, tall, athletic, seeks strong, intelligent, professional, good at work, 40-50, very proportionate. I like hiking, being outdoors, **22-2171**

LET'S HAVE FUN
22-2171, 31, tall, athletic, seeks strong, intelligent, professional, good at work, 40-50, very proportionate. I like hiking, being outdoors, **22-2171**

SEEKING GUY
22-2171, 36, positive, outgoing, energetic, intelligent, who is as respectful, looking for someone to go to. Good dancer a must! **21-2281**

TAKE A CHANCE
Charismatic, intelligent, multi-dimensional **22-2171**, 30-50, likes the outdoors, dancing, singing, playing, **22-2171**

LOOKING FOR YOU
Smart, healthy, tall **22-2171**, 30-40, who is as respectful, looking for someone to go to. Good dancer a must! **21-2281**

WAITING TO MEET YOU
22-2171, 38, 5'7", 170 lbs, seeks to meet an open minded man for casual relationship **22-2171**

YOU'RE READING THIS AD
You're an attractive, intelligent, open-minded person who has fun to be with. And you happen to be single. So are the thousands of other people who read these ads. So why not get to know them? Place an ad and start meeting who you want to meet. We'll keep all your info when you have messages. Just call the Membership line to find out how!

Females seeking Females

ITALIAN SWEETHEART
Spontaneous **22-2171**, 28, blonde/green hair, **22-2171**, 30-40, who is as respectful, looking for someone to go to. Good dancer a must! **21-2281**

SANTA FE SWEETIE
Fun, 37, smart **22-2171**, 30, smart, outgoing, intelligent, who is as respectful, looking for someone to go to. Good dancer a must! **21-2281**

SO YOU'D RATHER BE ALONE?
Smart, professional, intelligent, who is as respectful, looking for someone to go to. Good dancer a must! **21-2281**

... that can be resolved ...

The second distinguishing characteristic of a rhetorical exigence is that the rhetor believes that it can be resolved. The women who demonstrated to gain the right to vote, the couple who were arguing, the individuals who advertised for a partner—all believed that their problems could be resolved. If any of these problems were certain to be resolved, however, there would have been no need to craft a response. If a problem could never be resolved, there would also be no point in responding.

... through discourse

Only discourse can resolve or change a rhetorical exigence. It took a law—the series of words that constitute the Nineteenth Amendment—to resolve the problem of women’s not having the right to vote. It might take a visual and words—in the form of a Yahoo! e-greeting—to bring an arguing couple back together. It might require a number of phone calls to match up “Santa Fe Blonde” and “Ojitos Bonitos” from the personal ads with the partner of their dreams. Every successful phone call will need to address the specifics of the ad. “Santa Fe Blonde,” for instance, is seeking a single male, between the ages of 57 and 67, who shares her interests: the outdoors, museums, ballet, traveling, concerts, and being with friends. Only words to that effect will solve the problem. “Ojitos Bonitos,” on the other hand, is seeking a “humorous SPM 47–59, who is attractive, bilingual, and financially secure, for companionship.” He, too, has posed a specific exigence that calls for a specific response. The better speaker and writer you are, the better you’ll be able to use discourse to resolve the rhetorical problems that you’ll face nearly every day in college.



ANALYZING THE RHETORICAL SITUATION

Decide whether each problem listed below is also a rhetorical exigence. Be prepared to share the reasoning behind your five responses with the rest of the class.

1. The Internal Revenue Service is charging you \$2,000 in back taxes, asserting that you neglected to declare the income from your summer job.
2. Your college library has just sent you a letter fining you for several overdue books, all of which you returned several weeks ago.
3. During Eid-al-Fitr, the celebratory feast after Ramadan, your brothers and father resume their ongoing argument about the political situation in the Middle East.
4. In the student seating at the football stadium, some fans throw empty soda cans, toss beach balls, boo the opposing team, and stand during most of the game. You're quickly losing interest in attending the games.
5. If the university's child care center (so conveniently located that attending school is possible for you) raises its rates again this year, you will have to look elsewhere for affordable child care.

YOUR WRITING EXPERIENCES

1. Write for five minutes about a specific school-related assignment that created an exigence for you. In other words, try to remember an assignment that posed a problem to which you *wanted* to respond and *felt a need* to respond with spoken or written words or visuals. Be prepared to share your memory of this assignment with the rest of the class.
2. Consider a school-related assignment that you're currently thinking about. In your own words (and to the best of your memory), write out the assignment, paying careful attention to the problem (you think) the assignment is asking you to resolve with discourse. Does this assignment establish an exigence that you *want* to address? If so, explain why. If not, explain how the assignment could be rewritten in such a way that you would feel an authentic reason to write. Be prepared to share your ideas with the rest of the class.

Reading a text for rhetorical exigence The following essay, “Why I Want a Wife,” by Judy Brady, was first published more than thirty years ago, in the inaugural issue of *Ms.* It remains one of the most widely anthologized essays in the United States. As you read this short essay, try to imagine American domestic life thirty years ago. What specific details does the author provide to feed your imagination? Try to determine Brady’s reason for writing this essay. What might have been the exigence that stimulated her written response?

JUDY BRADY

Why I Want a Wife

I belong to that classification of people known as wives. I am a Wife. And, not altogether incidentally, I am a mother.

Not too long ago a male friend of mine appeared on the scene from the Midwest fresh from a recent divorce. He had **one child, who is, of course, with his ex-wife**. He is obviously looking for another wife. As I thought about him while I was ironing one evening, it suddenly occurred to me that I, too, would like to have a wife. Why do I want a wife?

I would like to go back to school, so that **I can become economically independent, support myself**, and, if need be, support those dependent upon me. I want a wife who will work and send me to school. And while I am going to school I want a wife to take care of my children. I want a wife to keep track of the children's doctor and dentist appointments. And to keep track of mine, too. I want a wife to make sure my children eat properly and are kept clean. I want a wife who will wash the children's clothes and keep them mended. I want a wife who is a good nurturant attendant to my children, arranges for their schooling, makes sure that they have an adequate social life with their peers, takes them to the park, the zoo, etc. I want a wife who takes care of the children when they are sick, a wife who arranges to be around when the children need special care, because, of course, I cannot miss classes at school. My wife must arrange to lose time at work and not lose the job. It may mean a small cut in my wife's income from time to time, but I guess I can tolerate that. Needless to say, my wife will arrange and pay for the care of the children while my wife is working.

I want a wife who will take care of my physical needs. I want a wife who will keep my house clean. A wife who will pick up after my children, a wife who will pick up after me. I want a wife who will keep my clothes clean, ironed, mended, replaced when need be, and who will see to it that my personal things are kept in their proper place so that I can find what I need the minute I need it. I want a wife who cooks the meals, a wife who is a good cook. I want a wife who will plan the menus, do the necessary grocery shopping, prepare the meals, serve them pleasantly, and then do the cleaning up while I do my studying. I want a wife who will care for me when I am sick and sympathize with my pain and loss of time from

school. I want a wife to go along when our family takes a vacation so that someone can continue to care for me and my children when I need a rest and a change of scene.

I want a wife who will take care of details of my social life. When my wife and I are invited out by my friends, I want a wife who will take care of the babysitting arrangements. When I meet people at school that I like and want to entertain, I want a wife who will have the house clean, will prepare a special meal, serve it to me and my friends, and not interrupt when I talk about the things that interest me and my friends. I want a wife who will have arranged that the children are fed and ready for bed before my guests arrive so that the children do not bother us. I want a wife who takes care of the needs of my guests so that they feel comfortable, who makes sure that they have an ashtray, that they are passed the hors d'oeuvres, that they are offered a second helping of the food, that their wine glasses are replenished when necessary, that their coffee is served to them as they like it. And I want a wife who knows that sometimes I need a night out by myself.

I want a wife who is sensitive to my sexual needs, a wife who makes love passionately and eagerly when I feel like it, a wife who makes sure that I am satisfied. And, of course, I want a wife who will not demand sexual attention when I am not in the mood for it. I want a wife who assumes the complete responsibility for birth control, because I do not want more children. I want a wife who will remain sexually faithful to me so that I do not have to clutter up my intellectual life with jealousies. And I want a wife who understands that my sexual needs may entail more than strict adherence to monogamy. I must, after all, be able to relate to people as fully as possible.

If, by chance, I find another person more suitable as a wife than the wife I already have, I want the liberty to replace my present wife with another one. Naturally, I will expect a fresh, new life; my wife will take the children and be solely responsible for them so that I am left free.

When I am through with school and have acquired a job, I want my wife to quit working and remain at home so that my **wife can more fully and completely take care of a wife's duties**.

My God, why wouldn't I want a wife?

After reading Brady’s essay, you may want to spend some class time discussing the merits of her argument, for the 1970s and for today. You may also want to consider her pervasive use of irony (her tongue-in-cheek attitude toward her subject), the extent to which she’s being serious, and the potential sexism of the essay. Few readers of this essay can resist registering their agreement or disagreement with its author; this may be something you’ll want to do as well.

Whether or not you agree with Brady, it’s important for you to be able to analyze her rhetorical situation, starting with the reason she may have written this essay in the first place. Why would she keep repeating “I want a wife ...”? Why would she write from the husband’s point of view? Why would she describe a wife who does all the “heavy lifting” in a marriage? What kind of husband does she evoke? What effects do her rhetorical choices have on you as a reader?

Write your responses to the following questions (which constitute a rhetorical analysis) to identify the exigence for Brady’s essay:

1. *What does this essay say?* Compile the details of a wife’s daily life and describe the writer’s feelings about a husband’s expectations; then write one sentence that conveys Brady’s main argument.
2. *Why does the essay say that?* Drawing on your previous answer, write three or four assertions that support Brady’s argument.
3. *Who composed this message?* What information does the writer supply about her identity?
4. *What is the exigence that sparked the writing of this essay?* State the exigence in one sentence.
5. *How does the essay resolve the exigence?*

Adbusters’ version of the U.S. flag is a visual response to an exigence.



Reading an image for rhetorical exigence Responses to exigencies are not limited to verbal ones. Visual responses to various exigencies constantly bombard us—from advertisements and promotions to personal communications and political stances. If you think the flag image is illustrating the “problem” of capitalism or the power of corporations in the United States, then you are considering it as a response to an exigence. In thinking about this image in terms of a

rhetorical response, you are “reading” it more exhaustively than you might have otherwise.

Reading for exigence helps you develop your skills as an active, informed reader and as a rhetorical analyst. Respond to the same questions you answered about “Why I Want a Wife,” but this time focus on the visual of the flag:

1. *What does the visual “say”—and how?* Describe the visual in one sentence, paying attention to the corporate logos that have replaced the state-signifying stars.

2. *Why does the visual say that?* Consider what the stars and stripes have traditionally represented. Compare that representation with this one.
3. *Who composed this message?* It was composed by Adbusters, a media foundation that describes itself as being “concerned about the erosion of our physical and cultural environments by commercial forces.” If you don’t already know about Adbusters, go online to find out about its series of campaigns.
4. *What is the exigence?* Using the information you’ve amassed from questions 1, 2, and 3, identify the exigence to which this visual is responding.
5. *How does the visual resolve the exigence?* What message does this visual send to viewers? How might this visual work to change the exigence you described in the previous answer?

Whether you’re reading an essay, listening to a speech, or viewing a visual, you’ll better understand the message if you begin your analysis by determining what rhetorical exigence those words or visuals are responding to. Very often, the responses you’re “reading” create an exigence you want to respond to. You may, for example, feel a strong urge to respond to “Why I Want a Wife” or to the logo-laden version of the U.S. flag. Whether your response is spoken, written, or composed visually, its power lies in your understanding of the exigence.

The power of exigence

Unless you perceive an exigence, you cannot respond. This fact is obvious, but you may not know why a response is so difficult—if not impossible—to formulate in certain situations. In other words, **something needs to provoke or stimulate your interest and response.** For instance, when you take an essay examination for an American history midterm, you might be given the choice of answering one of three questions:

1. Some historians have argued that the great increase in size and power of the federal government since the Civil War is one of the dominant themes of American history. Trace the growth of the federal government since 1865, paying particular attention to its evolving involvement in world affairs and the domestic economy. Be sure to support your argument with relevant historical details.
2. Some historians have referred to the modern civil rights movement as the “Second Reconstruction.” Do you think the comparison between the first era of reconstruction (post–Civil War years to the early twentieth century) and the so-called second era of reconstruction (1950s to the 1970s) is accurate? Compare and contrast the attempts to create and safeguard African American civil rights in these two periods. Your answer should consider government policies, African American strategies, and white responses.
3. “The United States has never entered a war for purely idealistic reasons. Its primary goal has always been the defense of vital national interests.” Assess the accuracy of this statement with reference to any three of the following: the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, the Cold War, and the Vietnam War. Be sure to explain what you mean by “idealistic reasons” and “national interests.” Remember to support your argument with relevant historical details.

Your selection will depend on which question seems to you to present the most compelling exigence. Which question do you care the most about? Which one do you know the most about? Which one can you write most successfully about? In this case, you can ignore the two questions that you don't want to answer and turn your energies to the one you choose. Similarly, when an instructor supplies a number of different topics for a research project, you choose the one that sparks your interest.

You might consider the entire essay examination or any other college-writing situation as an exigence for a written response. But, more accurately, it's **each question or topic that provides a rhetorical exigence by posing a problem that can be modified through discourse.** Some questions or topics pique your interest; others do not. And you make decisions every day about whether to respond.

Exigence online

If you've ever participated in an online chat room, you already know how people in that context recognize or shape exigencies to which to respond. In fact, most people log on to chat rooms in order to locate a topic or a **person whose presence creates an exigence.** You might participate in chat rooms that discuss novels because you have questions about them or wonder what other readers are thinking (*The Da Vinci Code*, for example, is the focus of several elaborate Web



A Web site with many potential exigencies.

The screenshot shows the Myspace.com homepage with a blue header and navigation menu. The main content area is divided into several sections:

- Cool New Videos:** Features four video thumbnails with titles: "Do's and Dont's" by Nick, "Amazing Buddy" by Martin, "Furbie Wins" by Andy, and "Birds and Bees" by Chris. A counter indicates "50,811 uploaded today!".
- Member Login:** A form with fields for "E-Mail:" and "Password:", a "Remember Me" checkbox, and "LOGIN" and "SIGN UP" buttons. A "Forgot your password?" link is at the bottom.
- Cool New People:** Displays three profile thumbnails for users named "Shell", "Jennifer", and "Chris".
- Myspace Music:** Promotes "The Automatic" rock band from Cardiff, Wales, with a "Listen Now" link. It also features a video section for "Boy Meets Bus II" with a "Watch It Now!" link.
- Myspace Comedy:** Promotes comedy content with a "Check Out MySpace Comedy!" link and a list of categories: Gigs, Tours, Comedy Forums, Top Comedians, Spotlight Features, and Sketch Videos.

Hyun Jong Song
MPCCN Case File: 1529F00



Above Images: Song, circa 2001

Vital Statistics at Time of Disappearance

- **Missing Since:** November 1, 2001 from State College, Pennsylvania
 - **Classification:** Endangered Missing
 - **Date Of Birth:** February 25, 1980
 - **Age:** 21 years old
 - **Height and Weight:** 5'1-5'3, 110-130 pounds
- **Distinguishing Characteristics:** Black hair, brown eyes. Song is of Korean descent. Her ears and navel are pierced. Song's nickname is Cindy. Her middle name may be spelled "Jung." Song's first name may be spelled "Hyunjong" or "Hyunjung."

Details of Disappearance

Song was raised in Seoul, South Korea. She moved to the United States in 1995 to live with relatives in Springfield, Virginia near Alexandria. Song graduated from high school and enrolled in Pennsylvania State University, where she majored in integrated arts. She was scheduled to graduate during the spring of 2002.

Song attended a Halloween party during the early morning hours of November 1, 2001 at the *Player's Nite Club* in the 110 block of West College Avenue. She departed from the party at 2:00 a.m., then stopped by a friend's home for two hours. Another friend dropped Song off outside of her residence in *State College Park Apartments* in the 340 block of West Clinton Avenue at approximately 4:00 a.m. She had been drinking that evening and was mildly intoxicated when taken to her apartment. She was last seen wearing her costume, which consisted of a pink sleeveless shirt with a rabbit design imprinted on the front, rabbit ears, a white tennis skirt with a cotton bunny tail attached to the back, brown suede leather knee-

sites that include chat rooms). You might enter a chat room to share your views on the 2007 World Series, the movie *Juno*, or games such as *World of Warcraft*. A quick Web search will lead you to pertinent chat rooms—and potential exigencies—for every interest.

If you're familiar with the Web site *myspace.com*, for example, you'll immediately see the ways it has been designed to present tantalizing exigencies. Not every visitor to this site will want to respond to any of the individuals featured under "Cool New People," but some will. Others will navigate their way to the pages of MySpace friends with whom they want to communicate. In other words, **different people recognize different exigencies—and exigencies exist nearly everywhere you look.**

College student Cindy Song disappeared on Halloween 2001. Despite an extended, intensive search, an ongoing FBI investigation, and a feature on the TV series *Unsolved Mysteries*, she remains missing. Like the flyers that still hang all over my university campus, this Web site asks anyone who knows anything about the missing woman to come forward. Each of these flyers, as well as the Web site, creates an exigence. Every time I walk by a flyer, I wish I could respond—but I cannot. I have no information about this missing woman. Therefore, despite the glaring exigence, I don't respond, even though I wish I could.

Web sites such as this one for missing persons try to create an exigence to which viewers want to respond.

YOUR WRITING EXPERIENCES

1. When was the last time you faced an exigence that you felt you had to address? Write for five minutes or so, describing the exigence within the rhetorical situation and how you addressed it. Share your response with the rest of the class.
2. When was the last time you faced an exigence that you *wanted* to address? Describe that situation, the exigence, and how you addressed it.
3. As you read this textbook and attend class, are you getting any ideas for an exigence that you think your instructor should address? What might such an exigence be? What do you imagine your instructor's response to it might be?

Exigence in everyday life

A disappearance like Song's is tragic, but tragedies and troubles are part of daily life, which offers exigencies on a regular basis. If your best friend has moved away, the distance between the two of you creates an exigence that you might address with daily emails, a phone call, or a letter. When someone dies, their death creates an exigence that you might address with a letter to the family or a bouquet of flowers and an accompanying condolence note. A friend's illness, an unexpected increase in child care expenses or tuition, an essay exam, a list of questions from the IRS, a sales presentation, a job interview, a sorority rush, a deposition, or arguing children—these are all situations that provide possible exigencies for response. In other words, these situations pose problems that could be resolved or changed through spoken or written words or through visuals.

Whether you choose to recognize, let alone address, any exigence is usually up to you. Whether your response is elaborate or simple is usually up to you, too. How you deliver your message may be your choice as well—whether you choose to write a letter to the editor of the campus newspaper, make a phone call to your state representative's office, prepare a PowerPoint presentation, create a fact sheet, or interrupt someone else and speak. You often have a choice, but not always.



Sometimes you're forced to respond and to do so in a particular manner.

ANALYZING THE RHETORICAL SITUATION

1. What exigence is part of your life right now? Write for a few minutes, describing the situation, the problem as you see it, and the specific (or nonspecific) exigence.
2. From whom would you like a response? Why is that person (or group) the best source of response? Write for a few minutes, connecting your answer with that for question 1.
3. What are the content and medium of response that you would prefer? How will that person know your preference? Continue with what you wrote for questions 1 and 2, explaining why your preferred content and medium form the best response to your specific exigence.

4. How might the response to your exigence resolve it? In other words, what might the response do to relieve or resolve the exigence in your life? Add your answer to this question to what you've already written. Be prepared to share your overall analysis with the rest of the class.
5. In class, listen carefully to your classmates' analyses, and take notes. Be prepared to provide suggestions for improving their concept of exigence, response, and resolution.

Selecting a Rhetorical Audience and Purpose

Many of you have, no doubt, received mail and email that was targeted to you based on your interests and purchases. The message shown here was sent via email by Barnes & Noble in anticipation of the last installment in the Harry Potter series. The invitation was sent to many people—but not to everyone—for one purpose: to persuade the receivers to come to a celebration at a Barnes & Noble bookstore and to buy a copy of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* there, too.

Of course, not everyone is interested in Harry Potter books, let alone attending a late night party in costume, just to be among the first to get a copy of the newest one. So Barnes & Noble sent this email message to people who had purchased other Harry Potter books or calendars, notebooks, and so on, anticipating that they would be receptive to the tradition of arriving at a store hours ahead of time (“Join us ... as you count down the final moments to Harry’s arrival!”). Additionally, because Barnes & Noble is reaching these people through



You are targeted as a rhetorical audience by many businesses.

the medium of email, the message also includes information about ordering the book online—just a click away for those already reading email. Thus, the specific audience (people who have purchased Harry Potter items in the past) for the email was closely related to the purpose (enticing these people to purchase Harry Potter items in the near future).



A magazine advertisement has a particular rhetorical audience.

deciding whether to attend. Those who do accept the invitation are capable of bringing about a change—adding to the number of guests at the party.

Now consider the Saab advertisement. Clearly, the purpose of all advertising is to sell a product, so every advertiser must keep a buying audience in mind. The Saab ad tantalizes readers with visual and verbal details, including the \$39,995 price tag. The audience for this ad consists of people who appreciate Saabs and perhaps admire (or even envy) Saab owners. Some of them might even yearn for a Saab themselves but feel they cannot afford one. **The rhetorical audience for this ad, however, consists of those people who can either buy a Saab or influence someone else to buy one.** These people can use words to negotiate specific features (color, engine, wheel design, model, and so on) and price. Or they can use words to influence someone else to purchase a Saab. Either way, theirs is a fitting response to the exigence of not owning a Saab.

Audience versus rhetorical audience

Audience is a key component of any rhetorical situation. After all, you'll direct your writing, speaking, or visual display to a specific audience in an attempt to change some opinion or action. But even as you tailor your verbal or visual discourse to a specific audience, you must keep in mind that that person or group may not be a rhetorical audience. **A rhetorical audience consists of *only* those persons who are capable of being influenced by verbal or visual discourse and of bringing about change, either by acting themselves or by influencing others who can create change.** The following examples will help clarify the concept of rhetorical audience.

Not every person who receives the invitation to come to the Harry Potter party will necessarily be persuaded to do so. No matter how enticing the invitation might be, some people will not even open the email: they are not capable of being influenced by the message. Others might look it over quickly, consider the offer, and *then* delete it. Still others might wait to discuss the invitation with their friends before deciding

Not every group of people who listens to a presidential hopeful's speech, watches court television, or reads about impending tuition hikes constitutes a rhetorical audience. After all, not every person is capable of being influenced by the discourse and bringing about change or influencing those who can make a change. But some people *are* capable of those things. **The delegates at the Republican National Convention are a rhetorical audience: they listen to speeches and cast their votes.** When the delegates choose the presidential and vice presidential candidate, they eliminate all the other Republican candidates, thereby influencing the voting options of millions of Americans.



Judge Joe Brown:
a rhetorical audience.

Judge Joe Brown is the rhetorical audience on court television. He listens to both sides of the case, asks questions, and then makes a judgment. Whether he rules that the former girlfriend must pay the former boyfriend \$3,000 in damages, or that a renter did indeed break his lease, or that a borrowed car is not a stolen car, Judge Joe Brown is shaping a fitting response to the rhetorical exigence presented by each case. And although many more people are upset—and affected—by tuition hikes than those who actually try to do something about them, those in the rhetorical audience write or telephone their state representative, their university's board of trustees, and the university administration to protest tuition hikes. They feel empowered as agents of change, that their words can change the minds of the people who determine tuition rates.

A rhetorical audience can be influenced by discourse . . .

The message—whether verbal or visual—can influence a rhetorical audience. You apply this knowledge every time you stand in front of a large display of greeting cards and spend what seems like more time choosing “just the right” card than you spent choosing the gift. You consider each visual and each greeting, considering and rejecting cards in rapid succession until you find the one that best suits your rhetorical audience, the person who can be influenced by the discourse of your selection. Because you want your influence to be positive, you spend time matching up the features of the card with the interests of the recipient. Whether you choose a card with a Bible verse for your Christian friend, a picture of a black lab catching a Frisbee for your dog-loving roommate, or a romantic greeting for your sweetheart, your choice reflects the message you want to send to your audience, the person who is capable of being influenced by the words and pictures that you choose.



Even when choosing a birthday card, you're considering a rhetorical audience.

Consider the pile of holiday cards you receive each winter. Some may be celebrating Christmas, Hanukkah, or Kwanzaa; some may be reminders of lesser-known holidays: Winter Solstice, Yule, or Ásatrú. Others may just be wishing you “Happy Holidays” or hoping for “Peace on Earth.” Whatever the greeting and visual, you are the audience for all the cards you receive. You are capable of

being influenced by any of them. But, in actuality, you'll be influenced by only a few: those that give you especial pleasure, motivate you to call the sender, surprise you because you don't celebrate that particular holiday, or make you feel sentimental about the holiday at hand.

When you're part of the rhetorical audience, you're capable of being influenced by the rhetorical situation, of being moved in some way by the words or visuals.

... and is capable of bringing about change

As a member of a rhetorical audience, you're not only capable of being influenced (or changed) by the situation but also capable of bringing about change as a result of the situation. You can bring about change on your own, or you can influence the people who can make the change.

You are bringing about change yourself, for example, when you pick up the phone and heal a long-standing misunderstanding after you read a former friend's moving handwritten message at the bottom of a "Peace on Earth" card. After receiving a "Happy Holidays" card from your brother announcing that he'll be home from Iraq for the holidays, you might recruit all his old buddies for a surprise welcome. Both decisions render you part of the rhetorical audience. When your English instructor writes comments on your drafts, you can become part of her rhetorical audience by following her instructions and writing better essays.

Not everyone in the viewing audience is a member of Dr. Phil's rhetorical audience, but those who follow the steps in his Weight Loss Challenge—begin to exercise, watch their eating habits, and lose weight—indicate that they are not only capable of being influenced by his discourse but also capable of bringing about change. And if those same people decide to support a friend or family member in a weight-loss program, then they are influencing other people who can make a change.

So you're part of the rhetorical audience when you're capable of making or influencing change. Sometimes, you can do both at once. For instance, you might respond to public outcry against U.S. intervention in the Middle East by joining a protest march in Washington, DC. You might participate in an anti-racism or AIDS-prevention program in order to inform others about the negative consequences of racist behaviors or unsafe sex practices. Your life situation might find you best served by Al Anon, Alcoholics Anonymous, or any of the other twelve-step programs that help people make or support positive changes. Even if you're a star athlete, you might need to listen carefully to the coach so that you can help influence the attitudes of your teammates—and the same goes for strong members of writing, study, therapy, and exercise groups.

Considering purpose in terms of rhetorical audience

Many writers equate purpose with their reason for writing: they're fulfilling an assignment or meeting a deadline; they want a good grade or want to see their essay in print; they want to make money or win a contest. When you're writing with a **rhetorical purpose**, however, you move beyond such goals to one of influencing your rhetorical audience. In order to achieve this influence, you'll

need to keep in mind the **nature of audience** (their control, power, and status) and their disposition (sympathetic or unsympathetic to, opposed to or in favor of your message).

You already know that rhetorical audience and purpose cannot be separated. You always try to send your message to **someone who can do something about it, someone who can be influenced by your discourse to change or resolve something.** For example, when you enter a department store to return defective merchandise, you know that you need to speak to a salesperson or maybe go to the service desk. You don't want to waste your time talking with people who cannot help you.

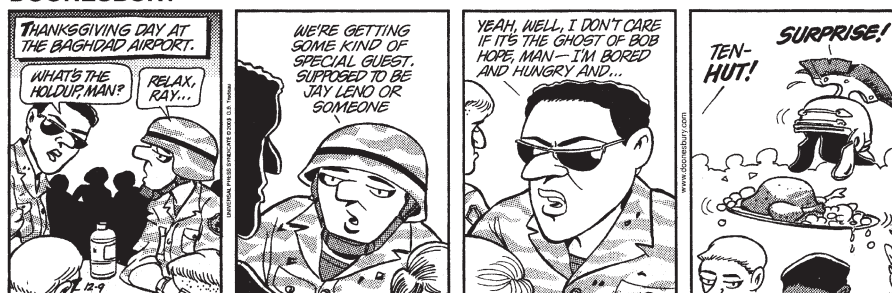
Once you reach your rhetorical audience, you try to shape your message in terms of information, tone, and language so that it successfully influences that audience. Whether you're talking to your instructor, one of your parents, or your physician, you try to keep in mind the kind of information you should deliver—and how best to deliver it. You already know that audience and purpose cannot be separated, but balancing audience and purpose is a skill you can work to improve.

Reading a comic strip for rhetorical audience and purpose The ongoing war in Iraq continues to be a controversial topic in the United States. Whether they support it or not, U.S. citizens tend to equate the wisdom of the war with the character of President George W. Bush. Supporters believe that this war will go down in the annals of military history as a superb act of liberation. They believe that Saddam Hussein was a brutal tyrant, whose country harbored and trained terrorists and provided them access to weapons of mass destruction. To them, Bush's foreign policy signifies the moral high ground of a righteous leader, as well as the altruism of a great country willing to rebuild the political, educational, and economic infrastructure of a smaller one.

Detractors of the war in Iraq believe that Bush is an empty-headed publicity hound, whose road to Washington was paved by his father and whose political decisions are masterminded by others. His decision to invade Iraq has been blamed on industrialists who have dark designs on Iraq's oil, as well as on financiers who are covertly helping Israel.

The comic strip represents President Bush's surprise Thanksgiving visit to U.S. troops in Iraq. Some say he visited the troops to mitigate criticism that he hadn't attended any of the funerals of fallen soldiers. Others say that visiting the troops was a perfect way to raise their spirits at holiday time. Everyone agreed, however, that the photo of the president holding up the beautiful table decoration made a picturesque scene.

DOONESBURY



This comic strip responds to a political exigence.

ANALYZING THE RHETORICAL SITUATION

1. Reread the comic strip, and then write for five minutes about it. List all the information you can possibly glean from the visual and verbal details of the strip.
2. Working with one or two classmates, compare your answers from question 1 and write a joint account of the visual and verbal details of the strip and its overall impact.
3. What is the exigence for the comic strip? How does it fulfill the definition of a rhetorical exigence?
4. Who is the rhetorical audience for the comic strip? In what ways does that audience fulfill the definition of a rhetorical audience?
5. Account for your response to the comic strip. Are you a member of the rhetorical audience? If so, list the ways you fulfill the role of a rhetorical audience. Be prepared to share your answer with the rest of the class.
6. What specific visual or verbal details reveal something about the character of the cartoonist? Appeal to your emotions (positively or negatively)? Shape an argument, even if it's one you don't agree with?

Reading a letter for rhetorical audience and purpose Racism has long been an exigence in the United States, appearing most boldly in language that diminishes others. Martin Luther King, Jr., believed in the power of language to overcome racism. As his 1963 “Letter from Birmingham Jail” indicates, King also believed that discourse could be used to influence a rhetorical audience, explaining a situation to them until they agreed to be agents of change or to influence those who could make change. For King, then, language provided the means for black and white people to work together to overcome racism and achieve justice.

When King sent the following letter (excerpted here), he believed that it was a fitting response to the moderate white clergymen who had issued a public statement criticizing King’s nonviolent civil disobedience. As you read the selection, circle all references to the rhetorical audience and underline all references to King’s purpose.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

Excerpt from Letter from Birmingham Jail

April 16, 1963

MY DEAR FELLOW CLERGYMEN:

While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities “unwise and untimely.” Seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would have little time for anything other than such correspondence in the course of the day, and I

would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, **I want to try to answer your statements in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms. . . .**

You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations. I am sure that none of you would want to rest content with the su-





perfidious kind of social analysis that deals merely with effects and does not grapple with underlying causes. It is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but it is even more unfortunate that the city's white power structure left the Negro community with no alternative. . . .

You may well ask: "Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent-resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word "tension." I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood. . . .

I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citi-

zen's Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and that when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress. I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that the present tension in the South is a necessary phase of the transition from an obnoxious negative peace, in which the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight, to a substantive and positive peace, in which all men will respect the dignity and worth of human personality. Actually, we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. **We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive.** We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured. . . .

You speak of our activity in Birmingham as extreme. At first I was rather disappointed that fellow clergymen would see my nonviolent efforts as those of an extremist. I began thinking about the fact that I stand in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community. One is a force of complacency, made up in part of Negroes who, as a result of long years of oppression, are so drained of self-respect and a sense of "somebodiness" that they have adjusted to segregation; and in part of a few middle class Negroes who, because of a degree of academic and economic security and because in some ways they profit by segregation, have become

continued



EXCERPT FROM LETTER FROM BIRMINGHAM JAIL (CONTINUED)

insensitive to the problems of the masses. The other force is one of bitterness and hatred, and it comes perilously close to advocating violence. It is expressed in the various black nationalist groups that are springing up across the nation, the largest and best-known being Elijah Muhammad's Muslim movement. Nourished by the Negro's frustration over the continued existence of racial discrimination, this movement is made up of people who have lost faith in America, who have absolutely repudiated Christianity, and who have concluded that the white man is an incorrigible "devil."

I have tried to stand between these two forces, saying that we need emulate neither the "do-nothingism" of the complacent nor the hatred and despair of the black nationalist. For there is the more excellent way of love and nonviolent protest. I am grateful to God that, through the influence of the Negro church, the way of nonviolence became an integral part of our struggle. . . .

Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself, and that is what has happened to the American Negro. Something within has reminded him of his birthright of freedom, and something without has reminded him that it can be gained. Consciously or unconsciously, he has been caught up by the Zeitgeist, and with his black brothers of Africa and his brown and yellow brothers of Asia, South America and the Caribbean, the United States Negro is moving with a sense of great urgency toward the promised land of racial justice. If one recognizes this vital urge that has engulfed the Negro community, one should readily understand why public demonstrations are taking place. The Negro has many pent-up resentments and latent frustrations, and he must release them. So let him march; let him make prayer pilgrimages to the city hall; let him go on freedom rides—and try to understand why he must do so. If his repressed emotions are not released in nonviolent ways, they will seek expression through violence; this is not a threat but a fact of history. So I have not said to my people: "Get rid of your discontent." Rather, I have tried to say that this normal and healthy discontent can be channeled into the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action. And now this approach is being termed extremist.

But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction

from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist: "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God." And John Bunyan: "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience." And Abraham Lincoln: "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." And Thomas Jefferson: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. . . ." So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice? In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill three men were crucified. We must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime—the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.

I had hoped that the white moderate would see this need. Perhaps I was too optimistic; perhaps I expected too much. I suppose I should have realized that few members of the oppressor race can understand the deep groans and passionate yearnings of the oppressed race, and still fewer have the vision to see that **injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent and determined action.** I am thankful, however, that some of our white brothers in the South have grasped the meaning of this social revolution and committed themselves to it. They are still too few in quantity, but they are big in quality. Some—such as Ralph McGill, Lillian Smith, Harry Golden, James McBride Dabbs, Ann Braden and Sarah Patton Boyle—have written about our struggle in eloquent and prophetic terms. Others have marched with us down nameless streets of the South. They have languished in filthy, roach-infested jails, suffering the abuse and brutality of policemen who view them as "dirty nigger lovers."

Unlike so many of their moderate brothers and sisters, they have recognized the urgency of the moment and sensed the need for powerful “action” antidotes to combat the disease of segregation. . . .

Before closing I feel impelled to mention one other point in your statement that has troubled me profoundly.



You warmly commended the Birmingham police force for keeping “order” and “preventing violence.” I doubt that you would have so warmly commended the police force if you had seen its dogs sinking their teeth into unarmed, nonviolent Negroes. I doubt that you would so quickly commend the policemen if you were to observe their ugly and inhumane treatment of Negroes here in the city jail; if you were to watch them push and curse old Negro women and young Negro girls; if you were to see them slap and kick old Negro men and young boys; if you were to observe them, as they did on two occasions, refuse to give us food because we wanted to sing our grace together. I cannot join you in your praise of the Birmingham police department.

It is true that the police have exercised a degree of discipline in handling the demonstrators. In this sense they have conducted themselves rather “nonviolently” in public. But for what purpose? To preserve the evil system of segregation. Over the past few years I have consistently preached that nonviolence demands that the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek. I have tried to make clear that it is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends. But now I must affirm that it is just as wrong, or perhaps even more so, to use moral means to preserve immoral ends. Perhaps Mr. Connor and his policemen have been rather nonviolent in public, as was Chief Pritchett in Albany, Georgia, but they have used the moral means of nonviolence to maintain the immoral end of racial injustice. As T. S. Eliot has said: “The last temptation is the greatest treason: To do the right deed for the wrong reason.”

I wish you had commended the Negro sit-inners and demonstrators of Birmingham for their sublime courage, their willingness to suffer and their amazing discipline in the midst of great provocation. One day the South will recognize its real heroes. They will be the James Merediths, with the noble sense of purpose that enables them to face jeering and hostile mobs, and with the agonizing loneliness that characterizes the life

of the pioneer. They will be old, oppressed, battered Negro women, symbolized in a seventy-two-year-old woman in Montgomery, Alabama, who rose up with a sense of dignity and with her people decided not to ride segregated buses, and who responded with ungrammatical profundity to one who inquired about her weariness: “My feet is tired, but my soul is at rest.” They will be the young high school and college students, the young ministers of the gospel and a host of their elders, courageously and nonviolently sitting in at lunch counters and willingly going to jail for conscience’ sake. One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judaeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

Never before have I written so long a letter. I’m afraid it is much too long to take your precious time. I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what else can one do when he is alone in a narrow jail cell, other than write long letters, think long thoughts and pray long prayers?

If I have said anything in this letter that overstates the truth and indicates an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said anything that understates the truth and indicates my having a patience that allows me to settle for anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me.

I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil rights leader but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood,
Martin Luther King, Jr.

ANALYZING THE RHETORICAL SITUATION

Respond to the following questions about Martin Luther King’s letter.

1. To what exigence is King responding? How does the problem fulfill the definition of exigence?
2. Who is King’s intended audience? What specific information can you glean about them from King’s letter?
3. How does King’s audience fulfill—or fall short of—the definition of a rhetorical audience? Provide specific examples from the letter.
4. Account for the specific ways in which King’s rhetorical audience could be capable of effecting change or of influencing others who could make change.
5. Do you consider King’s letter to be a fitting response to the rhetorical situation? Why or why not?

The power of a rhetorical audience—and a purpose

When we speak and write, we often hope that our words will reach a rhetorical audience. Whether we want our words to influence members of that audience in terms of their relaxation, imagination, reflection, curiosity, enjoyment, or questioning, our purpose is to change the way they think about, behave in terms of, or act in response to some idea, person, or action. In that way, we are no different from a U.S. president making an appearance at an army installation in Iraq or a civil rights leader writing to his detractors from a jail cell. Just like us, public figures send out (visual and verbal) messages in the great hope that those messages will reach—and influence—an audience.

Among the many impressive features of King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” is the author’s ability to include both his detractors and his supporters in his rhetorical audience. King’s skill in reaching a wide rhetorical audience is one reason that his is a rich intellectual and political legacy. Over forty years later, intellectual and political leaders continue to respond as part of King’s rhetorical audience. Michael Eric Dyson is such an intellectual leader. Author of many books, including *I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.*, and a frequent radio, television, and print media commentator, Dyson spoke at length about King’s legacy during a 2001 interview with Frank A. Thomas.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON

Speech Is My Hammer

The genius of Martin Luther King, Jr. is that he is a vitalizing and energizing force—and I use the present tense here because his words still live in our memories—through which millions of people continue to experience the richness and sublime character of religious commitment. King felt that we can’t experi-

ence the fullness of our religious passions and gospel beliefs until they are translated into social action. If anything motivated Martin Luther King’s career, it was this ethic of translation. He translated the work of philosophical theologians who advocated personalism, like Henry Nelson Wieman, into principles that



ordinary people could comprehend. Besides his genius for translating ideas and beliefs, King also possessed the gift to translate love into concrete political action. As I've argued in a couple of my books, Martin Luther King, Jr. believed that justice is what love sounds like when it speaks in public. In King's mind—and in the critical reflections of Paul Tillich, whose philosophy King examined in his doctoral dissertation—justice, love, and power could hardly be divorced. King believed that power exercised without the mediating forces of love and justice was ruthless; that justice without power and love was weak because it was empty of vision; and that love without power and justice was mere sentimentality.

King's social activism grew from his extensive study of Christian ethics and liberal theology, and his intuitive grasp of the black religious tradition. For King, black religion at its best was concerned with how we speak the truth of the gospel to brothers and sisters who are worried about rent payments, keeping the lights on, getting an equal education, reducing economic suffering, and achieving racial justice. Because he cared about these things, Martin Luther King, Jr. spent his

life translating the philosophical tenets and ethical demands of the gospel into concrete social resistance to interlocking oppressions.

Finally, what's absolutely critical about King's genius is his ability to change his mind and methodology. Although Malcolm X is credited with transforming his life in the last year of his life, King is rarely given his due in embracing a thoroughgoing radicalism in regard to the aims and means of nonviolent social change. King initially desired to appeal to the white conscience to effect racial progress, but later he contended that social change must be forced in more dramatic fashion. He began to advocate a more aggressive version of nonviolence that focused on blocking the flow of traffic and commerce in local municipalities as a sign of severe displeasure with the status quo. King also began to articulate his belief about the inextricable link between militarism, racism, and materialism.

King's theology near the end of his life was **radically incarnational, insofar as he was fairly obsessed with making the gospel of Jesus come alive off the biblical page and thrive in our nation's cities, especially among the broke and brokenhearted.** King was committed to pushing the black church to become much more intentional about directing its social, political, and economic resources to enable social revolution and to ameliorate the plight of the poor. If the gospel of Jesus is concerned with impressing God's identity on the human psyche and with imprinting it in human community, then the church must expand the boundaries of social intervention in seeking to render service and to improve the chances of social redemption. We have by and large failed to embody King's ethic of translation and his theology of radical incarnationalism, and I think American Christianity and the black church are the worse for it.

ANALYZING THE RHETORICAL SITUATION

Once you've carefully read Dyson's analysis of King's legacy, work with one or two other classmates to answer the following questions. Be prepared to share your answers with the rest of the class.

1. What exigencies does Dyson describe that can be resolved through verbal or visual discourse? In other words, what exigence does King respond to? What is the exigence of his legacy?
2. What are the responses to these exigencies?
3. Describe the rhetorical audience for each response. How do you know who comprises the audience in each case?
4. Describe the power of targeting—and reaching—a rhetorical audience, in terms of Dyson's analysis.
5. What is the rhetor's overarching purpose for targeting this audience? (Note that there is more than one rhetor in Dyson's essay, including Dyson himself.)

Dyson's analysis describes the continuing exigence of King's legacy, an exigence that must be addressed if the United States is to guarantee civil rights to every citizen. As you compare your small group's responses with those of the rest of your class, discuss Dyson's purpose, especially in terms of his rhetorical audience. Also discuss whether and how Dyson's response is fitting to the rhetorical situation.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

1. Bring a copy of your local or campus newspaper to class. Spend time with a classmate looking over the cartoons, columns, and letters on the editorial page. Choose one of the editorials or cartoons and determine the exigence it addresses or presents. Who is the rhetorical audience for the editorial or cartoon? In what specific ways can that audience be influenced or changed? What is the purpose of the editorial writer or artist? What does the artist or writer want the rhetorical audience to do with the information? Be prepared to share your answers with the rest of the class.
2. As you reconsider the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., work with one or two other classmates to consider someone with influence in your school or community (whether in politics, education, sports, medicine, or the arts) in terms of an exigence he or she has addressed. Describe the rhetorical exigence and the details of the person's response to that exigence. What group of people comprise the rhetorical audience for that response? What would that person have his or her rhetorical audience do? Be prepared to share your answers with the rest of the class.
3. What problem do you face today? How might that problem best be resolved? What is a possible fitting response to your problem? Who is the rhetorical audience for the response? How would you like them to be influenced or changed? Write for a few minutes, describing the elements of this rhetorical situation.
4. Consider yourself as a rhetorical audience. For whom do you function as such? In what ways are you considered capable of being influenced by discourse? Capable of implementing change? Capable of influencing those who can make change? Write for five minutes, describing yourself as a rhetorical audience. Prepare to discuss your answer with the rest of the class.