



WRITING
ARGUMENTATIVE
ESSAYS

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major concepts. In this chapter, *backgrounding* and *rhetorical situation* are examples of key words. First, read the context in which you find the word to help you understand it. A word may be defined in a sentence, a paragraph, or even several paragraphs. Major concepts in argument are often defined at length, and understanding their meaning will be essential to an understanding of the entire argument. If the context does not give you enough information, try the glossary, the dictionary, or another book on the subject. Remember that major concepts require longer explanations than a single synonym. Synonyms are useful for other minor words that are less critical to the understanding of the entire passage.

Analyze the Rhetorical Situation

Rhetorical situation is a term coined by Professor Lloyd Bitzer to describe the elements that combine to constitute a communication situation.¹ To understand these elements as they apply to argument helps us understand what motivates the argument in the first place, who the author is, who the intended audience is, how the audience might react to it, and how we as readers might also respond. By analyzing and understanding the rhetorical situation, we gain critical insight into the entire context as well as the parts of an argument, and this insight ultimately helps us evaluate its final success or failure. Analyzing the rhetorical situation is an important critical reading strategy that can be initiated during the prereading stages but should continue to be used as a tool for analysis throughout the reading process.

According to Bitzer, a rhetorical situation has five elements: the *text*, the *reader* or audience, the *author*, the *constraints*, and the *exigence* or cause. Use the acronym TRACE, from the initial letters of these five words, to help you remember these five elements. Now look at each of them to see how they can help you understand and evaluate argumentative writing.

The *text* is the written argument, which has unique characteristics of its own that can be analyzed. These include such things as format, organization, argumentative strategies, language, and style.

The potential *reader* or *audience* for the text must care enough to read and pay attention, to change its perceptions as a result, and perhaps to mediate change or act in a new way. A rhetorical situation invites such audience responses and outcomes. Most authors have a targeted or intended reading audience in mind. You may identify with the targeted audience, or you may not, particularly if you belong to a different culture or live in a different time. As you read, compare your reactions to the text with the reactions you imagine the targeted or intended reading audience might have had.

The *author* writes an argument to convince a particular audience. You can analyze the author's position, motives, values, and varying degrees of expertise.

¹Lloyd Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 (January 1968): 1-14.

Constraints include the people, events, values, beliefs, and traditions that constrain or limit the targeted audience and cause it to analyze the situation and react to it in a particular way. They also include the character, background, and style of the author that limit or influence him or her to write in a certain way. Constraints may bring people together or drive them apart. They influence the amount of common ground that will be established between an author and an audience. Here are some examples of constraints: an audience feels constrained to mistrust the media because it thinks reporters exaggerate or lie; reporters believe it is their responsibility to expose character flaws in candidates running for office, so they feel constrained to do so at every opportunity; candidates think voters want to hear rousing platitudes, so they deliver rousing platitudes; voters have lost their faith in public leaders, so they do not want to vote; people are too disturbed by the severity of the environmental crisis to want to listen to information about it, so they shut it out; people are too angry about destroyed property to consider peaceful solutions, so they threaten war; some welfare recipients fear that new changes in the system will deny food and shelter to them and their children, so they do not respond to training opportunities that may benefit them. Or, to continue with closer examples, you parked your car in a no-parking zone because you were late to class, but the police feel constrained by law to give you a ticket; you are angry because your college has made errors with your tuition payments before; you believe everyone should share the household chores, but your partner disagrees; you must transfer credits to graduate on time; without child care, you cannot attend classes; you do not particularly value college athletics, and you do want classes available when you can take them. These constraining circumstances will influence the way you react to the issues in the material you read.

Exigence is the real-life dramatic situation that signals that something controversial has occurred and that people should try to make some sense of it. Exigence is a problem to be solved, a situation that requires some modifying response from an audience. Here are some examples of exigence for argument: people become suspicious of genetically engineered foods because of newspaper reports; several parents report that their children can access pornography on the Internet; a high school student shoots and kills several fellow students; too many homeless people are living in the streets and subways; a third-world country threatens to resume nuclear testing; politicians refuse to sign a nuclear test ban treaty; a football player is badly injured in a game and the fans of the opposing team cheer in delight; human rights are being violated in another country. To bring the idea of exigence closer, here are some examples that might provide you with the exigence to engage in argument: you get a parking ticket; your registration is canceled for lack of payment but you know you paid; you and the person you live with are having trouble deciding who should do the household chores; you try to transfer in some past college credits and your current institution won't accept them; there is no day care provided on your campus for young children; athletics are draining campus resources and there aren't enough classes. In all cases, something is wrong, imperfect, defective, or in conflict. Exigence invites analysis and discussion, and sometimes also a written response to encourage both individual public awareness and discourse about problematic situations.