

2

The Expanded Rhetorical Situation

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By working through this chapter, you will be able to...

- Identify the exigence of a communication situation.
- Understand the role of purpose in communication.
- Define the means of communication: modality, medium, genre, and circulation.
- Explain how the means of communication shapes a communication's message and purpose.

As you'll recall, Chapter 1 introduced the rhetorical triangle, widely acknowledged to be the basic elements of the rhetorical situation.

While the rhetorical triangle is a very useful way of thinking about rhetorical acts, it also leaves a lot out. If you only relied on the rhetorical triangle, you might think that communicative acts happen in a vacuum: someone simply decides they have something they need to say, they find someone to say it to, and presto—rhetoric!

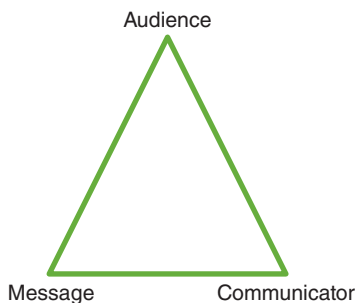


FIGURE 2.1 Traditional Rhetorical Triangle

So while the communicator, message, and audience are critical to understanding rhetorical acts (and to creating your own), it's more accurate to say that acts of communication emerge from a dynamic, shifting stew of various elements. Along with the communicator, message, and audience, these also include:

- the *context* for the communication;
- an *exigence* that prompts the communication;
- a *purpose* for the communication;
- the *means of communication*, or the material ways by which the communication happens: modality, medium, genre, and circulation.

So a more complicated and true-to-life representation of the rhetorical elements of communication might look more like Figure 2.2 (more like a rhetorical star than a triangle).

All of these elements need to be considered when analyzing the communicative acts of others and when you are communicating (and so I'll be referring to them frequently in subsequent chapters). Each is explored in more detail below.

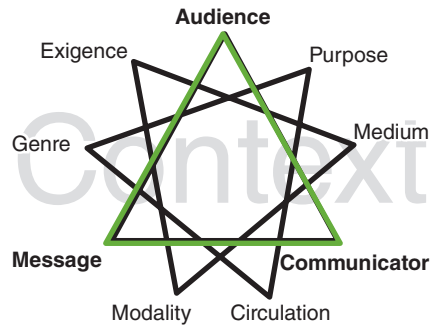


FIGURE 2.2 Expanded Rhetorical Situation

2a Context: What Are the Circumstances of Communication?

No rhetorical actions take place in a vacuum. If a rhetorical action is to be effective, it must respond to that **context**, which we could define as the *circumstances of communication*. We might distinguish several different levels and types of context:

- *Citational context.* This refers to a rhetorical action's location within a medium; so, for instance, a magazine article might be considered in the context of a particular issue of that magazine, or perhaps in the context of that magazine in general, or perhaps all magazines. Or one might consider an automobile advertisement within the context of where it appears (alongside an article in an online publication, or in a commercial break for a televised NASCAR race), or in the context of other automobile advertisements, or in the context of all advertisements.
- *Geographical context.* This is the physical location of the rhetorical action. What does the rhetorical action have to do with a physical place? For instance, to be effective, lost pet flyers probably need to be posted in the area in which the pet was lost. And professional documents such as project reports refer to things taking place in a location that would be familiar to everyone on the project team.
- *Historical context.* Everything exists in time (no smart comments about Schrödinger's cat, please), so all rhetorical actions have a historical context. When you watch a 30-second public service announcement for emergency preparedness, for instance, you might consider whether it's responding to historical events such as hurricanes or other natural disasters, or in the context of increased fears about terrorist attacks.
- *Sociocultural context.* This is the trickiest contextual category because in many cases sociocultural forces may be difficult to grasp or see. You could think of sociocultural context as all the things that have been

said and done about a particular issue or (on perhaps a less overwhelming scale) the state of public feeling about or energy around a particular issue or topic. So if you were planning to communicate about an issue that’s currently a hot topic—like abortion, religious freedom, gun control, or privacy—it’s important to have an awareness of the sociocultural context.

While all of these levels of context will apply to a given rhetorical action, not all of them may be equally important or influential.

EXAMPLE I’m a frequent—some might say avid—reader of my local newspaper’s Letters to the Editor section, and the differences between letters that do and don’t respond to their various contexts are often all too obvious. The best letters to the editor are written in response either to something that was in the paper (the citational context) or something that’s happening in town (the geographical context—appropriate because it’s a *local* as opposed to a national paper). It’s often very clear when a first-year writing class is doing a Letter to the Editor assignment because suddenly the section is filled with letters about issues that are irrelevant to what’s been happening in the paper or to the region. (This serves as a cautionary tale: **read your paper before you decide to submit a letter to the editor!**)

2b Exigence: What Invites You to Communicate?

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What Is Exigence?



Context overlaps significantly with **exigence** (also known as exigency), which can be defined as *whatever prompted a rhetorical action*. Exigence refers to whatever situation has invited or made possible some sort of response. In fact, each type of context described **above** can also serve as a kind of exigence. Receiving a gift provides the exigence for a thank-you card, for instance. The death of someone culturally important provides the exigence for not only typical rhetorical acts like obituaries and eulogies but also other sorts of public reflections about the person’s contributions.

But exigence is often more complex and layered. A pattern of uncivil behavior on campus that you notice can be an exigence—an invitation for response. A polluted stream can be an exigence; so can a natural disaster or a war, a series of controversial decisions made by a city council, or the overdevelopment of a particular area of town that’s causing it (you feel) to lose its character. Such situations provide opportunities, or perhaps urgent invitations for response. What they *don’t* do is dictate, or even strongly suggest, what that response might be. For this, communicators also need to consider the other elements common to all communicative acts (Figure 2.3).

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FIGURE 2.3 Natural disasters, accidents, and events are all exigencies—they invite response.



Underlying exigence is a more complicated notion of timeliness, or the proper moment for communication. You’ve probably heard the cliché “strike while the iron is hot.” This expression, and others like it, evoke the ancient Greek concept of *kairos*. Kairos, actually the Greek god of the “fleeting moment,” was typically portrayed with wings on his feet (to suggest that the opportune moment is always fleeting) and with a lock of hair hanging from the front of his head, but none in the back, to signal that those who would seize the moment had to act quickly and decisively or be left in the metaphorical dust (Figure 2.4).

The representation of Kairos is thus an apt image for communicators, a warning that one needs to always be looking for the appropriate time to convey one’s message. Waiting for the right moment can apply to everyday acts of rhetoric; for instance, rhetorically savvy children everywhere know to wait until Mom is in a good mood before asking for favors. (And conversely, asking your boss for a raise the day that the company announces a serious loss in profits probably won’t get you the desired results.)



FIGURE 2.4 Representation of Kairos

In terms of communicating publicly, arguments on particular topics will get much more of a hearing when something happens to put those topics in people’s minds; for instance, people are more likely to be receptive to arguments about global climate change during unusual weather events (whether or not these events actually have any causal tie to climate change), less so when the weather is ordinary. These arguments, or at least the feelings behind them, might exist prior to the events in a latent form, but the trigger of particular events provides the opportunity to give them a wider hearing. The tricky thing about *kairos* is that because it depends on chance, opportunity, and circumstances, it’s impossible to predict when an opportunity will arise. All one can do in the meantime is be attuned to the situation and practice with a variety of rhetorical tools so that one can be ready when the moment strikes.

As an example, let’s apply these questions to the following two letters to the editor (taken from my small-town local paper, the *Moscow-Pullman Daily News*): “Mushroom Discrimination” and “That Third Street Bridge.” See Table 2.1 for notes on the exigence of these two letters.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

Investigating Exigence

- What event (or series of events) prompted this rhetorical act?
- Is the exigence relatively simple or relatively complex?
- What might this event (or series of events) mean to the audience, and how might that have shaped the format and content of the rhetorical act?

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LETTERS (RHETORICAL ACTS)	“MUSHROOM DISCRIMINATION”	“THAT THIRD STREET BRIDGE”
What event (or series of events) prompted this rhetorical act?	The farmer’s market wouldn’t give the writer a booth to sell his foraged produce.	Continuing arguments for and against installing a traffic bridge that would allow residents from a fairly new development in the outskirts of town to get to the heart of town faster and more directly.
Is the exigence relatively simple or relatively complex?	Relatively simple (unless one starts probing the city’s reasons behind not giving him a booth—then it may be more complicated).	Relatively complex: there are several years’ worth of argument and debate about this issue among citizens and in City Council meetings.
What might this event (or series of events) mean to the audience, and how might that have shaped the format and content of the rhetorical act?	He feels that he is being treated unfairly. The local paper is read by a lot of farmer’s market customers, and so he may assume that by writing a letter to the editor, he’ll be able to generate sympathy and persuade customers to contact the city.	The writer represents a group that opposes the installation of a vehicle bridge (because the road that it would connect goes past a school and a heavily populated area, they fear the effects of increased traffic). As a compromise, they recommend the installation of a pedestrian bridge that would allow walkers and bikes to cross this junction. They chose a letter to the editor because this debate has been carried out for years in the local paper, so readers of the paper are likely familiar with the issue.

TABLE 2.1 Notes on Exigence of the Two Letters

Letter: Mushroom Discrimination

Oct 5, 2016

Some of you may know me from the Farmers Markets. My name is Josh Yake, and I am the wild mushroom vendor, Gourmet Foragables. I feature other foraged items as well (nettles, fiddleheads, sea beans, etc.) but we are now in the middle of the best time of year for my products: fall mushroom season.

I have not been at the Farmers Market. I have been systematically excluded by Daniel Stewart, market manager, and his direct supervisor Kathleen Burns, city arts director. As a walk-on vendor with agricultural products, I am considered a farmer and am supposed to be given preference over artists for a spot. As the only vendor with wild mushrooms, common sense and fresh product diversity would seem to guarantee me a spot.

In fact, I was present at the market last year when there was record attendance under the previous market manager, and I had a spot. So, what has changed? Simply put, the new market manager has intentionally excluded me and my product from the market. Apparently, he thinks the public would have no interest in chanterelles, lobsters, matsutake, bears tooth, chicken of the woods, honey mushrooms, cauliflower mushrooms and on and on.

Daniel Stewart is discriminating against me. If you would like to share your disapproval with him, he can be reached at dstewart@ci.moscow.id.us. His supervisor, Kathleen Burns, should also be notified of his discriminatory negligence. Kathleen can be reached at kburns@ci.moscow.id.us. They both can be contacted at the Moscow City Arts Department at (208) 883-7036.

I sure hope to return to Moscow soon and see all of your wonderful faces, but if the arts department has its way, I will be excluded for the rest of the season. I hope you can help me to let them know they have made a mistake.

JOSH YAKE

Spokane Valley, Wash

Letter: That Third Street Bridge

Oct 1, 2016

Please join Citizens for a Livable Community in urging the Moscow City Council to approve a bicycle-pedestrian bridge across Paradise Creek at Third Street, near East City Park and Lena Whitmore Elementary. The relatively modest investment would generate big returns by improving safety and connectivity for children, bicyclists, walkers, people with disabilities, and anyone who prefers to experience Moscow's beauty and friendliness from a human-scaled, human-paced perspective. It's an especially good idea now as popularity grows for youth recreation facilities along Mountain View Road.

The cost has been estimated at \$70,000, a comparative bargain, especially when advocates have already collected more than \$16,000. The federal government recently rejected the city's request for \$17.6 million for much-needed transportation improvements along Mountain View. The amount would have been matched with \$3.2 million from local sources and \$3.4 million from the state. An incongruous piece of the failed application proposed constructing a motor vehicle bridge over Paradise Creek at Third to move through-bound traffic faster, estimated to cost \$1 million to \$2 million.

Recently, East Third Street was redesignated from neighborhood collector to minor arterial to accommodate more vehicles at higher speeds. Moving more

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traffic more quickly through any neighborhood or the heart of town is contrary to Moscow's oft touted quality of life, including walkability, bikability, historic charm, safety, uncommonly healthy downtown, close-knit neighborhoods, parks events, well-situated community center, centrally located high school, Safe Routes to School and national Bike Friendly Community accolades.

A bicycle-pedestrian crossing over Paradise Creek on Third Street is fiscally responsible. It would improve safety for youngsters, elders and other vulnerable citizens. It would renew community conversations about how and why we protect what's special about all Moscow neighborhoods, and how the whole of our community is made up of interdependent parts. For more information, see <http://www.livablecommunitymoscow.com/>.

NANCY CHANEY

Moscow

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Off the top of your head, see if you can write down ten current situations (local, on campus, and national) that would count as exigencies—situations that seem to invite communication. Share these with small groups or the class. As a class, choose a few of the exigencies mentioned and discuss in more detail what *kind* of communicative acts could be mobilized in response to them.
2. Read the following short news piece. Discuss how this situation might constitute an exigence. What possible responses might it warrant? (purpose) From whom, and to whom? (audience) **And how?** (means of communication)

White House Supports Making Women Register for the Draft

GAB MORRONGIELLO, THE EXAMINER (WASHINGTON, D.C.)

December 1, 2016

The White House on Thursday came out in favor of requiring women to register for the military draft, despite the fact it was stripped from the compromise defense policy bill this week.

"The administration believes our military is strongest when we draw from a pool of all eligible recruits," Ned Price, a spokesman for the

White House National Security Council, said in a statement provided to the [Washington Examiner](#).

“Although we remain committed to an all-volunteer force that meets the highest standards of performance, applied equitably to all who serve, universal registration both furthers our commitment to equity and serves to sustain our legacy of public service,” Price said.

He added: “As old barriers for military service are being removed, the administration supports —as a logical next step —women registering for the Selective Service.”

The Pentagon joined the Obama administration in backing efforts to require women turning 18 on or after Jan. 1, 2018 to register for the draft.

“While [Defense] Secretary Carter strongly supports our all-volunteer approach and does not advocate returning to a draft, as he has said in the past, he thinks it makes sense for women to register for selective service just as men must,” Pentagon press secretary Peter Cook said in a statement.

The measure has drawn mixed reactions from conservatives on Capitol Hill.

Arizona Sen. John McCain, who chairs the Senate Armed Services Committee, told the New York Times earlier this year that requiring women to register for the draft is “fair” now that the U.S. allows both men and women to serve in combat roles.

Meanwhile, Texas Sen. Ted Cruz called the proposal “immoral” and suggested colleagues of his who support the measure are “nuts.”

“The idea that we would draft our daughters to forcibly bring them into the military and put them in close combat, I think, is wrong,” the ex-White House hopeful said at a campaign rally in February. “It is immoral. And if I am president, we ain’t doing it.”

2c Purpose: What Does This Communication Want?

The **purpose** of any act of communication is *what the communicator hopes to achieve with this particular rhetorical action*. When we think about the purpose of a piece of communication, then, we think about not just the content of the piece, but what it is *doing*. To understand a communicator’s choices—whether they be the layout of a brochure, the background

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music in a podcast, the vocabulary used in an email, the emoticons in an instant message, the color scheme of a website, or the length of the paragraphs in a textbook—you first need to understand what the communicator ultimately wants this piece of communication to *do* for and/or to its intended audience.

Purpose is often multilayered; that is, any communication typically contains several purposes, some of which are more explicit and/or important than others.

EXAMPLE You might think of the purpose of advertisements as relatively straightforward: to entice viewers to buy the featured product or service. But even the purposes of ads can be relatively complex. An individual ad might be just a part of a larger, more far-reaching marketing scheme that aims to get the consumer to identify in certain ways with the product and to develop a long-term relationship with that brand—to identify as a “Target shopper” or a “Gap person.”

The number of purposes for communicating is almost as extensive as the different means by which people can communicate. Table 2.2 lists some common purposes. In the For Discussion prompt that follows, you’ll see how many more purposes you can generate as a class.

TABLE 2.2 Different Types of Purposes

<i>Purposes of Informing</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To inform people about the existence and purpose of certain events that will enable them to decide whether to attend or not. • To inform them about developments or happenings that affect their well-being. • To inform them about products with the intent of enticing them to buy the product. • To provide information that will help people solve a problem or accomplish a task. • To provide information that will help them make a decision about something. • Other purposes for informing?
<i>Purposes of Persuasion</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To persuade people to adopt a certain position on a topic. • To persuade them to do certain kinds of actions. • To set policy on an issue. • To critique or condemn things or actions. • To provoke comments or a response. • To make people think or feel differently about a topic. • To prompt them to reflect on their own actions. • To compellingly present a problem in the hopes of inciting people to want to solve it. • To persuade a granting agency to give you money. • Other purposes involving persuasion?

(continued on next page)

Aesthetic and Literary*Purposes*

- To make people laugh.
- To make them feel differently about something.
- To appeal to their sense of wonder, mystery, or fantasy.
- To help them understand more deeply a particular person or way of being.
- Other aesthetic and literary purposes?

Purposes of **Scholarly Inquiry**

- To present new knowledge to a scientific or scholarly community.
- To challenge established views with new evidence or arguments.
- Other purposes for academic inquiry?

How do you determine the purpose of a given piece of communication? Sometimes, especially in technical writing, the purpose of a piece of communication is stated clearly up front, in a purpose statement: “The purpose of this [piece of communication] is to do X.” However, purpose in most communication isn’t so explicitly stated. This means that you need to determine the communication’s purpose through analysis. To begin to identify the purpose of any intentionally designed piece of communication, you might simply start by asking, “What does this piece of communication seem to *want* from its audience?” Is it asking them to behave or think in particular ways (perhaps differently than they already do)? Does it hope to evoke particular feelings about the topic? If the purpose is not immediately clear, the following steps can help you more readily identify the purpose of any communication.

HOW TO...**Determine a Communication’s Purpose**

1. **Note where and when the communication appears.** Since purpose is so closely linked to context and audience, thinking explicitly about these things can provide excellent clues about the purpose of the communication.


EXAMPLE

If you’re in the student health center and see a row of brochures prominently titled with names of various contagious medical conditions, you might guess even without reading them that their purpose is to inform visitors to the health center about the symptoms of these diseases and how they spread so that readers can take steps to prevent sickening others or becoming sick themselves. Since the student health center (by virtue of the professionals who work there and the money that funds it) is invested in maintaining the health of its patients and the campus more generally, this seems like a logical purpose.

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- 2. Gather as much information as you can about the communicators.** Knowing the values, beliefs, identifications, and social position of the communicators, as well as who is paying them, may give you some clues about their possible purposes. Say in a Web search for articles about genetically modified foods, you come upon one titled “GMOs proven to have few adverse health effects.” Clicking the link takes you to Monsanto’s website (Monsanto is a well-known producer of genetically modified plants). So you could probably guess that the purpose of the article is to improve public opinion of GMOs. Of course, this is not to say that communication produced by a communicator with something at stake in the issue has no value; however, you would need to very carefully evaluate the evidence presented to support the argument or underlying purpose.
- 3. Look for clues within the communication itself.** Focus on the choices made by the communicator. Doing so requires you to have some amount of background knowledge to recognize buzzwords and lines of argument that are associated with certain communities, which can be difficult at first. But with practice, and by combining this with steps 1 and 2, you’ll be able to identify the investments and likely purposes of an act of communication.

FOR DISCUSSION

- Reread the lists of common purposes [above](#). For each purpose listed, generate at least one type of communication (in any modality—written, visual, or multimodal) that attempts to achieve this purpose.
- Brainstorm a list of every type of communication that you’ve encountered recently (in all modalities). Match each type of communication on your list with the purposes [above](#). For the types you’ve brainstormed that don’t match any of the given purposes, try to determine their purposes using [Steps to Determining the Purpose of Communication in Section XX](#). Keep a list of the new purposes you come up with. As s, compile them into the categories [above](#) or create new categories.
- Find a piece of communication—it could be a published piece of writing in any genre, a visual communication, a website, or a song—that you find to have a particularly interesting purpose. Talk about the purpose(s) of the piece of communication and identify specifically how you came to that conclusion.
- Consider the screenshot of the *Elite Daily* website. You can also go to the site elitedaily.com and click around. What is the purpose of the site? Does it have multiple purposes?



2d The Means of Communication (Modality, Medium, Genre, Circulation): How Does Communication Physically Happen?



TEXTUAL GENRES

Chapter 3



VISUAL GENRES

Chapter 4



MULTIMODAL GENRES

Chapter 5

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 break down in detail how to analyze the rhetorical moves that are specific to various modalities (verbal, visual, and multimodal rhetoric). But before we dig into the specifics, it's important to understand the big picture of what we might call the means of communication.

With the advent of the Internet, and especially what some have called “the participatory Web”—the websites, apps, and platforms that make it possible for large numbers of people to communicate with large numbers of other people—the communication landscape has shifted dramatically. In less than a decade we've gained the ability to share videos and photos, and to post short or long discourses on anything imaginable through tools such as [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#),

[YouTube](#), [Facebook](#), [Flickr](#), and [Snapchat](#). The result is a sort of media Wild West: everything is in a fluid process of development, rules

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have been cobbled together in slapdash fashion, and nobody quite has a handle on the situation. Not only are traditional media venues scrambling to make sense of the new media scene (and in some cases, like many radio stations and newspapers, folding altogether), but regular people are finding celebrity and notoriety via platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube.

While we can celebrate the dramatic increase in the means by which it's possible for everyday people to communicate, this shift also means that you need to have all your wits about you. It's critical to develop a keen attention to not only how these new tools work, but to their rhetorical effects and consequences: unfortunately, the Internet abounds with cautionary tales about the perils of misusing or simply being unaware of how social media works.

EXAMPLE On Halloween 2013, a 23-year-old woman named Alicia Ann Lynch posted a photo of herself dressed in a Boston marathon bombing victim costume to Twitter. Some of her followers, outraged, retweeted her photo to their followers, and thanks to the lightning speed with which information can spread through social media, within three days Lynch had become the most infamous person on the Internet. For the conceivable future, anyone who Googles Lynch will undoubtedly turn up links to stories about the scandal; thus, her reputation has more or less been permanently damaged by her inattention to the rhetorical workings and consequences of Twitter as a communication tool.

The means of communication can be broken down into four parts: modality, medium, genre, and circulation. Each of these is described below, along with questions that will help you think rhetorically about how they work. But while I break them out to describe them separately here, keep in mind that they are always working together in any given communicative act.

The Modality of Communication

In some ways the most fundamental element of a rhetorical technology, modality refers to the basic sensory means by which communication happens. While the senses of taste, touch, and smell can certainly communicate, here are the modalities that are most frequently referred to and used for deliberate communication purposes:

- The **verbal modality** (words spoken, sung, handwritten, or typed)
- The **auditory modality** (spoken language, song, music, or ambient noise)

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- The **visual modality** (still and moving images, color, written text, gestures, or facial expressions)
- The **haptic modality** (involves a sense of touch, and where/how the body is positioned in relation to the communication; think of how you interact with videogames, for instance)

Most types of communication involve more than one modality; for instance, a speech combines the verbal modality (spoken language) with visual modalities such as gestures, facial expressions, and other ambient visual cues.

Paying attention to the modalities of an act of communication helps you understand its most basic limits—what can and can’t be done.

EXAMPLE Think about the differences between an in-person gathering of neighbors concerned about a proposed development project and a **Facebook** page devoted to the same concern. The modalities at the in-person meeting include speaking, gesture, and facial expressions (and perhaps handouts or PowerPoint). Such modalities lend themselves to things like spontaneous follow-up questions and collective, real-time discussion, which sometimes is the most efficient means for coming to a mutual understanding and making decisions. The modalities of the **Facebook** page, on the other hand, which might include pictures and short texts in the form of linear, chronological posts and comments, lend themselves to a visual record of the conversation among community members. Whoever is the self-appointed leader of the neighborhood group needs to think carefully about which modalities best lend themselves to the group’s goal or purpose.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

Thinking About Modality

- In what situations is this modality used? List as many as you can think of.
- In what sorts of communication situations is this modality most effective? What is this modality good for or best at communicating?
- What sorts of skills does one need to have to *effectively* use this modality? (“Effectively” is the operative word here.)
- What feelings does this modality of communication evoke (speech vs. writing, etc.)?
- How comfortable are people with this modality?

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FOR DISCUSSION

1. At home or in class (if the technology is available), examine a website like *Buzzfeed*. Create an inventory of all of the modalities apparent on that website. What kind of communicative actions does each modality enable and constrain? After considering the overall purpose of the site, discuss how the combination of the modalities on the site might help it achieve that purpose.
2. Imagine that you are part of a student group that wants to implement campus-wide composting in the dining facilities, dormitories, and other campus buildings. What modalities are at your disposal for enacting your purposes, and what do these modalities make possible or limit?

The Medium of Communication

Media are closely related to modalities but refer more to *the technical means by which communication is disseminated*.

EXAMPLES Some examples of media include the printed page—books, newspapers, magazines, brochures, posters, pamphlets), online PDFs, email, television, YouTube videos, photos on Facebook or Flickr, songs, film, cell phone, Web pages, SMS (text messages), social media sites, etc.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

Thinking About Medium

- What is the history of this medium?
- What can this medium do that others cannot?
- What modality(s) can be used with this medium?
- Does this medium allow one-to-many communication, many-to-many communication, or something else? What role(s) does this medium make available for its audience? (Many have argued that centrally controlled media like Hollywood-produced films and documentaries, radio broadcasts, TV news, and print newspapers put viewers in a mostly passive role because viewers don't have access to the means of production.)
- What groups does the medium exclude (i.e., who doesn't have access to the medium)?
- How does this medium shape the messages that it conveys? What constraints does it put on the messages?

FOR DISCUSSION

Choose a specific medium (e.g. the Internet, magazines, zines, radio, TV, streaming content services) and research its history as a form of communication (you can start by Googling “history of [the medium you’re researching]”). Use your research to answer the following questions:

- When and where did this medium of communication first begin?
- Why was the medium developed? What social/cultural/technological need did it fulfill?
- In what contexts and for what purposes is the medium primarily used nowadays?
- How has the medium changed from its original use or intent?

Then create a four-slide presentation (see [Chapter 13](#) for instructions on how to design presentation slides) that you can give in class (or, alternatively, a slidecast—a presentation with a recorded voiceover—that you can post online) that answers these questions for the rest of the students in the class.

The Genre of Communication

Genres are somewhat stabilized yet flexible forms of communication that have developed over time and in response to all these other rhetorical factors: purpose, audience, context, exigence, modalities, media, and circulation.

EXAMPLES Almost any form of communication you can think of is a genre: letters, obituaries, blog posts, contracts, advertisements, novels, textbooks, landscape photographs, documentaries, horror movies, and so on.

Genres arise from particular needs or patterns of activity.

EXAMPLES The genre of “listicles” (articles in list form, like “7 Ways You Know You Just Drank Too Much Coffee”) emerged in full force once the dominance of social media brought people in contact with way too much information to process. Through their format and content, listicles signal to the reader that they are easy to read and accessible, and hence won’t take up too much of readers’ time and attention.

Genres can enact certain cultural values and beliefs.

EXAMPLES The passive voice in a scientific lab report reinforces the scientific value of objective facts (not subjective humans) speaking for themselves.

Genres can also shape how their users see the world.

EXAMPLE In one academic study, workers in a group home for women with various mental illnesses were ordered to change how they kept track of the residents, from a journal-like daily log of household events to sheets

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that kept track of individual patients (**Writing UP/Writing Down**). A genre analysis of the change showed that the individualized sheets had the effect of amplifying various patients' behaviors because it no longer showed the behavior in the general context of the home (other patients' behaviors and material happenings in the general house such as power interruptions).

It's important to note that genres are not fixed: new genres and sub-genres, even in traditional media such as books and film, are continually emerging.



QUESTIONS TO ASK

Thinking About Genre

- Where does the genre appear? In what medium and context?
- What are the features of the genre? What are the things (content, format) that make it recognizable as a genre?
- Who composes using this genre?
- Who is the audience for this genre? In what circumstances do they typically engage with the genre?
- What actions does the genre help make possible? What actions does it constrain?
- How does this genre circulate?

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Brainstorm as many nonfiction genres as you can think of. Choose one of these genres and find three examples of it. Analyze these samples using the questions **above**. Write down your answers, supporting what you say with evidence from the genres.
2. Movies provide an easy way to get a feel for the conventions of distinct genres, and the materials used to promote the movies have developed genre conventions of their own. For this assignment, go to an online film streaming service such as **Hulu** or **Netflix** and find a link called "Genres." Choose a genre to analyze: romantic comedy, comedy, drama, military/war, Western, horror, sci-fi, etc.
 - a. First study the images for the videos and take notes about their various features: the images used, the typefaces, the colors, the juxtaposition of images and text (where the text appears in relation to the picture).

- b. Now study the descriptions of the films. Are there any commonalities in the descriptions of the film?
- c. Next, find outliers of the genre—images or descriptions that don’t seem to fit the conventions of the genre. What’s different about these?
- d. Write an overview of the features of the promotional materials for this film genre. Make an argument about the cultural values, beliefs, and assumptions that are revealed through these features.

The Circulation of Communication

Circulation refers to *the physical means by which a message gets distributed*. In an era where most information is digital, it’s important to think of how a message has been or can potentially be copied, forwarded, reposted, or appear in a way other than what one initially intended. This doesn’t just refer to unfortunate photos from last Friday’s party or texts composed at 2 a.m. that you later wish you hadn’t sent (though it’s important to think about these rhetorical effects!). Whole websites, like *Upworthy* and *Buzzfeed*, are devoted to recirculating content that they find valuable. *Upworthy* pays people specifically to write titles that will get the stories they circulate more clicks in the hope that those viewers in turn will pass the content on through “liking,” sharing, and reposting.

Rhetorically savvy communicators need to think about not just what the message is but also *how* messages circulate and the rhetorical effects that might have.

EXAMPLE I’ve noticed lately that videos created by media organizations like *Mic* and *The Guardian* now include an easy-to-read script (Figure 2.5



FIGURE 2.5 Screenshot of Chocolate Chip Recipe from a *Delish* Video

shows a screenshot of a chocolate chip cookie recipe video from the site *Delish*). Why do this? One reason may be that the creators of these videos expect them to be shared via **Facebook** or **Twitter**. Thanks to the **Facebook** feature that allows videos to play without sound when a user scrolls past them in the feed, a user can get the gist of the video's content without sound (so they can easily do this at work, for instance).

EXAMPLE Consider the following example as a way one person cannily considered the circulation of messages when composing his own.

In February 2011, football player Alex Tanney uploaded a video entitled “Alex Tanney Trick Shot Quarterback—Better than Johnny Mac” showing off his impressively accurate football throwing skills. The video went viral (as of early 2017, it's gotten over 4 million views). The History Channel's show *Stan Lee's Superhumans* noticed Tanney's video and subsequently filmed a segment featuring Tanney, which aired in July 2011. Soon after, Tanney was signed by the NFL, and has since gone on to play for several NFL teams.

Tanney's success, which can arguably be attributed at least in part to the notoriety generated by his viral video, did not go unnoticed. In June 2012 (after Tanney had been signed to the Kansas City Chiefs), another NFL hopeful named Chad Elliott uploaded a video named “Chad Elliott Trick Shot Quarterback —Better than Alex Tanney and Johnny Mac” to **YouTube** (Figure 2.6). Elliott's video, which owing to its title comes up in the search results for “Alex Tanney trick shots,” is fairly professionally produced. It also has a direct message, to a specific audience: in the beginning of the video, the text “Attention NFL Scouts...Chad Elliott is here!!” flashes on the screen, followed by Elliott's stats and playing history, and the message “Now's [*sic*] your chance. Call or email today!” His email address is posted below the video.

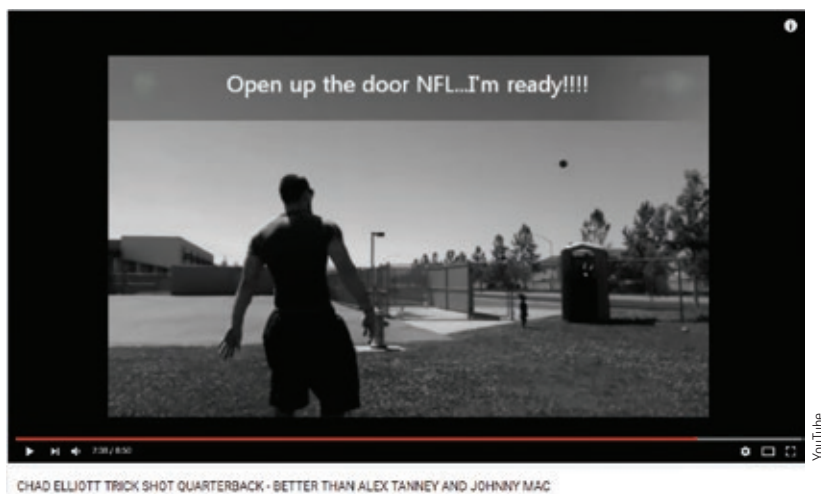


FIGURE 2.6 Screenshot of Chad Elliott's Video

The interesting thing about Elliott’s video was that it shows how he was being strategic about not only his message, but about rhetorical circulation—*i.e.*, how he could get the right people to see his message. The comments below the video suggest that the right people (NFL scouts) in fact *did* see it, though it appears that Elliott’s overall knowledge of the game and lack of discipline may have ultimately kept him from the NFL. Perhaps he’d be better as a marketing consultant.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

Thinking About Circulation

- What resources (technical, education/training, financial, skills, connections, etc.) does one need in order to produce a message in this modality and medium? Does one need to be a specialist?
- What are the physical and technological means by which messages produced in this modality and medium circulate? How do they reach their intended audiences?
- How can messages produced in this modality and medium be reproduced and redistributed? What are the barriers (legal, financial, technical, and otherwise) to recirculating a message produced in this modality and medium? (For example, digital messages can be reproduced very easily, but print documents and photographs can also be scanned, copied, and circulated in a variety of ways.)
- By what means might you best reach a particular audience? What media or modalities do they have cultural and technical access to?
- Which messages circulated by this modality and medium get the most attention?

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Identify a case where somebody thought rhetorically about circulation and used it to further his or her agenda. Identify another case where someone didn’t think about the rhetorical power of circulation, to bad effect.
2. As a class, try to explain the differences in circulation between academic work (that is, compositions that are aimed at other scholars) and compositions that are aimed at the public. What are the features of each meant to aid in the circulation of the composition?

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ASSIGNMENT

Comparing Compositions That Have Similar Purposes but Different Formats

Find three compositions that are similar in content and purpose, but are composed using different means of communication

(i.e. modalities, media, genre, and circulation). For example, you might compare a recipe found in a print cookbook, a recipe found in a food blog like *Smitten Kitchen*, and a how-to instructional recipe video like the one by *Delish* shown in Figure 2.5.

First, analyze each of these compositions using the terms described above. Then create a Prezi, infographic, or other visual composition that analyzes and shows the difference between each of these rhetorical compositions, using at least some of the terms described in the rhetorical star: exigence, audience, purpose, modality(s), medium, genre, and circulation. You should aim to show someone not versed in rhetoric what makes these compositions rhetorically different from each other and why the difference is important or interesting. Be creative with your presentation style.

FOR REFLECTION

Transferable Skills and Concepts

In this chapter we learned about the wider set of forces that influences composition and communication: exigence, purpose, and the means of communication. For this reflective journal piece, think about one specific communication platform that you use frequently: paper, email, writing on walls, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. What does this platform allow you to do, and what limitations with it have you noticed? How are these linked to the platform's technological features?

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