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Writing Rhetorically

What does it mean to be a writer today? In a media-saturated world where visual images surround us, does writing still matter, and if so, how much? How has the increasing emphasis on the visual influenced how ordinary people communicate? One need only search Google to notice the power that images hold. While drafting this chapter, for instance, I searched for *dog and owner* photos and promptly got more than 371 million hits. Clearly, dog owners are using the web to communicate how much they love their pets.

As a medium, photographs are not new, and neither is sharing them. Now, though, just about anyone with a smartphone can establish a visually rich presence on the web. On social media sites such as Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter; on video-sharing sites like YouTube; and on many blogs, images and video or audio clips can be as important as the written text.

Written language has hardly lost its power, however. If anything, the power of the written word has grown. Individuals with access to online technologies are writing more than ever before. On the same day that I searched Google for photos of owners with their dogs, I also searched Amazon for the

The power of images: The love people have for their pets — and the power images have to communicate — is reflected in the huge number of pet photos online.

Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* trilogy and found 73,948 customer reviews of this novel. Outside of school, many students read and write virtually all the time, via texting, tweeting, posting on social media, and so on.

Technology, of course, has engendered many changes in the kinds of texts produced, and the design of these texts has become increasingly important, with more and more texts integrating video, photographs, music, and the spoken word.

You may think that the writing you do for fun is irrelevant to the writing you do for your classes. It's not. All your experiences as a writer, reader, speaker, and listener will help you learn how to meet the demands of academic writing. But to communicate effectively, you will need to develop your rhetorical sensitivity: your ability to make effective choices about your writing based on your purpose, your audience, and the genre and medium in which you're composing and presenting. As you well know, a text to a friend is very different from an essay for a history class. Learning how to recognize your rhetorical situation and to adjust your writing appropriately will play a powerful role in helping you transfer what you already know about writing to an academic setting. This chapter (and this book) will help you gain that understanding.

Understanding the Impact of Communication Technologies on Writing

One helpful way to understand the impact of technology on writing is to consider the history of the printed text. For centuries, the only means of producing texts was to copy them by hand, as European scribes did in the Middle Ages. The limited number of manuscripts created meant that few people owned manuscripts and fewer still could read them. In 1440, Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press, which could produce multiple copies of texts and therefore dramatically increased the availability of the written word. The rise of printing tended to deemphasize the role of visual elements, however, because the technologies for printing words and images were largely incompatible. In the 1800s, it became possible to print high-quality illustrated texts. Since that time, readers have come to expect increasingly sophisticated combinations of words and images.

The history of texts produced by individual writers differs from that of printed texts. The invention of the typewriter in 1868 enabled writers to produce texts much more efficiently than they could writing by hand, and by using carbon paper, they could even make multiple copies. But typewriters were designed to produce only words. Writers could manipulate spacing and margins, and they could underline words and phrases, but that was about it.

The development of the personal computer and of sophisticated software for writing, design, and illustration changed all that. Today anyone with access to the Internet can compose texts that have most, if not all, of the features of professionally produced documents, including integrated visual and auditory elements. An art history student who's convinced that graffiti represents an

important genre of contemporary art could write a traditional print essay to make this argument, but she could also create a video, develop a PowerPoint or Prezi presentation, or record a podcast to make her point. If this student has an ongoing interest in graffiti art, she might even host a blog on this subject.

for **exploration**

List all the kinds of writing you do, from traditional print and handwritten texts such as essays, class notes, and to-do lists to texts, tweets, social media posts, and blog comments.

Now turn your attention to the media you use to write.

- In writing essays for your classes, do you first brainstorm and write rough drafts by hand and then revise at your computer; do you write entirely in a digital medium (on your computer, laptop, tablet, or smartphone); or do you switch back and forth, depending on the project and situation?
- How many programs do you typically have open on your computer, and how often do you move back and forth from your word processing program to Google, social media, or some other site as you compose?
- Does your smartphone play a role in your writing?
- Do you ever incorporate images or graphics (yours or other people's) into your informal or formal writing? Are design elements and visual images more important to some kinds of writing that you do than to other kinds?

Take a few more minutes to reflect about what — and how — you write. What insights have you gained from this reflection?

The ability to compose in diverse media (print, digital, and oral) and to integrate words, images, and sounds represents an exciting opportunity for writers—but opportunity can also bring difficulties and dilemmas. Consider the art history student writing an essay on graffiti as art. If she followed the conventions of traditional academic writing, she would double-space her essay and choose a readable font (like 12-point Times New Roman) that doesn't call attention to itself. If she's using headings, she might make them bold; she might also include some photographs. In general, though, her essay would look and read much like one written twenty, or even fifty, years ago.

Suppose, however, that in addition to assigning an essay, her instructor required students to prepare a presentation on their topic using software like PowerPoint or Prezi. The student would still need to communicate her ideas in a clear and understandable way, but she might manipulate fonts and spacing to give her presentation an edgy, urban feel. Although she would hardly want to use a font like the graffiti-style BROOKLYN KIDS throughout, she might employ it at strategic points for emphasis and to evoke the graffiti she's writing about (see p. 4). She might choose visual examples of graffiti and arrange her images in prominent or unusual ways to create the kind of in-your-face feel that characterizes much graffiti. In each case the student is sharing her understanding of and enthusiasm for graffiti, but she is doing so in ways appropriate to her particular rhetorical situation.

Settings for GRAFFITI

- Subways eliminated in the late 1980s as most popular venue
- Moved above ground to walls and buildings
- Freight trains took art across continent

DON EMMERT/AFP/Getty Images

Tools for GRAFFITI

- Paint cans using custom spray nozzles
- Keith Haring's work with chalk
- Markers and stickers
- Cutouts and posters applied with glue

Andrew Burton/Getty Images

PowerPoint Slides from a Student Presentation

Writing and Rhetoric

One of the most powerful resources that students, and other writers, can draw upon is one of the oldest fields of study in Western culture: rhetoric. Rhetoric was formulated by such Greek and Roman rhetoricians as Isocrates (436–338 B.C.E.), Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.), Cicero (106–43 B.C.E.), and Quintilian (35–96 C.E.). Originally developed to meet the needs of speakers, rhetoric came to be applied to written texts as well. Thanks to recent developments in communication technologies, students today are increasingly communicating via multiple media, not just print. In this world of expanded media and modes of communication, rhetoric continues to provide essential guidance.*

When you think rhetorically, you consider the art of using words, images, space and design elements, sounds, and gestures to engage—and sometimes to persuade—others. Writers who think rhetorically apply their understanding of human communication in general, and of texts in particular, to the decisions that will enable effective communication within a specific situation.

A rhetorical approach to writing encourages you to consider four key elements of your situation:

1. Your role as a *writer* who has (or must discover) something to communicate
2. One or more *readers* with whom you would like to communicate
3. The *text* you create to convey your ideas and attitudes
4. The *medium* (print, digital, oral) you use to communicate that text

The relationship among these elements is dynamic. Writers compose texts to express their meaning, but readers are equally active. Readers don't simply decipher the words on the page; they draw on their own experiences and expectations as they read. As a student, for instance, you read your economics textbook differently than you read a comic book or a popular novel. The more experience you have reading certain kinds of writing—textbooks in your major or the sports or financial pages of the newspaper, for example—the more you will get out of them.* (The same is true for viewers and listeners, of course.) Rhetoric is a practical art that helps writers make effective choices by taking each of these four elements into consideration within specific rhetorical situations.

Let's return to the student who wants to write an essay on graffiti as art. To analyze her situation, she would first consider her own position as a writer. As a student in a class, how much freedom does she have? In academic writing, this question leads immediately to the second element of the rhetorical situation: the reader. In academic writing, the reader is primarily the teacher, even when the student is asked to imagine another audience (an audience of interested nonexperts, for example). In an academic context, the student would

* **To learn more about multimodal composing, see Chapter 11.**
For more about reading, see Chapter 2.

also need to consider the nature of her assignment, such as how open it is and what statement (if any) the teacher has provided about format and expectations. But the writer would also want to draw on her general understanding of writing in the humanities. Instructors in the humanities often favor a conservative approach to academic writing; they want to make sure students can develop and express clear, logical, and insightful prose. So while this student might use headings and images in her research project, her safest bet would be to focus primarily on the clear and logical development of the ideas.

This student would have more flexibility in approaching her PowerPoint or Prezi presentation. The conventions for presentations are more open than those of traditional academic writing. Moreover, instructors and students alike expect individuals who compose presentations to take full advantage of the medium. Since this presentation would be for a class, however, the student would still want to focus on the development of her ideas, and any visual and design elements would need to enhance and enrich the expression of those ideas.

In this example, the student's teacher has specified the media that should be used: a print essay and a presentation using PowerPoint or Prezi. For this reason, constructing a blog or creating a video would be an inappropriate response to the assignment, but the student could embed video clips of interviews with graffiti artists and images of their work in her presentation. As this example indicates, a rhetorical approach to writing encourages you to think in practical, concrete ways about your situation as a writer and to think and act like a problem solver.

Composing and Designing Texts

When you think and act like a problem solver, you use skills that have much in common with those used in the design profession. There are many kinds of design—from industrial design to fashion design—but writing is especially closely allied with graphic design, thanks in large part to the development of software programs like Adobe InDesign and Adobe Photoshop. In fact, given ongoing developments in communication technologies, conventional distinctions between these two creative activities seem less and less relevant. While it is true that in the humanities the most traditional forms of academic writing emphasize words over images and other design elements, student writers—like all writers—are integrating the visual and verbal in texts more than ever before.

In his influential book *How Designers Think*, Bryan Lawson lists the essential characteristics of design:

- Design problems are open-ended and cannot be fully specified.
- The design process is endless.
- There is no infallibly correct process of design; rather, design is a persuasive activity that involves subjective value judgments.
- The design process involves finding as well as solving problems.

These characteristics apply, Lawson argues, to all kinds of design, from product design to graphic design.

Like design, writing is a creative act that occurs within an open-ended system of opportunities and constraints, and the writing process, too, is potentially endless in the sense that there is no objective or absolute way to determine when a project is complete. Instead, writers and designers often call a halt to their process for subjective and pragmatic reasons: They judge the project to be ready when they believe that their audience or clients will be pleased or when they run out of time or money. Indeed, the open-ended nature of writing and design is typical of activities that require creativity.

Precisely because writing and design are creative processes, there is no infallibly correct process that writers and designers can follow. Experience enables writers and designers to determine the strategies appropriate to the task, but each project requires them to consider anew their situation, purpose, medium, and audience. As they do so, designers and writers do not just solve problems; they also find, or create, them. That may sound intimidating at first. "I don't want to find problems," you might think. "I want to solve them quickly and efficiently." Here's the rub: Often you can't do the latter until you do the former.

Let's say, for example, that two dormmates are frustrated because their room is always a mess. They talk it over and realize that the problem is that they don't have enough storage space, a common problem for students who live in dorms.

To address this problem, they have to go beyond the general recognition that they need more storage space to pinpoint the problem more specifically. After reading an online article on organizing and redecorating dorm spaces, they realize that the real problem is that they've neglected to systematically consider all their storage options. Once they've identified the crux of their problem, they can address it; in this case, they take measurements and head to the local discount store to look for inexpensive storage units that will fit the space. They've solved their storage problem in part by correctly identifying, or creating, it.

In writing and in design, as in everyday life, the better you are at identifying your problem, the better you will be at addressing it. In fact, the ability to identify complex and sophisticated problems is one feature that distinguishes experienced from inexperienced writers and designers. An interior designer might develop solutions to the roommates' dorm room problems more quickly, and possibly more innovatively, than the students do. Furthermore, as Lawson argues, design inevitably involves subjective value judgments and persuasion to convince clients to accept the designer's vision. One roommate, for instance, may argue for design purchases that reflect her commitment to sustainably produced products, while the other roommate may believe that the least expensive product that meets their needs is the best choice.

Both writing and design offer individuals the opportunity to make a difference in the world. Someone who redesigns wheelchairs to improve their comfort and mobility, for instance, will improve the quality of life for

all who rely on them. It's easy to think of writers who have made a difference in the world. Most environmentalists agree, for example, that Rachel Carson's 1962 *Silent Spring* played a key role in catalyzing the environmental movement. But there are other, less visible but still important examples of the power that writing can have to effect economic, social, political, and cultural change. Writing is one of the most important ways that students can become members of a disciplinary or professional community. For example, in order to be recognized as professional civil engineers, engineering students not only need to learn how to plan, design, construct, and maintain structures; they also must learn to write like civil engineers. Besides playing a key role in most careers, writing also represents an important way that citizens express their views and advocate for causes (see the poster on p. 9). Think, for example, of the role that Twitter and Instagram now play in politics and public affairs. In these and other ways, writing provides an opportunity for ordinary people to shape the future of local, regional, and national communities.

for **exploration**

Write for five to ten minutes in response to this question: What has this discussion of the connections between writing and design helped you better understand about written communication?

for **collaboration**

Bring your response to the preceding Exploration to class and meet with a group of peers. Appoint someone to record your discussion and then take turns sharing your writing. Be prepared to share your discussion with the class.

Developing Rhetorical Sensitivity

thinking rhetorically

Both graphic designers and writers understand that to create a successful project they must do the following:

- Draw on all their resources, learning from their experiences, exploring their own ideas, and challenging themselves to express those ideas as clearly and powerfully as possible
- Consider their audience—who they are, what they know and like, and what they value and believe
- Assess the purpose and goals of the project—the meaning they wish to communicate and their reasons for composing
- Make use of all the tools available to them (such as word processing and image and sound creation and editing, as well as specialized programs), given the medium in which they are working

In all of these activities, experienced writers and designers practice *rhetorical sensitivity*.

Poster Advocating for a Cause

Designers and writers practice rhetorical sensitivity when they explore the four elements of rhetoric—writer/designer, audience, text/project, and medium—in the context of specific situations. The student writing about graffiti art, for example, drew on her rhetorical sensitivity in determining how best to respond to her assignment. She realized that as a student writing for a class, she is constrained in significant ways and that her reader's (that is, her teacher's) expectations are crucial to her decision making. She also knew that the textual conventions governing essays are more conservative than those governing presentations and that differences in media—print versus PowerPoint or Prezi—reinforce this distinction. As a result of her analysis, this student realized that she had more freedom to experiment with visual elements of design in her presentation than in her essay.

thinking rhetorically

To respond to her assignment, this student consciously explored her rhetorical situation. Writers and designers are particularly likely to do this when they undertake an important assignment or work for a new client. At other times, this kind of analysis takes the form of rhetorical common sense. In your daily life, you already practice considerable rhetorical sensitivity. As you make decisions about how to interact with others, you naturally draw on your commonsense understanding of effective communication. When you interview for a job, everything you do before and during the interview—what you wear, how you act, and what you say—is in an effort to make it a success. Much of your attention will focus on how best to present yourself, given the company you are applying to. You would dress differently if you were interviewing at your local fitness center rather than at a bank, for example. You would probably also recognize the importance of being well prepared and of interacting effectively with your interviewer. Savvy applicants know that everything they do is an effort to persuade the interviewers to hire them.

strategies for success

It can be a challenge to "read" a rhetorical situation if you are new to the university or the local culture, or if the context the professor has provided for the assignment is unfamiliar. To better understand the rhetorical situation of an assignment, ask your professor or peers specific questions. Consult your peers or visit your teacher during office hours. This is time that professors have scheduled specifically to answer questions and help with assignments. Take advantage of that time and go visit!

You also employ rhetorical sensitivity when you "read" contemporary culture. As a consumer, for instance, you're bombarded with advertisements urging you to buy various products or services. Wise consumers know that ads are designed to persuade, and they learn ways to read them with a critical eye (even as they appreciate, say, a television commercial's humor or a magazine ad's design).

Rhetorical Sensitivity and Kairos

Writers and designers who think rhetorically understand that writing and reading do not occur in a vacuum. The language you grow up speaking, the social and cultural worlds you inhabit, and the technologies available to you, among other factors, all influence how you communicate. For example, most students find that the writing they do in college differs considerably from the language they use in their everyday lives. The language that feels comfortable and natural to you when you speak with your family and friends may differ from that required in academic reading and writing assignments. This is just one of many reasons why writing cannot be mastered via a handy list of rules. Instead, writers must consider their rhetorical situation; doing so is especially important when they are writing in a new or unfamiliar context.

thinking rhetorically

Writers must also consider what the Greek rhetoricians called *kairos*. *Kairos* refers to the ability to respond to a rhetorical situation in a timely or appropriate manner. You can probably think of some obvious examples of kairos in action. Consider, for instance, President Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, which was delivered on November 19, 1863, four and a half months after the Battle of Gettysburg—which Union soldiers won at a terrible cost—and the day that the new Soldiers' National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, was to be dedicated:

> Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.
>
> Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.
>
> But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

President Lincoln was not the major speaker at the dedication, but his words have rung throughout subsequent history, while those of other speakers have not.

Historians generally argue that Lincoln's address, which lasted roughly two minutes, was so powerful because it took full advantage of its rhetorical situation and strongly appealed to kairos. In 1863, the Civil War had been going on for two bloody years, and it would continue another two years before it ended in 1865. In his address, Lincoln shifted the terms of the war, redefining what had largely been viewed as an effort to save the union between the North and the South to one dedicated to ensuring human equality.

The Gettysburg Address represents a pivotal moment in the Civil War and in U.S. history. World leaders often draw on kairos when they respond to a crisis or argue for an initiative. Many arguments about the necessity of addressing global warming rely on kairotic appeals. Kairos also plays a role in our daily lives. Advertisers recognize the power of kairos, even if they are not familiar with the term. For example, much of the advertising

surrounding Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving when brick-and-mortar retail stores advertise what are supposed to be their best sales of the year, draws on kairotic appeals as advertisers attempt to persuade people to embark on a day of frenzied bargain hunting.

As these examples suggest, those hoping to persuade an audience to value, believe, or do something must necessarily consider kairos. This is also true of academic writing, which often involves argumentation. For example, instructors in a writing course might ask students to identify and take a position on a campus issue that they believe needs to be addressed. A kairotic approach to argumentation would encourage students to explore the history of this issue so they could understand how best to resolve it and emphasize its urgency. It would also encourage them to pay careful attention to both explicit and implicit arguments made by others about this issue so they can better understand the most important areas of agreement and disagreement.

The first three chapters of this book will help you understand and apply a rhetorical approach to writing and reading. Chapter 4, "Academic Writing: Committing to the Process," will help you learn how to manage the writing process so you can be successful as a college writer. You may have a clear understanding of both the rhetorical situation and kairos as they apply to an essay you are writing, but if you procrastinate and begin working on your essay the night before it is due, the odds of writing a successful essay are against you.

As a college student, you may at times feel like the new writer on the block. Both this book and your composition course will help you build on the rhetorical sensitivity you already have, so you can use all the resources available to you to make timely and appropriate choices about your writing.

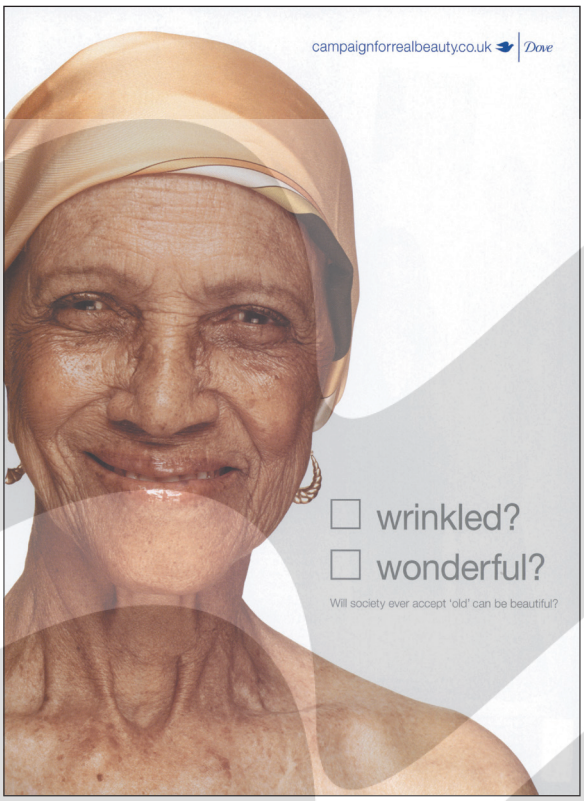
strategies for success

Academic writing conventions can feel strange and uncomfortable, especially if they are different from the rhetoric or languages you grew up with, you learned in your early education, or you use in other writing spaces like at work or online. Many writers, from all backgrounds, struggle with negotiating between the ways they are expected to speak and write in the classroom and the ways they speak and write in other places. It's okay to be frustrated. Remember, your goal as a writer is to add new ways of speaking and writing to your skill set without giving up your own ways of writing and speaking.

for exploration

Take a look at the advertisements for women's skin care products on p. 13. After carefully examining the two ads, respond in writing to these questions:

1. How do the designers of the ads use words, images, and graphics to persuade? Do some of these elements seem more important than others? Why?



The Advertising Archives

Advertisement from Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty

The Advertising Archives

Advertisement for an Anti-Aging Face Cream by L'Oreal

2. In what ways do the ads reinforce Lawson's observation that design involves "subjective value judgments"? Do they rely on culturally sanctioned stereotypes about women, beauty, and aging? If yes, how do these stereotypes reinforce the message?
3. In what ways do these ads demonstrate rhetorical sensitivity on the part of those who created them?
4. Advertisers often appeal to kairos in order to persuade consumers to buy something. In what ways do these two ads appeal to kairos?

thinking rhetorically

for thought, discussion, and writing

1. Take a few moments to recall an incident when you were called on to demonstrate *rhetorical sensitivity* and write a paragraph describing it. Then write a paragraph or two stating your current understanding of the terms *rhetoric* and *rhetorical sensitivity*. Finally, write one or two questions that you still have about these terms.
2. Write an essay in which you describe and reflect on the many kinds of writing that you do and the role that visual and design elements play in your writing. After writing the essay, create a text that uses words, images, and (if you like) graphics to convey the ideas you discuss. You can use any mix of photographs, drawings, text, or other material that will help others understand your experience.
3. Interview two or three students in your current or prospective major to learn more about writing in this field. Ask these students the following questions:
   - What kinds of writing are students required to do in classes for this field?
   - How would they characterize the role of images and other graphic elements in this writing? What roles, if any, do multimedia play in their writing?
   - How is their writing evaluated by their professors?
   - What advice about writing would they give to other students taking classes in this discipline?

   Your instructor may ask you to report the results of these interviews to the class and to write an essay summarizing and reflecting on the results of your interview.
4. Choose a newspaper of interest to you. It could be a local, regional, or national newspaper or your school newspaper. Read the letters to the editor that are published each day in the newspaper and identify three letters that you believe depend strongly on appeals to kairos. In what ways do these letters attempt to persuade readers to value, believe, or do something through appeals to timeliness? Be prepared to share your examples and analysis with your classmates.