

Understanding Misunderstandings: How to do a rhetorical analysis

By Trish Roberts-Miller

I.A. Richards once said that rhetoric is the study of misunderstanding, and I would only slightly modify that: rhetoric is the study of potential misunderstanding. Being able to do a rhetorical analysis has several benefits, not the least of which is that, when you are in the midst of a conflict, you can figure out what the conflict is really about (the "stasis"), what the various arguments are, and how those arguments are put together. In addition, should you decide to jump into the conflict, being skilled in rhetorical analysis can help you present your arguments more effectively, and even more ethically.

Rhetoric doesn't help you avoid disagreements, because a world without disagreements would be a bad thing. Disagreements result from lots of things, many of them good—such as that we have different experiences, different perspectives, and different areas of expertise. None of us knows everything, so we can learn from one another. Thus, good disagreement leads to better public decisions (because they are more broadly informed). So, we shouldn't avoid disagreements, even highly conflictual and emotional ones, but we should try to make them beneficial.

A productive disagreement ends up in all the participants understanding the situation better, whether or not they agree as to what to do about it.

It may seem strange to list as one of the benefits of skill in rhetorical analysis that you can figure out what the conflict is really about, as it often seems that it's absolutely clear—whatever the people are angriest about. But, it's fairly common for people to get angry with one another precisely because they're focusing on the wrong issue. This can happen in several ways. One of the more obvious is when people disagree about something because they disagree about premises (this is true of many environmental issues, where the unstated premise as to how long humans will be around is the real source of disagreement). This can also happen when people disagree about definitions—they are arguing unproductively because they don't agree on how the crucial terms should be defined (disagreements about the "liberal" media hinge on this). Sometimes people are arguing about the wrong issue in that they are arguing about something that can't be resolved, rather than shifting their discourse to something about which they might be able to do something (arguments about blame often fall into this category). Finally, there are times when people have not agreed as to what they're disagreeing about—what is the **stasis**?

Chester:

Please don't play with my red ball.

Hubert:

Well, you do some pretty crummy things, too.

We've all been in this kind of conversation, and we know that this is going to go from bad to worse faster than a squirrel goes up a tree. It's going to go wrong for a couple of reasons, the first of which is that Chester and Hubert have different stases (the plural of "stasis"). For Chester, the issue is Hubert playing with the red ball; for Hubert, the issue is which one of them is morally better.

And Hubert's stasis is the second reason that this is likely to get ugly—the more that a disagreement is, implicitly or explicitly, personalized (that is, about the relative moral worth of the beings involved), the more likely it is that people will attack without listening, and the less likely it is that the disagreement will be

productive. (Hence, avoid taking disagreement personally, and avoid attacking someone personally when you disagree with their ideas.)

Traditionally, people talking about rhetorical analysis draw a diagram (see figure 1.1). This diagram is a triangle, sometimes in a circle, which is itself sometimes against a background. The triangle has lines with arrows going in various directions. The point of this diagram is that you have (more or less) five things to consider when looking at a text: **the author(s)**, **audience(s)**, **textual strategies**, **immediate context**, and **larger context** (sometimes called "**background**"). The arrows go in all sorts of different directions because all those things influence one another.

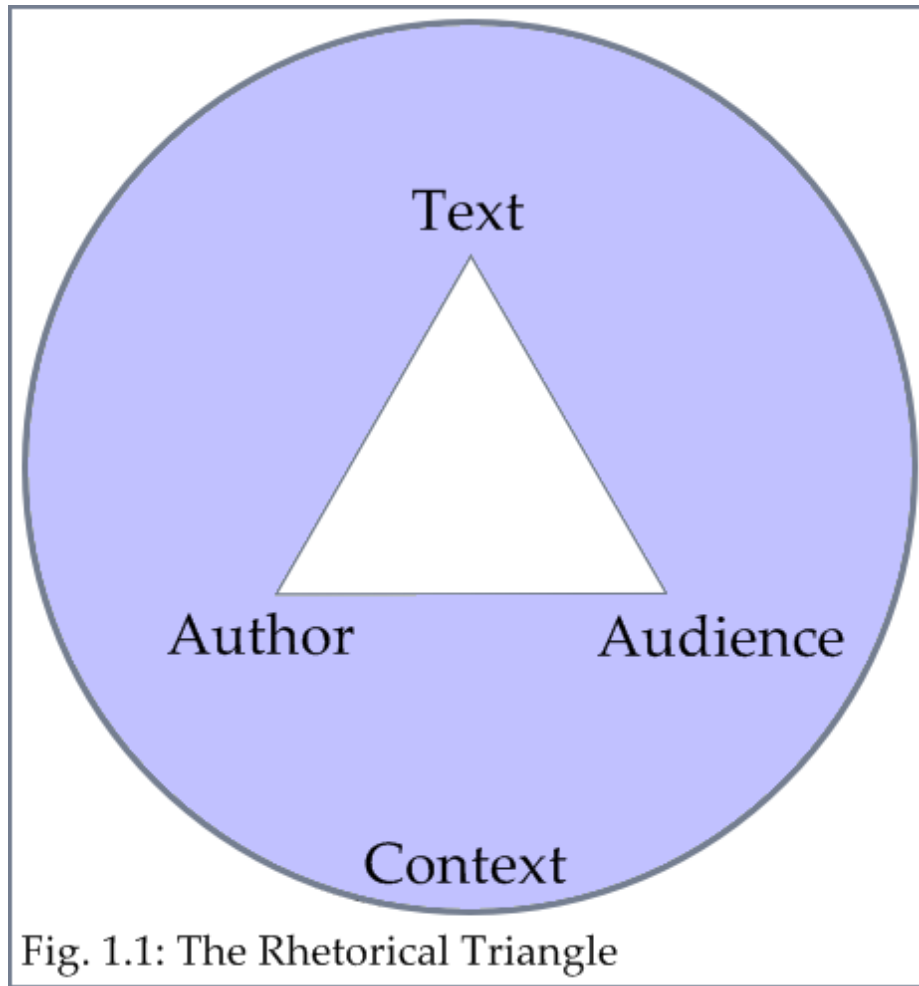


Fig. 1.1: The Rhetorical Triangle

For instance, I (author or rhetor) am writing this information (**text**) for my students (**audience**). The text is influenced by my intention (**author**) as well as my perception of what you people are likely to know and not know (audience). It is also shaped by the immediate context (e.g., how much time I have to write it, that I am using a word processing program that does not easily incorporate diagrams, etc.) and the larger context ("**background**" knowledge on which I can draw, such as that you know that squirrels go up a tree quickly).

Because there are so many factors, this triangle-in-a-circle-against-a-background can go wrong in all sorts of ways—people other than you might read this text, you might not know the things I think you know, you might be so phobic about squirrels that the mere mention of them sets you off into a panic attack and you'll miss my point altogether, I might accidentally delete a big chunk of text, and so on. (For instance, I once used the term "ignorant" in a class in North Carolina—in California, that's a neutral term meaning "not aware of". In North Carolina, like much of the south, it is an insult, meaning "stupid." I deeply alienated the students without having any clue I had just done so.) The more that the various things—author, audience, textual strategies, context, and background—work together, the more likely I am to create an effective text. The more that they

get in one another's ways, or contradict each other, the less likely it will be effective.

It is very common for a text to be effective in some contexts, or with some audiences, or in some ways, and not in others. And, it is quite possible for a text to be well-loved without being exactly effective, as the latter depends on the author's intention. For instance, William Harper's *Memoir On Slavery* was tremendously popular in the slave states and with people in favor of slavery, so, if his intention was to confirm a proslavery audience in their convictions, his piece was effective. It was outrageous to abolitionists, however, and even to many people who had never particularly thought about slavery. So, if he was trying to end the debate, persuade abolitionists, or reach an audience sympathetic to the anti-slavery argument, his text was completely ineffective.

A rhetorical analysis can focus on any one of those things (author(s), audience(s), textual strategies, immediate context, and larger context), but it is more common to focus on one of the **relationships** (e.g., how the author's intention is formed by the background, or how the author's intention shapes textual strategies, or how the textual strategies reflect the background, or how the context is shaped by the background). The more pieces and relationships the analysis tries to cover, the longer and more complicated the analysis has to be, so make sure to limit your analysis.

For instance, if you were doing a rhetorical analysis of William Lloyd Garrison's "To the Public," you might work on how he presents himself, whom he identifies as his audience, what he says his intention is, the way he structures his statement, his style, what abolitionists were doing at the time, or the slavery and abolitionist argument. Those would all be focusing on a specific quality. You might look at how his self-presentation (his ethos, discussed below) is connected to his intention, or how it is connected to his intention and audience, and so on—that would be looking at the connection between two pieces on that diagram.

Author/Intention

Rhetorical analyses generally work with texts that have an author or set of authors (but it is not impossible to look at how audiences are affected by random events). One can examine either the **actual author** or the **implied author**. People tend to assume that they are one and the same, but they usually are not. The actual author is the person (or persons) who wrote the text, and implied author is the ethos implied by the text—the author the reader imagines from the text itself.

The distinction is most obvious in something like a political speech—the politician says "I" but the speech was written by someone else. (So, the actual author is the speechwriter, but the implied author is the "I" of the speech.) Ghostwritten books are in the same category. If, for instance, you decided to write a legal letter, you might have an attorney write or draft it, but the letter would have your name signed to it (so you and the attorney are the actual author, but the implied author would be the person implied in the text).

Even things which appear to have a single author may have been strongly influenced by other people—readers or editors who made suggestions, for instance. Finally, even when a text was written by a single author, there can be a large difference between who the person really is and who the person seems to be from the text. People who, in real life, are cranky, mean-spirited, and belligerent may come off in a text as kindly, open-minded, and generous. Thus, my point is that the actual and implied author are not always the same. To make assertions about the actual author, you need historical-biographical information, but you can make assertions about the implied author just from the text. (This is confusing, I know, but will probably become clearer in class.)

Many of you have probably had teachers (especially in high school) who emphasized the actual author, and therefore required historical-biographical research. But, for reasons we can talk about in class, if you want, I generally discourage historical-biographical research as time-consuming, complicated, and inefficient. Instead,

stress the textual author and textual analysis.

An author has a variety of intentions in regard to a text—that is, an author wants the text to have a certain effect on some audience. To call it "a certain effect" might be misleading, as that might sound as though I'm saying there is only one effect, and that is rarely the case. In fact, it is not uncommon for an author to have multiple, even contradictory, intentions, and this is especially likely if "the" author is more than one person. To take the example mentioned above—a letter written both by an attorney and client who actually signs it—the primary intention of the attorney might be to represent the legal situation accurately, while the client might have the primary intention of intimidating the audience. These varied intentions might be obvious in the text—e.g., the parts written by the attorney might look very different from the parts written by the client—but they might not.

If you were writing a paper in which you argued that Plato stole everything he knew about rhetoric from the far more brilliant Chester Burnette, you might intend: to make that point about Chester, slam Plato (whom you have always hated), get a good grade, impress the teacher, write a paper you might be able to use as a writing sample for graduate school, practice using the periodic sentence, and try out a new word processor.

The desires may be conscious or unconscious (or in the very large grey area between), and may shift during the course of the writing. For instance, a novelist might want to make a lot of money, so s/he wants to write something wildly popular, but s/he might also want to get critical acclaim, and so feel the need to write something elitist. The text may show those varying intentions by having some parts that appeal to a popular audience and others that appeal to critics. The more that the various intentions are in conflict, the less likely it is that the text will achieve any of them. So, in your own writing, it is always a good idea to try to be clear with yourself about just what your intention is.

Focusing on the primary textual intention is usually helpful, both in your rhetorical analyses and your own writing. That is, what is the main point, and how does the author want the audience to feel about it? To call it a primary intention is not to say that it's the first one that occurs to an author, nor that it is the most important, but that it is logically the first—the author has to achieve that in order to achieve other intentions. For example, the South Carolina Congressman John Henry Hammond called for a "gag" rule—refusing even to accept, let alone discuss, petitions from abolitionists. Historians have speculated endlessly as to what Hammond's main goal was in calling for the gag rule—personal aggrandizement, tetchiness, the furtherance of Calhoun's political plan, or none at all (that is, some have suggested that Hammond hadn't thought about the long term at all, and was just reacting due to an over-festive lunch). But, whatever his larger goal, his primary textual intention in his speeches for the gag rule was to persuade his colleagues to support it.

In terms of analysis, the more that one is talking about the larger (and often more psychological) goals, the more difficult it is to get good evidence. Often, as with the case of Hammond, one is in the realm of pure speculation (and there is a real danger of engaging in what is often called "motivism," a fallacious kind of argument). The more that you speculate about internal motives, the more you need evidence that is sometimes hard to get—diary entries, letters, memoirs written by friends or colleagues—saying what the person was thinking at the time. It is because such arguments are so difficult to prove that instructors will tell you to "avoid assertions about internal states." That is, rather than talk about what an author "believes," write about what s/he says.

One is on firmer ground with textual intention, so accentuate that in your papers. The distinction is sometimes subtle, but it's important. For instance, if you say, "Chester Burnette was thinking that small dogs are evil," you need evidence about his internal state. If, however, you say, "Chester asserts that small dogs are evil" or "The logic of this argument assumes that small dogs are necessarily evil," then you're in the realm of providing evidence from the text.

In terms of writing your papers, research indicates that thinking a lot about extra-textual intentions (e.g.,

getting a good grade, impressing a boss, getting an article published) is closely associated with writing blocks. Shifting your attention, as much as possible, to writing an effective paper—that is, one that effectively persuades an informed and intelligent opposition—will generally prevent writing blocks at the same time that it may well get you the kind of results you want.

There are various ways of categorizing **intention**. Some people divide kinds of intentions into three categories: **inform, persuade, convince**. Augustine makes this division in regard to Christian preaching. With a pagan audience, he says, you might first need to inform them about the principles of Christianity. With an audience familiar with the doctrine, but who disagree with it, you have to persuade them (that is, change their minds). Some audiences understand and agree with Christian doctrine, but just can't get themselves to do it, so you have to convince them. So, informing an audience means telling them things they've never heard, and persuading means changing their understanding, and convincing means changing their behavior.

In *De Inventione*, Cicero has a different way of dividing up intentions, depending on the audience's reaction to your topic. Although it could easily be discussed here, because it has more to do with audience, I'll go into it more there.

William Brandt distinguishes between **argument** (changing a perception) and what he calls "stance playing" and others call "**display rhetoric**." In the latter, one's primary intention is to look good, and one does that by confirming one's audience in their perceptions (sometimes while appearing to engage in argument). I find the concept of display rhetoric very helpful—is the author really trying to change anyone's mind? Another useful way to categorize authorial intention is through considering the **stasis**. The stasis is the point at issue, the hinge on which the disagreement turns.

You can identify the stasis formally (described below), or through what we call the **topos**, meaning the topic. That simply means identifying the propositions, questions, or assumptions at issue. Often (always?) there is more than one stasis, and that is not necessarily disastrous, but it does make a disagreement more complicated. As mentioned above, in the example of Chester and Hubert, if the people disagreeing cannot agree on what the stasis is (or stases are), then it is likely to be disastrous.

This does not mean that the stasis must always remain the same in a discussion—it just means that people should agree as to what they're disagreeing about. In a productive discussion, it's common for the stasis to shift. You might start out on the topic of whether the Iraq War was justified and end up talking about whether one country is ever justified in invading another—if you and the other person disagree about the war because you disagree about the more abstract principle, that shift is very helpful and productive. If it isn't, and if you're on that topic because one of you is trying to distract the other, or has engaged in the straw man fallacy, then it's unproductive.

As I keep saying, sometimes the first move in making a disagreement productive is trying to identify the stases—what are the issues about which the participants disagree? (A stasis is usually identified as a "whether"—whether Chester should get to play with red ball all the time, whether the squirrels are in league with small dogs, etc.)

A lot of fallacies function by trying to shift the stasis without acknowledging that a shift is going on. If, for example, I am trying to persuade you to vote for Chester, but you are troubled by the fact that he is sitting in jail for embezzling millions of dollars, and you keep trying to make an issue of his honesty, I am likely to try to do anything I can to keep the discussion off that stasis.

A common way to do that is for me to try to get you to defend a position you don't have. Imagine the following exchange:

Me:

You should vote for Chester.

You:

Well, I'm concerned about his history of embezzling.

Me:

Oh, so you think a little bitty error that a person made years ago and which other people do all the time is a reason not to vote for someone. So you think George Bush is the worst President we've ever had just because he won't deny having snorted cocaine in college? Well, I know what to think of communists like you.

Suddenly, we're on the topic of George Bush, whom you may or may not like, and whether you're a communist, which may or may not be true. You are likely to be more than a little bit irritated. (There are various reasons that people do this, the most common of which is that they aren't really trying to persuade you, but they are trying to intimidate you—a really bad argument that is sort of hard to follow does that because it makes you want to stop arguing. Thus, the person can feel that s/he won.)

In *De Inventione*, Cicero lists a series of stases useful for criminal defense and prosecution. Imagine that you have been accused of a crime. You might:

1. Deny it.
2. Acknowledge that you did the action, but deny that it was a crime (e.g., it wasn't embezzlement, but a legitimate use of funds).
3. Stay away from the whole issue of whether you did it or not, and instead argue that the court has no right to try you.
4. Throw yourself on the mercy of the court.

Another way that people categorize stases is: **facts (conjecture)**, **definition**, **evaluation (quality)**, and **policy (procedure)**. Did something happen? What was it? How should we evaluate it? What should we do about it? Thus, for instance, people might disagree as to whether or not slaves are beaten and abused (the facts of the case); or, they might agree that such treatment happens, but that one side might argue that it is not abuse (how it is defined); or, they might grant that such things happen, and it is abuse, but argue that it is rare, or trivial (quality, also called evaluation); finally, they might agree that slavery is bad, but disagree as to what can or should be done about it (procedure, more often called policy).

Some people put another kind of stasis in there—**consequences**. That is, people might agree what the thing is, but disagree as to the consequences. It is interesting that each stasis seems to subsume the previous. That is, to make a definition argument, the rhetor must assume, assert, or argue the facts. An effective argument about the consequences must assume, assert, or argue the facts and a definition. An effective evaluative argument must assume, assert, or argue the facts, definition, and consequences. An effective policy argument must assume, assert, or argue the facts, definition, consequences, and evaluation. Hence, policy arguments are the most difficult kinds of arguments. (See diagram 1.2)

Another useful way to categorize intention is to distinguish between **deliberating** and **bargaining**. When two or more people are deliberating, the goal is to come to greater understanding, and potentially to reach a decision. In deliberation, success of an argument is supposed to be determined by the quality of reasons and evidence. One of the signs that people are engaged in deliberation is that they appeal to the truth, and they change their minds when given good evidence—often everyone involved ends up changed by the exchange, and the final result is different from what anyone had initially proposed.

In bargaining, on the contrary, the people are trying to get their way and will use explicit or implicit threats to win. The truth does not matter (although people might seem to appeal to it), and even persuading the minds of the others is not necessarily important. What matters is winning. If one side is much more powerful than the other, they will get their way; the more that the two sides are equally powerful, the more that the final

outcome will be a compromise between the two positions.

Thus, if Chester and Hubert are trying to decide which restaurant to go to, and Chester wants Chinese food, while Hubert wants Italian food, in a deliberative situation, Chester might describe how good Chinese food is because of all the cilantro, and Hubert might talk about how great the noodles are. They might end up persuading one another that cilantro and noodles are both great, and therefore go to a Thai restaurant. In a bargaining situation, Chester might promise to go to an Italian restaurant next time, or might offer to pay for Hubert's meal, or might threaten to bite Hubert unless they go to a Chinese restaurant. They might compromise, but their reasons for doing so would be because they have given up on argument and just gotten too hungry.

The final concept to mention in regard to author and authorial intention is **ethos**. In a way, ethos is simply the term for implied author—the persona of the author. Aristotle listed ethos as one of the three modes of persuasion, and it is important. If the author's ethos inspires us with trust, then we are more likely to believe the argument. Ethos is created by explicit references (e.g., autobiographical comments) and implicit ones as well (e.g., the level of formality, the degree of accuracy, the kinds of references).

For instance, if Chester were trying to persuade an audience that believed that a big, well-behaved dog is credible, he might drop evidence of those qualities into his text ("When I was the demonstration dog for obedience school..." or "Being 135 pounds..."). He might explicitly tell his audience how big he is and what obedience awards he has won. Or, he might just demonstrate those qualities—by being well-behaved (they could just look at him and see that he's big.)

Ethos is useful for creating **identification**, which some rhetorical theorists say is the most important part of persuasion. Identification is when the audience empathizes with the rhetor (or when the audience gets the audience to identify with some group). A lot of American political argument relies on identification—do people think the politician is like them—rather than policy (whether the person's policies will work) which I think is odd. It relies on the (deeply problematic) assumption that you can (only) trust people who are like you, and that you should mistrust people who are different.

Often, this strategy works through manipulating "**ingroup**" and "**outgroup**" identification. People generally see themselves as members of groups—this membership is important to their sense of personal identity, and they often automatically feel a bond with, and trust, others who identify as members of that group. They also often have some mental category of an outgroup—a group whom they automatically mistrust. Their sense of self-esteem is connected to seeing themselves as not a member of the outgroup. If a rhetor can get an audience to believe that they are all members of the same group, and that the opponent is a member of the outgroup, then s/he will automatically seem to be a trustworthy person.

Audience

There are lots of ways of categorizing audience, but I think it's most useful to begin by distinguishing the **actual**, **intended**, and **implied (or textual)** audience.

The **actual audience** is the one with which we're most familiar—the people who actually read or experience the text. It is important to remember that the actual audience is not always the people the author intended to reach. This can happen in several ways. First, the text may go astray, as when email intended for one person ends up splattered all over the Internet (for an entertaining account of this, see www.snopes.com).

Second, any text which lasts for a period of time may end up read by people who are very different from the people the author had in mind—Shakespeare wasn't trying to be difficult, but the language has changed in ways that mean that audiences now can have trouble with passages and references that his contemporary audience would have understood immediately. Third, authors sometimes misjudge an audience. I once

co-taught with a brilliant jazz fanatic, and he, in trying to explain to the students some distinction between ways of ending a paper, contrasted John Coltrane to Ornette Coleman. If you knew the two musicians in question, then his explanation was very helpful, but if, like most of the people in the room, you had no clue whom he meant, then you were likely to be pretty seriously lost. He didn't mean to be obscure—he just forgot that not everyone knows jazz as well as he.

(This also often happens with students papers when you've been researching something thoroughly. Think carefully about what is "known" to your audience, and what is "new." Make sure that you give the background information that your audience needs.)

A text can also have several actual audiences, with odd consequences. A textbook, for instance, typically has two actual audiences—the students who will use the book, and the teacher who selects it. (Sometimes there is yet a third actual audience—a committee or program director who selects the book for the teachers, and who may or may not even teach the course.) The teachers are likely to look at the book in terms of how they would find it useful but also how they think students would like it. So, one actual audience might mis-predict how another actual audience will react to a book.

The **intended audience** is the one in the author's imagination. It may or may not be similar to the actual audience, and it may or may not remain consistent as the author creates the text. (See the above example about the author who sometimes tries to write to a popular audience and sometimes to an audience of critics.)

It is most helpful to focus on the **implied** or **textual audience**, as that is the one about whom we have the most information. The implied audience is simply the one that we can infer from the qualities of the text—what sort of information is assumed, what beliefs are assumed to be granted, what is assumed to be at issue? You can figure these kinds of things out by looking at internal references, the logic of the reasoning, the proportion, implicit definitions of terms, and how things are evaluated. That is, what does the text seem to assume the audience will think is good and bad? This kind of thing is very hard to figure out when you share the author's perceptions (because then the values look "objective" to you), but somewhat easier when they are not shared.

Shortly after the Exxon Valdez disaster (when an Exxon oil tanker crashed off of Alaska and spilled a huge amount of oil), I heard this bit of a speech on Sproul Plaza (the free speech area on the Berkeley campus):

The normal definition of a bastard is someone who does not know his father. I want to change that definition—a bastard is someone who does not know his mother. Exxon is a bastard. [The crowd cheered wildly.]

What are the assumptions made by the audience so that they would cheer? Who was the implied audience of that argument?

At this point, we're starting to shift into talking about textual strategies, so I'll leave off and come back to it in greater detail in that section, but I do want to emphasize that it's by looking at how the text is constructed that you figure out the implied audience. And sometimes the implied audience is pretty much non-existent. So, for instance, I was reading a very interesting book that talked about media coverage of various issues, and I was thinking about using it in one of my classes. In the introduction, the book assumed that the reader would accept that gun control is a great idea, and that there was never any need for a person under twenty-one to have access to a gun (thereby knocking out hunters and many ranchers as part of the audience). A few pages later, the book took a nasty swipe at feminists, thereby suggesting that feminists were not part of his the implied audience. Along the way, similar things happened with environmentalists, psychologists, and various other categories of political belief. By the end of the book, I found myself wondering just who the implied audience was supposed to be, as I had trouble thinking of someone he would not have alienated. (And it was too bad, too, as I wanted to use the book for a class, but I figured he would have so irritated every single

member of the class that the students would not be able to see that he does make some really good points.)

Cicero, when talking about introductions, describes the kinds of audiences that one might have. He divides them up by how they are predisposed to one and one's topic: **hostile**, **well-disposed**, **potentially bored**, **potentially confused**. That is, if one's audience is already hostile to you or your argument before you even begin—committed to an opposition policy, for instance—then you have to shape your text in a different way. Announcing your thesis straight out is not a great idea, you will probably want to delay your conclusions till after you give your evidence, and you will want to ensure that you represent your audience's views accurately and fairly. Thus, a reader looking at your text could infer that the audience was hostile.

A well-disposed audience is one that already agrees with you even before reading or listening to you. With that kind of audience, you can assert things without or before giving evidence (assuming you give any evidence at all), you can get ugly about the opposition, you can announce your thesis at the beginning, and you can make a lot more assumptions.

This is one place where texts get scrambled—when the actual or intended audience is hostile, but the implied audience is well-disposed. Thus, for instance, if you are trying to write to someone in your opposition, but you announce your thesis at the beginning, insult them, misrepresent their views, and don't give the evidence they need, then you have a situation in which there is a conflict between your intended and implied audience. You also have an extremely ineffective text.

Textual Intention

As mentioned above, an author generally has a lot of intentions in regard to a text. We want to focus on the textual intention; which is best understood as trying to get a particular audience to feel a particular way about a proposition (the **thesis**). That is, a text has a major point: Chester Burnette has all the qualifications for President. Usually, the author wants a particular audience (e.g., people who believe that a President should be obsessed with the red ball) to feel some way about that proposition (e.g., agree wildly and passionately).

This is the part that my students typically have the most trouble, and it's because they have a tendency (like most people) to assume that everyone shares their values. So, if they believe that a President should be a great speaker, they assume everyone does, and base an entire argument on that premise without stopping to determine if their audience shares it.

To determine the primary textual intention, start with just trying to summarize the main point. Do not look at the last sentence of the introduction to do this. Students are the only people forced to put their thesis in their introduction; very few other authors do. Generally, the introduction (which is usually more than one paragraph) ends with a statement of the problem the text will address. Sometimes it is the thesis (Chester is the best candidate because he is most obsessed with the red ball), sometimes it is a thesis question (which candidate is most obsessed with the red ball?), and most often it is what used to be called a hypothesis—that is, a more abstract statement of the thesis (Let's look at the issue of what kind of President Chester would be). Having the thesis in the introduction is almost always an indication that the implied audience is an "in" audience—one that already agrees with the author—and is a strong indication that it is display rhetoric.

The most useful place to look for a clear statement of the thesis is the conclusion.

It is not uncommon for a text to have a several paragraph conclusion. For instance, texts often have one or more paragraphs in which the argument is summarized, and then one or more paragraphs in which the authors discussed implications, speculates on the significance of this argument, or engages in a rousing exhortation. So, you cannot simply look at the last paragraph; instead, look for places where the author says things like "in conclusion" or "in summary" or "my point is."

To figure out the intention, it can be most helpful to look at **metadiscourse**, **structure**, **recurrent topoi**, and **style**. Metadiscourse is a complicated term for something fairly straightforward—those places where the author speaks directly to the reader (e.g., "What I am trying to say is..."). Thus, for instance, William Gilmore Simms' *Slavery* begins with a statement to the state legislature in which he states his intentions in the piece. Keep in mind that rhetors sometimes mis-direct the audience—the abolitionists Angelina Grimke, for example, says that she is writing to other women, but one could raise the issue of whether she is trying to reach men as well.

As discussed in Advice on Writing there are various structures that a rhetor can use—list, syllogistic, chronological, and so on. There are not hard and fast rules about structure—in some circumstances, rhetors put their best arguments first, and in others they put them last, and so on. But, there are some indications of how a rhetor assesses her/his argument. In general, a skilled rhetor will spend the most time on whatever s/he thinks is most at issue, so the relative proportion of topics is something to pay attention to. Typically, effective texts move from known to new, or things the audience already knows to things the audience does not know. So, seeing where the rhetor starts can help you determine what s/he thinks is known and what is new (but remember that not all writers follow this rule—perhaps they should, but they don't).

A very important part of the structure for determining audience and intention is the **prolepsis**. That is the part of the text in which the author responds to opposition arguments. It is important for several reasons, including that it is a strong indicator of whether the author is engaging in display rhetoric. The prolepsis is often signaled by metadiscourse along the lines of "some people say" or "my opposition says." The question to ask yourself is: does the author go on to say what the opposition really says? Or is it a stupid version of their argument? If it is a stupid version (what is generally called "straw man"), then they are not really part of the audience (unless the rhetor's intention is to provoke them in some way).

As mentioned above, "**topoi**" means topics, or ways of making an argument. Thus, for example, a recurrent topos in anti-slavery writings is that slavers break up slave families, and proslavery writers almost always assert that slavery improves slaves because it "Christianizes" them. Sometimes a topos is particular to a single text or author—Channing keeps reverting to the topos that most abolitionists are too offensive in their rhetoric, William Gilmore Simms refers to Harriet Martineau's deafness so often that it becomes a topos. Topical analysis is very helpful for thinking about audience, and it can also be a strong indication of the context and background (for instance, when a topos shows up on all sides of a controversy, that's a strong sign that it is a cultural cliché).

Style is hard for students to pay attention to, but that's just because schools don't do as much with it as they used to. One can take the same sentiment, and express it with different sentence constructions. If I want to make the point that Hubert is brave, I might use a metaphor ("Hubert is a lion") or simile ("Hubert is like a lion"). I might do it in indirect ways—demagogues always use devil or contagion metaphors for the "outgroup;" sometimes they're obvious, but they can also be fairly subtle. Rhetors used to do it through an epithet, such as always referring to "brave Hubert," but that seems to me less common. Now it is often done through using a title.

In addition, different sentence constructions put emphases in different places, and that can have important consequences for the effect on the reader. **Passive agency**, for instance, makes causal relationships unclear, while **active agency** has great potency:

Active voice

Hubert **chased** the cat.

Passive voice

The cat **was chased** by Hubert.

Active agency

Hubert **chased** the cat.

(The grammatical subject of the sentence is also the agent of the verb.)

Passive agency

Chasing **happened between** Hubert and the cat.

(The grammatical subject of the sentence is not the agent of the verb. Notice, though, that this is active voice.)

Some abolitionists referred to slavery as the evil, while others referred to slave-owners as the source of evil. If you think about the rhetorical effects of the distinction, you can see why passive agency can be effective.

Figures of speech are ways of expressing meaning through variation in word, sentence, and even paragraph arrangement. Sometimes the shifts have purely rhetorical effect (e.g., making things more vivid), but often they change how we understand the text. For example, some of the abolitionists used the same figures of speech that are most common in Scripture—that added to the sense of religious urgency they were trying to convey.

If you want to know more about figures of speech, my favorite book on the subject is Arthur Quinn's **Figures of Speech**. Loosely, they can be categorized as depending upon **repetition, parallelism** (comparison), **contrast, deletion, rearrangement**.

So, for example, you might have a sentence in which each word begins with the same sound (Gerard Manly Hopkins' poetry does this beautifully), or each clause begins with the same word. You might have a passage in which each sentence begins with the same word or phrase, or a large chunk of a speech that begins with the same clause (The Declaration of Independence, the "I Have a Dream" speech). In all those cases, you are getting a desired rhetoric effect (and even meaning) through repeating. (The way in which that rhetorical figure affects meaning is that the **repetition** reinforces how each of the parts is like the other. In the case of alliteration, the meaning can be even more subtle, as when soft sounds are associated with something the rhetor wants the audience to perceive as soft, and harsh sounds with something s/he wants them to perceive as hard.)

Parallelism works in a similar way, but not necessarily through repeating sounds, words, or phrases. The grammatical structure is replicated, often on either side of a conjunction. The effect is one of suggesting balance. There can also be a powerful impact by having the same grammatical structure over and over and then suddenly altering it. That different sentence will be emphasized through the contrast. Parallelism can be ineffective when it is not intentional, and when the lack of variation becomes monotonous. (That's what I think happens in many of the Federalist Papers, for instance.)

As suggested in the previous paragraph, the comparison in parallelism can be important for setting up **contrast**. Contrast can also be effective for distinguishing one's policies from the opponent's, and for reinforcing the perception of there only being two choices ("ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country").

Metaphors work by comparison and contrast at the same time. They are often compressed analogies—"Chester is a king among dogs" suggests that Chester has the same relation to dogs that a king has to other people. Sometimes metaphors are very easy to translate ("Chester is a lion" meaning he is brave and noble), but sometimes the very reason that we use a metaphor is that the literal meaning is hard to convey (this is one reason that metaphors are often used for new technologies—horsepower, motherboard, mouse). Metaphors can be conveyed in subtle ways, as when a rhetor uses metaphors of disease for an opposing group or policy ("we must inoculate ourselves against kindness to small dogs").

Metaphors often end up clichés, and then people do not even realize there is a metaphor involved. Sometimes people start taking the metaphor literally, as in the case of disease metaphors for Jews and the Holocaust.

The figures of speech that depend upon **deletion** seem less obvious to us, but they are important, especially in speech. When a speaker stops halfway through a sentence, for example, that deletion suggests great emotion. Deletion can help parallelism ("I looked for him everywhere—the store, the park, the bars, the streets.")

Rearrangement is something that it's hard to think about till you have a really polished argument, but then it can be important. There are certain places that readers tend to emphasize—beginnings and ends of clauses, sentences, paragraphs, texts. Making sure that the concepts you want to emphasize are in those places (which can sometimes require rearrangement) will convey their importance to your reader. Placing concepts together, especially if repeated, will lead audience to believe that the two are linked (in Bush's speeches, he kept the words "Iraq" and "al Qaeda" close together, so, although he did not actually say they were linked, huge numbers of people thought he had).

Context

I am putting very little emphasis on the immediate and particular contexts of the texts in this class, not because they are irrelevant, but because they are particular and immediate. But, I think they do matter—Supreme Court decisions, for instance, are often influenced by public pressure (there is a reason that the Supreme Court split right along party lines to give Bush the election, and their decisions on free speech tend to more restrictive during communist scares). For these reasons, you may want to do more research on the immediate contexts of the text with which you're working, but do not feel that it is required. And just do enough to help you write the paper—the most important kind of evidence comes from close textual analysis. Whatever background research you do must be listed on the "Works Consulted" page.

Background

The distinction between context and background is somewhat arbitrary, as it is a question of degree. Context is particular and immediate, and it is often explicitly mentioned, but background is broader and often less implicit. So, for instance, for about a year after the 9/11/01 terrorist attacks, they were constantly mentioned, and their effect on our foreign policy was obvious and explicit. People no longer talk about them as much, but I would suggest they are just as much on our minds—they shifted from context to background. My point is that to say that something is background is not to say that it is unimportant, but that, on the contrary, it is so important as to not even require mentioning.