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Intermediate Composition

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Major Assignment #1

Understanding genre, audience and rhetorical situation

There are three major concepts critical to fully understanding written word and composing written word successfully. Audience, genre and rhetorical situation are elements of writing that affect its clarity and impact on readers. All three components are closely related and work together to create an effective piece of writing that keeps the reader interested and engaged.

Audience is very important to keep in mind every time something is composed. Whatever is being written should be written with a particular audience in mind, and with that the tone of the work potentially changes. Once an audience is identified the genre and phrasing of the writing can be greatly influenced. As Bitzer says of audience, “namely the audience to be constrained in decision and action, and the constraints which influence the rhetor and can be brought to bear upon the audience” (Bitzer, 6). Bitzer explains that the intended audience can affect how something is written and the audience is one of the constraints of a rhetorical situation.

When choosing or identifying an audience there are a series of questions one can ask themselves. Who is my intended audience? What is their point of view? What is the demographic of the intended audience? What is your desired response from the intended audience? Asking these questions can give one an insight to the reader’s mind and aid them with writing an effective piece of work.

Genre is another important element of writing, genre as described by Bazerman is a type of action and is categorized by the writings intended action not necessarily the writing itself. An example of a genre could be an email sent to a boss, this genre is written a certain way in professional language with the intended audience being someone in a business role. The genre of this work effects how it is written, as it does with all genres. Bazerman says, “Genre, then, is not simply a linguistic category defined by a structured arrangement of textual features, genre is a sociopsychological category which we use to recognize and construct typified actions within typified situations” (319).

Each genre contains a unique set of defining features. In addition to audience, genre can have a large impact on how something is written. Tone, language and format are all things to keep in mind when considering the genre.

Rhetorical situation is the context in which something is written, according to Bitzer there are three aspects of every rhetorical situation, the audience, the exigence and the constraints. Bitzer provides his personal definition of rhetorical situation,

“Rhetorical situation may be defined as a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence” (6).

The rhetorical situation is the basis for deciding an intervention. It serves as a starting platform to decide an appropriate genre in response to the situation. There are several questions one can ask themselves when considering the rhetorical situation and how to respond. Who is the audience I am speaking too? What is my argument or exigence? What is the motivation for writing?

In regard to rhetorical situation the exigence is the central issue or the motivation for writing. A rhetorical exigence cannot be something unchangeable like the eminence of death or the potential of pain in life but has to be something that can be changed or altered. It also requires discourse for change in order to be a rhetorical exigence.

As described before, audience is the intended reader, and is required for a rhetorical situation. The audience when applied to a rhetorical situation must be open minded and have the ability to be influenced, "...a rhetorical audience consists only of those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change" (Bitzer, 8). The audience must be identified and considered when responding to a rhetorical situation.

The final element of a rhetorical situation is constraints. The constraints of a rhetorical situation are all of the components of the situation ie, persons, situations, and objects, that have the potential to "constrain" the actions required to change the exigence. Bitzer describes constraint, "every rhetorical situation contains a set of constraints made up of persons, events, objects, and relations which are parts of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence" (8).

Once genre, audience and rhetorical situation are fully understood it is easier to draw connections between the three concepts. As previously discussed audience is one of the three components to a rhetorical situation, without an audience there is no rhetorical situation. As well as with the rhetorical situation audience is an important consideration when talking about genre.

The intended audience is a major factor when writing and categorizing the work. For instance, a commencement speech is its own genre and is generally written for faculty, friends and families of students and graduating students at a commencement ceremony. Billy Collins, an American poet, presented a speech in 2001 at Choate Rosemary commencement ceremony.

In his speech, he discusses the components that make up the usual commencement speech genre, including tidbits of wisdom and advice for succeeding in “the real world.” He decides to steer clear of the usual clichés and because he understands his audience he keeps the language light and casual.

Though Collins succeeds in keeping his commencement address unique and interesting, because of the genre of the speech there are elements that are unavoidable. For most, or all commencement ceremonies the situation and the audience are quite similar. The audience predominantly being young adults soon entering the work force, the speech includes words of encouragement and some sort of important lesson. Collins includes the most important defining features of a commencement speech, following the general outline for the genre.

The choice of genre is generally a response to a rhetorical situation, meaning that when a writer is considering the situation and all that comes along with it they must decide in what format to respond. The genre therefore, depends on the situation, “...the writer considers the purpose of her piece, whom she wants to reach, how best to appeal to her reader, and what sources and evidence to use...” (Braziller, 28). The choice of genre is reliant on the rhetorical situation and the audience, all three should be considered when deciding what elements to include in the text.

An example of the relationship between genre and rhetorical situation could be the response to the passing of a new law you do not agree with. Say, for example, your state recently legalized the use of medical marijuana and you do not agree with that decision; you could respond with several types of genres to any number of audiences. Writing a well informed and professional letter to your state officials is one option, another could be writing long posts on social media to stir up support for your cause. The letter and the post on social media have

different audiences, and very different genres. The post on your social media is directed towards friends and peers and is more than likely written in a casual tone, you are attempting to appeal to the average person. In contrast, the letter to your state representative should be professional and carefully proofread.

Genre, audience and rhetorical situation are all elements to be considered when composing a successful written work. In order for a writer to convey the intended message the rhetorical situation needs to be fully understood, a genre chosen and the audience considered heavily in the composure of the piece.

Work Cited

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