The Rhetorical Situation

The rhetorical situation refers to independent variables in a text, like audience, purpose, topic, as well as the relationship among those elements. By changing one variable, the entire rhetorical situation is altered (read more about the rhetorical situation at the Writing Commons).

The following questions can help you gain a sense of a text’s rhetorical situation:

• Who is the writer?
• What is the writer’s context? (i.e., What conditions are the writer operating within?)
• Who is the writer’s target (primary) audience(s)? (i.e., the main reader wants to reach)
• What are the writer’s goals in relation to the target audience(s)?
• Who are the secondary audiences? (i.e., What conditions are the audiences operating within?)
• What are the writer’s goals in relation to secondary audiences?
• What is the audiences’ context? (i.e., What conditions are the audiences operating within?)
• What is the subject? (i.e., the topic, the main point)
• Why did the writer choose to write about this subject at this time? (i.e., What is the exigence?)
• What is the text’s genre? (i.e., what would you call this type of writing?)
• What is the genre context? (i.e., what are the constraints of this particular genre? What other genres does this genre interact with?)
• How would you characterize the wider culture that the text, reader, and subject operate within?
• How does the rhetorical situation impact choices made by the writer?

Adapted from “Using a Mentor Text during the Writing Process,” developed by Michelle Cox, English Language Support Office at Cornell University