

Rhetorical Context – What is it?

Many composition instructors at UCF will ask you to include the rhetorical context for any essay that you write. What is this?

- "Rhetorical" is an adjective that means "by the act of communication" or "intending to transmit meaning." In a composition class, rhetoric is the art of persuasive or engaging writing.
- "Context" is the situation that surrounds any event.

The rhetorical context, then, is the situation that surrounds your act of writing. What are you writing? Why? For what purpose?

Professors may ask you to include a rhetorical context for several reasons. One important reason is that it helps you focus on exactly what, why, and for whom you are writing, thus keeping your thinking clear and organized. If you cannot explain the rhetorical context of your essay, chances are that you may have to reassess just what it is you are trying to accomplish with your writing.

Parts of the Rhetorical Context...

Depending on the specific requirements of your class, the rhetorical context can include a number of different areas. Some of the more common are subject, purpose, audience, and occasion (sometimes called the situation).

Subject

Put simply, the subject of your essay is your topic. It covers the content of what the essay is about. Obviously, you want to make sure that you are clear about your subject when you sit down to write. Possible subjects might include

- the UCF Student Activities fee
- professional women's soccer in America
- mandatory jail time for possession of ecstasy
- the TV show South Park
- Napster, Morpheus, and other music-sharing programs

The UWC website has a collection of possible essay topics; always check with your instructor about the appropriateness of your subject.

Purpose

What is your essay trying to accomplish? Your answer will be the purpose of your essay. Depending on your assignment, the purpose of your essay may be to

- narrate an episode from the past
- relate an event and explain its importance
- review or evaluate a text
- explain a concept or idea
- examine and investigate a problem
- argue a position

Your purpose will be much more specific than these examples, however, because it will relate to a specific topic (the subject) that you've chosen. For example, your purpose may be

- "to argue that the land bordering UCF's Greek Row to the north be preserved rather than developed for more housing."

This is much more specific than just "to argue a position." Depending on your assignment, you may have several purposes (i.e., to explain why something is a problem, and to argue for a certain solution).

Audience

The audience of your work is the group of people you are writing for. The style, tone, organization, diction, and content of your writing will be dependent on who exactly it is you want to be affected by your ideas. For example, an essay about drug use at Orlando rave clubs might be very different if the audience was the Florida legislature, the readers of the Orlando Sentinel, high school students, your parents, or ravers themselves.

Your instructor can provide you with help about who your audience should be. Sometimes, you may be asked to write to "an educated audience," or your class, or the professor. In this case, you will want to think about the kind of word choice, style, and structure that best fit this audience.

In any case, it's still a good idea to think more specifically about who your essay is intended for. For example, an argument essay probably doesn't need to be directed at those people who already think as you do--they don't need to be convinced. Similarly, those who have a strong opposing view may not be open to your persuasive attempts. In this case, your best audience might be people who are unsure as to how they feel about the issue, or are undecided.

The more you can define who you are writing to, the better you can craft your essay to have a specific effect on them.

Occasion (or Situation)

The occasion for writing is the external motivation you have for sitting down to write. For a composition class, some obvious external motivators may be the desire to get a good grade, or because the course requires you to write the essay.

Your professor will probably ask you to define your occasion in larger terms, however, than simply fulfilling class requirements. Presumably, you have chosen to write about a certain topic because it has some kind of meaning that you find personally interesting, compelling, valuable, or important.

- For instance, if you're writing a memoir about how important the regular Sunday dinner is in your family, the occasion for this might be the memories you have of the love and companionship you felt during these times when you were a child.
- Or, if you're writing a letter to a restaurant explaining a problem, the occasion might be the fly in your soup that made you angry enough to sit down and write.
- Or, if you're writing an essay that argues that UCF should build more parking garages as soon as possible, the occasion could've been the time you were late to class because you couldn't find a parking space.

Be careful not to confuse occasion with purpose. The occasion is your personal motivation for writing, while the purpose is what your writing is intended to do.

Remember, some professors will want you to include your rhetorical context at the top of the first page of the essay. Always check to make sure you're following the correct format for your class.