What is a Rhetorical Situation?

- Rhetoric: Using language effectively to persuade, inform, educate, or entertain

- Rhetorical Situation: The circumstances in which you communicate.
**Key Concept:** What is the “rhetorical situation”? It is the position of your writing in relation to various elements that affect the content and comprehension of your words—the identity of the writer, the purpose, the audience, the topic, and the context for writing. Each of these factors plays an important role in the writing process, and it is important to think about these in the planning stages of any writing project.

**Rationale:** While students may be aware of each of these factors, it is important to consider the relationship of these factors in the production of a written document. The following slides will serve as a guide to discussing each of these important factors and their relationship to each other.
Key Concept: Students tend to see writing as an egocentric activity—the expression of personal opinions, experiences, and emotions. Certainly, the writer has the most important role in the rhetorical situation because the writer is the one who makes decisions about what goes into his or her paper. However, there are many things about an individual that affect the way he or she writes about different subjects. Personal characteristics and interests play a major role in the writer’s choice of topics, position in an argument, and the style selected for communicating with an audience.
### Writer: Factors which can affect your writing include:

- Your age
- Your experiences
- Your gender
- Your location
- Your political beliefs
- Your parents and peers
- Your education

**Rationale:** This slide offers a sampling of eight different characteristics about a **writer** that can affect his or her approach to writing. There are, of course, many more factors, and the facilitator may choose to have the class brainstorm a variety of personal factors that affect writing situations.

**Examples:** To illustrate how these factors play a role in writing, the facilitator may choose to discuss some of the following examples:

Age--Age can play a huge role in how a writer thinks about a topic. Consider how a seventy-year-old would write about the subject of retirement benefits as opposed to an eighteen-year-old.

Experiences--How would someone who fought in the Vietnam War write about guerilla warfare differently than someone who has never fought in a war?

Gender--How might a woman write about the subject of abortion differently than a man might choose to write about it?

**Activity:** The facilitator may also choose to have the class participate and offer examples about the role of personal factors in hypothetical
Key Concept: People compose written documents for many reasons or purposes. Writing purposes can be best expressed in an infinitive statement: to + verb. The first click on this slide will show the infinitive statement. Additional clicks will provide a sample list of six different purposes for writing, but, of course, many more purposes for writing exist.

Activity: The facilitator may choose to show the infinitive statement, and then have the class brainstorm different reasons for writing. Participants might also be asked to give an example of their selected purpose at work.

Examples:
to educate—a composition textbook, a medical pamphlet about neonatal care, a magazine article about the differences between computer virus detectors

to call to action—a letter to your senator about nuclear waste, a letter to a newspaper editor about abandoned pets, an advertisement for a new credit card

to entertain—a magazine article about the new Tom Cruise movie, a
Key Concept: Genre is also an important element when considering the purpose of a writing assignment. A genre is a category of writing; the purpose of writing is shaped by the category of writing and its projected audience. Stephen King, an author of horror stories, writes to shock and entertain his audience. Molly Ivins, a political writer, tries to persuade her readers through her editorials to accept her opinions and enact change.

Activity: The slide presents several examples of different writing genres. To promote discussion, the facilitator may ask participants to brainstorm additional examples. You can also relate genre to movie genres and talk/brainstorm about it from that angle.
Key Concept: The **audience**, the group to whom one writes, is affected by many of the same factors that influence the writer. Writers need to use appropriate word choices and tone to appeal to their audiences. Consideration of the factors that define a particular audience will aid in making writing persuasive and effective.

**Activity:** The facilitator may ask participants to consider how a writer’s conception of his or her audience changes in each of the following examples:

How might a writer in favor of gun control write towards members of the National Rifle Association? A gun control advocate group? An undecided voter?

How might a historian explain the Clinton impeachment trial in a second grade history textbook? A ninth grade textbook? A college textbook?

How might you write a letter to your parents about the last party you attended? To your best friend from high school? To your grandmother?

Key Concept: Students sometimes tend to take the concept of audience very literally—"I’m writing this paper for my instructor.” The
Key Concept: Topic is usually the first thing students think of when they are given a writing assignment. When coming up with a topic, it is important to consider the parameters of the writing assignment, the projected length of the project, and the complexity of the issue being discussed. Narrowing a topic is an important process that should not be overlooked; making a topic more specific and focused can help the writer to build a more controlled, comprehensive, and compelling argument.

Examples: The American welfare crisis is not a topic that could be adequately covered in a three-page paper; this is a topic that might be more appropriately covered in a book-length argument. Conversely, the need for a new university bike rack is not a topic that could be covered well in a twenty-page assignment. Sometimes topics, such as the need for bike racks, need to be broadened to fit the requirements of the assignment.
**Key Concept:** *Circumstance and Context* is defined as the “situation” that generates the need for writing. The topic, purpose, writer, and writing audiences are all affected by current events, location, social customs, and cultural changes. The facilitator may note that the assignment and intended academic audience also impact the context of an assignment. It is important to consider the goals of the assignment in developing a focus.

**Examples:** For example, 1999 newspaper editorials about school violence were motivated by the Littleton school shootings. Articles about Kosovar refugees are written with different purposes in the United States than those published in Belgrade newspapers. Computer technology is written about much differently today than it was in the 1960s. Keeping attuned to the social, political, and cultural climate of your audience can help writers to produce current, convincing writing.

**Activity:** The facilitator may choose to look at recent newspaper headlines and invite class participants to consider the context for their production.
Rationale: This slide offers a review of the five interconnected components of the rhetorical situation. These elements are especially important when engaging in different categories, or genres, or writing.
**Rationale:** This final slide reemphasizes the importance of the rhetorical situation. At this point, the facilitator may choose to reemphasize components that might be especially important for the development of a given class assignment.

**Click mouse for each paragraph.**
The End