Understanding the Rhetorical Situation

Key Concepts

Rhetoric refers to the choices that a person makes to communicate effectively with an audience.

The **rhetorical situation** refers to everything involved in making this effective communication happen:

- Author's identity, expertise, and perspective
- Audience's knowledge, beliefs, and values
- Message the author delivers to the audience in order to achieve a purpose
- Context in which the author develops and/or delivers a message
- Exigence that prompts the author to develop a message

Statements in a passage may directly supply this information or provide clues about these elements and appear in any order throughout the passage.

1.A Author, Exigence, and Context

Brandi's Bid Episode 1

As a reader, it's important to identify details that are directly or indirectly revealed about the rhetorical situation and consider how these elements affect the way a message is crafted. Consider how these elements are used in a real-life situation involving a student writer.

- In the story above, you are given background information about this student author. You may not always have much information about the author of a passage, but by reading carefully, you can draw inferences about the author's background or perspective and their reasons for making the choices they did.
- Authors may provide information about themselves to establish their credibility with the audience. For example, when writing about the disappearance of her language and culture, a Native American author would want to talk about having Native American heritage.

- The event, insight, or concern that motivated the author to write is called exigence.
- To identify exigence, you will need to make an inference from the author's statements about a recent event, current situation, or specific problem.
- Read with this thought about exigence in mind: What is the major concern or situation that prompted the author to write?

- The context of a passage refers to the circumstances under which it was constructed, such as the events or issues weighing on the moment when the author wrote the text.
- Context can also refer to the text's genre, the type of publication from which it was excerpted, or its area of focus (e.g., academic discipline or category of concern).
- Understanding the historical context in which the text has been written can help you better understand the author's perspective and the experiences and mindset of the audience. For example, a text written in the 19th century might reflect a society in which traditional gender roles and class structures strongly affect people's beliefs and behaviors.
- On the AP exam, the introductory statement above a passage gives limited but important information about the passage's context, such as what kind of text it is (speech, essay, book excerpt, etc.) and when it was published. Sometimes relevant information about the author or audience also appears, such as the occasion on which an individual delivered a speech.
- Anything about the context that is not stated in the introductory information must be discovered by noting what the author states directly or indirectly in the passage.

Activity: Identify and Reflect on Author, Context, and Exigence

The introductory information and the first two paragraphs below are from a passage similar to those you will see on the AP exam. In each section, highlight statements that inform you about the passage's author, context, and exigence and write a brief annotation about what they reveal about these elements of the rhetorical situation. Remember, this information can be provided or implied in any order. Then, view the Suggested Responses for this activity at the end of this section.

The article below was recently published on an educational blog dedicated to the use of technology in schools.

The global gaming community has exceeded 3 billion enthusiasts, and I count myself among them. It may surprise you to learn then that I am the principal of a public high school in Upstate New York. However, if you have been paying attention to one of the fastest growing industries in the country, my enthusiasm is not likely to come as much surprise. Whether it's on mobile devices, consoles, or desktops, gaming boasts one of the largest user bases globally, surpassing the combined market size of movies and music. Official tournaments for popular games draw millions of viewers, and professional esports teams secure substantial sponsorships and prize money. In 2019 alone, players in over 5,400 tournaments earned more than $235 million. As another reflection of the escalating popularity of esports, the International Olympics Committee recently introduced Olympics Esports Week, scheduled for June 22-25, 2023, offering a virtual platform for e-athletes to compete in games related to sports.

Despite the growing popularity of esports, I recently received an email from a parent who expressed concerns about our school's esports program. She questioned why we encourage students to waste time on "mindless video games" instead of academically focused activities like chess and debate or "real" sports like basketball and soccer. She indicated she would be contacting the school board to get answers. I think it's important that I share with fellow educators what I have experienced and expand on what I shared with this parent.

Activity: Identify and Reflect on Author, Context, and Exigence
Suggested Responses

The article below was recently published on an educational blog dedicated to the use of technology in schools.

Context: The article has been published on a blog in which educators engage with information about technology in schools. Blog posts are often informal, and these platforms allow individuals to share personal experiences and perspectives with those who share a common interest.

The global gaming community has exceeded 3 billion enthusiasts, and I count myself among them. It may surprise you to learn then that I am the principal of a public high school in Upstate New York. However, if you have been paying attention to one of the fastest growing industries in the country, my enthusiasm is not likely to come as much surprise. Whether it's on mobile devices, consoles, or desktops, gaming boasts one of the largest user bases globally, surpassing the combined market size of movies and music. Official tournaments for popular games draw millions of viewers, and professional esports teams secure substantial sponsorships and prize money. In 2019 alone, players in over 5,400 tournaments earned more than $235 million. As another reflection of the escalating popularity of esports, the International Olympics Committee recently introduced Olympics Esports Week, scheduled for June 22-25, 2023, offering a virtual platform for e-athletes to compete in games related to sports.

Author: The author is a high school principal and gaming enthusiast, which the author acknowledges may be unexpected.

Context: The author notes that being a gaming enthusiast and principal may be unexpected. The author mentions that the gaming industry is one of the fastest growing, which means that the popularity of gaming represents a changing dynamic in society. This may be why the author anticipates surprise on the part of some in the audience.

Despite the growing popularity of esports, I recently received an email from a parent who expressed concerns about our school's esports program. She questioned why we encourage students to waste time on "mindless video games" instead of academically focused activities like chess and debate or "real" sports like basketball and soccer. She indicated she would be contacting the school board to get answers. I think it's important that I share with fellow educators what I have experienced and expand on what I shared with this parent.

Exigence: The author has recently been challenged by a parent about the value of their esports program and has decided to reach a wider audience of educators to advocate for such programs.

1.A Author Context Exigence
Check for Understanding

The following passage is an essay written by a woman in the late nineteenth century.

Why not? Why not take every means in one's power to discover so important a person as one's husband or wife? What is the prejudice that exists against it? To say that such advertisements are used for improper purposes is saying nothing against using them properly. To say that "marriages are made in heaven"; that it is "tempting Providence" to speak of mysterious laws which bring people together, needs only for answer: Look at the majority of marriages now existing! If they are made in heaven let us try some earth-made ones.

The *Alpha** and all common sense teaches that we should use reason and discrimination in a selection like this; and if one is desirous to marry and fails to find a fit mate in one's neighborhood or acquaintance, what reason is there that he or she should not look farther? They have no surety that fate will bring them the desired one without effort on their part, for behold! Many of their friends are unmarried and many more mismarried. What certainty have they of a better lot? I do believe that if we obeyed all the laws of our life as the birds do, we should find mates as they do; but we do not.

One reasonable argument may be adducted against me, namely, that people brought together from different parts of the country would be dissimilar in their tastes and habits, and so suffer when united; also that *one* must be separated from home and friends. To the latter I reply that in the case of true marriage it would be a small evil, that under ordinary circumstances the separation need not be complete, and that it frequently happens under the present method. To the former, that people whose local tastes and habits were stronger than their individualities, who shared the feelings of the neighborhood to such an extent that change would be painful, would not be likely to miss mating, for they would be satisfied with local character.

Conversely, those who found no mate in the home influence and were so constituted as to demand something different would find full compensation in what they gained for all they lost. It may be said that if the match proved unhappy they would bitterly regret having meddled with fate, and wish they had waited patiently; but in like cases those who meet by chance, or are thrown together in the natural course of events, as bitterly curse fortune, or their own folly, and wish the same. Errors of judgment need be no more frequent than now, and even in case of mistaking, surely it is better to look back on an earnest attempt to choose wisely than the usual much-extolled drifting.

Surely *The Alpha* teaches that marriage should result not from the will and judgment led by passion, but the opposite. If a man sees a fair woman before he knows her; feels the charm of her presence before he begins to understand her character; if first aroused to the necessity of judging by his strong inclination; surely he stands less chance of a cool and safe decision than one who begins knowingly, learns a character from earnest letters, loves the mind before he does the body. And that first love would improve and be more to him yearly, growing ever richer, stronger, and more lovely with advancing age. The other does not.

I see in writing still another consideration. It would if it became a general custom, teach both sexes to cultivate the mind and the power of expression in writing more than the beauty of the body and its sexual attraction. Also, when marriage was seen to depend more upon real value and worth coolly inquired into than upon feminine charms and snares and masculine force and persistence, that would be a huge power enlisted on the side of good. Young women would take more interest in the affairs of the world if they knew the chance of a happy marriage might depend on such knowledge; that they might be written to by such a man as they would love and honor, and expected to sympathize with his ideas, appreciate his work, understand and help him; and man might condescend to think a woman's nature worth studying a little if

their hopes rested also in genuine sympathy and appreciation. (Not her sexual nature! Heaven defend us! They have studied that long and well, but the *rest* of her, the "ninety-nine parts human!"). Will someone explain what harm would result from Advertising for Marriage?

*God

1. **Which of the following best describes the author's exigence?**
   A) An invitation to write for a religious publication
   B) A cultural tension brought about by a new development in media
   C) A growing public interest in marrying people from different cultural backgrounds
   D) A decline in the percentage of people who have been getting married

2. **Based on the tone and content of the passage as a whole, its author is most likely**
   A) an opponent of contemporary media
   B) an educator concerned with the plight of young women
   C) a supporter of political reform
   D) a social critic interested in modernizing the culture

3. **The statements in lines 43–44 ("Not…human!") best exemplify the author's**
   A) attempt to shame men for the way they value women
   B) disdain for women who attract men with their physical features
   C) belief in men's and women's potential for mutual compatibility
   D) use of widely known scientific principles