

chapter 2



understanding the rhetorical situation the choices writers make

A major theme of this book is that writing doesn't just happen. It occurs when people encounter a situation that calls on them to write, when they experience the sense that something is lacking, something needs to be paid attention to, something needs to be said. This can happen in a relatively simple and straightforward manner—when we realize, for example, that it's the right thing to send a note of condolence to the family when a friend or relative dies or a thank-you card for a birthday present. In these cases, the situation seems to dictate the appropriate response. If anything, the situation is so conventional that you can buy appropriate cards for the occasion.

In other situations, things are more complicated, and it's not as clear-cut how to respond. Let's say there is a proposal to cut financial aid at your college or university, and you want to do something about it. There is a sense of urgency—a realization that something needs to be done—but it doesn't automatically dictate what to write. You've got to make sense of the situation first, to develop an orientation toward it in order to clarify what you want to say and who you plan to address. There are multiple options about how you could locate yourself in the situation. You could appeal directly to college officials to cancel or reduce the cuts, write to the student newspaper protesting the cuts, or rally other students to join you in opposing the cuts. How you position yourself will determine what type of writing is appropriate for your purposes, and the possibilities range from a formal letter of appeal that seeks to persuade college decision makers to flyers, petitions, and posters that publicize the issues in a student campaign to roll back the cuts.

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate what leads people to recognize the desire to write—to have their say to influence the course of events, to exchange ideas and feelings with others. This is where the motivation to write takes place, what we will call the rhetorical situation.

This chapter is an introduction to analyzing rhetorical situations to understand the choices writers make when they respond to the call to write. In the first section, we define the rhetorical situation. Next, we present a case study that asks you to analyze a rhetorical situation and present reading strategies useful in your analysis. Finally, in a writing assignment at the end of the chapter, we ask you to use these strategies to look closely at a commentary in a newsmagazine and to analyze its rhetorical situation.

THE RHETORICAL SITUATION

Rhetorical situations begin with a felt sense of need or urgency—an exigence that motivates people to write. In this chapter, we examine how three factors work together to constitute rhetorical situations that produce writing.

- **Writer's orientation.** As you can see in the example of the financial aid cuts, complex social situations don't generate appropriate responses automatically. The writer has to locate himself or herself in the situation by making sense of what is urgent or pressing and what needs to be done in order to identify the call to write and how to respond to it. Writers have choices about how they wish to position themselves in relation to the situation and the people involved. They have to figure out how to represent what's at stake for them and others and to construct a sense of themselves and a tone of voice that fits their orientation toward the situation.
- **Audience.** Audience depends on how writers position themselves and how they clarify their own motivation in writing. The audience consists of the intended readers, who may be more or less diverse in their interests and attitudes according to the circumstances. At times writers may be addressing what seem to be multiple audiences. In the case of the financial aid cuts, for example, a letter to the student newspaper would likely have a diverse readership, of students, certainly, but also faculty, administrators, and staff. The financial aid cuts example also reveals another sense of the term *audience* that may factor in the rhetorical situation—namely that there are times when writers not only address an existing audience, such as the college officials responsible for the aid cuts, but also may, through the act of writing, try to organize and bring into being an audience that is only in the process of formation, as in the case of students joining together in a campaign against the cuts.

- **Genre.** Genres are the different types of writing people draw on to respond to the call to write. The financial aid cuts help us see how genres are not simply the written form that carries the writer's message but offer distinct strategies that shape and respond to the rhetorical situation. Consider the difference, for example, between writing a polite and well reasoned letter of appeal to campus officials and writing slogans on posters (which can also be well reasoned but in a different way) to use in demonstration in front of the president's office. Genres, from this perspective, are social and rhetorical actions that embody writers' purposes and motivations, shaping and responding to situations that call on them to write. An understanding of how various genres of writing work and when they are appropriate is part of a writing repertoire that enables writers to have choices and respond flexibly. (Part Two in *The Call to Write* presents a range of genres of writing.)

The point here is that the three factors—writer's orientation, audience, and genre—are really a way of naming the choices writers make based on their knowledge of the strategies of writing available to them to define and deal with the rhetorical situation. These choices can be analyzed separately, but they mutually influence each other to constitute the rhetorical situation as the grounds for producing writing.

ACORN KATRINA SURVIVORS ASSOCIATION

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) branch in New Orleans helped set up the ACORN Katrina Survivors Association (AKSA) to deal with the devastation of the storm and the struggle of local residents to rebuild and return home. This two-page flyer presents the AKSA platform, written in 2005, a few months after the storm.

Hurricane Katrina unquestionably produced a sense of urgency on the part of New Orleans residents, but as a complex situation it didn't dictate a single response. Rather, the rhetorical situation that emerged from the storm led to a variety of responses from individuals, government agencies, and community groups. Consider how AKSA defines and responds to the rhetorical situation in the wake of Katrina. Take into account here the three factors—writer's orientation (or, in this case, AKSA's orientation), audience, and genre. How do these factors combine to produce this document?

ACORN Katrina Survivors Association

The **ACORN Katrina Survivors Association** is the first nationwide organization of displaced New Orleans residents and other Katrina survivors. The Survivors Association unites members of our displaced communities in order to demand more effective relief efforts and a voice for survivors in the rebuilding process.

The ACORN Katrina Survivors Association uses public pressure, direct action, and dialogue with elected officials and public policy experts to win respect and a voice for survivors, the resources needed for families to survive, and a rebuilding plan that builds stronger communities for all.

The Platform of the ACORN Katrina Survivors Association

Right of return – The people of New Orleans will not be kept out by deliberate attempts to change the make-up of the city, or by neglect, which gives the richer and more powerful first access to choices and resources.

The means to take care of ourselves and our families – Survivors need help with housing, healthcare, income from unemployment, and assistance for those who've helped us.

Rebuilding the right way – Reconstruction should include affordable housing, living wage jobs, and good schools for our children.

Recovering together – The Hurricane should not be used as an excuse to cut health care and food assistance programs that help families across the country.

Accountability and honesty – An independent investigation is necessary so we can understand what went wrong and how to protect ourselves in the future.

ACORN Organizing and Direct Action

The Survivors Association will continue and expand the organizing that local ACORN chapters have accomplished since Katrina first hit, which has already resulted in some notable actions and victories.

- On October 7th, the Houston ACORN Katrina Survivors Association confronted Houston FEMA Director about a lack of response to the needs of the survivors. After negotiations, ACORN members won a shuttle bus to their service center, translated materials, and extended benefits to Rita survivors.

Courtesy of ACORN Survivors Association



Courtesy of ACORN Survivors Association





Courtesy of ACORN Survivors Association

- Louisiana ACORN members staged a caravan into the Lower 9th Ward on October 15th to claim their right to return and to placard hundreds of homes with signs stating "No Bulldozing!"
- A thousand people gathered on the steps of the Louisiana State Capitol for the October 28th Rally to Rebuild Louisiana, to demand job priority, training, and good wages for Louisiana's displaced working families.

ACORN Community Forum on Rebuilding New Orleans

- The Survivors Association sponsored the ACORN Community Forum on Rebuilding New Orleans, which convened in Baton Rouge, Louisiana on November 7th and 8th.
- The conference brought together low-income and minority residents of New Orleans and top urban planning, architecture, and development professionals from around the country.
- Forum participants took a bus tour of affected areas and held discussions on how to rebuild New Orleans to speak to the needs of all New Orleans' residents.
- More than 130 participants at the forum site were joined online by participants from all over the globe, who took part via webcast.

Katrina Survivors Continue to Fight to Return Home

- On November 22nd, 100 ACORN members marched to the Houston FEMA office to deliver a letter demanding that FEMA rescind its recently announced decision to stop paying bills for roughly 150,000 hurricane victims still in motel rooms come December 1st.
- Later that same afternoon, FEMA rescinded the unpopular policy and said that it would extend its hotel-housing program by a month in 10 states.
- Advancement Project obtained a favorable settlement on November 22nd in a lawsuit filed on behalf of ACORN and other groups in response to evictions that had been proceeding without notice to the tenants.
- The agreement requires FEMA to turn over to the courts in Orleans and Jefferson parishes the addresses of tenants facing evictions, and requires that hearings be scheduled no sooner than 45 days after notice is mailed to the evacuees.

The ACORN Katrina Survivors Association members are continuing the fight for the practical resources families need to return home: access to trailers on or near their property; water and electricity back all over New Orleans; federal dollars dedicated to rebuilding individual homes; assistance in Texas to find safe, quality rental housing; and assistance with furniture and transportation.



Courtesy of ACORN Survivors Association

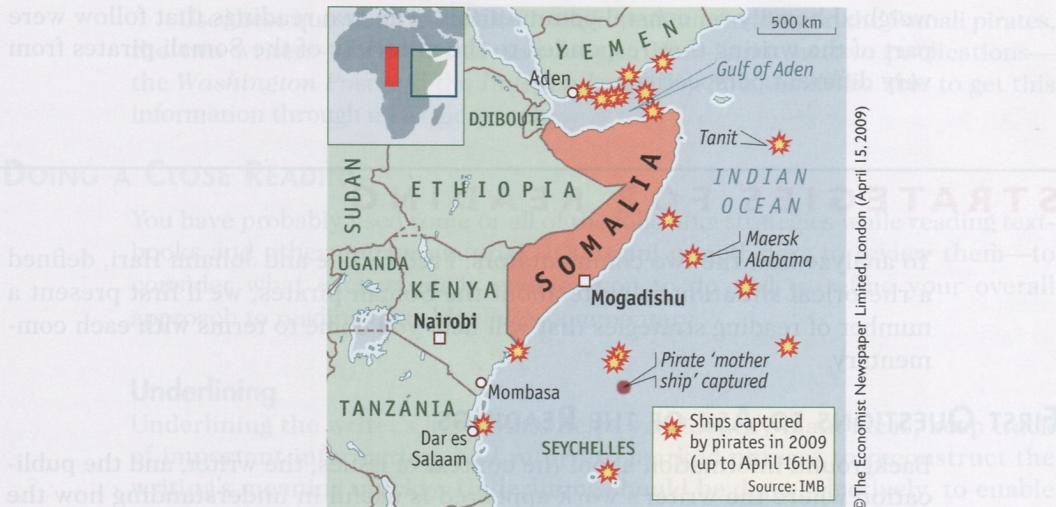
CASE STUDY: THE SOMALI PIRATES



U.S. Navy photo by Mass communication Specialist 2nd Class Jason R. Zalasky/Released

As a case study for analyzing the rhetorical situation, we will use two commentaries on the Somali pirates. Fred C. Iklé's "Kill the Pirates" appeared in the *Washington Post* on April 13, 2009, while Johann Hari's "You Are Being Lied to About Pirates" appeared in the *Independent*, a British newspaper, on January 5, 2009. These commentaries offer typical examples of the kind of reading on complex and contested issues that you'll be asked to do in college courses. The aim of this section is to help you develop reading strategies to come to terms with the commentaries and to analyze how the two writers defined and responded to the rhetorical situation. But first a little background on the Somali pirates.

By early 2009, the Somali pirates had become a hot news item in the American and international press for hijacking ships in the Gulf of Aden and holding them for ransom. The pirates' activity was a growing source of concern to governments and the multinational corporations who depend on the twenty thousand or more cargo ships that pass each year through the Gulf of Aden on their way to the Suez Canal. In 2008, the pirates attacked 111 ships and successfully hijacked 42 of them. The number of attacks increased dramatically in early 2009. Then, in April 2009 the pirates captured an American ship, the *Maersk Alabama*, and held its captain, Richard Phillips, for ransom, leading to a dramatic confrontation between the United States and the pirates holding Phillips in a lifeboat. Phillips was rescued by Navy SEALS, who killed three of the pirates. This map gives a picture of where the Somali pirates' activity was taking place in 2009 and the location of the *Maersk Alabama* when it was hijacked.



© The Economist Newspaper Limited, London (April 15, 2009)

Somali Pirate Fan Club



Courtesy Steve Schirra

CASE STUDY
Somali Piracy

weighed heavily on coastal communities. The two readings that follow were part of the writing that responded to the notoriety of the Somali pirates from very different perspectives.

STRATEGIES FOR READING

To analyze how the two commentators, Fred C. Iklé and Johann Hari, defined a rhetorical situation to write about the Somali pirates, we'll first present a number of reading strategies that will help you come to terms with each commentary.

FIRST QUESTIONS TO ASK OF THE READINGS

Background information about the context of issues, the writer, and the publication where the writer's work appeared is useful in understanding how the writer identifies the call to write.

Context of Issues

What do you know about the particular topic the writer is treating? If your knowledge is limited, where can you get reliable background information? What have people been saying about the topic? What do they think the main issues are? What seems to be at stake in these discussions? Do people seem divided over these issues? If so, what positions have they taken?

The Writer

What do you know about the writer? What authority and credibility can you attribute to the writer? Is there reason to believe that the writer will provide informed accounts and responsible arguments, whether you agree with them or not? What political, cultural, social, or other commitments is the writer known for? How are these commitments likely to influence the writer's argument? How do these commitments relate to your own views? How is this relationship likely to influence your evaluation of the writer's argument?

Publication

What do you know about the publication? Who is the publisher? Is it a commercial publication? Does it have an institutional affiliation—to a college or university, an academic field of study, a professional organization, a church? Does it espouse an identifiable political, social, cultural, economic, or religious ideology? If the publication is a periodical, what other writers—and types of writing and topics—appear in the issue? Who would be likely to read the publication? If the site of publication is the Web, consider whether the site is .edu (educational), .org (nonprofit), .gov (government), or .com (commercial). What is the purpose of the Web site? When was it last updated? Does it have links to other Web sites?

Use these questions to develop background information on the Somali pirates, the two writers—Fred C. Iklé and Johann Hari—and the two publications—the *Washington Post* and the *Independent* (UK). You should be able to get this information through a Google search.

DOING A CLOSE READING

You have probably used some or all of the following strategies while reading textbooks and other course material. It's useful nonetheless to review them—to consider what each strategy enables you to do and to refine your overall approach to reading texts like Iklé's commentary.

Underlining

Underlining the writer's key points helps you identify main ideas, keep track of important information, and return to marked phrases to reconstruct the writing's meaning quickly. Underlining should be done selectively to enable you to recall quickly where the writer presents important information, claims, evidence, interpretations, and conclusions.

Annotation

Annotations are comments that readers write in the margins of a text. Annotation can help you read actively and create a record of your experience as you come to grips with a text's meaning. There are no rules about annotation, but here are some suggestions: Write brief notes on major points. Agree or disagree with what the writer is saying. Refer to what the writer is doing at a particular point (for example, making a claim, giving an example, presenting statistical evidence, or refuting an opposing view). Raise questions or voice confusion about something you need to clarify. Draw connections to other things you have read or know about.

SAMPLE UNDERLINING AND ANNOTATION

KILL THE PIRATES

FRED C. IKLÉ

Links
pirates to
terrorists

Is there
any
evidence
that
terrorists
have
forced
pirates?

With the rescue of American Richard Phillips from the hands of pirates yesterday, there was a blip of good news from the Indian Ocean, but it remains a scandal that Somali pirates continue to routinely defeat the world's naval powers. And worse than this ongoing demonstration of cowardice is the financing of terrorists that results from the huge ransom

payments these pirates are allowed to collect.

It is naive to assume that the millions paid annually in ransom to pirates merely enables them to purchase villas and fancy automobiles. Somalia is a country without government, where anarchy is being exploited by terrorist organizations. Although the threat that pirates pose to commercial

Check background info on Somalia

uses rhetorical questions. the language seems overheded

States his main point

Disputes ship owners' reasons for not arming crews

ships is increasingly known, little is being done to combat it. And we must consider the bigger picture: Terrorists are far more brutal than pirates and can easily force pirates—petty thieves in comparison—to share their ransom money.

We already know that Somalia is an ideal fortress and headquarters for global terrorist activity. The United States has learned the painful lesson that Somalia is not an easy place for our military to establish law and order; two of our interventions there became embarrassing defeats—in 1993 and more recently in support of Ethiopian forces.

So why do we keep rewarding Somali pirates? How is this march of folly possible?

Start by blaming the timorous lawyers who advise the governments attempting to cope with the pirates such as those who had been engaged in a standoff with U.S. hostage negotiators in recent days. These lawyers misinterpret the Law of the Sea Treaty and the Geneva Conventions and fail to apply the powerful international laws that exist against piracy. The right of self-defense—a principle of international law—justifies killing pirates as they try to board a ship.

Nonetheless, entire crews are unarmed on the ships that sail through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Shipowners pretend that they cannot trust their crews with weapons, but the facts don't add up. For one thing, in the United States most adults except felons are allowed to have

guns, and the laws of many other nations also permit such ownership. Even if owners don't want everyone aboard their ships to be carrying weapons, don't they trust the senior members of their crews? Why couldn't they at least arm the captain and place two experienced and reliable police officers on board?

When these pitifully unarmed crews watch pirates climb aboard their vessels, they can do little to fight back. And while the United States and many other naval powers keep warships in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean—deployments that cost millions of dollars—these ships cannot keep pirates from boarding commercial ships that have unarmed crews.

The international right of self-defense would also justify an inspection and quarantine regime off the coast of Somalia to seize and destroy all vessels that are found to be engaged in piracy. These inspections could reduce the likelihood that any government will find itself engaged in a hostage situation such as the one that played out in recent days. Furthermore, the U.N. Security Council should prohibit all ransom payments. If the crew of an attacked ship were held hostage, the Security Council could authorize a military blockade of Somalia until the hostages were released.

Cowardice will not defeat terrorism, nor will it stop the Somali pirates. If anything, continuing to meet the pirates' demands only acts as an incentive for more piracy.

Lists measures that should be taken

Takes a hard-line position accuses anyone of being coward

Summary

A summary condenses clearly and accurately what you have read. Like underlining, a good summary identifies the main idea and important supporting material. But it also calls on you to explain the connections between points. To write an effective summary, follow these steps:

1. Review your underlinings and annotations. Start your summary with a statement in your own words that identifies the writer's purpose and expresses the main point. If the writer didn't explicitly state his or her main point, write the main point as you see it. (The main point is often tied to the writer's purpose, so thinking about purpose might help in stating the main point.)
2. Consult your underlinings and annotations to identify the most important supporting details. Rewrite these details in your own words, combining ideas when you can.
3. Check your summary to see if it holds together as a coherent piece of writing and is not simply a series of unconnected statements. Add transitions where needed to make connections between parts of the summary.

Sample summary of “Kill the Pirates”

In “Kill the Pirates,” Fred C. Iklé responds to the Somali pirates’ success in hijacking ships in the Indian Ocean by suggesting that ransom money is going to finance terrorists in Somalia. He proposes that much more needs to be done to stop the pirates, including arming the crews of the ships that pass through the Gulf of Aden and recognizing that the right of self-defense justifies the crews killing pirates. Iklé also argues that any ships involved in piracy should be seized and destroyed and that the UN should ban ransom payments as a matter of policy and instead apply a military blockade to Somalia to free hostages. Iklé closes by saying that bargaining with the pirates only encourages further hijackings.

Describing the Writer’s Strategy

The summary gives an account of what the writer is saying. Describing the writer’s strategy asks you to identify what the writer is doing, to explain how paragraphs or groups of paragraphs function in a piece of writing. Focusing on what the writer is doing—for example, defining a problem, providing background information, proposing a solution, explaining causes or consequences, giving reasons, offering examples—is a way to analyze how a piece of writing is constructed and how the parts are connected to form a whole.

To describe a writer's strategy:

1. Write a statement that describes the writer's overall purpose.
2. Explain what the writer is doing in each paragraph. If a sequence of paragraphs forms one unit in the writing, explain what that group of paragraphs is doing. (It is particularly helpful to divide longer pieces of writing into sections by grouping sequences of paragraphs together. Label the writer's strategy in each paragraph or section to explain how it functions in the writing as a whole. Try to do this, as much as possible, by using terms that express strategies and functions instead of referring to the content of the writing.)

Sample Description of a Writer's Strategy

Overall purpose: To propose a change in policy toward Somali pirates.

¶¶1–2: Establishes the existence of one problem.

Argues that failure to deal with the problem has produced a bigger problem.

¶¶3: Provides brief background information on the situation.

¶¶4: Poses rhetorical questions that ask why the problem is allowed to persist.

¶¶5: Gives one explanation for the problem and proposes a change in policy.

¶¶6–8: Provides support for change in policy by (a) refuting reasons for not adopting policy, (b) showing weakness in current policy and, c) explaining further implications of changing policy.

¶¶9: Closes by explaining negative consequences of continuing current policy.

WRITING STRATEGIES

What a Writer Does

- ❑ Narrates, tells a story, relates an anecdote or incident
- ❑ Describes things, people, places, processes
- ❑ Illustrates by using examples, details, data
- ❑ Defines key terms, problems, issues, trends
- ❑ Compares and/or contrasts things, ideas, persons, places, processes
- ❑ Classifies things, ideas, people, places, processes into categories

What a Writer Functions

- ❑ Explains causes and effects
- ❑ Gives reasons
- ❑ Offers evidence (statistics, established facts, expert testimony)
- ❑ Cites other writers
- ❑ Makes concessions
- ❑ Refutes opposing views

EXERCISE**DOING A CLOSE READING OF JOHANN HARI'S "YOU ARE BEING LIED TO ABOUT PIRATES"**

Now it's your turn to use the reading strategies we've just reviewed. Underline and annotate Hari's commentary. Then write a summary and a description of the writer's strategy.

YOU ARE BEING LIED TO ABOUT PIRATES**JOHANN HARI**

Who imagined that in 2009, the world's governments would be declaring a new War on Pirates? As you read this, the British Royal Navy—backed by the ships of more than two dozen nations, from the US to China—is sailing into Somalian waters to take on men we still picture as parrot-on-the-shoulder pantomime villains. They will soon be fighting Somalian ships and even chasing the pirates onto land, into one of the most broken countries on earth. But behind the arrr-me-hearties oddness of this tale, there is an untold scandal. The people our governments are labelling as “one of the great menaces of our times” have an extraordinary story to tell—and some justice on their side.

Pirates have never been quite who we think they are. In the “golden age of piracy”—from 1650 to 1730—the idea of the pirate as the senseless, savage Bluebeard that lingers today was created by the British government in a great propaganda heave. Many ordinary people believed it was false: pirates were often saved from the gallows by supportive crowds. Why? What did they see that we can't? In his book *Villains Of All*

Nations, the historian Marcus Rediker pores through the evidence.

If you became a merchant or navy sailor then—plucked from the docks of London's East End, young and hungry—you ended up in a floating wooden Hell. You worked all hours on a cramped, half-starved ship, and if you slacked off, the all-powerful captain would whip you with the Cat O' Nine Tails. If you slacked often, you could be thrown overboard. And at the end of months or years of this, you were often cheated of your wages.

Pirates were the first people to rebel against this world. They mutinied—and created a different way of working on the seas. Once they had a ship, the pirates elected their captains, and made all their decisions collectively, without torture. They shared their bounty out in what Rediker calls “one of the most egalitarian plans for the disposition of resources to be found anywhere in the eighteenth century.”

They even took in escaped African slaves and lived with them as equals.

The pirates showed “quite clearly—and subversively—that ships did not have to be run in the brutal and oppressive ways of the merchant service and the Royal Navy.” This is why they were romantic heroes, despite being unproductive thieves.

The words of one pirate from that lost age, a young British man called William Scott, should echo into this new age of piracy. Just before he was hanged in Charleston, South Carolina, he said: “What I did was to keep me from perishing. I was forced to go a-pirateing to live.” In 1991, the government of Somalia collapsed. Its nine million people have been teetering on starvation ever since—and the ugliest forces in the Western world have seen this as a great opportunity to steal the country’s food supply and dump our nuclear waste in their seas.

Yes: nuclear waste. As soon as the government was gone, mysterious European ships started appearing off the coast of Somalia, dumping vast barrels into the ocean. The coastal population began to sicken. At first they suffered strange rashes, nausea and malformed babies. Then, after the 2005 tsunami, hundreds of the dumped and leaking barrels washed up on shore. People began to suffer from radiation sickness, and more than 300 died.

Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, the UN envoy to Somalia, tells me: “Somebody is dumping nuclear material here. There is also lead, and heavy metals such as cadmium and mercury—you name it.” Much of it can be traced back to European hospitals and factories, who seem to be passing it on to the Italian mafia to “dispose” of cheaply. When I asked Mr Ould-Abdallah what European governments

were doing about it, he said with a sigh: “Nothing. There has been no clean-up, no compensation, and no prevention.”

At the same time, other European ships have been looting Somalia’s seas of their greatest resource: seafood. We have destroyed our own fish stocks by overexploitation—and now we have moved on to theirs. More than \$300m-worth of tuna, shrimp, and lobster are being stolen every year by illegal trawlers. The local fishermen are now starving. Mohammed Hussein, a fisherman in the town of Marka 100km south of Mogadishu, told Reuters: “If nothing is done, there soon won’t be much fish left in our coastal waters.”

This is the context in which the “pirates” have emerged. Somalian fishermen took speedboats to try to dissuade the dumpers and trawlers, or at least levy a “tax” on them. They call themselves the Volunteer Coastguard of Somalia—and ordinary Somalis agree. The independent Somalian news site WardheerNews found 70 per cent “strongly supported the piracy as a form of national defence.”

No, this doesn’t make hostage-taking justifiable, and yes, some are clearly just gangsters—especially those who have held up World Food Programme supplies. But in a telephone interview, one of the pirate leaders, Sugule Ali: “We don’t consider ourselves sea bandits. We consider sea bandits [to be] those who illegally fish and dump in our seas.” William Scott would understand.

Did we expect starving Somalians to stand passively on their beaches, paddling in our toxic waste, and watch us snatch their fish to eat in restaurants in London

and Paris and Rome? We won't act on those crimes—the only sane solution to this problem—but when some of the fishermen responded by disrupting the transit-corridor for 20 per cent of the world's oil supply, we swiftly send in the gunboats.

The story of the 2009 war on piracy was best summarised by another pirate, who lived and died in the fourth century BC. He was captured and brought to

Alexander the Great, who demanded to know “what he meant by keeping possession of the sea.” The pirate smiled, and responded: “What you mean by seizing the whole earth; but because I do it with a petty ship, I am called a robber, while you, who do it with a great fleet, are called emperor.” Once again, our great imperial fleets sail—but who is the robber?

ETHICS OF READING

BOREDOM AND PERSISTENCE

Going to college means that you will encounter a wide range of academic and professional writing, some of which may be specialized and technical. You may find at times that the reading you're assigned is intimidating and hard to follow. You may wonder what the writer is trying to prove, or you may think the writer is splitting hairs. The writing may seem abstract, detached from the real world.

These are all symptoms of boredom, and the danger is that you will give up at this point and say you weren't really interested in the first place. What is often the case, though, is

not that you aren't interested but rather that you are unfamiliar with the particular type of writing, its forms, specialized vocabularies, and ways of reasoning.

To act responsibly in college, the workplace, and the public domain, you need to read writing that is pertinent and carries weight. An ethics of reading holds that readers need to give difficult material a chance. It's not simply a matter of being fair to the writer. By working on new and difficult material, you also, in effect, refuse to be alienated from it. In this regard, you avoid the threat of boredom leading to the premature closure of communication. ■

ANALYZING THE RHETORICAL SITUATION: THE SOMALI PIRATES

Analyzing the rhetorical situation builds on the reading strategies just presented, as steps that have already begun to suggest how we might understand the choices these two writers have made to define and respond to the call to write. In this section, we examine how Fred C. Iklé and Johann Hari make sense of the Somali pirates by identifying their orientation as writers, their audience, and their genre of writing.

WRITER'S ORIENTATION

The way in which the two writers establish the sense of urgency calling on them to write differs dramatically. Interestingly both of them, in their opening paragraphs, identify a “scandal” that motivates them to write.

For Iklé, the scandal is the “cowardice” of the “world’s naval powers” and how their failure to stop the pirates is enabling ransom money to finance terrorist activities. Iklé’s orientation is changing what he sees as a failed policy that has had dangerous consequence. So, he calls for sterner measures and argues that self-defense, including shooting to kill the pirates, is justifiable and legal. Basically he’s proposing a solution to a problem, which he defines in terms of national security. He’s positioning himself as someone called to write by the dangers of Somalia as a “headquarters for global terrorist activity.”

For Hari, on other hand, the scandal is the pirates’ “untold” story that has not gotten out to the public. This lack is what Hari experiences as calling on him to write. Notice that Hari is proposing a change in understanding more than a change in policy, as Iklé does. Accordingly he looks at the history of pirates, who “have never been quite who we think they are.” He’s positioning himself as a revisionist, to change our view of what piracy has meant historically and to rethink who the Somali pirates are by examining the context of nuclear dumping and overfishing in which they emerged.

AUDIENCE

The differences in how the two writers identify the call to write lead to differences in the way they approach their audiences.

Iklé’s stance is hard-line, and his language is at times heated, when, for example, he implies that opponents are “cowards” on a “march of folly.” In this sense, Iklé is consolidating an audience of readers who share his desire for a strong military response. Other readers may feel bullied by his approach but at the same time worry about the dangers he says the Somali pirates represent. The fact that he doesn’t really provide any evidence for the link between pirates and terrorists suggests that Iklé assumes his readers, or at least those he feels he has the best chance of reaching, will accept the connection.

Hari approaches his readers as people who are interested in getting the story behind the news and government’s representations of the Somali pirates as a “great menace.” There is a good deal of research in Hari’s commentary but he doesn’t come off as pedantic. His tone is rather breezy and informal, and he seems to invite readers to join him in examining piracy, past and present. Like Iklé, Hari faces a diverse readership and seems to be looking for an audience among his readers who are interested in rethinking things. He is more personal in his approach, addressing readers as “you” and treating them as people who can think for themselves, whereas Iklé uses “we” to posit an imagined group of people who know Somalia is a terrorist fortress yet who keep rewarding the pirates that is meant to include the reader and on whose behalf Iklé is speaking.

GENRE

It shouldn't be surprising, given the situation, that the two writers have turned to the genre of commentary as it appears on op-ed pages in major newspapers like the *Washington Post* and the *Independent* (UK). The genre and the places of publication are particularly well suited to the writers' goals of influencing public opinion concerning the Somali pirates. (See Chapter 9 "Commentary" for more on the genre.) Some of the strategies both writers employ such as rhetorical questions ("So why do we keep rewarding Somali pirates?" "Did we expect starving Somalians to stand passively on their beaches?"), are characteristic of genre. But more important is that the genre of commentary has long been part of the public forum, where writers offer opinion and analysis, to shape public understanding of the events and issues they feel compelled to write about.

A CHECKLIST: ANALYZING THE WRITER'S LANGUAGE

Words and phrases carry powerful associations that can sway readers to share or reject what a writer is saying. It is one thing to refer to business executives as “corporate leaders” or “entrepreneurial visionaries” and quite another to call them “fat cats” or “robber barons.” The choice of terms reveals the writer’s orientation and the perspective readers are invited to share. Paying attention to the writer’s language, as the two commentaries reveal, is a useful reading strategy in analyzing the rhetorical situation.

Tone

We've already noted the hard-line, sometimes bullying tone in Iklé's commentary ("It is naive to assume," "Cowardice will not defeat terrorism") and the breezier tone of Hari's ("Who imagined that in 2009, the world's governments would be declaring a new War on Pirates?"). Tone projects attitude and helps define the writer's orientation.

Denotation/Connotation

Words have *denotative* meanings that you can find in the dictionary. For example, the denotative meaning of *terrorism* is “violence or the threat of violence, especially bombing, kidnapping, and assassination, carried out for political purposes.” Denotation is meant to be the specific, precise, literal meaning of a word, but, in practice, as writers use words they inevitably release *connotative* meanings as well that contain additional senses, associations, and emotional charge—evoking in the case of the word *terrorism* images of Al Qaeda, 9/11 and threats to the homeland.

One of Iklé's key rhetorical moves is to associate "terrorism" with the Somali pirates, while Hari, on the other hand, seeks to redefine the term *pirate* altogether by associating it with sailors rebelling against injustice.

Figures of Speech

Figures of speech include simile, metaphor, analogy, overstatement, and personification, among others. Hari uses a figure of speech when he says that we still think of pirates “as parrot-on-the-shoulder pantomime villains.” The most commonly used are simile and metaphor—figures of speech that compare one thing to another. Similes use the words *like* and *as* to make a comparison. (“My love is like a red, red rose.”) Metaphors make an implicit comparison, as though one thing is actually another. (“She was a thin reed of a girl.” “The long arm of the law grabbed him and brought him to trial.”)

Stereotypes

Stereotypes are oversimplified representations that fit people into unvarying categories. These broad generalizations break down under careful scrutiny but carry powerful (and often self-serving) explanations. “Women are more emotional than men” is a classic stereotypical statement that a writer might use to argue that women won’t do well under the stress of positions of authority (and therefore shouldn’t be promoted over men). Along the same line, stereotypes of poor and working-class people and racial and ethnic minorities have created popular images (of “white trash,” “drunken Indians,” “welfare queens”) that make subordination of one group to another seem necessary and inevitable.

AUDIENCE

SAMPLE ANALYSIS OF A RHETORICAL SITUATION

The following analysis draws on a number of reading strategies presented in this chapter to examine how the writer Kevin Powell identifies and responds to the call to write in his commentary “My Culture at the Crossroads.”

“My Culture at the Crossroads” appeared in the October 9, 2000, issue of *Newsweek*, as part of its special feature cover story “The Rap on Rap.”

Following Powell’s commentary is a sample rhetorical analysis with annotations.

Newsweek

My Culture at the Crossroads

A rap devotee watches corporate control and apolitical times encroach on the music he has loved all his life. BY KEVIN POWELL

I am a hip-hop head for life. I have tagged my moniker—"kepo1"—on walls; break-danced on cardboard; bumped elbows with fellow hip-hoppers at legendary clubs like The Rooftop, Union Square and Latin Quarter in New York City, and done everything from organizing rap shows to working as a hip-hop journalist and managing music producers. This culture has not only rescued the lives of countless masses who look like me, but it has empowered more young, working-class black and Latino cats than the civil-rights movement.

Yet something peculiar erupts when you've been around hip-hop for a while. Although you still love it, you look at its culture from a more critical perspective, particularly if you have studied other music genres, traveled widely and reflected intensely. You realize that what began as party music has come to be the soundtrack for post-civil-rights America. You realize that hip-hop is urban folk art, and as much an indication of the conditions in impoverished areas as bluesman Robert Johnson's laments in the 1930s. Naturally, you see a connection between the lives of Johnson and Tupac Shakur, not to mention a not-so-funny link between the mainstream hyping of Elvis and Eminem as innovators of black music forms. And, for sure, you wonder loudly, if what happened to rock and roll will happen to hip-hop, if it hasn't already.

That is the external battle for hip-hop today: corporate control and cooptation. But there is also a civil war going on within the hip-hop nation. Part of it, unquestionably, has to do with this corporate stranglehold. Part of it has to do with the incredibly apolitical times in which we live: for some white Americans the current economic boom has created the myth that things are swell for all Americans. Not the case; 20 years after the Reagan backlash on civil rights, the influx of crack and guns and the acceleration of a disturbing class divide in black America, hip-hop has come to symbolize a generation fragmented by integration, migration, abandonment, alienation and, yes,

self-hatred. Thus, hip-hop, once vibrant, edgy, fresh and def, is now as materialistic, hedonistic, misogynistic, shallow and violent as some of the films and TV shows launched from Hollywood.

It wasn't always that way. But, unfortunately, the golden era of hip-hop—that period in the late '80s and early '90s when such diverse artists as Public Enemy, N.W.A, Queen Latifah, MC Hammer, LL Cool J and De La Soul coexisted and there was no such thing as "positive" or "negative" rap—has long been dead. Gone as well is an embrace of hip-hop's four elements: graffiti writing, the dance element (or what some call break-dancing), DJing and MCing. The MC or "rapper" has been singled out to be his own man in this very male-centered arena, and the formula for a hit record is simple: fancy yourself a thug, pimp or gangster; rhyme about jewelry, clothing and alcohol; denigrate women in every conceivable way, and party and b.s. ad nauseam.

None of this would matter much to me if videos didn't pump visual crack into the minds of young people across the planet. Of if "urban radio" actually played something other than the same 10–12 songs every day. Or if some of our fabulous hip-hop magazines didn't make constant references to marijuana, liquor and "niggas" under the guise of keeping things real. The above notwithstanding,

I am not a hater, or someone who disses for the sake of dissing. Nor do I feel hip-hop has created urban misery, racism, sexism, homophobia or classism. That said, what I do believe is that hip-hop is at a crossroads, struggling for control over its creativity, while truly creative artists like Mos Def, Bahamadia and Common wonder when they will get the attention they deserve. In other words, Jay Z's "Big Pimpin'" would not bother me so much if Dead Prez's "Mind Sex" received as much notice. Perhaps Chuck D is correct in stating that the Internet is the great equalizer for would-be artists. But what does it matter if homeboys are still screaming "nigga" or "bitch" for global consumption, with no regard for who is inhaling those sentiments?



© Erica Berger/Corbis

Powell is the editor of "Step Into a World: A Global Anthology of the New Black Literature," to be published in November (Wiley), and is guest curator of the Brooklyn Museum of Art's "Hip-Hop Nation: Roots, Rhymes & Rage."

ALLISON NADEAU, SAMPLE ANALYSIS

Nadeau 1

Allison Nadeau

English 101

Prof. Malek

15 October 2006

Rhetorical Analysis of "My Culture at the Crossroads"**Identifies publication**

"My Culture at the Crossroads" by Kevin Powell appeared in the *Newsweek* issue of October 9, 2000, as part of a special feature in the Arts and Entertainment section on the current crisis in rap music and hip-hop culture. In Powell's view, there is a "civil war going on within the hip-hop nation," caused in part by corporate control of the music and in part by an apolitical climate in post-civil rights America. The result, as Powell sees it, is that hip-hop is now as "materialistic, hedonistic, misogynistic, shallow, and violent" as Hollywood movies and TV shows. Powell points out that hip-hop was not always this way. In the "golden age" of the late 1980s and early 1990s, hip-hop was a vital "urban folk art" that included graffiti writing, breakdancing, DJing, and MCing. Since that time, however, the single focus on the MC or rapper as a thug, pimp, or gangster has brought hip-hop culture to a crossroads. The issue for Powell is whether the most creative artists can gain control of the music and take it in a positive direction.

Summarizes the commentary

Powell's commentary is part of a larger debate about the current status of rap. Hip-hop culture has always been controversial, but for many people, black and white, inside and outside the hip-hop nation, rap music now seems to focus exclusively on money, sex, and violence. The murders of Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls have heightened concerns about rap's "gangsta" image, and the constant preoccupation with guns, expensive jewelry, fancy cars, drugs, and partying worry many that rap is feeding racist stereotypes and has turned the music away from its original promise to tell the truth about black America. As Michael Eric Dyson is quoted in another article in *Newsweek*'s coverage of rap. "There's a war going on for the soul of hip-hop."

Explains the context of issues

Nadeau 3

publishing criticisms of hip-hop in a mainstream magazine. This perhaps accounts for the way Powell lists his own roots in hip-hop and proclaims his devotion to it. He also tries to make it clear that he is not "someone who disses for dissing sake." But he must also know that he is unlikely to convince those MCs who are making millions rapping about pimps, "niggas," and "bitches." Instead, his commentary seems to seek out those readers within hip-hop who might join with him to turn things around.

Analyzes language use

Tone

Denotation/ connotation

Figure of speech

Evaluates rhetorical effectiveness

Powell's language is one technique he uses to establish his allegiances to hip-hop and a common ground where progressive forces can join together. The commentary has an informal, conversational tone that emphasizes Powell's sincerity and makes it seem he is speaking directly to his readers. Powell sprinkles his commentary with rap terms such as "tagged," "def," and "DJing" and the names of rap artists, not so many that mainstream readers will lose the train of thought but enough to ensure Powell's authenticity for his hip-hop readers. The use of the term "fresh," for example, will probably just go by many readers as denoting something new, while hip-hop readers will recognize its connotative use as a key term in rap vocabulary. Finally, Powell's most powerful figure of speech—the phrase describing videos that "pump visual crack into the minds of young people"—provides all readers with a striking image of what he sees as wrong with the current rap scene.

My analysis suggests that Powell's commentary is rhetorically effective, given the constraints of space and the fact that we cannot assume that Powell's argument will actually rally progressive rappers and produce genuine change. The commentary does, however, make available to many readers what may well be a new and more complicated understanding of hip-hop, and it clearly offers points of identification for "positive" rappers. For some readers, Powell's argument that "the current economic boom has created the myth that things are swell for all Americans" may be too brief and lacking in evidence, but this in part is a problem of space. Those predisposed to share Powell's view

Nadeau 4

that there is an accelerating class divide may just be glad to see this idea put forward in a major mainstream publication like *Newsweek*. In all, Powell has done a skillful job of conveying the sense of urgency that called on him to write this commentary and a skillful balancing act in establishing the authority to address two very different audiences.

WRITING ASSIGNMENT

Analyzing the Rhetorical Situation

Your task is to select a piece of writing to analyze its rhetorical situation. Use the sample rhetorical analysis as a flexible guide—not as a rigid model. How you organize your analysis will depend in part on the writing you choose and in part on the decisions you make about how to arrange the parts of your analysis.

Directions

1. Select a short (five to ten paragraphs) written text that takes a position on an issue. Newspaper editorials and op-ed pieces, featured columnists published in newspapers and magazines, magazine commentary, political ads, and ads from advocacy groups are all good sources for this assignment. It helps if you know something about the topic and the issues involved.
2. To prepare for your analysis, use the reading strategies presented in this chapter to come to terms with the reading you've chosen.
 - Do a first close reading that uses underlining, annotation, and summary to make sure you understand what the writer is saying. Go back to any sections that need clarification.
 - On a second reading, pay attention to what the writer is doing by describing the writer's strategy.
3. Use your close reading to analyze the rhetorical situation. Here are some questions to guide your analysis:
 - What is the context of issues? What do you know about the topic? What issues does the topic raise? Is there a larger debate,