The Rhetorical Situation
At the start of any writing project, think through your writing in context, as a rhetorical situation involving your own ideas, the words and media that you will use to express them, and the ideas and expectations of your readers. The elements of context will shape your thinking at each node of this rhetorical triangle.

**Context**
- Textual
- Immediate
- Historical/Social

**The Text**
- Content, words, images, form, media

**The Writer**
- Knowledge, experience, memories, feelings, intentions, purpose, desires

**The Reader**
- Knowledge, experience, memories, expectations, predictions, feelings, desires

Each writing situation has contexts that should be considered carefully before you start writing and while you are writing and revising. When you consider contexts as a writer, you practice the art of rhetoric, which involves discovering ideas and using words and images designed to persuade, inform, or move readers.

Context refers to all the situational elements that might shape a writer's purpose. Context includes the situations of readers and writers, the historical and physical circumstances, other texts, and even the broader systems of meaning like ideology that "contain" the text. You can read books, films, TV shows, and cultures as texts that have contexts that shape meaning.

Bear in mind how these aspects of context might shape your purpose and meaning.
Suppose you want to ask a peer to give you feedback on a personal essay before you submit it to your instructor or to your campus literary magazine. The hard part about asking for a favor is not the gist of what you will say or write—"Would you please give me feedback on this essay?"—but figuring out how you will say or write it (the style, the words), what medium you should use (spoken words, a handwritten note, an email message, an instant message), under what circumstances your message will be read, and how the person will respond (yes, no, maybe, why? what?). You decide that you'll ask for help via email.

You also need to take into account your reader's context. Under what circumstances will he or she read your request for a favor? In the midst of a busy day, among lots of spam email? On a busy commute home on a wireless PDA? As a friend or mild acquaintance? What does your reader already know about you? Will he or she be inclined to respond? What might he or she expect in return?

The questions you ask and the rhetorical decisions you make should be governed by a sense of *kairos*. *Kairos*, a Greek concept meaning "timeliness" and "suiting the word to the occasion," is central to understanding rhetoric (and writing generally) as a method of discovering the available means of persuasion in any situation.

Scenes for writing and reading email
How would your message change if you knew it would be read in the contexts pictured here?
Learning to draw on elements of the context in order to shape your purposes and your subject is a strategy you'll need in every situation that calls for you to communicate your ideas to others.

- The **textual context** consists of the words, images, or other symbols that contain or surround ideas. In the Declaration of Independence, phrases like "all men are created equal," "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," and even the signatures themselves are part of the textual context.

- The **immediate context** is the situation to which the text responds. In a film review, it would include the reviewer, the review, the newspaper in which the review is published, the readers of the newspaper, and so on.

- The **social and historical context** is the broader context of attitudes and practices that have histories associated with them. For instance, a film review might be read in the context of conflicting cultural attitudes about violence.

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**About Project Checklists**

When you are assigned a writing project or choose to take one on, consider the questions in the Project Checklists on pages 5, 6, and 7. For assistance with other aspects of writing, consult the list of Project Checklists on page v.
In college, your motives for writing either will arise naturally as a result of your interests or will result from assigned coursework. Even when you write because you’ve been assigned to do so, you can discover a personal motivation to make the enterprise more interesting—to express yourself, examine what you know, or “set the record straight,” for example. Whatever the circumstances of your writing, one key to success is to approach any writing situation as an opportunity to learn, as well as to teach, persuade, or move others.

When your motivation is internal—when you have what psychologists call a “felt need” or there is some imbalance you need to respond to—you can still be systematic about the process you follow to produce good writing. For example, you may want to voice your opinion on a community problem in a letter to the editor of a newspaper, or you may want to post a review of a book you recently enjoyed on your reading blog at Blogger.com or Reger.com. Your reasons for writing may arise out of your own experiences and motives, but you will still need to examine the editorial policy of the newspaper or the blogging practices followed by others so that your writing will communicate effectively with readers. You will need to understand your writing in context.

### Project Checklist

#### Understanding a Writing Assignment

1. **The prompt or topic.** What topic, question, or situation have you been asked to write about or respond to? How much freedom do you have to pick a specific subject or approach?

2. **The background information.** Assignments often discuss the prompt by explaining the context, providing more information about how to approach the topic or why the topic is important.

3. **Steps in the process.** Some assignments spell out what steps you need to follow to complete the writing project and even list due dates for completing intermediate steps, such as doing research, participating in peer review, and turning in rough drafts.

4. **The audience.** The assignment might identify a specific audience. For example, you might be asked to address your argumentative essay to readers who haven’t yet made up their minds on a subject. Your sense of audience should help you guide your invention of subject matter and your methods of developing and organizing your content.

5. **Grading criteria.** To help you set your goals, assignments may provide you with specific criteria for measuring your success (called rubrics), or more general expectations regarding the form of your writing and its effectiveness in elaborating the subject, explaining information, or arguing a point.
   - Does your assignment discuss what kinds of evidence will be needed? Will details come from personal experience, talking with others, or conducting more formal research?
   - Does your assignment discuss what final form the project should take? For example, does it call for a five-page printed essay, a brochure, a Web page, or a lab report?
   - Is there a specific length requirement for the final project?
   - Are you required to cite or refer to a specific number of outside sources of information?
   - For projects that draw on outside sources, which documentation style should you use?
Every call to write has a rhetorical situation. Analyzing it can help you make smart choices about how to approach your subject matter and present it to readers. In addition to considering the elements of context (discussed in section 1a), develop an understanding of the rhetorical situation—your subject, purpose, and audience—as you analyze your writing assignments.

**Subject**
- What do you already know about the subject?
- What have others said about it?
- What does your audience know about it?
- To develop your understanding of the subject, use the invention methods discussed in Chapter 2.

**Purpose**
- What are your purposes for writing this assignment? Will you analyze a trend, inform readers of a new policy, entertain them with a story, or persuade them to take action?
- What tone—your attitude expressed toward the subject—will best accomplish your purpose? Do you want to sound formal and distantly polite, informal but engaged with your subject, lively, reasoned, expert, or inexperienced but curious?
- What genre will best help you accomplish your purpose?

**Audience**
- Who is your primary audience—the people you want to influence most directly? Consider traits such as the age, gender, economic class, region, ethnicity/race, previous experiences, education, reading ability, and likely interests of your intended readers. Which of these (or other) traits of your audience is most important in this particular writing situation?
- Do you have a secondary, or subsidiary, audience, and if so, whom does it include? The subsidiary audience for your writing consists of readers who may read your work but who will do so with less investment than your primary audience. What audience expectations should you address in order to fulfill your purpose for writing? As your writing becomes more public—on the Web, for instance—you will find it increasingly important to consider how both primary and subsidiary audiences might respond to you.

**Genre**

A genre is a type of writing (or, more broadly, composition) used in a particular situation for a certain purpose and often with a conventional form, style, or subject. For example, there are genres and subgenres of nonfiction (such as biography and the personal essay), literature (poetry, fiction, drama), music (classical, country, punk, hip-hop, rap, rock), and art (still life, portrait, landscape, abstract).

Your understanding of genre will color many of your decisions throughout the planning, inventing, drafting, revising, and editing phases of your writing process. What expectations about your purpose, form, style, and subject matter will your audience bring to your work?

Genre becomes critically important as you write in classes across the curriculum: people learn to value a certain type of writing for certain purposes and in
particular contexts. Readers bring expectations that help them decide how to read and respond to your writing. For example, the conventional form of an argumentative essay changes somewhat as you move from writing about literature to writing about science. A thesis—a statement to be proven—might organize your argument in an essay on literature, but in psychology, a hypothesis might organize a study whose results argue that the hypothesis itself is true or false (section 9k).

As you plan your writing projects, you should from the start try to learn the conventions of the genre so that you know what expectations your readers will bring to your work and how they are likely to respond to what you write.

The Academic Essay as a Genre

The genre of the academic essay has features that help readers distinguish it, for example, from a blog posting, a note between friends, a business letter, or a screenplay. Like any genre, it has conventions of form, style, and subject matter that distinguish it from personal narrative, fiction, poetry, or drama.

Genre Notes on the Academic Essay

A genre needs to be learned and practiced; no list of features can fully define it. The following guidelines are meant only as a starting point.

Form

- A descriptive title that suggests the subject and, if possible, the writer's perspective or position.
- Introductory paragraphs that invite readers into the subject by providing them with background information, context, and a thesis to be argued or a problem to be posed and explored.
- Body paragraphs that develop the reasons and evidence needed to support the thesis or elaborate the problem. Each body paragraph typically offers a full explanation of one major reason, idea, or example that supports the thesis statement or extends the inquiry.
- Concluding paragraphs that return to the thesis or problem, explain the implications of the argument or new ideas, or raise questions for further consideration.

Not all academic essays will be organized in this fashion, but if you are unsure how to organize your thoughts, these guidelines suggest a form that will be useful.

Style

- A formal or semiformal style in which the writer addresses a knowledgeable but unknown reader. Academic essays typically avoid slang and the colloquial language people use in everyday speech.
- Specialized terms that clarify or explain the subject. Be careful about your use of jargon, the field-specific words that people who share knowledge use to simplify their exchange of information. Good academic essays are not so jargon-laden that only a few people in the world can understand them. As academic essays have both primary and subsidiary audiences, you should define specialized terms so that all educated readers will understand your meaning.
- Well-developed paragraphs and sentences that help readers ponder meaning and follow a line of reasoning or explanation.

Subject

- Subject matter that people have conflicting opinions about, that is timely, that can help us solve or understand problems, or that inspires deeper understanding of the human condition.
Connections and circulation with the ideas of others, whose work is cited. Academic essays join an ongoing conversation about the subject matter and so will typically acknowledge what others have written previously.

Citation style appropriate to the given field of study.

A tone of confidence in the writer’s attitude toward the subject. Good academic essays show their writers to be careful, knowledgeable, and trustworthy. It is clear that the writer has thought carefully about the subject.

Analyzing Genre Requirements and Learning Specialized Terms

Analyzing genre requirements. If you have questions about what is expected of you when you are given an assignment, ask your instructor for help. If you can point to specific aspects of the assignment that you don’t understand, write your questions down before you talk to your instructor. You can also ask to see examples of effective writing projects that were responses to similar assignments. Carefully examine the samples you are given and take notes on the features of the writing. Share the samples with peers in or out of class and discuss what they think is expected. After you look over the samples, go back to your instructor and share what you have learned about the assignment. Instructors will appreciate your early attempts to understand assignments and will help when they can.

Learning specialized terms. Part of the difficulty of studying a new topic or a new academic discipline is learning the precise meanings of words or phrases that mean something different in general usage. For example, when you are asked to write a critical analysis in a composition course, that usually means more than criticizing something (as in finding fault with it). Critical analysis involves breaking a subject into its parts and explaining how and why these parts add up to something of value (or not). (See Key Terms for Understanding Exam Questions on page 86.) When you are dealing with complicated concepts and language, take the time to check your understanding of ideas and language with someone who knows your subject matter well, such as a tutor in the writing center.

Developing Content in Context: Understanding Ethos, Logos, and Pathos

Regardless of the genre in which you compose, three rhetorical concepts can help you decide how to develop your subject: ethos, logos, and pathos. In rhetoric, ethos, logos, and pathos describe the three kinds of proof, or rhetorical appeals, that a writer can draw on when deciding what to say about a subject and how to say it. Because they help writers make decisions about what to write and how to write it, ethos, logos, and pathos are considered aspects of rhetorical invention.

Ethos is the appeal to the character of the writer and his or her attitude toward the subject. Writers convey ethos with their depth of knowledge about a subject, tone or attitude toward the subject, awareness of alternative viewpoints, manner of addressing readers, and fairness and trustworthiness. Logos is the use of content as a form of proof or appeal and may include ideas, images, information, and evidence. Pathos is the appeal to the emotions of the audience. Writers use pathos to encourage readers to attach emotional responses to the content (logos) or writer (ethos) and thus to feel moved to action or belief.

CONSIDERING THE RHETORICAL SITUATION