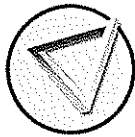




- **Writers today recognize that an active and personal style free from errors is often most effective.** Readers in general prefer a personal and accessible style.
- **Writers today communicate visually as well as verbally.** Computers and digital media give writers the ability to use pictures and graphics in addition to text. Knowing how to communicate visually is important to your success in the digital era.



CHAPTER 1

The Rhetorical Situation

COMMUNICATING IN THE WORLD

Roberto de Nobili

In May 1605, a Portuguese ship arrived at the colony of Goa on the west coast of India, the administrative center for Portuguese trade in the East. On the ship was a young Italian aristocrat, Roberto de Nobili, who had abandoned his inherited title and wealth to become a Jesuit missionary. He found the wealth of Goa dazzling, but it did not take long for de Nobili to discover that the spiritual mission of the Jesuits had failed. After nearly a hundred years of occupation, almost all the converts to Christianity were either the servants of the Portuguese or under their direct control.

Roberto de Nobili quickly learned Tamil, the language spoken in much of southern India. His talents made him the ideal candidate for an attempt to convert the people in India who lived in the interior. He was sent to Madurai, a provincial capital in southern India, where his predecessor had failed to make a single convert in eleven years. Over time de Nobili came to understand why the record of success had been so poor. The Portuguese ignored the basic values of the local people, such as the prohibition on eating beef; consequently, the people in India regarded the Portuguese as subhuman beings.

(continued next page)



De Nobili decided that he needed to take a different approach. He wore the clothing of a Hindu holy man, ate one meal a day of herbs and rice, observed local customs, and preached in Tamil. Gradually, de Nobili drew many visitors and became the first European to learn Sanskrit, giving him access to Hindu religious texts. With this knowledge he could draw parallels between certain Hindu and Christian beliefs. He gained widespread acceptance among the upper castes of Hindu society. Even though his dream of converting much of India to Christianity did not come to pass, de Nobili taught us how people from vastly different cultural backgrounds might engage in dialogue.

1a THE RHETORICAL TRIANGLE

The lessons that Roberto de Nobili learned still apply today. He recognized that the message alone is inadequate for effective communication. If de Nobili were to convince anyone in southern India to convert to Christianity, he would first have to convince the people that he was a person worth listening to. De Nobili realized that to gain respect he would have to respect the values of the community.

All too often, as was the case with de Nobili, we become aware of how communication works only when communication breaks down. De Nobili understood that communication is more than the message—that the speaker and the audience are also essential components of communication. These components are often represented with a triangle.

The rhetorical triangle (Figure 1.1) depicts two important points about any kind of communication. First, all three elements—speaker, subject, and audience—are necessary for an act of communication to occur. Even if you are talking to or writing to yourself, you still have an audience. Second, the three elements are in a dynamic relationship, which the example of Roberto de Nobili illustrates. De Nobili had to change his dress, his eating habits, his language, and indeed, his entire way of living in order to convince his audience that he was a person of good will with their best interests in mind. Few people ever go to these extremes to communicate, but every one of us makes adjustments depending on our audience (think of how you talk to small children). Similarly, just as speakers adjust to audiences, audiences continually adjust to speakers (think of how your attitude toward speakers changes when they are able to laugh at themselves).

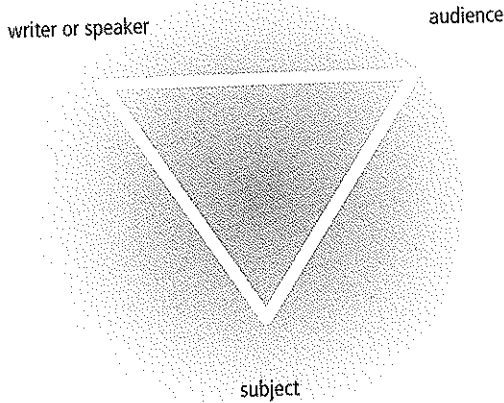


FIGURE 1.1 The rhetorical triangle

Persuasive appeals

The ancient Greeks recognized that the dynamic nature of the rhetorical triangle is the key to understanding how an audience is persuaded. The most important teacher of rhetoric in ancient Greece, Aristotle (384–323 BCE), defined rhetoric as the art of finding the best available means of persuasion in any situation. He set out three primary tactics of persuasion: appeals based on the trustworthiness of the speaker (*ethos*); appeals to the emotions and deepest-held values of the audience (*pathos*); and appeals to logic, reasoning, and evidence (*logos*). These appeals likewise can be represented using the rhetorical triangle (Figure 1.2, page 8).

Let's take a practical example of persuasion. Imagine that you drive every day on Lakeside Boulevard, a four-lane highway divided in two by a narrow grass median strip. You've read in the newspaper about numerous accidents on Lakeside Boulevard, many of them fatal. You yourself have witnessed two horrible accidents, when cars skidded across the median and collided head-on with traffic in the opposite lanes. You want your city council to vote to erect a concrete barrier that will prevent these frequent head-on collisions. One approach would be to use logic and evidence, documenting that Lakeside Boulevard has far more fatal accidents per mile than other streets in your city (*logos*). Another would be to invite an expert on traffic safety to speak to the city council (*ethos*). A third way would be to appeal to the council about the unnecessary loss of life caused by the unsafe street (*pathos*). Often you will use all of these appeals to gain support of an audience.



1a The Rhetorical Situation

Ethos

appeals to the character and expertise
of the writer or speaker

Pathos

appeals to the beliefs and values
of the audience

Logos

appeals based on logic, reasoning, and
evidence concerning the subject

FIGURE 1.2 Persuasive appeals

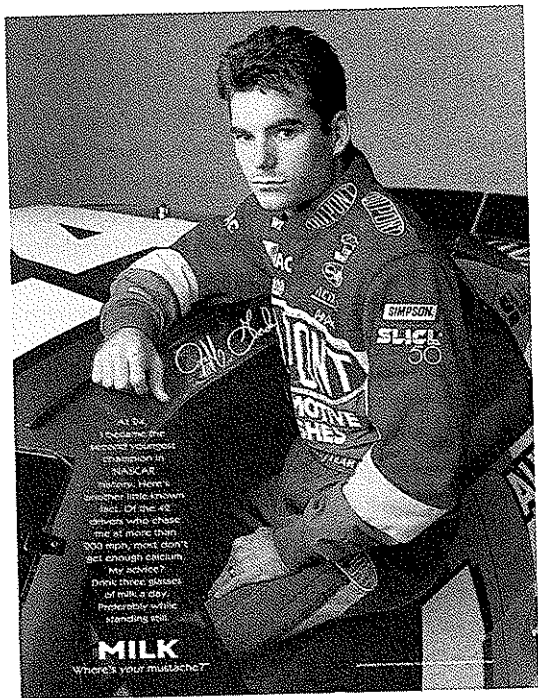


FIGURE 1.3 *Ethos*. "At 24, I became the second youngest champion in NASCAR history."



As young people, you HAVE:
...a FRESH perspective...



"The future of this movement lies with the young people."

—Millard Fuller, founder and president of Habitat for Humanity International

FIGURE 1.4 Pathos. "As young people, you have a fresh perspective."

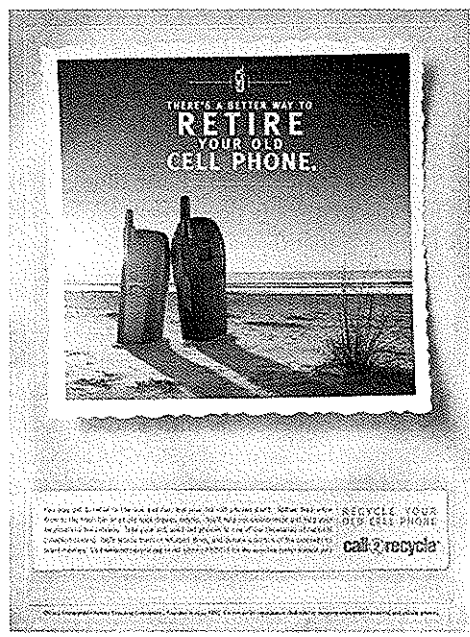


FIGURE 1.5 Logos. "You may get to retire in the sun and fun, but your old cell phones don't. Rather than retire them to the trash bin or an old sock drawer, recycle. You'll help our environment and help your neighbors in the process."



The larger context

The rhetorical triangle is useful for understanding how an act of communication works at a particular time. What is missing, however, is a sense of how the participants happened to be talking about that particular subject at that time in that place. Roberto de Nobili did not arrive in southern India by accident. He was part of an expanding Portuguese empire that extended from Macao off the coast of China, across south Asia and Africa, to Brazil in South America. De Nobili was also a priest who represented the Roman Catholic Church. Likewise, the people of the higher castes in southern India, whom de Nobili was attempting to convert, were not vegetarians because they had suddenly decided to stop eating meat; they were following a centuries-old Hindu religious tradition of not taking the lives of animals.

We do not think much about long-standing cultural traditions when we talk to people who live in our own culture, but we often become aware of the historical dimensions of particular subjects for particular audiences. For example, you might know that certain species of sharks are becoming increasingly rare. Large coastal sharks are vulnerable to overfishing because they grow slowly and have a slow reproductive rate. Nonetheless, it's much harder to convince a general audience that sharks need protection than it is to argue for the protection of a cuddly species like the panda. Most people have seen too many movies like *Jaws* and read too many accounts of shark attacks to think of sharks in the same way they think of pandas.

Any act of communicating is never quite the neutral situation that a simple rhetorical triangle implies. Speaker, subject, and audience each bring histories to a particular rhetorical situation (Figure 1.6, page 11). People who know how to communicate effectively use those histories to their advantage. They understand that many people have spoken and written about the subject before them and that they are entering an ongoing conversation.

The writing situation

When the rhetorical situation changes from speaking to writing, it becomes more complex. It might seem that we can simply substitute "writer" for "speaker" and "readers" for "audience" in the rhetorical triangle, but it's not that simple. While every healthy person above infancy can speak and listen, people can read and write only if they are taught. Writing requires a system of representation, in which symbols stand for sounds or words. Writing requires an instrument for writing, even if it is only your finger making letters in the sand at the beach. More important, writing changes the dynamics of the rhetorical triangle because usually writer and reader are separated by time and space. Writing changes the nature of the audience and the nature of the speaker in more ways than merely substituting written words for those spoken.

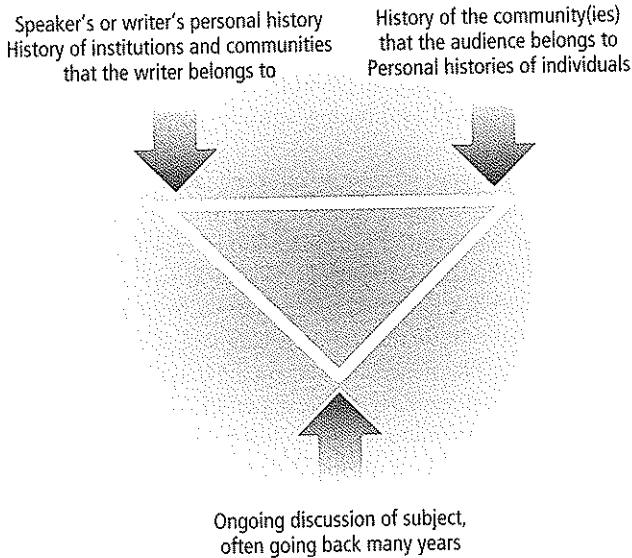


FIGURE 1.6 Social and historical contexts of the rhetorical situation

1b A WRITER'S AUDIENCE

On occasion you may write to a person who is close enough to talk to. For example, in a large lecture class you might write a note to the person sitting beside you. At other times, even though the person isn't present, you know the person so well that writing seems almost like speaking, such as when you send email to a member of your family. You know your family member shares much in common with you and will pick up on your tone and meaning when you write "Aunt Sally made her mystery meatloaf once again."

At other times your audience may consist of many individuals whose knowledge is relatively uniform and similar to yours. If you write an article for a journal in your major field, you can assume that your readers are familiar with the terms and concepts in that field even though your readers are different as individuals. When you can easily characterize the knowledge and attitudes of your audience, the audience can be called a **simple** audience.

Frequently, however, the issue of audience is much more complicated when you write. When an accountant writes a financial analysis for a bank, different people—officers of the bank, other employees, shareholders, government regulatory officials, financial analysts, and potential investors—might read that analysis for different reasons. This kind of complex



audience—people with different backgrounds who read the same document for different reasons—is called a **multiple** audience. When you write for multiple audiences, you need to consider differing levels of knowledge about your subject, as well as differing attitudes toward both you and the topic you are writing about.

Critical to what you write is your audience's knowledge of your subject. If you know that your readers will be unfamiliar with your subject, you should provide background information and connect your new information to what your readers already know. Another critical factor is the level of expertise of your audience. If you are writing for an audience of experts in a field, you can use the technical language of that field. If you are unsure how much your audience knows, you may need to explain technical terms. For example, a newspaper article about the options for connecting to the Internet from home should explain key concepts such as kilobits per second, the measure of connection speed. If your audience knows nothing about your subject, then you may have to convince them that they should be interested.



1c A WRITER'S ETHOS

Your college newspaper may print guest editorials by fellow students and others connected with the school on the editorial pages. When you glance through its columns, you make quick decisions about what to read. When you read an editorial, you form an opinion about how much the writer seems to know about the subject. And if the writer urges you to do something—such as vote for a candidate or initiative—you will decide whether the writer has your best interests in mind before you act.

A perusal of any newspaper illustrates two key principles about a writer's ethos. Writers must convince their readers that the writers

- Are knowledgeable about the subject
- Have their readers' needs in mind

If a writer fails on either count, readers either stop reading or do not believe that what they have read has any relevance to them.

Some writers begin with credibility because of who they are. If you wonder what foods compose a balanced meal for your dog, you will probably take seriously the advice of a veterinarian. If you want to develop a powerful backhand in tennis, you might read carefully advice from Venus Williams in a tennis magazine. Most writers, however, do not begin with an established ethos. They have to convince their readers to keep reading by demonstrating knowledge of their subject and concern with their readers' needs. No matter how much you know about a subject or how good your ideas are, your ethos



as a writer will be destroyed by sloppy, error-filled writing. Perhaps people should not make strong negative judgments on the basis of a few mistakes, but in the workplace and in public life, they often do.

1d A WRITER'S PURPOSE

The starting point for effective writing is determining in advance what you want to accomplish. You may want to reflect on your experience or the experience of others. You may want to inform your readers about a subject. Or you may want to change your readers' attitudes about a subject or persuade them to take action. Your purpose will determine the tone and presentation of your message. You will find more about these purposes in Chapters 8, 9, and 10.

To give one example, imagine that you are invited to contribute a guest editorial to your college newspaper. Your purpose is to convince your readers that state government should provide parents with choices among public and private schools. Your position is that the tax dollars that now automatically go to public schools should go to private schools if parents so choose.

First, you have to establish your ethos by doing your homework. You discover evidence that the sophomore-to-senior dropout rate in private schools is less than half the rate of public schools. Furthermore, students from private schools attend college at nearly twice the rate of public school graduates. You argue that one of the reasons private schools are more successful is that they spend more money on instruction and less on administration. And you feel that school choice speaks to the American desire for personal freedom.

But you know from the outset that not everyone on your campus will agree with you. Many of the faculty and other students will feel strongly that public money should not be given to private schools. You can anticipate that critics of the public funding of private schools will raise the objection that because many students in private schools come from more affluent families, it's no surprise that they do better. You will have to deal with that objection. Anticipating points of view different from yours and stating them in a way that is recognizable to those who hold those different viewpoints is a means to building your ethos. Even though you know from the outset that you will not convince everyone, if you can get your readers to consider your position seriously you will have succeeded.