

ESSAY ONE

The Importance of Context for Your Topic

One of the goals in this course is to help you recognize that issues occur in a particular **situation** within a larger **context**. When people sit down to write, the choices they make in writing are influenced by the situation in which they are writing. For instance, you may write two pieces explaining ways to recycle radioactive waste, one an essay for your environmental engineering professor and the other a letter-to-the-editor in response to a dumping of radioactive waste near your hometown. While the information contained in the two writings may be similar, they will most likely be written differently because the **situation** for each is different. The academic essay may be hypothetical and for an assignment, while the letter to the editor may use language and ideas appropriate to the large and diverse community that reads your hometown newspaper. Your letter may address the state legislators who permitted this dumping; then you will be addressing the legal issues and policies governing such practices.

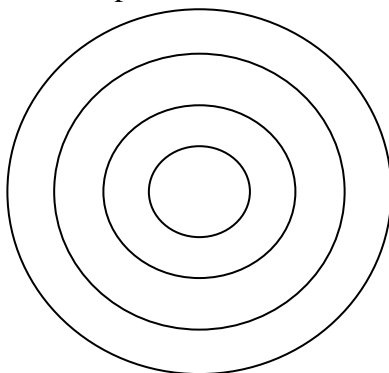
Thus, when you read essays and articles in this course, you will examine not only what the authors have said but **when, where, to whom, and why**. In other words you will be analyzing the **rhetorical situation**. When you write essays you'll need to ask yourselves the same questions. What is the **purpose** that motivates you to write this? How can you convey that purpose so your readers will understand why they should read your piece? Who else might read it? Should you try to anticipate their responses? As you can see, when reading and writing are examined with larger **contexts** in mind, they become more complex. In fact, every time you write something, you should consider:

- Purpose for writing
- Audience for whom you write
- Situation in which you are writing
- Larger context

In our texts, we will be reading about the rhetorical triangle and the rhetorical situation.

Background or Contextual Analysis Essay (Essay One)

An examination of the context for your issues may include a number of areas. For example, the geography in which you are examining your topic may be important. You will write very differently about environmental issues in the Arctic than you will in the state of South Carolina. Context also includes demographics: what are the religious, gender, racial, ethnic and economic issues for your topic? If these areas impact the topic in any way, you must examine and analyze them. The history also may be important. You will write differently about rights that states can exercise if you live in South Carolina instead of in Maine. Learning to analyze contexts is also important for your major, because your discipline will have a historical, demographic and economic context, too. The difference between situation and context is that the situation is a smaller, particular part of the larger context of the times, the geography, and the culture. Think about a particular viewpoint situated in a series of concentric circles that make up the wider context:



For your first 4-6 page essay, you will be describing the wider context surrounding your issue.

You will examine the history, the people or demographics, the geography (if relevant), the cultural factors (if relevant) such as: traditions, folklore, rituals, habits, taboos, religion, expectations, norms, class values, etc.

Now answer the following questions:

- How long has this topic been debated?
- Where has this controversy taken place?
- When has this debate taken place?
- Who are the groups of people involved in this debate?
 - What is their gender?
 - What is their race?
 - How about class?
 - Is their sexual orientation relevant?
 - What about religious preferences?
 - What other cultural factors impact the people in this debate?

Once you have researched and determined the answers and relevance of these questions to your topic, you will write four- to-six detailed, descriptive pages to “situate” or “contextualize” this debate using the data gathered via your questions. If the topic is not researched in this way, you may end up arguing from a very ill informed point of view, simply because you didn’t consider the bigger picture or wider context.

Organizing Essay One

Your first page should contain an introduction to your topic and a thesis about what you will be doing in the following four-to-six pages (when the essays are combined, you will revise your thesis to cover the entire paper). You can let your reader know what cultural and other contextual factors are important for your topic. For example, a thesis for Essay 1 on an environmental topic about protecting the South Carolina Upstate hiking trails from the developers and loggers could be the following:

South Carolina’s scenic Upstate hiking trails contain some of the most beautiful waterfalls in the Blue Ridge Mountains, but they are presently being fought over by developers, hikers and loggers. In this essay, I will give the context for this battle by showing what advantages of this mountain range various groups of people experience when they explore this region and how they might want to use these magnificent and plentiful falls for their own purposes.

In the body of the next four-to-six pages, you would describe the trails and the region in which they are found, if and how long they have been an established part of the Appalachian and Foothills Trails, and what groups are vying for their own rights to them. Once you identify the various groups, you would describe them, carefully avoiding taking a stand on one or more group’s behalf at this time. You could use a page or two for introducing your topic, two pages for answering the first three questions above and two pages for describing the groups and the cultural factors and incentives driving these groups. (This suggestion for organization is just one of many – the organization depends on your topic and its context).