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## The Rhetorical Situation

A rhetorical situation is any circumstance in which one or more people employ **rhetoric**, finding all the available means of persuasion. Speakers and writers who use rhetoric are called **rhetors**.

### Exigence

All rhetorical situations originate with an exigence. The **exigence** is what motivates a rhetor to argue in the first place. Why does the rhetor need to make this point? What will this argument do for the world?

Examples of exigence:

A congressman delivers a speech arguing that we need stricter gun control. The exigence is that the congressman believes stricter gun control will lead to less gun violence.

A pastor writes and delivers a eulogy at a funeral. The exigence is that it is customary to reflect on a deceased person's life and accomplishments.

A defense attorney argues before a jury that her client is innocent of murder. The exigence is that it is the defense attorney's job to ensure that her client—even if guilty—receives a fair trial.

### Audience

All rhetors write or speak for an **audience**, the body of listeners or readers—real or imagined—that the rhetor is arguing to. There are two kinds of audience:

- **Immediate audience:** the individuals literally listening to or reading the rhetor's argument. For example, in the president's State of the Union address, those hearing the address (representatives, senators, people watching from home, etc.) are the president's immediate audience.
- **Mediated audience:** the individuals for whom the argument is intended. These individuals may or may not actually listen to or read the rhetor's argument. For example, in the State of the Union address, all American citizens—even those not tuning in to the address—are the president's mediated audience.

### Constraints

Rhetorical situations are based on the relationship between the rhetor, the audience, and the subject matter, but they are also based on various constraints that not only affect how the rhetor argues but how the audience interprets the argument. Common constraints include:



- Knowledge of the rhetor and audience about the subject matter

Example: A rhetor alludes to a quotation from the Declaration of Independence which she knows the audience will understand.

- Beliefs held by the rhetor and audience about the subject matter

Example: A rhetor argues against tattoos by citing a passage from the Bible condemning them.

- Culture of the rhetor and audience

Example: A rhetor argues that supporting the war effort is “part of being an American.”

- The time of the argument

Example: A rhetor has a hard time stirring the emotions of the audience at 7:00 a.m.

- The *timing* of the argument (the Greeks called this *kairos*—the idea that a good rhetor will know when it is the right time to make an argument)

Example of good *kairos*: Following a fatal school shooting, a rhetor argues for stricter gun control laws.

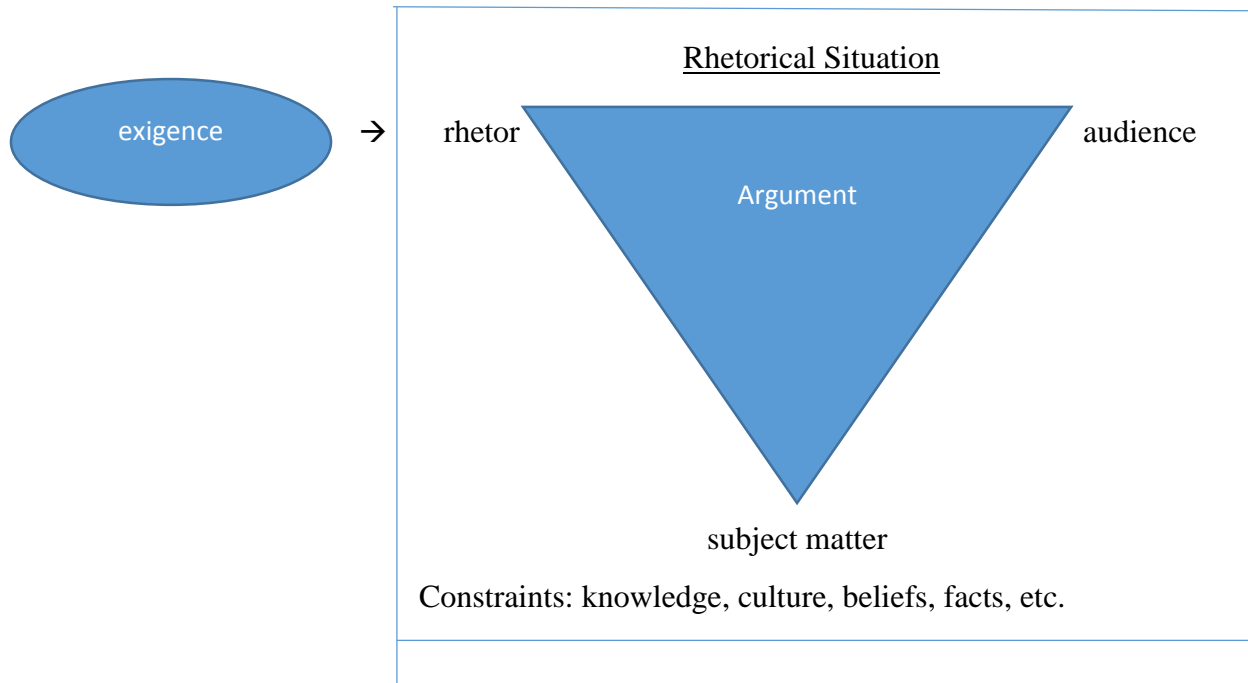
Example of bad *kairos*: A rhetor makes a tasteless joke too soon after a tragic event.

- The place of the argument

Example: A rhetor delivers a compelling argument, but the audience is too distracted by the sound of nearby construction machinery to pay attention.

- Relationship between rhetor and audience

Example: A political candidate gets a warm reception in her home state, but when she gives speeches in other states, the audience is more hostile toward her.



Example of a rhetorical situation:

Abraham Lincoln delivers his second inaugural address upon being reelected president during the American Civil War.

Exigence: it is customary for the president of the United States to deliver an inaugural address upon being elected or reelected.

Argument: the United States should finish the war with “malice toward none.” Citizens should work toward recovery instead of blaming each other for the war.

Rhetor: Abraham Lincoln

Immediate audience: those in attendance of the address

Mediated audience: all Americans

Subject matter: the American Civil War, slavery, religion, recovery

Constraints: facts (e.g., the participants in the war, the death toll, the major battles), beliefs (e.g., about the cause of the war), time (March 4, 1865), timing (near the end of the Civil War and approaching the Reconstruction period), place (in front of the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C.), relationship with audience (both Union and Confederate)