

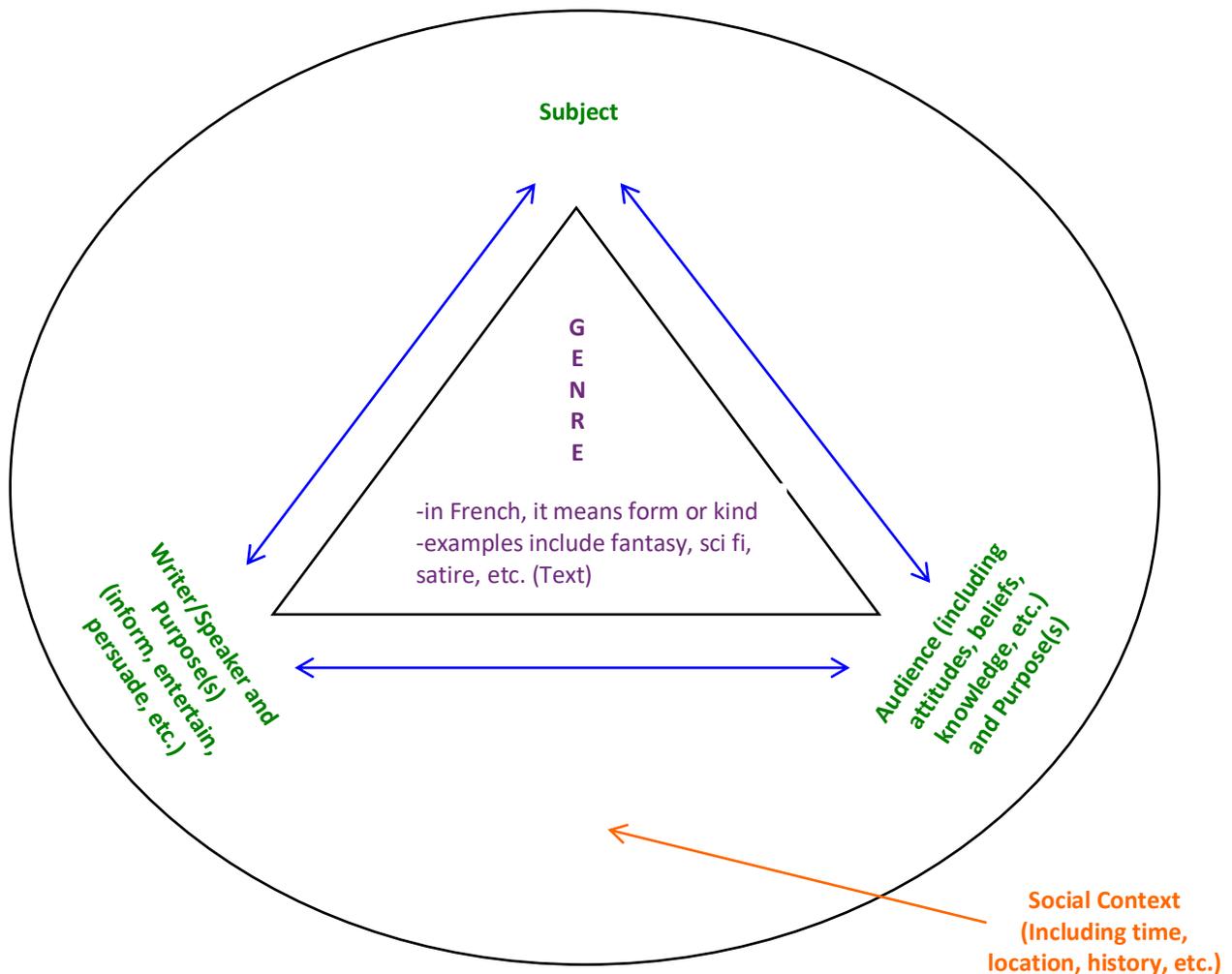
Teaching Rhetorical Awareness

What is Rhetorical Awareness?

When we talk about rhetorical awareness, we are really just considering how well a speaker/writer accomplishes their goals on a particular subject for a specific audience.

What's the Deal with the Triangle?

The Rhetorical Triangle is a heuristic for the rhetorical situation. In other words, the triangle diagram shows how and why a writer writes about a subject to accomplish a purpose for an audience. The writer also adheres to a particular genre, and all of these things occur within some larger social context. The blue arrows convey the recursive nature of this process. For example, even though the writer is writing to a particular audience, the nature of that audience is shaping the way the writer writes.



Do I Teach the Rhetorical Triangle, or Is That Just for Me?

Teach it! Having the Rhetorical Triangle in mind will give you and your students a common frame of reference for discussing not only their writing but also other texts they read. If you want an easy way for students to remember the Rhetorical Triangle, you might call their attention to its resemblance to the Deathly Hallows from *Harry Potter*. (Note: Ben objects to *Harry Potter* references in general, but Mandy is considering audience; many students will be familiar with the reference, and the comparison may help them retain this information.)

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What Does it Mean to Teach Rhetorical Awareness?

When you teach rhetorical awareness, you are mostly just calling students' attention to the impact that a speaker's/writer's decisions have on an audience. Some of these decisions (like choices about content) are obvious, but others (like sentence-level choices) may be more subtle. Once students understand that all of their written choices have some degree of impact on their audience, they can start making more effective choices to accomplish their goals with that audience.

Consider some ways you might already be teaching rhetorical awareness:

- Having students write to a particular audience, such as in a letter to the editor
- Telling students to avoid colloquialisms in formal writing
- Asking students to provide definitions for jargon in their writing
- Identifying/discussing the audience and social context for different works
- Letting students assume their reader has read the text on which they are writing
- Requiring students to research a subject
- Discussing the credentials and motivations of a speaker/writer
- Pointing out how stylistic errors could interfere with a reader's understanding
- Calling students' attention to a writer's word choice

Although you are already teaching rhetorical awareness implicitly, here are some ideas for making your instruction more explicit or intentional:

- Teach students the Rhetorical Triangle fairly early in the semester. We recommend pairing it with a short text, video clip, etc. so students can consider the rhetorical situation of an actual work. This is a great first day of class activity!
- Refer back to the triangle during discussions of course readings, assignment guidelines, and student drafts. Have students identify the speaker/purpose, subject, audience, etc. for each. In other words, each of the implicit examples above could simply include a direct reference to the Rhetorical Triangle.
- Emphasize audience. We tell students that the reader (or audience) is usually right. If the decisions they've made in their writing are not suitable for their audience, they cannot accomplish their purpose.
- Ground instruction of sentence-level concepts with rhetorical concepts. In other words, how do sentence-level errors impact an audience? If you master subordination and coordination, how can those methods help you convey your points to an audience?