

Writing, Rhetoric, & The Madness of America: How All The Stuff We Talked About Made Things Make A Hell of a Lot More Sense, & How I Plan to Use It

Rosalind Rohrbaugh

Created in Matthew Bryan's ENC 3314 Writing & Rhetoric Foundations

Abstract

A wealth of scholars such as Deborah Brandt, Karma Chavez, Amy Devitt, and more have explored both the separate and intersecting worlds of literacy, rhetoric, and genre within communication. This paper explores how these three communicative elements connect and how they contribute to and function within the real world as well as within the creative writing craft. The paper is broken up into multiple separate portions, beginning with an author preface explaining the intentions behind the structure of the paper, then moving into a single introductory segment followed by three distinct body segments. The conclusion works to tie all the points in the paper together and reiterate the piece's intentions. A hearty selection of scholarly readings is referenced throughout the entirety of the paper with a complete works cited section attached, and ultimately the intersectionality of literacy, rhetoric, and genre is thoroughly investigated, and their impacts on the world and writing are established.

Author's Preface: Why Are We Here, and What Are We Doing?

Initially, the final assignment for this course asked for a reflection on a single concept, idea, or argument encountered through the semester and an exploration into how said concept, idea, or argument is both significant now and how it could be utilized in my future ahead. From there, the assignment invited me to go in my own direction. I instantly thought of three key concepts that served as critical landmarks throughout the semester. In further planning for this final piece, I realized that the implications of all three terms on my life and my knowledge of the world around me were too significant to pass up. I simply could not choose a favorite. So, seeing the

Convergence Rhetoric

instructions for the assignment were free range, I chose to dedicate my final assignment to all three of these terms: Literacy, Rhetoric, and Genres.

I split up the portions of the essay as I have in past assignments, laying them out in more broken up “chapters,” so to speak. As a reader myself, I believe this style has always made essay comprehension much more accessible. I opted heavily for examples and course reading references, deciding against more visual aspects as I wasn’t truly connecting with those forms of expression for this specific piece. I enjoyed being able to join the lessons I’ve learned from the authors we’ve been exposed to, to scenarios that had taken place in my life even before this course began. I wanted more than anything to share what this class has given me, and that is understanding. The title itself says what I’ve been thinking at the end of every module: “oh, well, now that makes a hell of a lot more sense.” I felt very comfortable writing this piece. The fluidity of our assignments has made learning and application enjoyable, and it was nice to be able to write in my voice. Overall, it was a pleasing way to put into words all the things that this semester, and in particular this course, has offered me.

It’s been a good ride this fall, and I’ve discovered lots. It’s incredible to consider the fluidity, versatility, and overall intersectionality of the realm of writing and rhetoric as a whole. I am enlightened in all areas of my life and everything around me has been re-familiarized. I’ve made connections that would have seemed unfathomable only months before, and I am primed to enter scenarios of discussion and communication in new ways.

How convenient that amid unprecedented political turmoil, many of the elements over the semester have directly or indirectly faced fundamental world topics, addressed the way they function, and frankly, made them make a hell of a lot more sense. So, I’d like to delve into that a little more and unpack the “how’s” and “why’s” as they exist in literacy, rhetoric, and genres within the real world. I’ll be invoking some of the scholars and authors I’ve been introduced to over this semester in course content that have served as distant guides, offering sensical discussions to cut through the madness of America.

“Literacy is primarily something people do; it is an activity, located in the space between thought and text” (Barton and Hamilton 3).

It feels only appropriate to build this body from the beginning, and what better beginning than the topic of literacy? When I first confronted this term, I came at it from a relatively Standard English approach. Literacy was always presented to me as “being literate,” cut and dry. However, this view was only in the context of being literate in America, the standards of which I’ve come now to feel serve as a pillow over the face of authentic expression and communication. I didn’t realize I’d been panting under that smother for years of my life.

This point was a central one in my first major assignment dealing with

literacy this semester. In this, I explored literacy as an action in motion, as an act beyond writing a book or essay comprehension. Literacy is culture and what you do to get to know it. Eric Pleasant was the first to solidify this for me, as he recounted in his article, “Literacy Sponsors and Learning: An Ethnography of Punk Literacy in Mid-1980s Waco,” how he acquired his punk rock literacy and the elements that make it up. Posters on walls, clothing styles, music choices, track listings – these are visual and written mediums that we use every day to survey space and subculture. I’ve observed these mediums in every new setting I’ve been in without even noticing. Every new place carries opportunities to gain literacy.

Returning momentarily to the term Standard English (SE). As SE would have you believe, I realize that there is no right way to write.. The idea that all students must conform to a set of rules that squeezes them into boxes is unreasonable and disturbing when considering the oppression and intolerance it breeds. There is now a stain on the American thought process, where if you write like Vershawn Ashanti Young when he discussed Code Meshing in his piece “Should Writers Use They Own English?”, you are beneath someone who may write like a white college composition professor. We use these standards – created more by the government than by actual educators – to classify a student’s worth and success without acknowledging that one can be perfectly academically capable and have a strong grasp of everyday language while still writing as they speak. And isn’t that how it should be? Overall, literacy and its language are diverse and fluid, used both as a tool of advancement and oppression. It is also ever-changing, as Deborah Brandt explored in her College English article, “Accumulating Literacy: Writing and Learning to Write in the Twentieth Century,” addressing the accumulation of literacy. With each generation, the layers keep layering.

With all of this being said, it’s easy to see how literacy can make worldly matters more sensical. The broiling frustrations that existed for me in Common Core and Standard English rules now make sense. I have realized the creative chains they bound me in. I’ve also recognized that there is more to writing than tradition, more to creating than controlling. The world of literacy and writing can be somewhat subjective.

Really, why would any young writer be taught only one way to structure a story, construct an essay, and communicate through the written word? . It is no secret that the world of writing and publishing is a male-dominated industry slowly growing into a white-dominated sector as white women begin to take root. When methodologies such as code meshing or literacy accumulation begin to make more room for people of color and international individuals, the white fragility that exists in the realm of writing and the academic world is challenged and therefore becomes defensive. And as a manifestation of this defensiveness, we see aggressive implementation of Standard English and Common Core practices.

Armed with this new awareness, I feel more prepared as I move forward in my future as a writer and as a professor. It would be best to guide future generations further away from Standard English and overall Western Literacy ideas. We should adopt a far more creative and free-flowing form of writing. Students can learn proper form and basic structure to be successful in their communication, but beyond that, any further restriction is simply oppression.

“We encounter rhetoric” (Edbauer 23).

On the heels of my own literacy, I was slightly more prepared to have my preconceptions turned on their heads when I entered the realm of rhetoric. Rhetoric was quite a dry subject for me before this course, as it was simply persuasion in my mind. I always heard political causes and movements called “rhetoric”. So, while my awareness of the term and its function existed, it was atrophied. I have come to recognize rhetoric goes beyond persuasion through the wisdom of those like Krista Ratcliffe and her navigation of rhetorical listening within her book *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*. a process I’ve engaged in to be a better speaker, writer, and persuader in future discourses. When one listens, one learns. Ratcliffe explored four individual moves for rhetorical listening, but I found these two to be the most important: promoting an understanding self and other and developing accountability.

If we examine our world, we see that in many of our conversations in politics specifically, we have lacked accountability. We still have counter statements to issues such as systematic racism like “well I have Black friends” and “but my family wasn’t involved in slavery,” both of which express a lack of accountability. Many of these same conversations lack a willingness to understand both others and self. Take, for example, relationships among liberal movements. I’ve seen centrist/moderate Democrats refusing to engage in conversation with progressive members within my very own party. Because of this, many young people are feeling the crushing weight of fatalism. Moderate candidates are elected to top positions who then go on to provide very little actual change to communities that need it. There are plenty of young people who were thrilled when Joe Biden won the 2020 election. Yet, they now taste a bitterness in the back of their throat for the four years that will go by with very little fundamental change. There is no expected relief for massive student loan debt, abolishment of corrupt private insurance, deep restructuring of the broken electoral college system, and many other issues that have gone unhandled through both Democratic and Republican administrators. Many moderates won’t hear these voices, so eventually, we’ll lose them from the Democratic party totally. With this, many liberal centrist voters will ask “well why,” when the answer has been shouted in their faces for years. They simply haven’t been rhetorically

listening.

Ratcliffe is not the only woman with ideas that enlightened me. Karma Chávez took rhetoric even further away from general persuasion and turned it on the body in her article “The Body: An Abstract and Actual Rhetorical Concept.” She discusses the value of certain bodies in rhetorical scenarios, political discussions, and even professional environments. The asymmetry regarding male vs female bodies is clear, whether it’s legislation towards the female bodies in America drafted by men, unequal pay across the board in many careers, or even the perception of men vs. women and their behavior (e.g., men are assertive where women are aggressive).

Now, asymmetry regarding white bodies and bodies of color is also prevalent. While white women are disfavored in comparison to white men, women of color are disfavored in comparison to white women. White women have been integrating into politics earlier than all other women of color, even earning the right to vote some 30+ years before Black women in America. From white women, the body staircase descends. POC continue to struggle to gain traction in both a systemically racist political and academic system.

The overall ecology of rhetoric is one extensive network as we’ve read. A nervous system firing off in some form of sync across multiple mediums. A brain. But what about rhetoric in creative writing? It does exist as it does everywhere, and in fact, it can be active and even volatile. Seeing that writing is somewhat subjective, there is constant room for multiple conversations. The idea of “good writing” is one that many can only speculate the definition of. While to one person, a writer’s work and methods of production will underwhelm, to another, it will invade their brain and captivate them wholly. Writing always sucks, but it also always rocks. It just depends on who you’re talking to.

Knowing how to have effective discourses surrounding writing is vital in surviving in this craft and teaching it. Not only that, acknowledging that politics exists not just federally but professionally is the first step to engaging in office and academic politics effectively. Public colleges and universities are state institutions, therefore affected directly by the politics and leadership of a state. Unions are lifelines for many teachers and professors, but one must have the ability to engage well in rhetorical situations within and outside of the protections of union representation. Professorships sometimes call for proposals, persuasions, even arguments. As a woman myself, I can take what I’ve learned and now recognize that I will have to enter my career with more grit to face challenges my white male counterparts don’t experience. However, I can also acknowledge that my challenges will be rather incomparable to some of my other female peers of color. Considering I will be a professor one day, I’ll be a guide for young writers on navigating and handling the rhetoric of creative writing, as Ratcliffe did for me in steering and handling rhetoric of the real world.

Convergence Rhetoric

“Genres have the power to help or hurt human interaction, to ease communications or to deceive, to enable someone to speak or to discourage someone from saying something different” (Devitt 1).

Ah, the genres. As a creative writing major, I was thrilled when the semester’s train pulled into this station. While the definition of genres did take a different spin than what I had expected in that initial excitement, it was nevertheless enthralling. Genre, like literacy, is a concept in motion. It is a series of elements and functions within what John Swales defines as a discourse community in his article “The Concept of Discourse Community: Some Recent Personal History,” which like social literacy, is built on and within communities and sub-cultures. Kerry Dirk ventured into this concept further, demonstrating the idea of functions as more tangible, such as through her country music example within the opening of her essay “Navigating Genres.” Big trucks and heartbreaks on every note and key. According to Dirk’s definition, genre functions exist in many things. Everything has a process that produces expectations that have been previously observed. You enter a college course with the expectation of passing, earning credit, and gaining new information. You use the functions of the college classroom and university system to get you to that expected goal: textbooks, advisors, financial aid, even your professors. Genres are simply structures, the way something works, and therefore they become a universal idea.

Genres also do their part to connect multiple tiers of people. Writing manuals and textbooks we use to expand our knowledge were written for us by academics and scholars who were once in our place. Genres exist in the craft of creative writing in both very literal and then more abstract ways. Horror, science fiction, romance, fan fiction – these are all the genres a reader may indulge in. But what about the publisher who put those books on the shelves within the bookstores that function solely to sell them? What about the agent that connected the author to the publisher? What about the author themselves? Editors? Cover sheets? Pens? Paper? Tea?

Each of these elements has a function in the genre of creative writing (alright, maybe tea is subjective). Even more importantly, when we recognize these things as functions, we see them as crucial and central functions, not tedious accessories to the craft. These are functions that allow writing to make sense, whether one knows it or not. If there’s one thing I’d want to make my curriculum about, it would be the importance of these functions.

Ultimately, it’s spectacular recognizing genres all around us. We see their impact in more places than just writing and academia, and scholars such as Jennifer Sano-Franchini portray in her piece, “Designing Outrage, Programming Discord: A Critical Interface Analysis of Facebook as a Campaign Technology,” the gravity genre functions have on the world of social media. She delves into the interfaces of Facebook and recognizes that the influence social media can have over thought processes is monumental. Through likes, comments, follower

and friend tallies, and news blurbs, Facebook creates everything from friendly social interactions to fundamental indoctrination. This fact has never been more evident than in the world we live in now. When we see the impacts of interfaces like social media, we enter them with a new perspective and a potential sense of caution and preparedness. Social media takes up plenty of space in our lives and even in our education. College-age students, a group that ranges from age 18 to age 29, utilize the treasure trove of online platforms heavily, taking up 90% of cyber traffic on social networking according to Statista's 2019 social media usage survey. At some point, most individuals will enter an online society for one reason. Writers themselves must consider the genres and functions in social media when they create content on these sites or venture outside of the marketing side and dare to interject in the land of politics or personhood themselves. After all, writers are also people who do like to discuss things other than writing.

How They All Come Together...

I noticed something as I planned for this grand exit, combing back through the droves of new and precious knowledge stuck to my brain. Literacy, Rhetoric, and Genre can be easily seen as one of the same. Consider: to be literate is to learn and then engage in functions of the discourse community. Within said community, you are exchanging or participating in the rhetoric of that community's subculture, while also using genres of the community to further both your literacy and rhetorical communication skills. When one of these processes is taking place, so are the other two. To me, this is quite remarkable.

On a genuinely heartfelt note, literacy, rhetoric, and genre as we've known them this fall paints a new sun on an old horizon, in a world where many happenings around us feel so chaotic and lacking in much sense (probably because they are, though that's a different essay). To be graced with understanding, structure, and the "how's" and "whys" that plague us is grand. It's a heating pad over the ache of madness that leaves many feeling sore on more than just passing occasion, and it grounds us. Thankfully, much of my new knowledge now grounds me.

Works Cited

- Barton, David, and Mary Hamilton. *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community*. Routledge, 1998. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203125106>.
- Brandt, Deborah. "Accumulating Literacy: Writing and Learning to Write in the Twentieth Century." *College English*, vol. 57, no. 6, 1995, pp. 649-668., <https://doi.org/10.2307/378570>.
- Chávez, Karma R. "The Body: An Abstract and Actual Rhetorical Concept." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2018, pp. 242-250., <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2018.1454182>.
- Devitt, Amy J., et al. "Materiality and Genre in the Study of Discourse Communities." *College English*, vol. 65, no. 5, 2003, pp. 541-558., <https://doi.org/10.2307/3594252>.

Convergence Rhetoric

- Devitt, Amy J. *Writing Genres*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2004. Print.
- Dirk, Kerry. "Navigating Genres." *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*, edited by Charles Lowe and Pavel Zemliansky, vol. 1, 2010, <https://doi.org/https://wac.colostate.edu/books/writingspaces1/dirk--navigating-genres.pdf>.
- Edbauer, Jenny. "Unframing Models of Public Distribution: From Rhetorical Situation to Rhetorical Ecologies." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2005, pp. 5–24., <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773940509391320>.
- Pleasant, Eric. "Literacy Sponsors and Learning: An Ethnography of Punk Literacy in Mid- 1980's Waco." *Young Scholars in Writing*, vol. 5, 2008, pp. 137–145., <https://doi.org/https://youngscholarsinwriting.org/index.php/ysiw/article/view/87/87>.
- Ratcliffe, Krista. *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*. Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 2005.
- Sano-Franchini, Jennifer. "Designing Outrage, Programming Discord: A Critical Interface Analysis of Facebook as a Campaign Technology." *TechComm*, 14 Nov. 2018, <https://www.stc.org/techcomm/2018/11/08/designing-outrage-programming-discord-a-critical-interface-analysis-of-facebook-as-a-campaign-technology/>.
- Statista Research Department. "Percentage of Adults in the United States Who Use Social Networks as of February 2019, by Age Group." *Satista*, 28 Jan. 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/471370/us-adults-who-use-social-networks-age/>.
- Swales, John M. "The Concept of Discourse Community: Some Recent Personal History." *Composition Forum* 37, 2017, <https://compositionforum.com/issue/37/swales-retrospective.php>.
- Young, Vershawn Ashanti. "Should Writers Use They Own English?" *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2010, pp. 110–117., <https://doi.org/10.17077/2168-569x.1095>.



Rosalind Rohrbaugh is currently an undergraduate in her third college year pursuing a B.A in English Creative Writing and a minor in Writing and Rhetoric. She adores reading scary stories, taking her chihuahua on stroller rides with her mom, and binge-watching horror movies.