

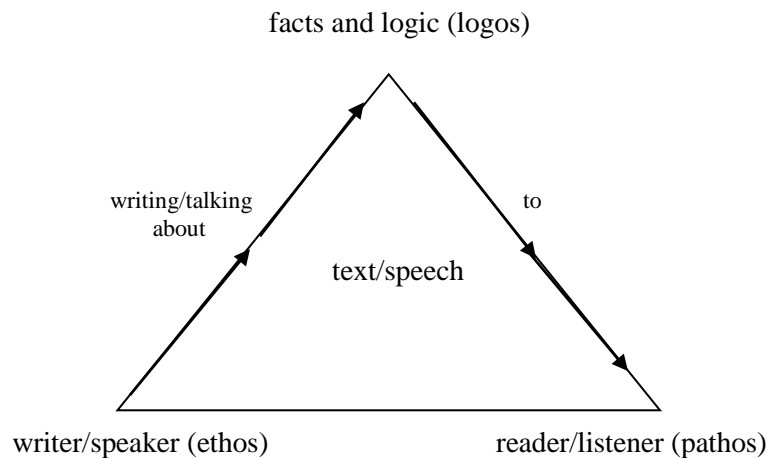
Introducing a Rhetorical Theory of Texts

Most of us come from a culture of schooling that treats texts—especially academic texts—as “autonomous” (Olson, 1977). According to this view, texts can be understood independent of the context of their production or interpretation because their meaning is available to all readers in all ages. Students who are trained to think this way generally believe that meaning resides in the text itself and that it’s their job as readers to retrieve it and as writers to inscribe it.

“I worry that our most valuable pitchers could crack in this heat,” said the manager in one of his discouraged moods. I wanted to help, but all I did was hit a fly. “If only we had more fans,” he continued, “we would all feel better, I’m sure. I wish our best man would come home. That certainly would improve everyone’s morale, especially mine. Oh well, I know a walk would perk me up.”

Chances are you can make an educated guess about the situation depicted in this passage because you have learned to interpret texts by analyzing the words on the page.

We want to replace this notion of the autonomous text with a rhetorical understanding of texts, one that treats *all* texts—even textbooks—like conversations among human beings. According to this view, texts are not stable, frozen, autonomous objects, but rather dynamic human actions. They represent the attempts of human beings to communicate with other human beings for specific purposes.



Consider how the passage above is clarified when framed by its rhetorical situation:

