

Introducing Rhetorical Situations

Developed by Nelson Graff

MINI-MODULE: STUDENT VERSION

Module Text

The only text students read carefully for this module is the description of the problem they address and the prompt for the letter they write. However, students also look carefully at paintings to evaluate their appropriateness for a hospital waiting room.

This mini-module is based on material developed by Thomas M. McCann for the *English Journal* in 2010.

Reading Rhetorically

Preparing to Read

Activity 1: Exploring Key Concepts – What Makes Someone a Philanthropist

The key concept you need to understand in order to engage successfully with this module is *philanthropy* (Greek roots phil = loving, Anthropos = humans). A *philanthropist* is someone who goes out of his or her way to help others, in the modern context, often by donating money. For each of the following, indicate whether the description is an **example** (E) or **non-example** (N) of a philanthropist. After you have made your own determination, your teacher will ask you to discuss. There are no right answers—the point is to discuss what makes someone a philanthropist.

- _____ Lee donates hundreds of dollars every election season to support candidates who will vote to lower taxes on people like them.
- _____ Olivia spends every Sunday volunteering at a food pantry for homeless people.
- _____ Javier spends his own money to grow his business.
- _____ Xi is moving and has to get rid of a lot of books, so he donates them to Goodwill.
- _____ Debra gives money every month to the Red Cross.
- _____ Bill organizes a canned food drive for victims of fires in California.

Reading Purposefully

Activity 2: Reading for Understanding/Annotating and Questioning the Text

Individually read the following description. As you read, underline any portions you think will be especially important for you to keep in mind as you work in groups to help Ms. Bipkins resolve her problem. Make notes in the margins to paraphrase your understanding and identify any questions you need answered.

Background: Ms. Flavia Bipkins, a wealthy Bay Area philanthropist and art collector, would like to **donate a painting** to Children’s Memorial Hospital in San Francisco. The painting would hang in the Family Lounge in the Surgical Center of the hospital. This is where families wait, sometimes for long periods, while a young family member undergoes surgery. As one might imagine, the wait is often stressful, while the family members worry about the successful outcome of the medical procedures.

Problem: Flavia Bipkins has an extensive art collection, which she treasures. She has narrowed down her choices for the donation to four paintings. She will give the hospital **only one**. Since she is a very caring human being, she does not want her attachment with the paintings to influence her choice. She seeks your guidance in making the selection. Here is the question that she needs to answer: **What is the most appropriate painting to adorn the Family Lounge at Children’s Memorial Hospital?**

Directions to Students: Write a letter to Flavia Bipkins to tell her what you think of her choices.

Questioning the Text

Activity 3: Thinking Critically

When you read the description of the situation, you should notice two different settings about which you must make decisions—the setting of the waiting room and the occasion of your letter to Ms. Bipkins. In small groups, discuss these two occasions and answer the following questions about the first occasion:

1. What purpose(s) should the paintings hanging in the waiting room serve for their audience (the “families [who] wait, sometimes for long periods, while a young family member undergoes surgery”)?
2. What do those families have in common? How might they differ?
3. Given your group’s answers to those questions, what “rules” can you generate for selecting a painting that would be appropriate for the waiting room?

Make notes of your group’s responses to these questions and prepare to report out to the class.

Preparing to Respond

Discovering What You Think

Activity 4: Considering Your Task and Your Rhetorical Situation

Your teacher will display four paintings for you, one after another. As you view each painting, make notes for yourself about how closely it follows the rules the class has generated. As a group, discuss each of the paintings in light of the class’s ideas about what kinds of paintings would be appropriate.

Each of you should keep notes about your group’s discussion and decisions, as you will be composing your letters individually. Note that this is a discussion in which every person’s ideas are especially important, as each of you is likely to notice different details in the paintings, and each of you may understand the point of view of some of the families better than others.

Prepare to report out with your reasons for and against each of the paintings and your ultimate choice.

Activity 5: Considering Your Task and Your Rhetorical Situation – Writing a Letter to Flavia Bipkins

In small groups, discuss the following task:

Write a Letter to Flavia Bipkins

Use your notes to write the letter to Ms. Bipkins. When she opens the letter, she will want to know why a stranger is writing to her. Don't bother with a personal introduction, but you will want to let her know that you are aware of the tough decision she has to make and what she is hoping to accomplish through her donation. The draft of the letter will also include a conclusion in which you review your judgment that one painting is a more appropriate donation than the other three.

Letter

In short, your letter will have an introduction (noting Ms. Bipkins's tough decision), a thorough evaluation of each painting, and a conclusion that compares your choice to the other possibilities.

Given your discussions so far and our exploration of **philanthropy**, answer the following questions:

1. What do you know about Ms. Bipkins?

2. What purpose(s) should your letter serve?

3. What will those answers mean for what you write and how you write it?

Writing Rhetorically

Composing a Draft

Activity 6: Revising Rhetorically

Each of you will read another student’s letter **as if you were Flavia Bipkins**—that is, you should imagine yourself the person who has made the offer of donating the paintings. Answer the following questions about the letter you read:

1. After reading the letter, how do you feel about your decision to donate a painting to Children’s Memorial Hospital?

2. What particular words, sentences, or sections in the letter make you feel that way?

3. How likely are you to want to donate again to Children’s Memorial Hospital after reading this letter?

When you receive the feedback from your colleague about your letter, think carefully about whether those responses meet your purpose(s) for writing the letter. If not, revise in order to better meet those purposes.

Reflecting on Your Learning Goals

Activity 7: Reflecting on Your Learning Goals

Rhetorical situations are defined in terms of **occasions, audiences, and purposes**. Someone takes rhetorical action (writing, speaking, or even hanging a painting) to change a situation—usually to satisfy some need or to encourage others to help one do so.

Write a paragraph or two about what you experienced in these activities and how that experience helps you to understand rhetorical situations.

Works Cited

McCann, Thomas M. "Gateways to Writing Logical Arguments." *English Journal*, 2010, vol.99. no.6, pp.33-39.