Working with national plain. Collaborative

The caribou are among the most visible source of nervous anxiety. The fact is that these magnificent animals graze unconcernedly around the drilling rigs. The scene is little different than cows munching pasture around a rig in Texas. One experience was particularly striking. In Alaska, the buildings stand 7 ft off the ground to avoid damaging the permafrost. At one site, a mother caribou stood with her calf in the shade of such a building. So much for our industry's threat to the caribous!

This brings me to the great Alaskan environmental bugaboo—the Alaskan National Wildlife Refuge. The US Congress regularly denies drilling access to ANWR. From the hype, one might conclude that allowing drilling on this frozen wilderness is to invite an environmental disaster on a par with Chernobyl. In all this, one gets the notion that ANWR is a pristine Eden of scenic proportions equal to Yellowstone or Yosemite.

From “A” to “Y,” ANWR couldn’t be more different from Yellowstone. There are no sweeping forests and grand rolling rivers, all teeming with wildlife unknown in modern society. ANWR is a barren and empty place. It is a land of endless tundra where no vegetation stands taller than 6 in. The principal wildlife is the migratory Porcupine Caribou Herd. Having observed the aplomb with which caribou react to drilling activities elsewhere on the North Slope, I have no doubt that this 150,000-animal herd would be similarly unaffected.

Part of the reason is there’s plenty of room in ANWR. Out of the refuge’s 19 million acres, 17.5 million acres are permanently off limits to exploration. Development would be confined to only a small fraction of ANWR’s coastal plain. Estimates are that this field could reach a peak output equal to 10% of total current US production. Developing ANWR would create jobs, enhance national security and lower consumer costs, all at an extremely remote environmental risk in a forbidding area of the US. In a cost-benefit analysis, it’s easy to see the logical solution.

Collaborative Activity 1.3

Working with classmates, select one of the three editorials and describe in as much detail as you can the rhetorical situation to which it is responding. Who are the likely participants in this situation? What purposes seem to be driving these participants? What are the setting in which the editorial appears, including the date of its publication? And how does the interaction between the participants, the purposes, and the setting affect how the subject of the editorial is treated and presented? Describe some of the choices that the writer makes regarding kinds of organization, examples, style, tone, and persona as a result of his or her situation. Then explain how these rhetorical choices were shaped by the situation of writing.

Writing Activity 1.5

Keeping in mind their different rhetorical situations, compare how the three editorials treat the topic of oil drilling in ANWR. (For example, even though the first two editorials take a similar position on the topic, they differ because of where and when they were published, who wrote them, and who would be reading them.) How do the shared objectives, beliefs, and values of the differing scenes (the national conservation organization, the academic scene, and the corporate scene) affect the rhetorical choices? Look back over the editorials and compare how the writers present themselves in each, the ways they describe the oil companies. Once you have described the differences, speculate on the effects these differences might have on readers of the editorials.

As the three editorials exemplify, each time we communicate, we act within a rhetorical situation. When we write, we perform a rhetorical action—an action shaped by the situation we are responding to. As you discovered in the previous activities, this action involves all sorts of strategic decisions and choices, choices regarding vocabulary, sentence structure, tone, persona, organization, and supporting evidence. These choices are guided not only by the situation—the participants, subject, setting, and purposes—but by the chosen type of writing (in the case above, an editorial). The type of writing chosen guides decisions about such elements as the use of examples, length (fairly brief for an editorial), tone, and persona (the editorials chosen as examples are informal). The next section will focus further on this key component of scene, the type of writing or genre.

Acting with Genres

We know that each of the various situations that make up a scene represents a specific rhetorical interaction taking place within that scene. As participants find themselves in these situations over and over, they develop habits or rituals of interacting within them. In the case of the criminal trial, for example, participants have developed typical rhetorical ways for dealing with such situations as swearing in witnesses, delivering the opening statements, or presenting evidence to the jury. In each of these repeated situations, participants draw on a pattern of action that is already in place, widely.
accepted by participants in the scene to guide them as they act in that situation. They do not need to invent everything anew. Some of these patterns are more flexible than others (the conventions for the swearing-in of witnesse are more strict than the conventions for opening statements, f but all involve certain conventions for using language to accom-

clude), but all involve certain conventions for using language to accomp-

ly oneself in these situations. This is where genre comes into play. Genres are the typical rhetorical ways of responding to a situation that repeatedly occurs within a scene.

You may already be familiar with the term genre, which literally means “type,” as in genres of books (mystery, science fiction, autobiography, textbook), genres of music (classical, country, alternative), or genres of movies (action adventures, romantic comedies, “slasher” movies, or thrillers). But genres are more than just categorizations. Genres carry with them certain expectations—expectations that a romantic comedy will end happily or that an action adventure will incorporate high-tech special effects. Where, you might ask, do these expectations come from?

Your expectations of genre are based on your participation in scenes that repeat themselves and your prior experiences with reading, writing, and using genres. For example, how do you know how to respond to the Writing Activities in this textbook? Much of your knowledge comes from having written such classroom activities before, in other classes with other textbooks and teachers. While the details of this particular set of activities and your teacher’s use of them probably vary somewhat from your past experience, you know from your past experience what to expect in them and how to respond appropriately, to meet your teacher’s expectations.

You might be surprised to realize that most of our spoken and written communication operates within generic conventions. Some of our generic responses, our responses to situations that repeat themselves, are automatic. When the phone rings, you know, without even thinking about it, to answer “Hello” or “Smith residence” or maybe even “Bob [your name] speaking.” Any response that varies too much from these typical responses might confuse the caller at the other end. Similarly, when you write a personal letter to a friend, you know to begin by addressing the recipient (“Dear Sue”) and greeting him or her (usually with “How are you?” or “What’s up?”). How do we automatically know how to act within these situations? We know because these are situations communicators within these scenes. You are not the first to have answered a personal letter or written a personal letter. These generic conventions have been played out many times, and we are familiar with our roles as a phone call or written a personal letter. Without these generic responses to situations that repeat themselves, we would have the almost impossible task of inventing new ways of communicating each time we confronted a rhetorical situation.

In the next two chapters, we will teach you how to analyze genres in greater detail so that you can turn your understanding of genre into your writing in the genre. And then in Parts II and III of the book, you will have the opportunity to apply your genre knowledge to write more effectively in academic, workplace, and public scenes.

**Stop here**

**Writing Activity 1.6**

To illustrate how genres arise based on rhetorical situations that repeat themselves, consider the genre of the postcard. (If you’ve never written or received a postcard, answer the following questions for the genre of the greeting card.) What repeated situation does it arise from? What is its purpose? What are the expectations of the readers of postcards? What relationship with readers is established? What are the particular features or textual regularities that make up the postcard? For the next class meeting, bring in a postcard that you or someone you know has received and compare your findings.

**Writing Activity 1.7**

Read back over the editorials presented earlier in this chapter. Despite their differences, what do they share in common that defines them as editorials? What makes editorials different, say, from a newspaper article, an advertisement, or even an argument paper you would write in your writing course? What do editorials allow their writers to accomplish that these other genres may not?

**Putting Scene, Situation, and Genre Back Together**

Let us summarize the key terms we have been describing and then return to the scene you are now becoming more familiar with, that of the writing course, to show how they work together:

- **Scene**: a place where communication happens among groups of people with some shared objectives. Think of the scene as the overarching site that frames the action.
- **Situation**: the rhetorical interaction happening within a scene, involving participants, subjects, settings, and purposes. Scenes often have multiple situations within them, each with its own specific
different uses of language do you recognize in these two texts? Can you see more than just differences of technical or specialist vocabulary? List some examples of different language use, and speculate why these differences might exist.

Reading Scenes and Situations through Genres

The language that people use reflects not only the scene but also the situation and genre within the scene. People adjust their language to the particular situation (involving certain participants, subjects, settings, and purposes) and the particular genre (the typical way of responding to the situation) in which they are participating. For example, scientists usually do not speak in passive voice no matter what situation they are in and what genre they are using. If they are instructing students how to perform an experiment, they will more likely use the imperative, saying “Pour the chemical into the beaker,” not “The chemical was poured into the beaker.” Passive constructions are prominent instead, as we’ve seen, in such genres as lab reports and research articles associated with a more reportive communication situation within the scientific scene. Similarly, medical students do not use the language Klass describes in all situations, but mainly when they are speaking with other medical personnel. And even Marines may shift from “rack” to “bed” when speaking to their families.

Once you learn to recognize how different situations and genres encourage different uses of language, you can use your understanding of these differences to make more effective writing choices within different situations and genres. In the remainder of this chapter, we will show you how to recognize and interpret features of genres; at the end of this chapter and then in the next one, we will show you how to turn that social understanding into making your own writing choices.

Genres as Social Scripts

As typical rhetorical ways of acting in different situations, genres function as social scripts. For instance, when you attend the first day of a typical college course, say this writing class, the first things you probably do are look around at the other students, check out the layout of the room, try to figure out what the teacher is like, and so on. In other words, you begin to read the situation you will get about the nature of this scene is through the syllabus that the teacher distributes. As you know, the syllabus is a genre, one that teachers typically distribute on the first day of class. Beyond containing important information about the course goals, policies, and expectations, it helps set the scene of the course. By reading it carefully, you not only learn what you have to do in order to succeed in the course, when assignments are due, what the course policies are, and so on; you also learn something about how to behave in this scene: what kind of role your teacher will play and what kind of role she or he expects you to play; and what values, beliefs, and goals guide this course. The syllabus, in short, gives you early and important access to the “script” of the course. How well you read this script will impact how effectively you will act within the scene of the class and its various situations.

Writing Activity 2.6

Select a course other than this one for which you have received a syllabus. Before looking back at the syllabus, describe the “personality” of that course—the nature of the course that is conveyed through the class structure, activities, assignments, teacher-student interactions, student-student interactions, etc. Now look at the syllabus for that course: Does the syllabus share any “personality traits” with the course? Could you tell from the syllabus what kind of course it is turning out to be? If so, find some features of the syllabus that reveal that personality. If not, find some features of the syllabus that suggest a different personality.

Collaborative Activity 2.3

In a group of three or four other students, revise the syllabus for this writing course to create a “personality” quite different from the one the actual syllabus describes. Think about how different the role of students might be, what different kinds of information might be conveyed, how different the persona of the teacher might be. Your new syllabus should not change the requirements of the course, but it should significantly change the nature of its scene. Depending on what your teacher requests, write your new syllabus on an overhead transparency or your computer or post it to your class’s Web site, and be prepared to explain to your classmates what aspects of the course’s scene you changed by changing the syllabus script.

Reading the Patient Medical History Form

For another example of how the language of genres reflects their situations, think about the scene of the doctor’s office. Most of us can readily picture this scene, with its seating area, its coffee table piled with magazines, its