



PROJECT REPORT AND HEURISTIC

Assignment 2

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Part 1: Description of Writing Project

For TCOM110, I wrote an assignment on reviewing and editing, a core concept in technical communication. Specifically, in what I called *Collaborative Engagement: Understanding the Writer and Editor Dynamic*, I discussed the practice of working with an editor. At the research stage, I identified a need for a document aimed at technical writers addressing the role of editors within the field. I followed my habitual writing process, which relies heavily on the current-traditional rhetoric approach (Hungerford 2005, 1).

After researching and gathering my notes, I struggled to compose the “perfect outline” as I defined the rhetorical situation for my article. I spent little time prewriting, devoting most of my time to drafting. During the revision stage, I updated the structure and added more content; in the end, I was satisfied with the coherence of the article; but the process was long, frustrating, and unsatisfying.

Issue A: What’s the occasion?

Through the readings in this course, I have learned that process theory grounds technical writing in the 4 elements of the rhetorical situation (Hungerford 2005, 6–8):

1. the exigence (what is the contextual need?)
2. the audience (who is the intended reader or user?)
3. the purpose (why am I writing this discourse, and why would the audience read it?)
4. the occasion (genre—what am I writing?)

Anne Hungerford examines the fourth aspect of the rhetorical situation, and explains occasion in connection to genre:

[O]ccasion ... can be defined as the expectations readers have concerning the content, form, and style of any given document ... Genres serve to unify us, and to make our shared experiences coherent, but they also shape our thinking and promote the perspectives of our discourse communities (Hungerford 2005, 119–120).

Moving from an understanding of genres as formal constraints of documents to an appreciation that genres have “rhetorical dimensions that shape and convey social knowledge” (Hungerford 2005, 119), I thought I understood the genre relevant to my article. In retrospect, I did not completely understand the occasion element of the rhetorical situation for my article. During the extensive drafting stage of the project, I often deviated from the outline and had to generate more content to “patch” the content gaps I identified while drafting.

I tried to keep the rhetorical situation in mind, but in reviewing the project and process for this assignment, I did not define sufficiently the rhetorical situation. Specifically, I needed a clearer understanding of the occasion element of the rhetorical situation.

Issue B: Who has time for invention?

Writing is an art. Rules and conventions are important, but they can distract a writer from moments of inspiration that the writing process can offer. I feel like I have lost sight of the creative element of composition—my writing process has its roots in the current-traditional rhetoric approach, which neglects the role of invention and its characteristic pre-writing techniques.

I appreciate Hungerford’s use of the classical term “invention” to characterize the “prewriting” stage of the process approach (2005, 4). It is a solid reminder of the creative element inherent to composition (Johnson-Sheehan 2024, 396–400). As invention is “an unavoidable part of writing” (Hungerford 2005, 5), it is also a reminder that I need to evolve my own writing process. In my current approach, moving from an extended drafting stage to a brief revising stage, I neglect the prewriting techniques that characterize invention:

The purpose of invention is to give you an opportunity to discover and explore your content as well as develop appropriate strategies for your writing tasks before the challenges of organizing your material and finding appropriate language begin (Hungerford 2005, 19).

From the standpoint of writing theory as expressed in module 2.2, I could not access my generative voice for the sections of my outline that I had largely committed to during the planning stage. By not making enough space for invention techniques, I spent most of my process in the evaluation stage where my critical voice dominated. My lack of focus on prewriting techniques muted my generative or creative voice and blurred my understanding of the rhetorical situation. This was frustrating and disappointing because, while I felt that I could offer something to the discussion on the topic, I did not quite get there.

PART 2: MY INVENTION HEURISTIC

While heuristics are not new to me, the course readings remind me that the use of exploratory questions can mitigate preconceptions, offer fresh perspectives on my topic (Hungerford 2005, 25), and keep the rhetorical situation front of mind during the writing process. Had I tried to follow a heuristic, the overall process of my writing assignment could have been smoother, and I might have crafted my content to its intended purpose without struggling over structure and form.

Occasion (genre) heuristic

- What organizing format and structure do texts for similar occasions or genres generally follow?
- What templates exist, or can be adapted to fit, this typical arrangement of material, for print or online formats?
- How can I make content interesting for this type of occasion?
- How can I best inform or persuade readers for this type of occasion?
- What concerns or objections might readers have about the material I intend to present?
- What kinds of images, graphic elements, and text treatments (such as tables) are characteristic of the genre and reflect conventions of the discourse community?
- What stylistic patterns (such as sentence structures or word choices) do readers expect that reflect conventions of the discourse community?

Rationale for this exploratory questions approach

Module 2.5 includes a “Rhetorical Situation Heuristic”, but within its framework occasion and genre is cut down to a minimal set of considerations about length, budget, and schedule. Meanwhile, Hungerford’s “Heuristic for analyzing a genre” includes a great many elements, including ones related to purpose and audience (2005, 121–123), which Module 2.5 treats as being part of the rhetorical situation but not in the genre, strictly defined. Also, Hungerford’s heuristic for analyzing a genre draws attention to formal or objective characteristics of a corpus of writing, like verb choice, sentence length, or paragraph structure (2005, 121–123).

By contrast, the kind of disciplined questioning approach that can help me with technical writing projects like the article for TCOM110 needs to focus on a level where the answers to each question can inform how I structure the text and deliver the intended message to the audience with the necessary focus and emphasis.

My aim is that the questions in my heuristic clarify for me the best format for my document, delineate such rhetorical dimensions as the best ways to inform or persuade readers, and alert me to conventions of the relevant discourse community (Hungerford 2005, 120). Had I followed such a heuristic for the TCOM110 assignment, I could have developed a relevant template and set of strategies for knowledge base article contributions, which would have taken the entire rhetorical situation into account.

I see myself in Anne Hungerford’s descriptions of the “habitually task-oriented” writer “used to mental invention” (2005, 19). I recognize these as old writing habits, and I am hopeful that as I make space for invention and prewriting strategies in my writing process, I will adopt new habits to replace those that no longer serve a purpose. Getting to a place where I am no longer “governed by hesitations and questions concerning genre conventions” is possible (Hungerford 2005, 149). For future writing projects, I will use my new occasion heuristic as a way to spark

invention in my process. I have added freewriting and mapping to my writing process and exploratory questions like my heuristic will help alert me to any established forms of my genre.

SOURCES

Hungerford, Anne. 2005. Unit 1: Introduction to Writing Theory and Unit 6: Occasion. In *Advanced Study in Writing for Business and the Professions*. Simon Fraser University Continuing Studies.

Johnson-Sheehan, Richard. 2024. *Technical Communication Today*. 7th Ed. Hoboken, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.

Module 2: Prewriting. 2024. Course content for TCOM310, Simon Fraser University Continuing Studies.