

While in our time the word *rhetoric* may suggest deception, this speech reminds us that rhetoric can serve sincerity as well. No wonder one commentator wrote, “Lou Gehrig’s speech almost rocked Yankee Stadium off its feet.”

Occasion, Context, and Purpose

Why is this an effective speech? First of all, rhetoric is always situational. Every text is influenced by the historical, cultural, and social movements of its time. We call these broad influences **context**. Within that context, a text is also directly informed by the **occasion** — the specific circumstances, atmosphere, attitudes, and events surrounding the creation of the text. The occasion involves an opportune moment for decision or action — which gives rise to the text. Sometimes, the occasion is immediately apparent, such as in the case of an attack, an election, or a natural disaster. In other instances, the speaker must clarify, and even argue for, the occasion, to convince people of its urgency.

In the case of Gehrig’s speech, the occasion is Lou Gehrig Appreciation Day. More specifically, his moment comes at home plate between games of a doubleheader. The context is first and foremost Gehrig’s recent announcement of his illness and his subsequent retirement, but as is often the case, the context goes well beyond that. Gehrig, known as the “Iron Horse,” held the record for consecutive games played (2,130) and was one of the greatest sluggers of all time. For such a durable and powerful athlete to fall victim to a disease that strips away strength and coordination seemed an especially cruel fate. Just a couple of weeks earlier, Gehrig was still playing ball; by the time he gave this speech, he was so weak that his manager had to help him walk out to the mound for the ceremony.

Purpose is the goal the speaker wants to achieve. One of Gehrig’s chief purposes in delivering this speech is to thank his fans and teammates, but he also wants to demonstrate that he remains positive: he emphasizes his past luck and present optimism and downplays his illness. He makes a single reference to the diagnosis and does so in the strong, straightforward language of an athlete: he got a “bad break.” There is no blame, no self-pity, no plea for sympathy. Throughout, he maintains his focus: to thank his fans and teammates for their support and get on with watching the ballgame. Gehrig responds as a true Yankee, not just the team but the can-do Yankee spirit of America, by acknowledging his illness and accepting his fate with dignity, honor, humility, and even a touch of humor.

ACTIVITY

Construct and analyze a rhetorical situation for writing a review of a particular movie, a new app, or a local restaurant. Be very specific in your analysis: What is your subject and its context? What is your purpose? Who is your audience? What is your relationship to the audience? Remember, you need not write a full review; just analyze the rhetorical situation.

The Rhetorical Triangle

Another important aspect of the rhetorical situation is the relationship among the speaker, audience, and subject. One way to conceptualize the relationship among these elements is through the **rhetorical triangle**. Some refer to it as the **Aristotelian**