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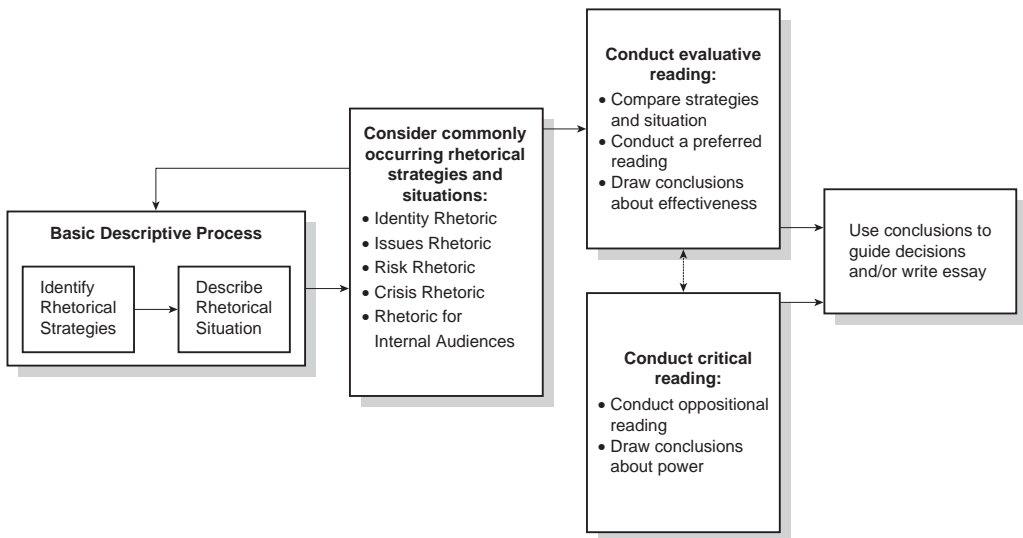
Organizations and Rhetoric in Contemporary Culture

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Figure 1.1   Process for Analyzing Organizational Rhetoric (Introduction)

Basic Descriptive Process

Identify Rhetorical Strategies → Describe Rhetorical Situation

Consider commonly occurring rhetorical strategies and situations:
- Identity Rhetoric
- Issues Rhetoric
- Risk Rhetoric
- Crisis Rhetoric
- Rhetoric for Internal Audiences

Conduct evaluative reading:
- Compare strategies and situation
- Conduct a preferred reading
- Draw conclusions about effectiveness

Conduct critical reading:
- Conduct oppositional reading
- Draw conclusions about power

Use conclusions to guide decisions and/or write essay

SOURCE: Adapted from Ford (1999).

Most people's lives are structured in large part around organizations. As students, you are part of a university, and usually part of one or more student groups. Outside of school, you may hold a job in an organization or be a member of a civic or religious group or a

political party. You may play on a recreational sports team or be part of a book or cooking club. Each of these organizations influences how you structure your time, with whom you interact, how you spend your money, and how you formulate your personal values. Even organizations of which you are not a member have tremendous influence on your life. They influence national policy and public thinking on issues such as who has access to health care and at what price, what sorts of pollutants are released into air or water, what safety features are included in cars, and what principles and practices guide how U.S. organizations operate in other nations.

One of the most common, and often understudied, ways that organizations exert this influence is through the use of rhetoric. In this chapter, we build a foundation for our ongoing exploration of organizational rhetoric. We discuss what it means to study organizational rhetoric, explain why it is important to investigate this type of communication, and preview the two approaches we will take to organizational rhetoric.

❖ **DEFINING RHETORIC**

The term *rhetoric* often has negative connotations, as we hear people label some statement as "just rhetoric," or we hear them say, "The action doesn't match the rhetoric." In reality, though, rhetoric is a neutral term that simply refers to the strategic use of symbols to generate meaning. Understanding an early definition of rhetoric will help establish a foundation for how organizations use the ancient art of rhetoric.

One of the earliest and certainly most well-known definitions of rhetoric comes from Aristotle (trans. 1932), who argued that it was "the faculty for discovering in the particular case what are the available means of persuasion" (p. 7). For Aristotle, rhetoric was an ability to see what would be persuasive to a particular audience in a particular situation. For example, when you ask an instructor to allow you to enroll in a class that is already closed, you should have a sense of what sort of appeals will help your case, and what sort will hurt it. You might tell the professor how much the topic area interests you, or how important it will be to your future career. You will likely avoid telling her that you heard the class is really easy or that it is the only section that fits your 2-day-a-week schedule.

In his book *The Rhetoric,* Aristotle (trans. 1939) identifies the means of persuasion as appeals to personal character *(ethos),* appeals to emotion *(pathos),* and the use of reasoning *(logos).* Both Aristotle's definition of rhetoric as an ability to see what will be persuasive and his identification of the basic appeals are useful in the study of how organizations persuade.

For our purposes, rhetoric can be understood as *the strategic use of symbols to generate meaning.* To say that rhetoric is "strategic" is to emphasize that messages are created to accomplish a goal. This requires that a speaker or writer carefully consider the challenges in meeting the goal, as well as all of the potential resources available for doing so. A *symbol* is something that represents something else. Words and other symbols, such as nonverbal emblems or visual cues, come to be associated with particular objects or ideas because humans make that association. Symbols allow us to make sense of events and create a world in which we can construct meaning (or understand our world through language), and thereby accomplish tasks such as organizing.

The symbols used to describe the study of rhetoric are numerous, and sometimes confusing. The term *rhetoric* may refer to the practice or the product of message creation. We may say that a speaker used rhetoric to make his or her point, or we may ask to see the rhetoric a speaker or author produced—perhaps a videotape or transcript of her remarks. This product may also be referred to as *rhetorical discourse* or a *rhetorical artifact.* A person who creates rhetoric is known as a *rhetor.* The process of analyzing artifacts or discourse is called *rhetorical criticism,* and is guided by sets of questions or lenses known as *rhetorical methods.* Over the centuries, scholars have done enough rhetorical criticism to formulate some general principles governing how rhetoric works. These principles are referred to as *rhetorical theory.* There is a circular relationship between rhetorical theory and rhetorical criticism. Theory helps determine what critics look for when analyzing rhetoric, and the findings of the analysis modify and supplement what we know about rhetorical theory.

Although early rhetorical critics primarily studied single speeches from individuals in political positions, contemporary critics have a much broader conception of what constitutes a rhetorical artifact. Contemporary critics study films, music, Web sites, works of art, public memorials, and almost any other "text" that makes an

argument. Organizational rhetoric is one rapidly growing area of interest to scholars. At its most obvious, we might say that organizational rhetoric is rhetoric produced by organizations, and that would be true. However, in order to understand the unique nature of organizational rhetoric, it is necessary to determine what is meant by an organization, and to recognize the basic ways in which organizational rhetoric differs from more traditional types of rhetoric.

❖ DEFINING ORGANIZATION

Since you no doubt belong to and receive messages from so many organizations, you may not stop to think about exactly what the term *organization* means. Whether organizations are for-profit, not-for-profit, government, business, or social entities, they have some characteristics in common. In 1939, Chester Barnard (1939/1969) argued that people form organizations because they lack the power to accomplish some of their goals independently. This makes sense when we consider some contemporary examples.

Recently, homeowners in an Austin, Texas, neighborhood were concerned that if Wal-Mart were allowed to build a store there, it would create additional traffic problems and have a negative impact on small business. If each neighbor had tried alone to challenge the development, he or she would have been fairly powerless against a major national chain. However, by joining their voices and creating an organization, residents were able to get the attention of city planners and have a voice in deciding how the area would be developed. Likewise, an engineer might have an idea that could revolutionize computer hardware, but she may lack the resources to develop, produce, market, and service the equipment. By forming or joining an organization, she increases the chances that she will accomplish her goal. Similarly, an individual athlete might love playing hockey, but he knows he can't have a game by himself, so he forms a team and joins a league (both organizations) in order to meet his goal.

Organizations can lend power to our individual voices, but what exactly does it mean to affiliate with an organization? One of the most well-known definitions of organization was developed by Barnard (1939/1969). He wrote that "a formal *organization* is a system of consciously coordinated activities or forces of two or more

persons" (p. 73, emphasis added). This definition suggests three characteristics shared by all organizations: communication, willingness to cooperate, and common purpose. Each of these is important in understanding the role of rhetoric in organizations.

First, organizations cannot exist apart from communication. In fact, some scholars argue that communication is what creates an organization (e.g., Cooren, Taylor, & Van Every, 2006). If organizations are systems of "consciously coordinated activities," communication is essential if all of the interdependent parts and practices of any group are going to work together. Think of a factory producing athletic shoes. Communication is necessary to make sure that among thousands of other activities, shoes are designed; supplies arrive; workers are hired, trained, motivated, and paid; there is agreement about the level of quality needed in each shoe; and potential customers are persuaded to purchase the product. This conscious coordination results in what organizational scholars refer to as *structure*—the system of relationships that guides the actions of an organization.

For many groups, this structure is represented visually in an organizational chart that shows who the supervisors are, and to whom each subordinate reports. Structure is also evident in titles and status indicators (such as office size and location). Structure is created, reinforced, and sometimes challenged by communication (Poole & McPhee, 2005). Without communication, organizational members cannot build relationships or accomplish tasks—both elements that are key in the second characteristic of organizations.

The second characteristic is what Barnard (1939/1969) called "willingness to cooperate." He wrote, "Activities cannot be coordinated unless there is first the disposition to make a personal act a contribution to an impersonal system of acts, one in which the individual gives up personal control of what he does" (p. 84). This characteristic points out the voluntary nature of organizational membership. Individuals join organizations if they believe that membership will work to their advantage in achieving individual goals. Think about student organizations you may have considered joining. Maybe you declined to join a particular group because you found yourself thinking, "I am not going to get anything out of that." Individuals understand that although joining an organization may help them accomplish their goals, it also requires that they sacrifice some level of control to the group.

Organizations depend upon individuals being willing to participate, and therefore they create messages to show individuals that the benefits of joining outweigh the costs. Recent U.S. Army advertising, for example, attempts to show young people that the financial, educational, and personal advantages of military experience outweigh the potential disadvantages of personal danger, time away from family and friends, or loss of personal freedom.

Barnard (1939/1969) also identified "common purpose" as a key element in organizations. Groups can function only if the members agree about the goal to which they are dedicating their individual efforts and for which they are sacrificing their individual control. Communication is central in this element as well. Members must communicate with one another and the leadership in order to negotiate understanding of the common purpose.

For example, consider a recreational hockey team. The members of the team probably have a variety of individual reasons for participating—some want to stay in shape, some want to improve their skills, and some want to win games. The team will not function effectively if they fail to agree on a common purpose in playing. That purpose may be to win games, in which case the individual goals of poorer players to improve their skills may not be met. Or the purpose may be to have fun and get some exercise, in which case the individual goals of highly competitive players may not be met. Depending on which common goal the team embraces, some members may lose their willingness to cooperate, and might join a different organization.

Our discussion of the nature of organizations makes it clear that rhetoric has an important role to play in persuading individuals to cooperate and in negotiating common purposes, so we now need to examine a definition of organizational rhetoric.

❖ **DEFINING ORGANIZATIONAL RHETORIC**

Though you may not have heard the term before, you are very familiar with organizational rhetoric—you are bombarded by it every day. When your university sends you a free mascot T-shirt to help build school spirit, when you see television or print ads claiming that energy companies are protecting the environment, or when a charitable organization asks for a donation by showing you the victims of a disaster, you are the audience of organizational rhetoric.

Organizational rhetoric is the strategic use of symbols by organizations to influence the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of audiences important to the operation of the organization. Three elements of this definition merit further explanation: the strategic nature, the goals, and the audiences of organizational rhetoric. First, organizational rhetoric is strategic because it is concerned with how messages are fashioned to meet specific goals. To be strategic is to carefully consider the impact of the selection and arrangement of symbols in the message.

In 2001, Philip Morris, known primarily as a producer of cigarettes, but also the parent company of brands like Kraft and Nabisco, announced that it was changing its name. In the press release announcing the name "Altria," representatives of the organization even explained the strategic nature of their rhetorical choices. They wrote,

> The significance of the name "Altria," Bible [the CEO] said, is derived from the Latin word "altus" which reflects the corporation's desire for its family of companies to always "reach higher" in striving to achieve greater financial strength and growth through operational excellence, consumer brand expertise and a growing understanding of corporate responsibility. (Altria Group, 2001)

Given that tobacco is often an unpopular product, Philip Morris likely wanted to put distance between people's perceptions of a tobacco company and their perceptions of other brands produced by the company. By strategically selecting a new name that makes no reference to tobacco, or to the well-known brand "Philip Morris," the organization sought to deflect negative attention from those opposed to tobacco production and marketing.

As this example illustrates, rhetoric doesn't happen by accident; it is the result of careful thought and planning on the part of CEOs, managers, human resources, public relations, and other communication professionals in organizations. The amount of time and money organizations spend crafting messages, or having others craft messages for them, is one indication of the strategic nature of this type of discourse.

Second, the goals of organizational rhetoric are to influence thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of audiences. When a major discount retailer runs ads to refute public criticism of its employment practices, it is encouraging us to think about the company differently. When a nonprofit organization gives us examples of people in need, it is attempting to influence our feelings. Thoughts and

feelings influence how we behave. Thus, our changed thinking might lead us to shop at Wal-Mart, Target, or K-Mart, or our changed feelings might encourage us to donate to the American Red Cross or Salvation Army.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the importance of audiences in the definition of organizational rhetoric. All rhetoric is strategically generated for one or more audiences. Organizations face many audiences, and often those audiences have multiple and potentially conflicting interests. Contemporary channels of communication such as the Internet, email, and 24-hour business reporting means that nearly all audiences have access to the messages designed for other audiences.

❖ **UNDERSTANDING ORGANIZATIONAL RHETORIC**

In order to more fully understand what we mean when we talk about organizational rhetoric, it is helpful to know how it emerged as a field of study and the two ways that scholars continue to study it.

In some respects, to study organizational rhetoric is to study both the oldest and one of the newest areas of communication. The study of communication was born with the study of rhetoric, and scholars have been examining the creation and reception of public messages for thousands of years. In 1965, Edwin Black refocused rhetorical scholars' attention on methods for analyzing messages, and over the next few decades critics developed a wide range of methods, or lenses, to analyze rhetoric.

In addition to building new tools to analyze discourse, rhetorical critics began to explore a much broader array of texts. Early critics primarily studied speeches and essays, but later critics turned their attention to messages produced by social movements, artists, and lyricists. As the pool of acceptable objects of study expanded, rhetorical critics began to look to the rhetoric produced by contemporary organizations. While rhetorical scholars were beginning to see organizations as sources of texts for analysis, organizational communication scholars were beginning to recognize the importance of focusing on symbol use in organizations. This converging of interests would set the stage for the emergence of organizational rhetoric as an independent area of study.

Early scholarship in organizational communication was heavily influenced by the social scientific movement in the study of communication.

A focus on improving productivity, often influenced by theorists in business, added to the idea that the scientific method could be used to create more effective communication in organizations. In the early 1980s, though, scholars began turning to more qualitative and interpretive methods. They began conducting interviews and focus groups, and looking at organizational documents in order to learn how individuals understood their experiences in organizations (Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983).

A rhetorical approach to studying organizations emerged parallel to this movement. Although some earlier authors had embraced a rhetorical approach, conferences of organizational communication scholars in 1988 and 1989, and a special issue of the *Journal of Applied Communication Research* in 1990, made organized arguments for the value of using rhetorical concepts to understand organizations and laid out some basic principles (Meisenbach & McMillan, 2006).

In the years since then, scholars have studied a wide variety of organizational texts from perspectives informed by rhetorical theory and criticism. Some of these texts were items that we would traditionally consider rhetorical—for example, speeches or editorials by organizational leaders, newsletters, or advertisements addressing public policy issues. One example of this type of analysis is Hoffman and Cowan's (2008) analysis of organizational Web sites. These authors analyzed the Web sites of 50 organizations in order to investigate organizational perspectives on initiatives to address work/life balance among employees. Other authors have taken this approach in studying rhetoric addressing rhetorical crisis in order to determine what are effective and ineffective crisis messages for organizations (Benoit, 1995a; Hearit, 1995).

Other critics investigate texts that are more familiar to qualitative social scientists, such as notes from observations made in organizations, observations of physical décor, or transcripts of interviews or small-group meetings with organizational members. Murphy's (1998) analysis of how flight attendants resist the authority of the airlines is an interesting example of this approach to understanding organizations. Murphy, who was working as a flight attendant, observed interactions, interviewed other flight attendants, and looked at organizational documents to understand how power was exercised and resisted at the airline.

Studying both of these kinds of texts has the potential to generate a great deal of knowledge about organizations and the social system in which they exist. In this book, we focus primarily on traditional rhetorical

texts, but the methods presented can help you analyze almost any message in an organization.

❖ CHARACTERISTICS OF ORGANIZATIONAL RHETORIC

If you have taken a class in public speaking, then you are probably familiar with the concepts of speaker, situation (or context), audience, and message, and understand their importance in crafting an effective speech. These terms are also important to those who study organizational rhetoric because for a long time the primary goal of rhetorical critics was to assess the persuasive impact of a message on an audience (Wichelns, 1925). At the time that Wichelns advanced his theory of criticism, this meant that, unlike literary critics who looked primarily at language choices and ideas in a work outside of its context, rhetorical critics needed to pay particular attention to such factors as speaker goals, audience composition, and context in addition to analyzing the message itself.

Although Wichelns's ideas remain relevant, contemporary scholars of organizational rhetoric find the elements of speaker, situation, audience, and message to be much more complex. Understanding these characteristics should help you understand some of the ways in which organizational rhetoric differs from what we consider "traditional" rhetoric.

Speaker

In the early days of rhetorical criticism, it was easy for a critic to identify the speaker—it was the man (usually) at the podium, or whose name appeared at the top of the text. However, because so little of today's organizational rhetoric is distributed in traditional spoken form, and because the actual spokesperson speaks for the entire organization rather than for him- or herself, it is much more difficult to isolate and investigate the "speaker." The rise of what Cheney and McMillan (1990) call "the corporate person" is one of the ways that organizational rhetoric differs from traditional rhetoric. McMillan (1987) wrote that every organization (for-profit and nonprofit) has "a persona not a flesh-and-blood entity, but an organizational image which has been *created* from the accumulated symbols by which the organization represents itself" (p. 37, italics in original).

Because it is influenced by so many people and developed from the accumulation of so many symbols, studying this persona is more complicated than studying a single speaker would be. When a spokesperson says, "State University is happy to announce our new football coach," who is the speaker? The whole university—including students, staff, and faculty? The athletic department? The president and her cabinet? Personnel in the University Advancement Office? McMillan's (1987) perspective on the organizational persona suggests that it is all of these groups, and at the same time not really any one of them. The announcement does not tell us who was involved in the decision, or who can be held responsible for the outcome. Understanding who is speaking, and for whom he or she is speaking, is an important element in analyzing organizational rhetoric.

Situation

Rhetorical critics have always paid careful attention to what Bitzer (1968) labeled the *rhetorical situation,* in order to determine the goals of rhetors and the obstacles faced in accomplishing them. This, too, is more complicated in organizational rhetoric. Contemporary organizations are what systems theorists refer to as *open systems,* meaning that they take information and events from the outside world and produce information, products, and services that have an impact on the larger community (Katz & Kahn, 1978). As a result, it is critical that organizations attend to what is happening around them, monitor their impact on the organizational environment, and respond appropriately. A detailed discussion of the rhetorical situation in organizational rhetoric is the focus of Chapter 3 of this book.

Audiences

Audiences are also much more complicated. With the expansion of technology and the concurrent shrinking of the world, the concept of audience now involves a complex tangle of interests, particularly because organizations need to consider so many diverse audiences when formulating messages.

Pharmaceutical companies provide an excellent example. Customers are clearly one audience. They are concerned about prices, safety, and availability of products, and perhaps the charitable or community contributions made by the organization. At the same time, stockholders are an audience. They are concerned with prices as well,

but that concern is based on profit rather than on the need to purchase drugs. Employees are a third audience; the Food and Drug Administration, a fourth audience; Congress and the executive branch is a fifth audience; and the scientific community is a sixth audience. You can probably think of several additional audiences as well, and recognize that each of them will have different concerns and different opinions about how concerns should be addressed. A detailed discussion of audiences in organizational rhetoric is found in Chapter 3 of this book.

Message

Organizational rhetoric is still founded on the basic elements identified by Aristotle centuries ago, but the strategies and the forms in which those strategies occur are vastly more complicated and diverse. Years of research in rhetoric and in organizational communication have created a large body of ideas used to label and understand the strategies found in organizational rhetoric. In Aristotle's day, rhetoric appeared in one form—oral and in person. Today, organizations use Web pages, print, radio and television advertising, even blogs and virtual Web worlds in addition to newsletters, posters, speeches, and events.

Cheney and McMillan (1990) introduce a set of categories for classifying messages in organizations that can help identify types of organizational messages. They explain that all organizational messages could be placed somewhere on a series of five continua: formal to informal, impersonal to personal, public to private, universal to particular, and external to internal. Any message can be described by using a combination of these continua.

To say that rhetoric is *formal* means that its content is guided by organizational policy, and the sender is an official representative of the organization (Stohl & Redding, 1987). An email from the dean of students announcing a snow day would be formal in nature, but a conversation between that dean and her office manager would be informal. Most of the day-to-day interactions of individuals at work, while clearly interesting and clearly organizational communication, are not considered organizational rhetoric for the purposes of the beginning critic.

Impersonal messages are directed at a general audience rather than a specific individual. The exact identity of the source also may not be clear in an impersonal message. *Personal* messages are directed at, and adapted to, specific and identifiable individuals or groups. A television ad or Web pop-up window designed to create awareness of an organization is impersonal—it seeks a wide, nonspecific audience, and it is not made clear who actually crafted the message. A letter or instant

message directly addressed to an individual or small group of individuals is personal. Such phrases as "To our employees" or "Today, the church announces" are clues that a piece of discourse can be called impersonal. You have probably noticed that some organizations make impersonal messages seem personal by individually addressing mass mailings or personalizing emails. This may make it even more difficult to determine if a message is more personal or more impersonal.

Universal messages are crafted to appear to express the thoughts and attitudes of all members of an organization, rather than the thoughts and attitudes of the leadership or of those creating the messages. Particular messages identify for whom they are speaking. Universality and impersonality are related characteristics. An impersonal message allows for a sense of universality, as in "The United States Navy announced . . ." This statement suggests that all members of the Navy support the policy being announced, when in fact, we can be quite sure that there is some level of dissent. Organizations may use similar statements to suggest the agreement of all, when in reality, many members of the organizations likely were not consulted on the issue. Although organizations are collections of individuals, they often appear to speak as if they have only one shared voice. The corporate voice may encourage audiences to think of, and perhaps act toward, organizations as singular entities rather than as collections of individuals.

A *public* message is one that is accessible to wide audiences and not intended to circulate to a prescribed group of people. For example, a mass mailing of a fundraising letter, a Web site that is not password protected, or an employee newsletter would be public messages. A memo designated for a few people would be a more private message.

Finally, Cheney and McMillan's 1990 work discussed the continuum of *external to internal* characteristic of messages. They argued that organizational rhetoric is primarily external—that it consists of messages directed at audiences outside the organization such as customers, legislators, and so forth, rather than at internal audiences such as employees. Recent work by both of these authors, however, makes it clear that their thinking about organizational rhetoric has expanded to demand more attention to rhetoric that is internal to the organization (e.g., Cheney, 2005; Cheney & Christensen, 2001a; Meisenbach & McMillan, 2006).

Documents designed to communicate the organization's ideals, principles, processes, or identity to its members are clearly rhetorical—the public audience is simply internal to the organization rather than external. In this book, we will consider such materials as training programs, employee newsletters in print or electronic form, events and strategic office décor as examples of internally directed organizational rhetoric.

Two examples demonstrate how these categories can help us classify messages. Following a prolonged controversy and many deaths and injuries in vehicle rollovers, the Ford Motor Company ran several newspaper advertisements emphasizing safety. These messages were formal in that they were phrased as being from the organization and were the result of strategic planning. They were impersonal because they were directed at the wide audience of newspaper readers rather than at specific individuals. They were universal since the company itself rather than a single individual was identified as the "speaker" in the discourse. They were public because they were targeted at a general audience, and since they were published in national newspapers there was no attempt to limit access to the information. Finally, in this case, the messages were external—directed at audiences outside the organization rather than at employees, though internal audiences would also have access.

Employee orientation materials in many large organizations can also be classified using these continua. They are formal because they conform to organizational standards. They are impersonal because they are directed at all new employees rather than tailored to individuals. They are universal because they represent the "organization's" perspectives on priorities and procedures. They are public within the organization because they are available to all employees rather than a select group. Clearly, in this case, they are directed at an internal audience, though they may also be seen by members of external audiences.

As you look at discourse produced in organizations, it may be difficult to place samples cleanly in these categories because there is no "yes" or "no," only a "more" or "less." The most important thing is that you are able to use the characteristics to make an argument for why the discourse you have selected should or should not be studied as an example of organizational rhetoric.

The methods introduced in this book can be used to analyze almost any type of message produced by and in organizations; however, beginning critics may find it easiest to start with messages that are on the formal, impersonal, public, and universal segments of the continua.

Although product advertising and marketing share many of the characteristics of organizational rhetoric, we exclude them from consideration in this text because they are highly specialized messages designed for the audience of consumers, while organizational rhetoric is defined in part by the existence of multiple audiences. In addition, a wide range of academic and popular literature already addresses the topics of advertising and marketing.

❖ REASONS FOR STUDYING ORGANIZATIONAL RHETORIC

Now that you have a clearer understanding of the development and focus of organizational rhetoric, it is important to explore why its study is worthy of an entire book, and perhaps an entire college course. It is vital to study organizational rhetoric because of the power that organizations exercise, and because they exercise much of that power through the strategic use of symbols. There are both philosophical and practical reasons to study this type of rhetoric. On a philosophical level, it is important to realize how much power organizations wield in contemporary culture, and to identify how that power is constructed and reinforced through the use of rhetoric. On a practical level, understanding how organizations use discourse may make us wiser consumers and citizens, and in turn, more ethical and effective producers of rhetoric for the organizations in which we work.

Organizations Are a Powerful Force in Society

In the days of Aristotle, individuals, rather than organizations, produced all of the rhetoric. As the world changed, individuals pooled their skills in guilds and associations. This required them to surrender their individual voices, but they gained some power by becoming part of a collective voice. As the world became industrialized, the balance shifted even further, and organizational voices became more powerful than individual voices (Cheney & McMillan, 1990). Many authors even argue that organizations—particularly corporate organizations—have come to have more influence over individuals than do governments. Organizational communication scholar Stanley Deetz (1992) is especially concerned with the influence of corporations. He writes, "Major national and international corporations have frequently, wittingly and unwittingly, replaced religious, familial, educational and community institutions in the production of meaning, personal identity, values, knowledge and reasoning" (p. 17). Deetz argues that organizations, particularly corporations, have gained power to such an extent that they can, in essence, tell individuals who they are (an IBMer, a State University Lion), what is true (that global warming is, or is not, scientifically supported), and what they should believe and value (that buying a new car is a patriotic act).

Perhaps even more thought-provoking to college students is Deetz's (1992) argument that the push for education to create workers for corporations has changed the very nature of education. Rather than teaching students to think critically and independently, he explains, the

educational system now focuses on creating successful employees who will support organizational perspectives.

In addition to considering these larger social impacts, it is helpful to think of the daily power of organizations in individual lives. Cheney and McMillan (1990) conclude that organizations have become so influential that they have "become, in many cases the individual's voice, source of authority and resource for identity" (p. 97). We define ourselves in part by the organizations to which we belong, whether they are fraternities or sororities, professional organizations, labor unions, churches, or the organizations for which we work. We make arguments based on affiliation with organizations, by claiming expert knowledge and information, and we allow organizations to speak for us when we endorse a political party, a social movement, or a church group.

Organizations do much good in society. They produce products and services that people need to live happy and healthy lives, they provide jobs that give both income and fulfillment to workers, and they contribute to the social and cultural lives of their surrounding communities. However, despite the good that organizations do, and their central place in our culture, they may also abuse their power. Some produce products that endanger lives and refuse to take responsibility for their actions; some exploit or mistreat workers by paying substandard wages or maintaining unsafe working conditions. Some may endanger the physical environment, and some may mislead investors through dishonest business practices. Surely, entities with this level of power over individuals and society should be studied carefully. One way to understand the values, goals, motives, and practices of all organizations is to examine the rhetoric that they produce.

Organizations Produce a Great Deal of Rhetoric

You are confronted with a vast number of organizational messages every day. If you wake up to the radio, the station is probably using rhetoric to establish or reinforce its identity in your head before you even get out of bed. When you drive onto campus, you see the banners promoting the identity and excellence of your school. If you have a job, the bulletin board in the break room likely holds messages trying to influence how you feel about your work, as well as how you perform it. Organizations produce a massive amount of discourse in a wide variety of forms, all of which is intended to persuade audiences to think, feel, or behave in a particular way. There are philosophical and practical reasons why it would be foolish not to study a phenomenon that is so widespread.

As you may have concluded from the sheer number of messages swirling around you, organizations are the largest producers of rhetoric in contemporary society. By analyzing the messages used to influence audiences, critics can note the actions and strategies of organizations using power responsibly, and challenge the actions and strategies of those that use it irresponsibly.

❖ GOALS FOR STUDYING ORGANIZATIONAL RHETORIC

Because we understand why it is important to pay attention to the rhetoric of organizations, we can examine the goals we hope to accomplish in doing so. Most critics of organizational rhetoric will pursue one or more of four goals when analyzing an artifact: (1) determining whether or not the rhetoric should have been effective, or how it could be more effective; (2) understanding and judging what is revealed by an organization's presentation of itself, including what values the organization claims to uphold; (3) understanding and judging the general role and power of organizations in society; and (4) improving understanding of theory about organizational rhetoric.

When examining a single piece of rhetoric, critics may seek to learn whether or not it seems well-crafted to meet its persuasive goal—in other words, should it have been effective? For example, a critic might study the produce industry's attempts to restore faith in the health value of its product following the ecoli outbreak of 2008. By looking at multiple samples, they can draw a conclusion about the overall effectiveness of rhetorical choices across situations. In another example, major U.S. retailer Wal-Mart has faced much negative publicity in recent years. Critics might conduct an analysis of several samples of the company's responses to controversy in order to make a judgment about its rhetorical choices.

Critics might also want to know what a particular piece of rhetoric reveals about the ethics or culture of an organization. Analysis of the Web site of a company at which you are interviewing, for example, might help you decide whether or not you would be comfortable with the company's policies and practices. Studying organizational rhetoric can also enlighten critics about the organization more generally and allow them to make judgments about whether an organization operates in an ethical manner. Viewing a wide range of rhetoric from a single organization can also allow a critic to learn more about the identity, values, and priorities of an organization. For example, if you want to get a sense of what is truly important at your university, you might do

a close comparison of the mission statement and goals with other rhetoric such as newsletters or specific Web sites that might reinforce or contradict the stated mission and goals.

Critics might also study organizational rhetoric in order to learn about a national or international culture. Organizations are a tremendous force in contemporary society, and studying the messages of multiple organizations may help reveal what sorts of influence they have as well as the implications of that influence.

Finally, all rhetorical criticism, whether organizational or not, should contribute to our understanding of rhetorical theory. In the case of organizational rhetoric, there is a chance to help build a relatively new but growing body of general principles that help explain the area of study. For example, Rowland and Jerome (2004) explore a model to explain how organizations defend themselves in the face of accusation, and Kuhn (1997) proposes a model of how organizations can best manage public issue campaigns.

❖ PRACTICAL OUTCOMES OF STUDYING ORGANIZATIONAL RHETORIC

Being able to answer each of these four questions can make you both a wiser consumer and a wiser creator of organizational rhetoric. Rhetorical analysis provides the tools you need to make an informed judgment about whether a business moving to your neighborhood will have the benefits it claims in the pamphlet its representative leaves on your porch. These same tools will also allow you to make wiser choices about which organizations you support with your business and which you avoid. Finally, you will be able to think critically about what kind of organization you want to work in, and analyze the ways in which you allow that organization to control some elements of your life.

Being able to analyze organizational rhetoric can also make you a more effective and ethical producer of such rhetoric. Knowing what strategies are most effective in particular situations and knowing how rhetoric can be used to exercise or resist power can help you when you need to create messages for an organization. Organizations spend billions of dollars each year to produce rhetoric designed to accomplish a variety of goals. For example, in recent years, many fast food chains have attempted to alter the perceptions of consumers that fast food is unhealthy, and create new identities that include fast food as a healthy option. In addition, large energy producers have initiated campaigns to make their identities more environmentally friendly, and any

number of organizations have needed to create messages to restore faith in their products or services following some sort of crisis. Public relations and other communication professionals design and execute each piece of discourse created by these organizations. With training and practice in organizational rhetoric, you could be one of those professionals. Even if you don't want a career focused on developing messages for organizations, understanding rhetorical situations and strategies in organizations will make you a more effective employee in a range of areas, including organizational development, training, sales, and strategic planning.
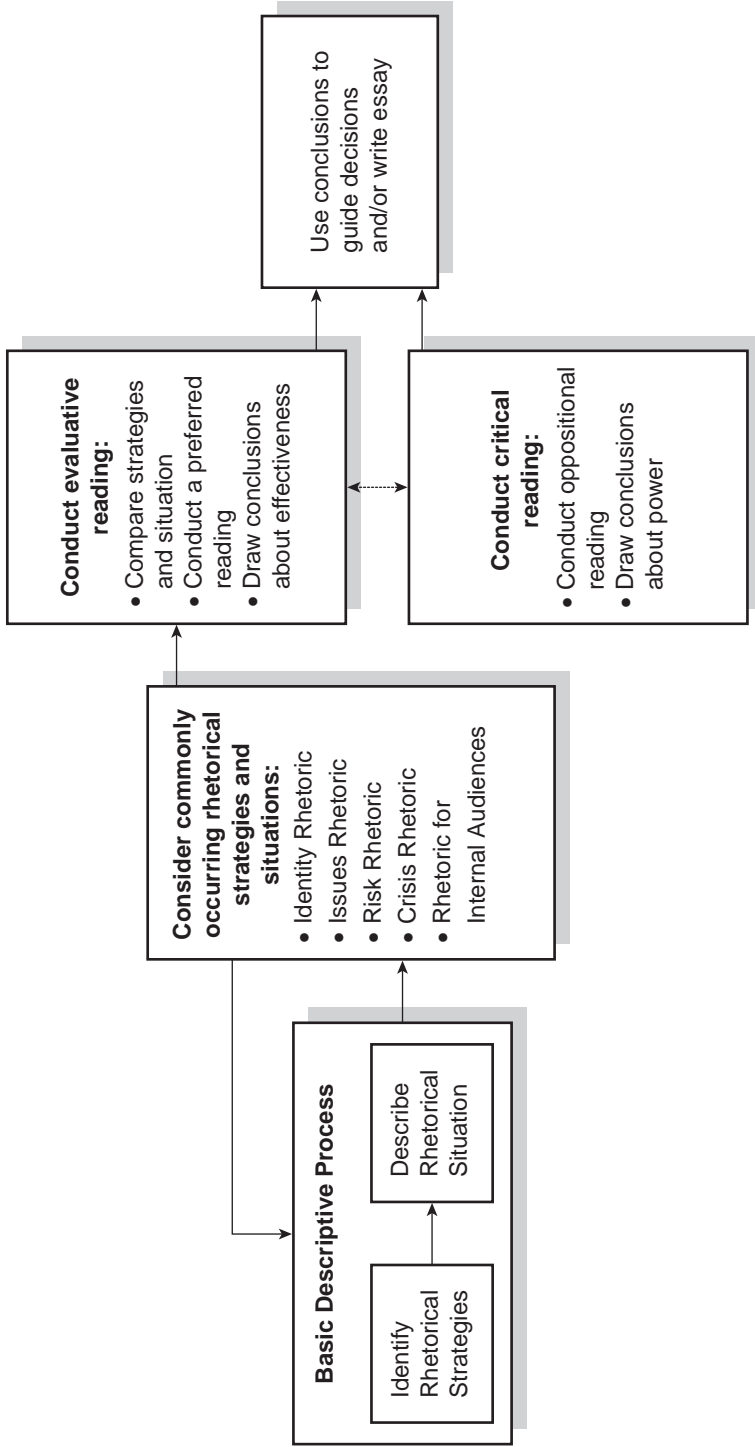
❖ A PROCESS FOR ANALYZING ORGANIZATIONAL RHETORIC

With an understanding of the reasons for studying organizational rhetoric, it is important to have an overview of how a critic approaches a sample of organizational rhetoric. This process also serves as the structure of the first half of this book, as we take beginning critics through each of the steps in the process of analyzing organizational rhetoric.

No matter which of the above goals they want to accomplish, critics must be systematic in their approach to analyzing organizational rhetoric. To be *systematic* means to use a standard set of practices or steps to reach a conclusion. As critics become more experienced, some of the steps may be modified or their order changed, and some may be done almost by reflex. For beginning critics, however, it is important to recognize and carry out each of the steps in the system. Several authors have developed systems for analyzing rhetoric (e.g., Campbell & Burkholder, 1997; Rowland, 2008). Even more authors have used systems to conduct rhetorical criticism, and we will discuss samples of that work throughout the book. Figure 1.2 summarizes a process for analyzing organizational rhetoric.

All rhetorical critics begin with the same basic descriptive process: (1) Identify the rhetorical strategies in the sample, and (2) describe the elements of the rhetorical situation for which the rhetoric was created. The first step, identifying the rhetorical strategies, requires the critic to examine the artifact many times using a list of the basic elements that appear most often in samples of organizational rhetoric. These elements have been discovered by rhetorical theorists and critics over the course of centuries. In Chapter 2 of this text, we catalog and explain rhetorical strategies that appear frequently in organizational rhetoric.

Figure 1.2   Process for Analyzing Organizational Rhetoric

Basic Descriptive Process

Identify Rhetorical Strategies

Describe Rhetorical Situation

Consider commonly occurring rhetorical strategies and situations:
• Identity Rhetoric
• Issues Rhetoric
• Risk Rhetoric
• Crisis Rhetoric
• Rhetoric for Internal Audiences

Conduct evaluative reading:
• Compare strategies and situation
• Conduct a preferred reading
• Draw conclusions about effectiveness

Conduct critical reading:
• Conduct oppositional reading
• Draw conclusions about power

Use conclusions to guide decisions and/or write essay

The second step involves researching and describing the elements of the situation for which the rhetoric was created. Several scholars have provided theories to help explain rhetorical situations. We explain two approaches to describing the rhetorical situation in Chapter 3.

Once a critic has identified the rhetorical strategies and described the rhetorical situation, the third step is to consider whether the elements of the situation or patterns of strategies are the type that scholars have recognized as happening with frequency across a variety of organizations. If they are, the critic then reviews theory about those situations and strategies and uses that added knowledge to inform additional readings of the artifact. In Chapters 6 through 10, we introduce five sets of situational and strategic elements that appear with frequency in organizations: identity rhetoric, issue management rhetoric, risk management rhetoric, crisis management rhetoric, and rhetoric directed to internal audiences.

Fourth, using all he or she has learned in the first three steps, a critic must decide what type of question to ask about the rhetoric. All critics will approach their analysis from one of two larger perspectives. These perspectives are sets of assumptions about the purpose of rhetorical analysis and about how rhetoric works. In the case of organizational rhetoric, we identify two general approaches or ways to "read" texts—an evaluative approach and a critical approach.

The type of question being asked will determine whether the critic makes only an evaluative reading or also adds a critical reading of the rhetoric. Critics who want to determine how effectively a piece of rhetoric functions should proceed with an evaluative reading. An evaluative reading involves comparing the strategies with the elements of the situation to identify what the rhetor wanted to say, and how well he or she said it.

Critics who want to understand organizational positions or power in organizations will also complete an evaluative reading, but will follow that with a critical reading. A critical reading encourages the critic to ask questions about who has a voice in the organization's rhetoric, and about how much choice the audience has in understanding and influencing the organization. Neither the evaluative nor the critical reading can be completed without an understanding of both situations and basic rhetorical strategies. The theory behind the evaluative reading is discussed at the end of Chapter 3, and the theory behind the critical reading is discussed in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5, we present a more detailed discussion of the procedures for both types of analytical reading.

Finally, critics must apply the conclusions drawn from the evaluative and critical readings. For academic critics, the conclusions will result in a critical essay. For those tasked with creating organizational rhetoric, it may result in a list of strategies to remember in future situations; for practical critics, it may result in a decision about whether to support or work for a particular organization.

❖ CONCLUSION

This chapter sets the stage for our exploration of organizational rhetoric by defining our object of study. Organizational rhetoric is the strategic use of symbols by organizations to influence the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of audiences important to the organization. Organizations are powerful and pervasive voices in contemporary society, and they exercise that power through the use of rhetoric. The chapters that follow explore ways to understand and analyze that power.