

Research and the Rhetorical Situation

The word *research* strikes fear into the heart of many students. Why? Some students report that research is boring or that they're fearful of the grade that they'll receive when they turn in their assignments. Others are uncertain about their teachers' expectations, and they might be wary of the amount of time they'll have to put into a research assignment. These fears can be relieved if you understand how to do research, what the expectations are for your research, and how it will be assessed. In addition, choosing a topic in which you are interested and invested can make research helpful and enjoyable, even exciting. Instead of boring, in Kendall's research scenario detailed on the next page, for example, she is interested in her topic, and she has experience with it. She will probably enjoy her research project because she sees an immediate purpose for the work she is doing.

We'll explore

- ▶ the rhetorical situation's effects on writing and research
- ▶ similarities and differences between academic research and research for other purposes
- ▶ reasons for conducting research
- ▶ comparisons of writing and research in different academic disciplines

Research in Action

Author: As part of the service learning component of a class she is taking, Kendell decides to volunteer at a local homeless shelter.

Topic: Kendell wants to understand how to help people in the homeless shelter who are also struggling with mental illness, so she starts to research schizophrenia and other serious psychological illnesses.

Audience: Kendell's original audience is her professor, but when the managers of the homeless shelter realize that she is doing the research, they ask Kendell to share the results with the other volunteers.

Purpose: Kendell needs to find reliable information that she can condense into manageable pieces to pass on to the other homeless shelter volunteers.



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Questions

1. How do the elements of Kendell's situation detailed above help develop her research topic?
2. How might Kendell present her research results to her intended audience? How do the elements of her situation suggest this presentation or publication plan?
3. What other things might Kendell want to find out about her situation before beginning her research?
4. Can you imagine other aspects of the situation that would affect researching, writing, and presenting or publishing in this case?

Recognizing Research Contexts

You might be surprised to realize that you've been conducting research for a long time. Whenever you have a problem to solve or a question to answer, you decide what kind of information you will need to solve the problem or find the answer, that is, you decide what kind of research you need to conduct to find an answer or solution. In school, you might be used to thinking of research in terms of going to the library, searching for information on the Internet, or writing a report. Research certainly takes place in academic contexts, but it also takes place in our everyday lives. For example, you might have conducted research about which college to attend, or you might research a particular company if you are applying for a job. Sometimes your research involves a large-scale investigation, but often it is pretty informal. The goal of this book is to help you develop strategies for conducting research in all sorts of scenarios: college classes, work settings, and various personal situations.

Although you'll be able to use the methods in this book to approach any kind of research, the key to remember is that research is highly situational. That is, research needs and processes change according to the circumstances. For example, imagine that someone close to you is experiencing heart problems, and you want him or her to go to the best doctor available. Answering the question, "Which heart doctor should my mother/father/friend/loved one go to?" requires some research. Not only do you need to do research on local doctors and their expertise, but you also have to consider the person's resources (especially medical insurance coverage) as an important element of the research situation. Although the final product of your research may simply be the name of a specific doctor, the reading, writing, and thinking you put into the process is considerable and depends on multiple variables within the situation.

People encounter problems that can be solved by carefully constructed research questions every day—questions about which car to buy, whether to lease or purchase that car, whether to adopt a pet, where (and how) to apply for a specific job, which utility company to choose, where to apply for scholarships and financial aid for school, which store to purchase textbooks from at the beginning of the semester, or which classes to take. While you are in school, you'll also conduct academic research to find answers to a variety of questions. Even school assignments are situational, though; they depend on the teacher's expectations, the course, the discipline, and a variety of other factors, such as:

- ▷ topic chosen or assigned
- ▷ length of the paper or project
- ▷ whether you conduct primary research
- ▷ whether you interpret something or critique someone else's interpretation
- ▷ whether you develop a theory about a phenomenon or test someone else's theory
- ▷ the expected product: a proposal? a developed argument? a report? an analysis? a description of a methodology? a review of previous research on the subject?

You will continue to encounter research situations outside of the academic setting. In the workplace, you might encounter research questions—either ones that are assigned to you (What do we need to include in our proposal in order to win the contract?) or issues that intrigue you (What salary would be competitive and fair for the work that I will be doing in my new job?). Working through the activities and projects described

In this book will help you with the everyday research that you already do, the academic research you'll be expected to do, and the workplace research that you'll want to do in the future.

Regardless of the purpose of the research you are conducting, the general research principles remain the same, although your approach might vary depending on the situation and context of your research. This book will guide you through developing your own research process and developing arguments that consider the **rhetorical situation**. The rhetorical situation is the context surrounding a particular research or writing task. In other words, we will ask you to consider how several contextual factors influence your research:

- ▷ **topic**—what you are researching
- ▷ **purpose**—why you are researching it
- ▷ **audience**—to whom you are writing (reporting results)
- ▷ **author**—who you are and the experience you bring to the issue you are researching

When you consider the rhetorical situation of your writing, you are considering these elements. These factors influence not only the research that you do and how you conduct it but also your conclusions and your presentation of those conclusions to your readers. Additionally, becoming more thoughtful about your own research process will make you a more careful reader of the research and arguments of others.

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How Have You Conducted Research Before?

Think of a situation recently in which you had to conduct research to solve a problem. Perhaps you had to solve some transportation problems in getting to school, or maybe you had to come up with a solution to a challenge at work. You might even consider the choice that you made about where to enroll in classes or which degree to pursue. Answer the following questions about that experience.

1. Describe the situation. Why did you need to conduct research? What did you need to find out? Try to state your challenge as a question that you needed to answer.
2. Who was involved in the situation—just you, or did the research and conclusion(s) affect others? Did you conduct the research alone or with others?
3. How did you explore possible answers to your question? Where did you look for information? Did you ask anyone for advice? Did you look for information that others had written, or did you gather information by talking to people?
4. What conclusion(s) did you come to? How did you decide on that conclusion?
5. Were you satisfied that you had considered all the options or did you make a quick decision? If time was a factor, was there something you would have done differently if you had had more time?
6. How did you share the results of your research? Who wanted or needed the information and how did you present it to them?

Identifying Research Purposes

You might conduct research for a number of reasons, but each time you're essentially doing the same thing—answering a question. In other words, there are a multitude of purposes you may fulfill by answering research questions. You might choose which college to apply to or what car to buy. You might decide where to live or which name to choose for your baby. You might point out an often-overlooked reason for the start of World War II or propose a more efficient process for your company. Each of these personal, academic, and work-related situations requires that you ask a question and then find an answer.

When most people think of traditional research purposes, they think of research to answer an academic question. For example, a history professor might ask the class to dig a little deeper into the history of World War II and to question the reasons that traditional textbooks give for the war. This research question requires the student not only to answer the question, "What are the traditionally cited reasons for the start of World War II?" but also to consider other possible causes of the war. After looking at numerous textbooks to understand which reasons are often cited, the student needs to access highly specialized references (history journals, discussion boards, even individual scholars) to search out other possibilities. Because this is an academic assignment, the student has access to traditional academic resources: library materials, databases, and professors. However, one student in the class may have a family member who fought on the European front in World War II. Another student's family may have emigrated from Japan after the war. These students may have access to personal and individualized resources that relate to the cultural situation at the beginning of and during World War II.

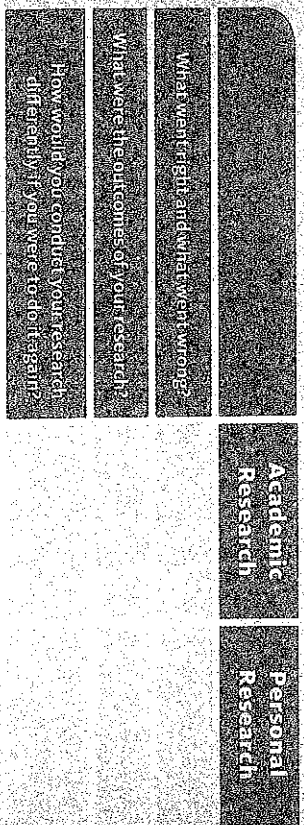
Such a research project is a fairly traditional example of the purpose and situation of a research assignment in a school setting. You will likely find that you will adapt your research process to the research question, the context in which you need to answer it, and the resources to which you have access. For any research question and context, it's important to be aware of the rhetorical situation.

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How Do Research Processes Compare?

Think about two times you've conducted research in the past: one when you conducted research for a school project and one when you conducted research to answer a question for yourself. Think about the processes that you used in each situation and respond to the following questions.

Why did you conduct this research? If you were given instructions, what were they?	Academic Research	Personal Research
When questions did you ask?		
How did you share?		



Considering Elements of the Rhetorical Situation

Whenever we conduct research, and especially when we share the results of our research, we must consider each element of the rhetorical situation of our research and writing: the topic, purpose, audience, and author. In the history project example, the professor requested that students write an essay about possible causes of World War II. Such an essay would require that the students demonstrate their understanding of both the generally mentioned causes of World War II and possible alternative causes. On the other hand, the professor might request that rather than write an essay, the students use the results of their research in a letter to the author of the course's history textbook, proposing that a lesser-mentioned reason be given more attention in the textbook's next edition. In this letter, students would have to demonstrate their understanding of World War II (the topic) and how and why content decisions are made for textbooks (the purpose is to influence this decision), while addressing the needs of the textbook author (audience) and keeping in mind their own experience in studying with this textbook (author).

Each of the four elements of the rhetorical situation is shaped and influenced by the others. (See Figure 1.1.) The topic you choose to write about may be influenced by your

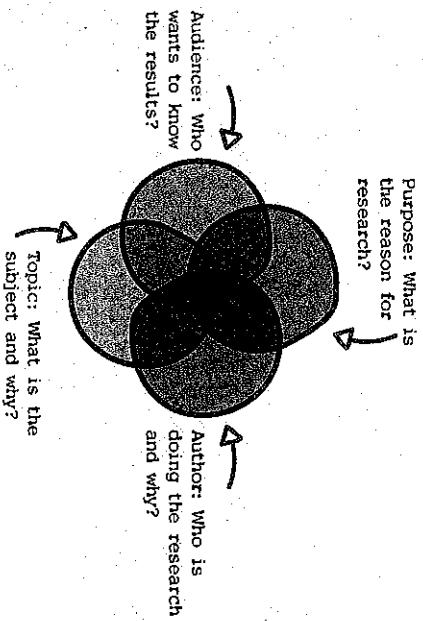


Figure 1.1 The Rhetorical Situation

purpose for researching, especially if you are assigned a research paper in a class. Or your topic might be influenced by who you are and what you are interested in as the author. The way you approach and narrow your topic might also be influenced by the audience for your research and that audience's expectations. Being aware of the rhetorical situation for your writing and research will help you to answer your research question effectively.

Let's go back to Kendall's research situation outlined at the beginning of the chapter. If Kendall had been doing the research purely for her own interest, the author and audience for the research would completely overlap; in fact, they would be the same. (See Figure 1.2.)

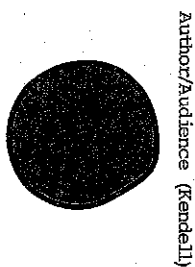


Figure 1.2 Overlap of Author and Audience

As we know, though, Kendall's topic and purpose for researching originally arose out of the class she was taking. Therefore, Kendall's audience widens to include her professor, but her audience still overlaps somewhat with the author because Kendall is interested in the topic herself, too. (See Figure 1.3.)

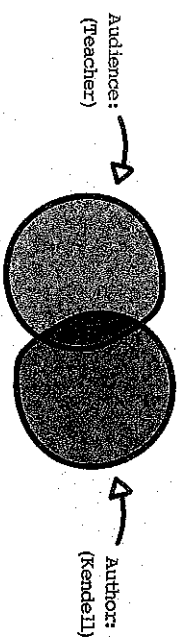


Figure 1.3 Kendall's Audience Widens

When Kendall shared her research goals with managers of the homeless shelter, she found that other people were interested in her research. Kendall's audience widened even more. She needs to be aware of this because different audiences have different expectations.

The rhetorical situation of Kendall's research and writing affects the way she conducts her research and the kinds of resources she chooses. What types of resources might Kendall have assumed were appropriate for just personal knowledge? How might she change her research processes and the types of resources she looks for if she is going to present her information in a formal research paper? And how might those shift even further if she presents her research more informally to other volunteers at the homeless shelter?

As another example, imagine that you are applying for scholarships so that you can continue your education. First, you must conduct research to determine

- ▶ which scholarships to apply for, and
- ▶ what to write in your applications.

Imagine that in the first stage of your research you locate two scholarships for which you would like to apply:

1. One is sponsored by the institution you attend and is given by the alumni association to a student who demonstrates financial need and has a promising academic record.
2. One is sponsored by a local charity organization and is given to a student who is actively involved in community service and also has a commitment to academic achievement.

For both scholarship applications, you must conduct research to determine what each organization values and which aspects of your experience you should include in the application. What would be relevant for both scholarship committees to hear? In your application to the alumni association, you might discuss your previous success in school and include specific praise for the institution you are attending. In your application to the charity organization, you might include information about your school record, but it will also be important to include information about your involvement in community service. The expectations and values of your two audiences will most likely result in your writing two different scholarship applications, even though the purpose is the same (asking for money for school), the author is the same (you), and the topic is the same (also you). All elements of the rhetorical situation shape and affect your research and writing; any of the elements might carry more weight than the others in any given situation. (See Figures 1.4 and 1.5; for more information about cluster maps and how to use them in your writing, see Chapter 2.)

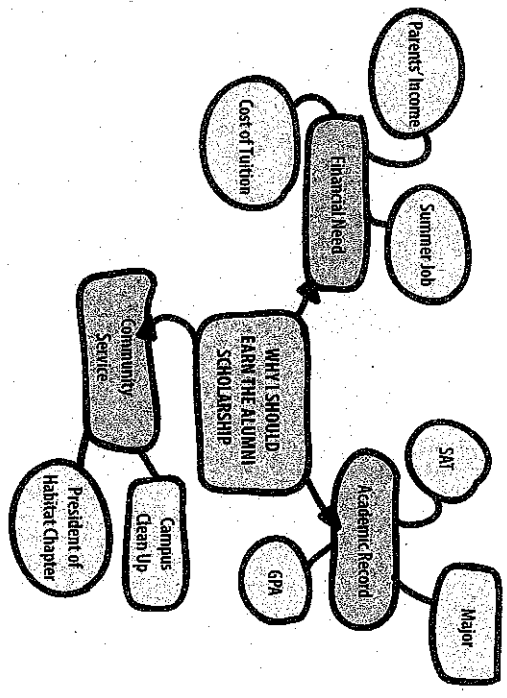


Figure 1.4 Cluster Map of Ideas for Alumni Scholarship Application

Considering the rhetorical situation of research and writing is central to the discussion of research in this book. You will be asked to reflect on your purpose for conducting research, your audience, your position and influences as the author, and the way your topic shapes (and is shaped by) your research. In addition, we will ask you to consider how each element of the rhetorical situation influences the others in the research you are conducting: Awareness of the rhetorical situation will help you conduct successful research and communicate the results of your research so that you can achieve your goals.

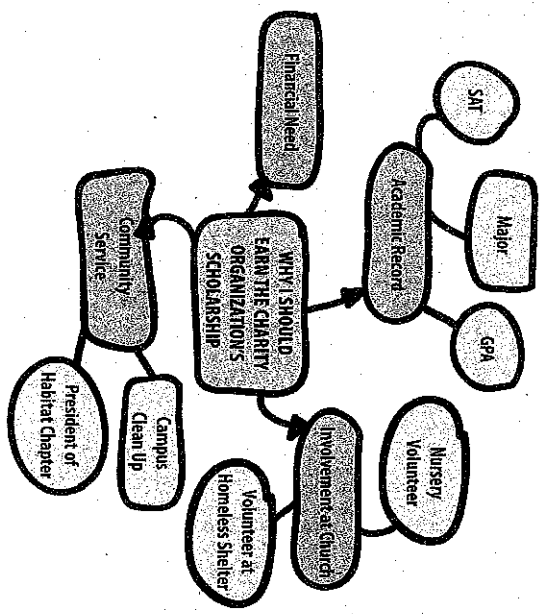
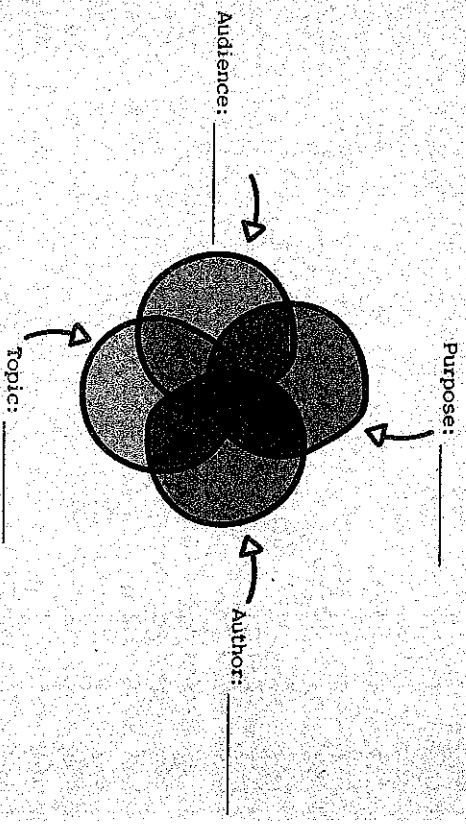


Figure 1.5 Cluster Map of Ideas for Charity Organization Scholarship Application

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How Do Rhetorical Situations Compare?

Think of a situation in the recent past that required some research. Maybe you were planning a celebratory dinner at a restaurant and needed to look at menus, price ranges, locations, accommodations, and so on. Or you might focus on a research project that you completed for one of your courses. Think about the rhetorical situation of your research and fill in a Venn diagram like the following one with the four elements of your rhetorical situation. Try to pay attention to the size and placement of your circles based on the importance of and relationship between the different elements.



Compare and contrast your situation with other members of the class using the following questions:

1. What motivated you to conduct the research?
2. What was the topic, or subject, of your research? Was the topic tied to a specific time and location? Why or why not?
3. Who was the audience for your research? Who was affected by the results? Who might have been an unintended audience that was affected by your research? How did knowing your audience affect your research?
4. As the author, what was your experience with this topic before you began to research it? What was your experience with the audience? How did your experiences affect your research?
5. How do your rhetorical situations compare with those of other members of your class? How do your processes for adapting to the specific rhetorical situations compare?

Understanding Disciplinary Approaches

The rhetorical situations outlined so far in this chapter have included personal, workplace, and academic contexts. Academic contexts, as you may have already discovered, are just as varied as personal and workplace contexts. That is, from one class to the next you will come across different preferences, or what writing teachers often call **conventions**, for each discipline. As an extreme example, the writing that you do when completing an observational lab report in a biology class will be very different from the writing you do when completing a poetry assignment for a creative writing class. For example, in poetry it is generally okay to use the first-person pronoun *I*, whereas scientific writing generally uses passive voice, erasing the subject of the sentence altogether. Similarly, your writing in a literary analysis paper will probably have significant differences from your writing in an experimental psychology report. Other more subtle conventions may differ between disciplines as well, such as the width of your margins and the style you use for citing sources (in-text citations or footnotes).

Of course, there are many similarities in the writing you will do in these contexts, too. Since they are all fairly formal assignments completed in an academic setting, you will thoroughly proofread and edit your work. Also, you will carefully cite resources that you use in your writing because the citation of others' ideas is an important part of writing in any academic setting. But there may be differences in style, organization, voice, and even the format for citing your sources, depending on the conventions of the discipline. You will even find that what counts as evidence for an argument can vary from one discipline to another. While a logically constructed argument defending a theory might count as evidence in one class, another class might require the collection of data through observation or experimentation to defend a claim.

One of the best ways to discover the kinds of writing conventions that are expected in a given field is to look at examples of writing in that discipline, writing that you want to emulate. You'll notice certain patterns. For example, if you look at various observational and experimental reports in the natural sciences and social sciences, you might notice that many of them follow the same organizational pattern. Researchers and writers in these disciplines expect that reports, generally, will be organized as follows:

- ▶ Introduction and review of relevant research
- ▶ description of the methodology used in the study
- ▶ presentation of the results of data collection
- ▶ analysis of the results
- ▶ discussion of the results and concluding comments

Exceptions to this pattern exist, too, and part of being an effective writer is determining when to follow the conventions and when to break them. In order to make that decision, you have to know the conventions in the first place. Learning about the discipline in which you are writing is an important part of your rhetorical situation if you are writing in an academic setting. Table 1.1 shows some of the distinct characteristics of academic disciplines in four main categories: the types of research in those areas, and the usual citation styles, but always keep in mind that such distinctions aren't absolute. You have a variety of resources to help you learn about the conventions of different disciplines. Your primary resource is your instructor. Ask your instructor about expectations for

TABLE 1.1. Characteristics of Academic Disciplines

	Humanities	Social Sciences	Natural Sciences	Applied Field
Example areas of study	Literature, art, philosophy, dance, film studies, religious studies	Anthropology, sociology, political science, psychology, justice studies, economics, linguistics	Biology, geology, physics, mathematics, chemistry	Engineering, computer science, nursing education, business, pre-law
Primary areas of inquiry	Texts, artifacts, and other ways in which people create meaning and value	Society and social (especially human) interaction	The physical world	Application of scholarly knowledge to real-world situations
Primary role of the researcher	Interpreting and making meaning	Developing theories and looking for patterns	Systematically investigating and reporting results	Integrating and applying knowledge from one or more fields to practical context
Common citation styles	Modern Language Association (MLA), Chicago Manual of Style (CMS)	American Psychological Association (APA), Linguistics Society of America (LSA)	Council of Science Editors (CSE), American Psychological Association (APA)	Various, depending on field

writing and research in your discipline. Ask for a list of academic journals to skim through so that you can see those patterns. You might even ask your instructor for a sample of the writing he or she has done in that discipline. In addition, you could look at one or more of the many textbooks and references devoted to discussing writing in various disciplines.

Discover Disciplinary Patterns and Conventions

Begin by finding a teacher or professional that you could talk to in the discipline/major/career that you are interested in pursuing. You might talk to a professor that you know, or you might talk to someone who is currently in the kind of job you would like to have. Ask the following questions, and take careful notes on the responses you receive.

1. What kinds of writing are assigned in classes in this field? What kinds of writing do professionals in this field do on the job?
2. Are there specific patterns or conventions expected in the writing in this field? If so, what are they?
3. What are the most common problems that students or new writers in the field have? How could these problems be avoided?
4. What kinds of research are conducted most often in this field?
5. Are there specific research processes that people in this field/profession usually follow? How do they learn these processes? (For more about common research processes, see Chapter 2.)
6. What citation style is primarily used for research conducted in this field? Why is that citation style used? Are other styles sometimes used as well? If so, how should a new writer in the field choose an appropriate citation style?
7. Is there an example of writing in this field that you could share with me? (You might even ask to see something that the teacher or professional has written.)

If you do receive a piece of writing that you could analyze, look for the patterns and conventions that the teacher or professional identified for you. Then share your discoveries with your classmates. You might try filling out a table so that you can compare the similarities and differences among the disciplines you each investigated.

Entering a Conversation

As you can see, research does not happen in a vacuum. Research projects develop in a particular situation, from a problem that someone has or a question that someone asks. Sometimes it helps to think of your rhetorical situation as a conversation that you are entering—and you are entering that conversation by asking a question (or answering a question someone is asking you). So what does this mean, exactly?

Imagine that a friend has invited you to a party and you're a little apprehensive about going because you don't know many of the people who will be there. Perhaps you feel a

little out of your element at first when you walk in the door. You don't see many people that you know, and there are already several groups around the room having lively conversations. Your friend immediately sees people that he knows and runs over to say hello. You're left on your own. What do you do? Perhaps you would circulate through the room, listening to what's going on, until you find a conversation that sounds interesting to you.

You might listen for a topic or person you know about already, or you might listen for something that is interesting for another reason. As you join the circle of people in discussion, you might listen for a little bit before saying anything—you wouldn't want to say something inappropriate, and it's best to find out what has been said already. It is wise to listen to the ongoing conversation before jumping in and adding to it. Perhaps an entry point into that conversation is a question—and you might think of your research in the same way. As you choose a topic to research and a question on which to focus, you are entering

a conversation in progress. People have most likely been talking about this topic for a while, and you can learn by "listening" to what's been said already. You might do this by reading things that others have written, paying attention to any disciplinary conventions you find, or you might interview people who are knowledgeable about the subject to learn what they know. The important thing is to remember that you're most likely jumping in mid-stream—the conversation has been going on already and you'll have some catch-up work to do before you can contribute to the discussion. Part of understanding the rhetorical situation of your research topic is learning what has already been said so that you can focus on how you want to enter the conversation.



Listening to conversations in progress

LINDEN/SIPA/Newscom

techno tip

Listen to Conversations in Progress Online

With the prevalence of the Internet, many professional and academic conversations are occurring more quickly than ever, and sometimes a little less formally, than in traditional print venues. A number of professionals have blogs, or online journals, in which they reflect and share their thoughts and processes on various topics. For example, Michael Wesch, a cultural anthropologist at Kansas State University, has published *Digital Ethnography*, both the blog as well as the YouTube channel (a video blog), for a number of years (<http://mediatedcultures.net/> and <http://www.youtube.com/user/mwesch/>).

In his blog and YouTube videos, Wesch reflects on various technologies and their incorporation into our society and various cultural processes. Both his students and his peers read his blog and follow his YouTube channel as a way to keep up on innovative ideas for researching and reading with technologies. One way to start listening to conversations in progress is to read dynamic Internet materials produced in blogs. You can find blogs on a variety of topics at the following sites.

- BlogCatalog: <http://www.blogcatalog.com>
- Technorati: <http://www.technorati.com>

