The Rhetorical Template

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Abstract

This paper seeks to expand the conversation about templates in the context of Web 2.0. While templates in Web 2.0 constrain writing options, this does not mean that they divorce form and content. By grounding templates in scholarship on the rhetorical situation and using genre theory as a lens, I argue that writers can still use the prefabricated designs of Web 2.0 templates in creative and unexpected ways. Drawing on examples from my personal web activity and an assignment in my composition class, I call for developing innovative writing practices for templates in Web 2.0.
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This essay investigates the rhetorical role of a template for writers in Web 2.0. I argue templates, though constraining, do not necessarily cause a form and content split. This argument arises out of the following question: In Web 2.0, is filling in a template *the* rhetorical situation, or is filling in a template *part of* the rhetorical situation? This question picks up and expands the conversation about templates in Web 2.0. For instance, in "The Design of Web 2.0: The Rise of the Template, The Fall of Design," Kirsten Arola (2010) noted that templates replaced the need for students and everyday web-writers to have web-authoring experience. Rather than using specialized computer coding languages, most web-writers now "post" simply by using the template of a prefabricated website. The post is a demonstration of the split between form and content that results from the rise of templates. Web-writers often do not have to account for font or presentation (form) and can instead focus on the words themselves (content). According to Arola:

> We are certainly posting information, but this information has become "content" placed in a "form" beyond the user's control. I worry that unless we, along with our students, engage in analysis and discussions of online design, in the absence of creating designs—our alienation from "form" or "presentation"—we will further render the template invisible. (2010, p. 6)

To avoid the split between form and content, we should make templates visible by accounting for them as a crucial aspect of the composing process in Web 2.0. This means developing strategies for using templates in unanticipated, unexpected, and creative ways. These strategies place templates in the production process of Web 2.0 rhetoric. We, therefore, should consider what role templates play in rhetorical discourse and the situations that give rise to that discourse. To do so, I situate templates in the scholarship of rhetorical situations, drawing upon genre theory in order to take a flexible view of templates. I highlight, through personal examples, ways that writers could use a template.

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Although I acknowledge the limitations of a template, I show that these limitations are not new to the templates of Web 2.0 or even to the medium of the internet and do not eliminate the possibility for using a template creatively. Overall, I argue for a dynamic pedagogy that seeks out ways to control design when using a template.

1. Scholarship on the rhetorical situation

Templates in Web 2.0 are prefabricated designs that allow writers to create a coherent text. They differ from text-editors—e.g., word processing programs—in that they are forms with *predetermined* design and layout. These templates can be viewed in two ways. First, they can act as the rhetorical situation in which writers participate; various elements in the rhetorical situation combine to form a template. In the second case, a template is one of many elements in a rhetorical situation. In the former case, a template is *the* rhetorical situation, whereas in the latter it is *part of* the rhetorical situation. For instance, if I post an update on my Facebook page, does the template create a rhetorical situation for me as a writer? Or am I writing for the rhetorical situation of my personal context? The answer is most likely both. In either case, a template plays a significant role in the production of rhetorical discourse in Web 2.0. The current scholarship of rhetorical situations helps to understand the role of templates in this production. In the following discussion, all references to templates refer to templates in Web 2.0.

It is my estimation that templates act mostly as an additional element in the rhetorical situation. Much of the scholarship on the rhetorical situation views elements as circumscribed in the *confluence* of the rhetorical situation. Templates are also within the confluence of the rhetorical situation. The rhetorical situation generates rhetorical discourse, which "comes into existence as a response to situation, in the same sense that an answer comes into existence in response to a question, or a solution in response to a problem" (Bitzer, 1968, p. 5). Thus, the ability of the writer to produce rhetorical discourse is circumscribed by the rhetorical situation, which implies that the writer is one of many elements. Lloyd Bitzer, in "The Rhetorical Situation," explicitly named three elements when he wrote:

> Prior to the creation and presentation of discourse, there are three constituents of any rhetorical situation: the first is the *exigence*; the second and third are elements of the complex, namely the *audience* to be constrained in decision and action, and the *constraints* which influence the rhetor and can be brought to bear upon the audience. (1968, p. 6)

This view is too limited because it subsumes templates under the general category of constraint. In fact, templates add to our view of the rhetorical situation because they affect purpose and exigency by determining sets of choices for writers and audiences. Thus, they should be considered an element.

However, templates may not be a *discrete* element because the choices they determine are deeply intertwined with the choices made by a writer. When viewed as an element, templates call into question the source of rhetorical discourse: Is it the writer or the template that is the origin of rhetorical discourse? Some rhetorical scholarship can help posit a response to this question. Bitzer (1968) claimed the situation is rhetoric's defining quality. A rhetorical situation is *rhetorical* when these three constituents—exigence, audience, and constraint—are at play in the situation. In this way, an objective rhetorical situation exists that calls for rhetorical analysis. Rhetorical situations exist as inherently rhetorical for Bitzer's theory, which means that an individual's response is determined by the situation. On the other hand, in "The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation," Richard Vatz (1973) advocated for a social construction of the rhetorical situation in that it is managed by individuals' dispositions for a particular situation. He claimed, "The very choice of what facts or events are relevant is a matter of pure arbitration" (p. 157). Vatz believed that "[t]o the audience, events become meaningful only through their linguistic depiction," which implies ".. .meaning is not discovered in situations, but created by rhetors" (1973, p. 157). Rhetoric, for Vatz, is defined by the rhetor; the rhetor decides which situations become rhetorical and ultimately receive attention. According to Vatz, the writer creates the rhetorical situation and is the origin of rhetorical discourse. The Bitzer-Vatz debate, thus, hinged on the origin of rhetorical discourse: situations or people.

I apply these ideas to the following question: Are writers or templates the source of rhetorical discourse in Web 2.0? On one hand, rhetorical discourse could emerge from templates, meaning the situation guides the production of rhetoric. In this case, the choices made by the writer are ignored when subject to analysis. On the other hand, rhetorical discourse could also emerge from the writer's choices when filling in a template. In this latter circumstance, the coercive nature of templates is obscured when subject to analysis.