

Rhetorical Situation Worksheet

Your name:

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Completing this worksheet may take more time than you think. It's worth the time. The information you gather will help you later when writing up assignments. But more importantly, the process of addressing each of the questions below will slowly work to change *how* you read texts. Keep in mind that some answers will not be obvious or even observable in the text, and so you may have to do some critical thinking and, at times, even some online research. Use full sentences. Take as much space as you need.

Context & Exigence: What topic/conversation is this text responding to? What year is the text published? What is the exigence--that is, what motivating occasion/issue/concern prompted the writing? The motivating occasion could be a current or historical event, a crisis, pending legislation, a recently published alternative view, or another ongoing problem.

This text is addressing the very real stigma around immigrants being dismissed and ridiculed about their "broken" and "imperfect" form of English. This is something that people foreign to the United States have been dealing with ever since the concept of immigration in the U.S. has been brought to the forefront. But more specifically, the author's experience as the daughter of a Chinese immigrant who spoke this broken English and had to navigate a prejudiced world in which the way she spoke would limit the opportunities she got. Tan, the author, recalls that she was giving a speech in front of a crowd with her mother in attendance when she became conscious of the code switching that she was doing between talking to her mother and her family and talking to other in an academic, and complex language style. The essay was written in 1990, which is a progressive time but still very susceptible to falling into stereotypes and offensive attitudes to people who speak in an "improper" fashion.

Author: Who is the author of this text? What are the author's credentials and what is their investment in the issue?

Amy Tan is an American author who comes from immigrant Chinese parents. She was raised in the San Francisco Bay Area and bounced around about twelve homes until it was time for her to graduate high school. She graduated college and received her bachelor's degree with a double major in Linguistics and English. She had jobs as a language development specialist and a freelance business writer before pursuing a career as a creative writer by joining a writing group. Between Tan's credentials and her mother being an immigrant, she is very familiar with the concept of language being used as a powerful tool to discriminate and empower. To communicate in a united fashion and to divide each other, and *Mother Tongue* is essentially an essay about her mother faced these exact hardships because of a perceived language barrier.

Text: What can you find out about the publication? What is the genre of the text (e.g., poem, personal essay, essay, news/academic article, blog, textbook chapter, etc.)? How do the conventions of that genre help determine the depth, complexity, and even appearance of the argument? What information about the publication or source (magazine, newspaper, advocacy Web site) helps explain the writer's perspective or the structure and style of the argument?

Mother Tongue by Amy Tan was published in 1990 in a literary magazine called *The Threepenny Review*. The magazine is based in Berkeley, California. Despite Tan being a creative author and novelist, *Mother Tongue* is more of an essay and works as commentary

on the idea of linguistics and her mother's derivative form of English. The essay format allows her to display an argument and critique in a fashion that does not have to worry about being particularly enthralling in a creative sense but compelling in that way that she's speaking to the reader. It allows her to freely talk about her experiences with linguistics, and by extension her mother's experiences with language. The Threepenny Review is held in very high regard, so Tan's Mother Tongue is something that is enhanced by its status in a heavily respected magazine specifically designed for essayists.

Audience: Who is the author's intended audience? What can you infer about the audience (think about beliefs and political association but also age, class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, profession, education, geographic location, religion, etc.)? Look for clues from the text (especially the original publication) to support your inference.

Tan's intended audience could be a number of people. That is the beauty of an essay like she wrote, it doesn't require the reader to relate to what she is saying because how she is saying it and the anecdotes she provides are vivid enough to evoke some sort of emotional or critical thinking in anyone who reads Mother Tongue. However, in terms of relatability, Tan's essay seems to target immigrants and the children of immigrants—specifically those who speak “broken English”. In sharing her experience and leaving much of the scientific and academic jargon out of her essay (two things which she is very qualified to utilize) you can infer that her words were written to meet the common person, the common person who has had trouble making it in a place where their language seems to be more of a burden rather than just an alternative that their peers work around. Just as she became aware of her own speech, she forces the reader to become conscious of their language and how they may or may not bend the way they speak for whatever reason.

Purpose: What is the author trying to accomplish? To persuade, entertain, inform, educate, call to action, shock? How do you know?

Amy Tan's purpose is to simply bring attention to the stereotype and the stigma that she admits she once fell victim to. The stereotype that if a person cannot speak the standard version of a language, in this case English, their ideas are lesser and less profound than someone who is more proficient in articulating themselves in the way society has been molded to recognize. She wants to relay the sudden epiphany she had during her speech to the reader, because as a person who studied linguistics and a writer, the idea of language is very important to her. This essay serves as the critiquing of the status quo, to flip everything we know about language and immigrants and ideas all on its head. It's as if she's telling a close friend “What happened to her the other day”, and we're all listening intently to what she has to say. Through her use of her own stories, she's giving us the incentive to think critically about the language that we use and can potentially inspire an entire generation that gets rid of the harmful stereotype that has been perpetuated on immigrants for hundreds of years.

Argument: What do you believe is the main claim/idea/argument that the author is trying to communicate? What stance does s/he take?

The claim made by Amy Tan in *Mother Tongue* is a bold stand against racist and prejudiced stereotypes concerning the accents and languages of immigrants who are trying to learn US English. She says that the quality of their speech does not determine the quality of their ideas and expression, and just because someone may speak in a “broken” or “limited” language, does not mean they deserve to be ridiculed and taken advantage of. There is this cliché that immigrants who speak broken English are nonsensical and simply cannot be taken seriously because of the way they speak, speech suddenly becoming a defining factor to whether a person deserves to be treated like a *person*. Tan interprets her mother speaking and even though the English may be grammatically imperfect from an academic standpoint, she is still perfectly understood, and her point comes across very concisely. Tan’s point is that language and specifically English is a very malleable form of communication, and no one form is correct over the other.

Evidence: How is the argument supported? Types of support include reasons and logical explanations as well as evidence. Types of evidence include anecdotes, examples, hypothetical situations, (expert) testimony, quotes, citing sources, statistics, charts/graphs, research the author or another source conducts, scientific or other facts, general knowledge, historical references, metaphors/analogies, etc.

Mother Tongue is laced with anecdotes and personal stories on the topic of linguistics. Tan uses this structurally, the anecdotes serving as the evidence and the commentary backing up the anecdotes as a critical analysis and breakdown of the situation she had just described. A clear-cut example of this is when Tan describes a period in which she had to pose as her mother while on the phone with a stockbroker. Tan writes, "Why he don't send me check, already two weeks late. So mad he lie to me, losing me money. And then I said in perfect English, "Yes, I'm getting rather concerned. You had agreed to send the check two weeks ago, but it hasn't arrived." Here, Tan and her mother essentially said the same thing, but it was Tan’s more academic tone that would’ve probably got through easier to the stockbroker. She’s displaying the anecdote structure by simply letting the story play out and saving the commentary for after the anecdote.

Rhetorical Strategies: What aspects of this text stand out for you as a *rhetorical* reader? In other words, what do you observe about what the author strategically *does* (consciously or not) in hopes of appealing to their audience? List here as many observations as you can make about what the text *does*.

- The text is very personal and requires the audience to try and resonate with Tan through the use of anecdotes
- Tan also uses universal truths and well-known facts to enforce her breaking down of the status quo
- In some instances he talks directly to the reader and essentially demands that they think of things differently

Citation: Add the correct MLA or APA bibliographic entry for this text. Use easybib.com if you prefer.

Mother Tongue, by Amy Tan - University of Missouri–St. Louis.

<https://umsl.edu/~alexanderjm/Mother%20Tongue%20by%20Tan.pdf>.

Notes: What do you want to remember about this text?

I want to remember the effort that went into proving a commonly accepted stereotype wrong, and encouraging me to think critically.