

# Ethics as a Form of Critical and Rhetorical Inquiry in the Writing Classroom

*Two classroom strategies help students use ethical questions to enhance their persuasive writing.*

**I**n a recent article, George Hillocks Jr. uses a claim from Alsup et al. that “the ultimate rationale for the teaching of language arts” is “creating a just society whose citizens are critically literate about their world” (279) to make a case for putting critical thinking at the “forefront” of English education (Hillocks 24). Yet, this claim, with its reference to “a just society,” could also be easily used to make a case for putting ethics at the forefront of teaching English. Like Hillocks and Alsup, I hold critical thinking in high regard and place it at the heart of my writing classroom, but over the years, I have come to closely align that critical thinking with ethics; ethics is an important form of critical and rhetorical inquiry that can and should have a prominent place in the writing classroom.

## Defining Ethics as a Mode of Inquiry

To define ethics as a mode of inquiry, it is first important to consider how ethics relates to critical thinking. Put simply, ethical inquiry is one type of inquiry required to think critically. To observe this connection between ethics and critical thinking, it is helpful to use the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ (AAC&U) definition of critical thinking as “a habit of mind characterized by the comprehensive exploration of issues, ideas, artifacts, and events before accepting or formulating an opinion or conclusion.” Further, AAC&U notes that an understanding of context, which it defines as “the historical, ethical, political, cultural, environmental, or circumstantial settings or conditions that influence and complicate the consid-

eration of any issues, ideas, artifacts, and events,” is an important aspect of such critical thinking. In other words, if we engage students in the process of identifying values and relating them to a specific situation, such as a rhetorical situation, we are engaging students in both critical thinking and ethical inquiry.

A connection between critical thinking and ethics is only possible, however, when ethics is defined not as a static list of rules but as a “mode of questioning,” a phrase both James E. Porter (218) and Sheryl I. Fontaine and Susan M. Hunter (4) use. Writing teachers recognize the limits of static, rule-based advice for learners. We know that while our students may long for recipe-like rules for writing, good writing requires a thoughtful flexibility. Similarly, responsible, ethical thinking requires a sophisticated understanding of ethics beyond simply a set of rules. As a mode of inquiry, ethics invites teachers, students, and scholars to consider: Who is responsible? For what is one responsible and to whom? Using ethics as mode of inquiry focuses our attention not only on rules but also on contexts and relationships, which are vitally important aspects of work in English education.

## What Writing Teachers Need to Know about Ethics and Writing

To engage students in ethical inquiry during the writing process, teachers must have some understanding of where to start. Work in the teaching of technical writing and ethics can be of some help here. Historically, ethics has held a more prominent place in technical writing than other kinds of writ-

ing because technical writing almost always leads to action in the world. As such, issues of responsibility and safety are more likely to be raised by this kind of writing.<sup>1</sup> Richard Johnson-Sheehan in *Technical Communication Today* acknowledges the significance of ethics in technical writing when he notes that writers should consider where ethical values come from by directing their inquiry to these three, overlapping areas:

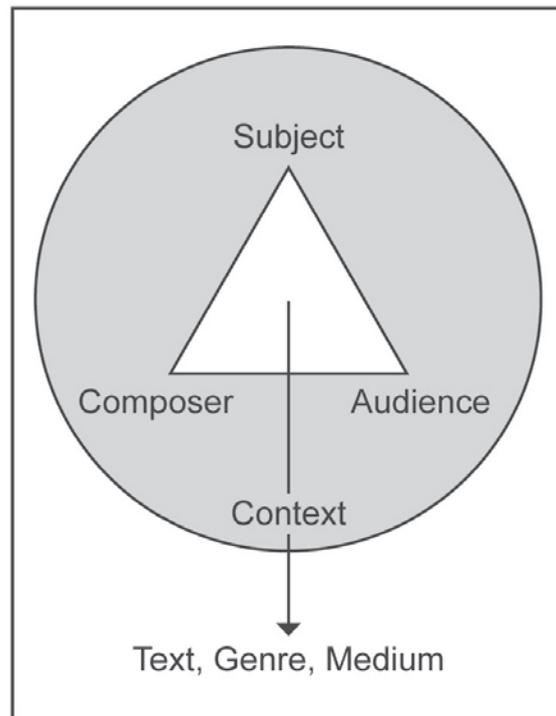
1. “personal ethics,” which are defined as “values derived from family, culture and faith” (Johnson-Sheehan 96);
2. “social ethics,” which are defined as “values derived from constitutional, legal, utilitarian, and caring sources” (96); and
3. “conservation ethics,” which are defined as “values that protect and preserve the ecosystem in which we live” (96).

Of these three areas of inquiry, Johnson-Sheehan’s **social ethics** category is the most complicated and is divided into four smaller categories: **rights, justice, utility, and care**. **Rights** in the United States refer to “civil and constitutional” rights that citizens have in common (98), while **justice** refers to “laws, corporate policies,” and institutional policies that citizens and/or members of an organization have in common (98). **Utility** refers to the ethical principle of doing what is the “greatest good” (98) for the “greatest number of people” (97), while **care** refers to concern for others with whom we relate such as family and friends (97).

Johnson-Sheehan suggests that when faced with an ethical dilemma, which he defines as a situation in which none of the choices are good (92), his readers can decide what to do by interrogating each choice with his four categories of ethical inquiry (96). Further, these questions can be used in a team setting to rationally guide discussions regarding an ethical dilemma.

So far this article has made a case for using Johnson-Sheehan’s ethical categories to guide ethical inquiry. To consider how these lines of inquiry relate to writing requires complicating Lloyd Bitzer’s rhetorical situation, which reminds us that any communication situation involves an audience, subject, composer, and context. A recent poster in *English Journal* (republished from *College Composition and Communication*) depicts the rhetorical situation by placing the communication triangle of the com-

FIGURE 1. Lloyd Bitzer’s Rhetorical Situation.



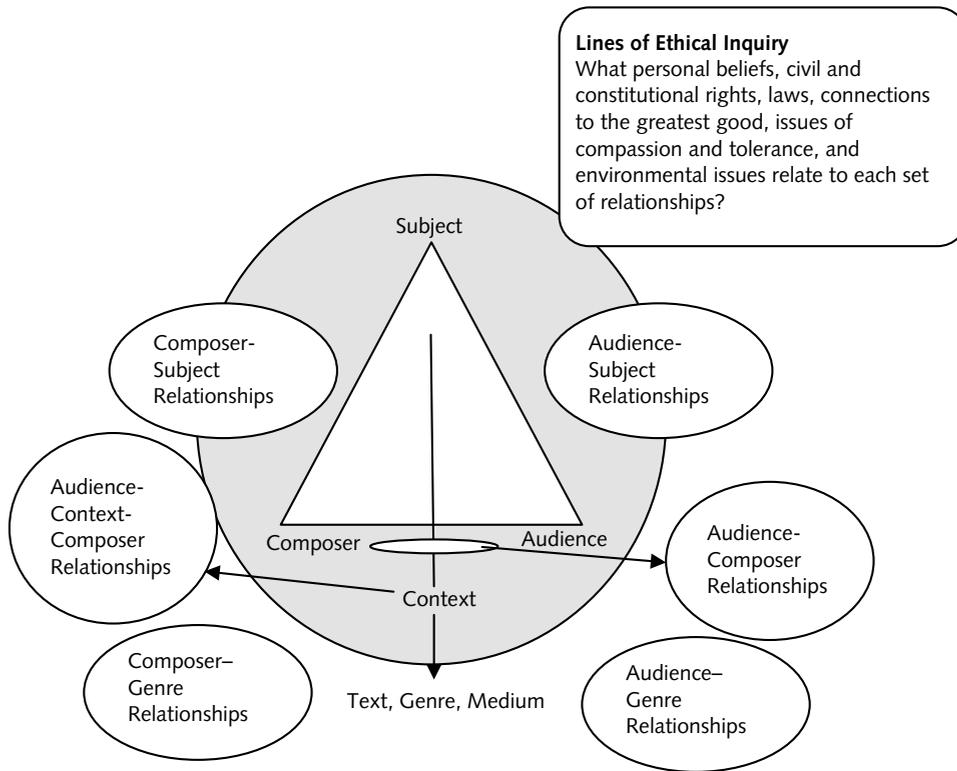
Reprinted from “Rhetorical Situation: A Poster,” *College Composition and Communication* 61.3. (2010): 611.  
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poser, subject, context, and audience within a circle of language (see fig. 1).

One can usefully complicate this diagram by adding the relationships between and among the individual elements of the triangle (see fig. 2). For instance, one can consider what relationship the audience and composer share or what relationship the audience shares with the subject of the composition. Once we begin considering the relationships between and among terms in the rhetorical situation, we open up the act of communication to ethical inquiry because relationships entail responsibility. The callout box in Figure 2, “Lines of Ethical Inquiry,” is an attempt to encapsulate the possible ethical questions one can ask about the relationships present in any act of communication.

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**FIGURE 2.** Visual Representation Revising Lloyd Bitzer's Rhetorical Situation for Ethical Inquiry



Adapted from "Rhetorical Situation: A Poster." *College Composition and Communication* 61.3 (2010): 611. Reprinted by permission in *English Journal* 99.6 (2010): 17.

When should writers pursue ethical inquiry as a part of the analysis they engage in when they consider their rhetorical situation? For most writers, it probably does not make sense to engage in thorough ethical inquiry every time they compose. However, there are times when engaging in ethical inquiry can be a valuable aspect of invention for writers. For instance, when composing a piece of persuasion urging action on a sensitive issue that has the potential to harm others, it is crucial for writers to consider the audience's ethical relationship to the topic. Doing so may even change the writer's view on the issue and lead to a more persuasive piece. Or, when selecting a topic for a personal essay, it might be important for writers to consider the ethical relationships both they and their audiences have with the subject.

In sum, it is most appropriate to conduct ethical inquiry as a part of rhetorical analysis when someone in the writer's rhetorical situation, includ-

ing the writer, has the potential to be negatively affected by the act of communication.

### Two Strategies for the Classroom

To explain more fully how ethics may function as critical, rhetorical inquiry, I will describe two strategies that I use: an ethical inventory and an ethical question star. I use these strategies as prewriting after students have established their topic and audience and have begun exploring their rhetorical situation during a persuasive composition unit where students are required to find a specific, local problem about which they have some knowledge and write a composition in a genre of their choice (typically a letter or an essay) in which they persuade an audience to take some action to solve the problem.

It is important that the problem be local and specific, so the student writer can actually suggest some useful action in the situation. For instance,

one student wrote a letter to his student council about trash generated during the high school's homecoming football game. He noticed that on the Monday after the game the football field was strewn with trash. After some investigation, he discovered that the full, topless garbage cans had been blown over during the weekend's wind storm. The school's maintenance team spent Monday morning picking up trash. In his letter to the student council, the writer recommended that as their next service project the council generate funds to buy ten trash cans with lids for use at high-traffic events such as the homecoming celebration.

### The Ethical Inventory Heuristic

I have used the ethical inventory, essentially a list of questions (see fig. 3), in two ways. In classes with students who like to talk and discuss well, I write each category of questions, one at a time, on a flip chart. In round-robin fashion, the students share responses to the category's questions. This process is repeated for each of the six categories. In other classes, students form teams of four and write answers to the six categories on flip-chart paper. The teams then report out to the class a summary of their top three values. Once the process, whether completed as a whole class or in teams, is done, the flip paper is hung on the classroom walls for the next steps in the process. Sometimes, working through the inventory questions can take a full 50-minute class period, and sometimes it can be completed well in 30 minutes, so I always come prepared with the next step, which is to use the values generated to explore a rhetorical situation with the ethical question star.

### The Ethical Question Star

Once students have developed a set of values, they are ready to use the ethical question star to explore a rhetorical situation. In my classes, this star is used twice (see figs. 4 and 5). The class uses it to explore the same rhetorical situation together, and then class members use it again to explore their individual rhetorical situations. To get ready to use the star, I first hang up the flip-chart papers with ethical values on the walls in the classroom. The class and I refer to these papers if we get stuck answering a question on the star. The whole class practices using the star on the same rhetorical situation.

I find that the rhetorical situation of the high school student who wrote to the student council about trash on the football field works well for practicing the star, as the class can relate to the rhetorical situation. I ask the students to imagine that they have to use the field for football, band, or track practice. I then describe to them what happened to the field and why. I also invite them to imagine that they are going to write a letter to their student council to urge them to do something about the problem. Using that situation, we then work through every question on the star. Before starting the whole-class discussion, I make sure everyone has a copy of the star. I allow everyone in the class to get up and view the flip-chart papers full of values and write down relevant values on their question star handout. I allow about five to ten minutes for this step. I then lead a whole-class discussion in which we complete the question star together. Figure 4 illustrates what the question star looks like before it is completed. Figure 5 is an example of a question star that a first-year writing class com-

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**FIGURE 3.** Ethical Inventory Questions as They Connect to Johnson-Sheehan's Ethical Categories

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1. **Discovering values related to personal ethics:** What makes for a good person? Neighbor? Friend? Parent? Sibling?
2. **Discovering values related to social ethics of care:** How do the people in the first question show that they care for one another?
3. **Discovering values related to social utilitarian ethics:** What are some actions people take to make the world a better place? What makes these actions good?
4. **Discovering values related to social policies/rules:** What makes for a good organization? A school? A church? A corporation? A government?
5. **Discovering values related to social rights/laws and rules:** What rights, rules, and laws are important to you as a citizen of the United States? As a member of this school? As a member of your church? As a member of your town?
6. **Discovering values related to conservation:** What do people do to care for the earth, its air and water, and its plants and animals? What makes these actions good?

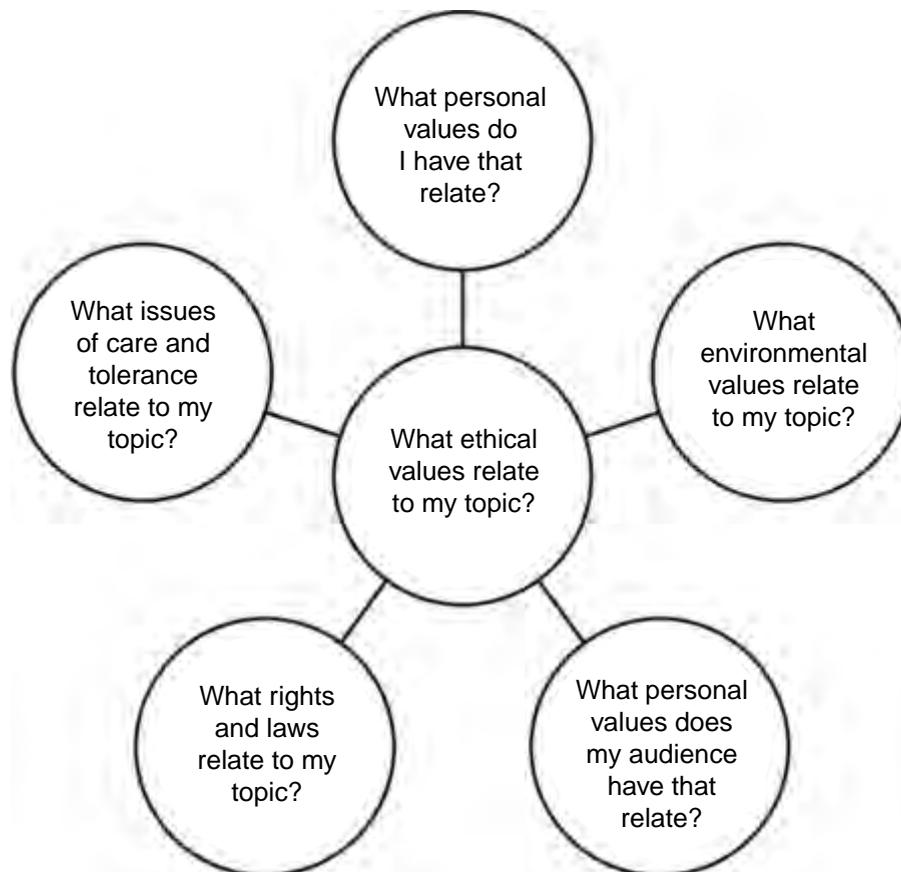
pleted together in response to the trash-on-the-football-field topic.

Once the class has practiced with the ethical question star and observed how it relates to the ethical inventory that they took, I ask class members to complete a question star for their own rhetorical situations. I typically have students work in pairs, helping each other with their stars. Even with practice, students sometimes get stuck completing the star, so I go around and help the teams. I often invite them to get up and look again at the values hanging on the classroom walls as a way of generating ideas. If students are still stuck after reviewing the values on the classroom walls, I ask guiding questions to help them complete their question stars.

Now that the question stars are complete, the next class periods use strategies that can work for almost any paper. The students have completed some invention (just as they do for other papers). They now need to consider how they can use the work

they have generated to begin drafting. To help them see the connection between invention and drafting, we revisit the answers to the ethical question star that we generated about the same topic—in this case, the topic of the trash on the football field. I ask the class, what can the writer do with the completed question star? How would you use it? Some say that they will use the star to do research. Others say the star is an outline for the paper. Yet others say the star has details for paragraphs. I point out that all of their answers are right. I then invite them to pick an idea from the star and use it as a topic sentence for a paragraph that they write with one other student. They read these team-produced paragraphs, and we discuss what we like best from the paragraphs. I list those strengths on the board. I then give all the writers ten minutes of individual writing time to turn something else from the stars into a paragraph for their own papers. Showing writers how they can use the ideas they invent reinforces the ways pre-

FIGURE 4. Ethical Question Star for Exploring a Rhetorical Situation



writing, and in this case ethical inquiry, can be a fruitful part of their writing processes.

### The Importance of Ethical Inquiry in the Writing Classroom

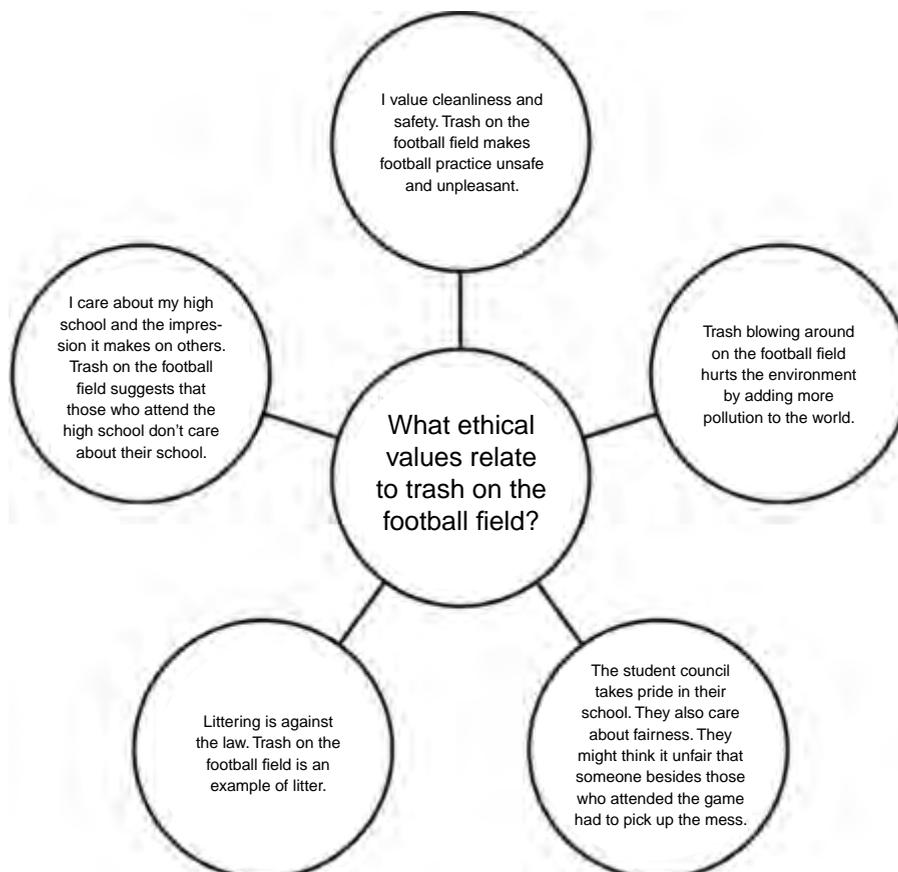
Ethical inquiry is an important form of critical thinking and as such it is an important component of students' cognitive development. The potential ethical inquiry has for writing students can be best understood if we consider Erika Lindemann's claim that "intellectual growth occurs when people are required to exercise high-level thinking . . . relative to their own stage of development" (107). Both the ethical inventory and ethical question star heuristics encourage learners to see themselves as "sources of knowledge," which is the key quality that Marcia B. Baxter Magolda says "transitional knowers" possess (qtd. in Lindemann 103). As such ethical inquiry can begin to move students from Magolda's "abso-

lute knowing" stage, where knowledge is construed as "certain" and obtained from an instructor (Lindemann 103), to a "transitional knowing" state where learners begin to understand their role as a "source of knowledge" (Lindemann 103). The movement from absolute knowing to transitional knowing is a developmental one that occurs as early as students' junior year in high school and as late as their first year of college. As such junior and senior high school writing teachers and first-year college writing teachers can play a fundamental role in supporting and challenging their students as they undertake this important developmental growth.

In addition, ethical inquiry has the potential to enrich writers' processes of invention. For developmental writers who have special difficulty

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FIGURE 5. Example of a Completed Ethical Question Star



in creating sufficient, audience-based content for their work, having another angle from which to consider their rhetorical situation is empowering and useful. They often find that they really do have something to communicate and begin to view writing as an act of communication instead of an empty classroom exercise.

Finally, ethical inquiry helps students understand that writing is a form of action and as such can have consequences for themselves and others in the world. I find that students typically get excited about the fact that their work can have real power, and it is important to help them understand that such power has consequences for others. Ultimately, incorporating ethics as critical, rhetorical inquiry can help writers better understand how to use communication to create responsible and caring relationships with others. 

#### Editor's Note

1. For an example of ethics as applied to professional and technical writing, see "Good Writing: The Problem of Ethics" in this issue's "Professional Writing" column, written by Leah A. Zuidema and Jonathan Bush.

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#### READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

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Read more about ethics and writing in the ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan, "Developing Persuasive Arguments through Ethical Inquiry: Two Prewriting Strategies," also written by Teresa Henning. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/developing-persuasive-arguments-through-30744.html>