**Introducing Kairos**

**MODULE TEXTS**

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Choosing the Right Words at the Right Time
By Jennifer Fletcher
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Sometimes you feel an urgency to write at the moment when it is most needed.

Reyna Grande

1 An awkward silence falls across the crowd. The audience members exchange embarrassed looks as the speaker at the podium shifts uncomfortably. One person whispers, “Did he really just say that?” The speaker clears his throat before mumbling into the microphone, “Too soon?”

2 Without even knowing the content of what was said, you can probably guess what’s happened: Somebody said the wrong words at the wrong time.

3 Timing is everything. The ancient Greeks understood that effective communication depends upon a skilful response to the immediate social situation. This includes the audience’s expectations and needs, the issues that are timely and important in that moment, and the limited chance the speaker has to achieve persuasion. The Greeks even had a special word for this idea: kairos.

4 Kairos was the name given to a circumstantial kind of time, a window of opportunity during which something could happen (Crowley and Hawhee 45). Unlike chronos, or calendar time, kairos is about situational time, including what’s expected in terms of propriety or fitness for the occasion. Whereas chronos is quantitative (e.g., How long does it take to drive from L.A. to Fresno?), kairos is qualitative (e.g., When is the best time to plant a new crop?). Kairos is that sense of time that marks the different seasons of our lives—our time for joy and our time for grief, for new beginnings, as well as endings. Because effective rhetoric depends on context, learning about kairos helps writers be more responsive to changing contexts.

5 For a good sense of kairos as the opportune moment for action, look at rapper Eminem’s song “Lose Yourself” from the 2002 movie 8 Mile:

Look, if you had one shot, or one opportunity
To seize everything you ever wanted, one moment
Would you capture it or just let it slip?

6 As these lyrics show, a kairotic moment can be a turning point, a finest hour, or a last chance. It can be any special circumstance calling for a time-sensitive and appropriate response.

7 Consider the following scenario. You’ve just been contacted by your local newspaper for an interview about your best friend, the basketball star. The reporter calls you on your phone. What’s the first thing you do? Thank the reporter and tell her you’ll call her right back. Why? You need a few moments to prepare your comments before you talk to the press (don’t tell her that part—just say you’ll be available to talk in five minutes). If you do this, you’re following the advice of top public relations firms.
8 Strategic communications experts give their clients two rules to follow when talking to the media:

1. Respond immediately to requests from the press.
2. Don’t respond until you’re ready.

10 These seemingly contradictory rules get at two different aspects of kairos: spontaneity and decorum. On the one hand, being kairotically aware can mean having lightning-quick response times. You have to act fast if you’re going to take advantage of an available opportunity. On the other hand, kairos demands a response appropriate to the situation, especially in terms of etiquette and social norms. In some situations, we might need to do a little research to get the decorum part of kairos right…but we’ll have to do it quickly to get the timing right. Kairotic knowledge helps us find that magic combination of the right words at the right time.

Kairos as Inquiry Strategy: Understanding the Rhetorical Situation

11 In “Rhetorical Situations and Their Constituents,” Keith Grant-Davie uses the question “Why is the discourse needed?” to encourage writers to think about the connection between need and opportunity. Asking about need, Grant-Davie explains, raises the issues of “what has prompted the discourse, and why now is the right time for it to be delivered” (268). Some opportunities for persuasion require especially fast response times. Think about the importance of timing and purpose in each of the rhetorical situations that follow:

- College applications
- Job applications
- Letters to the editors
- Trending hashtags (e.g., #BLM)
- Scholarship and grant applications
- Fighting a traffic or parking ticket
- Writing a thank-you email after a job interview

12 Attention to kairos develops a strike-while-the-iron is hot sensibility. It can also help writers and speakers pay more careful attention to audience needs and social expectations, including language conventions. Kairotic awareness prompts us to ask essential questions about the rhetorical situation: What is the most important thing in this context? What’s the most important thing that needs to be said right now?

13 When editors review manuscripts for publication, for instance, they might ask questions about the originality, relevance, and timeliness of the work. This is another way of considering the kairos of a particular rhetorical situation.

14 Rhetoricians Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawee provide several questions that can help students explore the kairos of a rhetorical situation. Notice how these questions guide writers toward a more nuanced and sophisticated response.
1. Have recent events made the issue urgent right now, or do I need to show its urgency or make it relevant to the present?

2. What arguments seem to be supported by what groups at this time? That is, which communities are making which arguments? How are their interests served by these arguments?

3. Where are these arguments being made? What media and venues are people using to make these arguments? Does one group or another seem to be in a better position—a better place—from which to argue? In other words, what are the power dynamics at work in an issue?

4. What lines of argument would be appropriate or inappropriate considering the current needs and values of the audience?

5. What other issues are related to the discussion of this issue right now, in this place and in this community? Why? (adapted from Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students)

15 Questions like these deepen our thinking about a topic. Considering how time, place, and social dynamics impact arguments can help writers see ways their own positions might need to be qualified or even changed.

**Kairos as Persuasive Strategy**

16 When a writer says “this seems like the right time” to make a particular argument or tell a particular story, that writer is invoking the power of kairos.

17 A perception of urgency can be critical to persuasion. In a 2018 “Weekend Update” skit on Saturday Night Live, for instance, a news anchor reported that “New York isn’t doing anything about removing controversial statues because we don't care about that this week.” The joke makes an important point: we often have to act fast if we hope to have an impact.

18 The classical Greek concept of kairos is related to a concept from contemporary rhetorical theory: exigence. Rhetorician M. Jimmie Killingsworth describes an exigence as “what prompts the author to write in the first place, a sense of urgency, a problem that requires attention” (2005). Combine an urgent problem with a limited window of opportunity for addressing it and we have the kind of high-stakes rhetorical situation that calls for our best response.

19 Using timely examples in your own writing shows you’re paying attention to the current social moment. Experiment with appealing to your audience’s sense of proper timing as a persuasive move.

**Kairos as Reading Strategy**

20 Asking questions about kairos also promotes deeper reading. The following questions can help you extend your thinking about the time, place, and particularities of arguments:

- What’s special about this moment? How can you tell?
- Do you think the speaker or writing has been waiting for this opportunity? If so, how long?
• What would surprise this audience at this time? Why do you think this?
• What evidence do you see, if any, that the writer knew the time was right to
  make this argument?
• Are there any special rules or manners the writer or speaker is expected to
  follow? How do you know?
• What happens if the speaker or writer isn’t successful in their attempt to
  persuade the audience? Will they get another chance? How high are the
  stakes?

21 Exploring these kinds of questions helps us understand the turn a text takes in an
ongoing conversation.

Recognizing the Language of Kairos

22 Words and phrases like the following are cues that kairos is an important part of the
arguments people are making about an issue:
• At this point...
• It’s now too important...
• We need to move as quickly as we can...
• This increases the urgency...
• Now is the time...
• Now is not the time...
• A new degree of urgency...
• The issue has changed...
• This is the moment
• This is not the moment
• New research compels us...
• These events drive us...
• It’s not the right time...

23 You can use similar words in your own writing and speaking to help your audience
understand why an issue is timely and relevant.

What “Outdated” Texts Contribute to the Conversation

24 Changing times change how we react to texts. A new social moment requires us to
read a familiar text with fresh eyes. After the 2016 presidential election, for instance,
you may have heard how classic novels such as 1984, Brave New World, and The
Handmaid’s Tale—or plays such as The Crucible or King Lear—became
suddenly popular. Some of these were even best sellers on Amazon.com. Readers
were finding new relevance in these enduring works. Increased interest in politics,
gender, language, and power was driving a renewed interest in literary texts that
dealt with these issues.

25 As you read a text, keep the following questions in mind:
• Has the context significantly changed since this text was first published?
• Who was the original target audience (i.e., the “intended audience”)?
• Who is the audience now?
• Do today’s readers see the issue differently from the way the original audience
  probably viewed the issue?
• Would you personally have viewed this issue differently six months ago? Two years ago?

• If “yes,” what changed in your life or your thinking that has altered how you understand this issue?

26 Sometimes the social moment represented by a text helps us understand other voices in the conversation better. A text may help us understand where a way of thinking comes from or how it has changed over time.

27 For instance, in “Honor Code” (2012), New York Times columnist David Brooks says that schools need “curriculums that teach how to win and how to lose.” To what extent, if any, did the idea of winning and losing—and of winners and losers, in particular—take on new meaning after the presidential campaign of Donald Trump in 2016? Could a new understanding of winning and losing change how a reader reacts to Brooks’ article?

28 Exploring these kinds of questions can help us engage the history and context of a particular issue instead of just dismissing an older publication as “outdated.” By making connections among different social moments and turns in an ongoing conversation, we trace the trajectory of an academic discussion—one that indeed may have being going on for decades or even centuries.

**Kairos as Tipping Point**

29 Some kairotic moments signal important tipping points in a conversation. For instance, the Children’s Crusade in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963—in which thousands of young people participated in peaceful protests against racial discrimination—marked a turning point in the Civil Rights Movement. The event led to lasting change, including the desegregation of businesses.

30 To further develop your understanding of kairos, consider the following “Before and After Moments.” How has the way we think and communicate been changed by these events?

• 9/11

• The first iPhone

• Mass shootings at Columbine High School and Sandy Hook Elementary School

• Mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglass High School

• Donald Trump’s election

• The Black Lives Matter Movement (#BLM)

• The #MeToo Movement

31 Questions to consider: What changed in mass media after these events? What could be said before and after? How has the context changed? How have people’s viewpoints changed? How has our language changed? How has our sense of the world changed?

32 Awareness of kairos can help writers respond effectively to the most pressing issues of our time.
Kairos Neglected

33 When communication goes wrong, it’s often through a failure to attend to kairos. A jarring tone or facial expression, using understatement when it’s not appropriate (e.g., saying “that’s not fun” to someone who just lost a family member), a delayed response—all show a lack of sensitivity to the immediate social moment. If everyone is posting about a recent tragedy on social media, the one person who decides to share their latest vacation photos instead may seem out-of-touch and insensitive.

34 Think of some other examples of kairos gone wrong—awkward moments created by the wrong words at the wrong moment (e.g., an inappropriate joke at a funeral). Sitcoms like The Office and Parks and Recreation are full of these moments. Take the example of Raiders owner Mark Davis trying to get season ticket holders to follow the team to Las Vegas one day after the NFL announced the Raiders were leaving Oakland. Long-time fans were not happy. One man who was interviewed for a story in The San Francisco Chronicle described the team’s actions as “pouring salt into the wounds after they stabbed you in the back” (April 2, 2017). This reaction says a lot about timing, propriety, and the situatedness of arguments.

Making the Most of Your Opportunities As You Write

35 In addition to the opportunities presented by the rhetorical situation—the best genre and medium to choose, the most important audience to reach, and the most urgent issue to address—writers also must negotiate many mini-opportunities for persuasion while composing their texts.

36 The idea of kairos has important implications for how we handle time as writers. Part of our task in any writing situation is figuring out what to tell when. Should we start with a story or some dramatic statistics? Do we need to establish that a problem exists before we propose how to solve it? What do we need to do to make sure our reader stays with us? We have to imagine our reader moving with us through time, so that we can prepare our reader for what’s coming next. We also need to know when to “stop” time—that is, when we need to create a special, stand-alone moment that our reader will remember. Often, this moment takes the form of a story or an especially powerful example. Sometimes this moment is created by a surprise shift. In writing, we have many opportunities for choosing the right words at the right time. An understanding of kairos helps us make the most of these opportunities.
Works Cited


1 NOT long ago, friends of mine confessed over dinner that they had put spyware on their 15-year-old son’s computer so they could monitor all he did online. At first I was repelled at this invasion of privacy. Now, after doing a fair amount of research, I get it.

2 Make no mistake: If you put spyware on your computer, you have the ability to log every keystroke your child makes and thus a good portion of his or her private world. That’s what spyware is—at least the parental monitoring kind. You don’t have to be an expert to put it on your computer. You just download the software from a vendor and you will receive reports—weekly, daily, whatever—showing you everything your child is doing on the machine.

3 Scary. But a good idea. Most parents won’t even consider it.

4 Maybe it’s the word: spyware. It brings up associations of Dick Cheney sitting in a dark room, rubbing his hands together and reading your most private thoughts. But this isn’t the government we are talking about—this is your family. It’s a mistake to confuse the two. Loving parents are doing the surveillance here, not faceless bureaucrats. And most parents already monitor their children, watching over their home environment, their school.

5 Today’s overprotective parents fight their kids’ battles on the playground, berate coaches about playing time and fill out college applications—yet when it comes to chatting with pedophiles or watching beheadings or gambling away their entire life savings, then...then their children deserve independence?

6 Some will say that you should simply trust your child, that if he is old enough to go on the Internet he is old enough to know the dangers. Trust is one thing, but surrendering parental responsibility to a machine that allows the entire world access to your home borders on negligence.

7 Some will say that it’s better just to use parental blocks that deny access to risky sites. I have found that they don’t work. Children know how to get around them. But more than that—and this is where it gets tough—I want to know what’s being said in e-mail and instant messages and in chat rooms.

8 There are two reasons for this. First, we’ve all read about the young boy unknowingly conversing with a pedophile or the girl who was cyberbullied to the point where she committed suicide. Would a watchful eye have helped? We rely in the real world on teachers and parents to guard against bullies—do we just dismiss bullying on the Internet and all it entails because we are entering difficult ethical ground?

9 Second, everything your child types can already be seen by the world—teachers, potential employers, friends, neighbors, future dates. Shouldn’t he learn now that the Internet is not a haven of privacy?
One of the most popular arguments against spyware is the claim that you are reading your teenager’s every thought, that in today’s world, a computer is the little key-locked diary of the past. But posting thoughts on the Internet isn’t the same thing as hiding them under your mattress. Maybe you should buy your children one of those little key-locked diaries so that they too can understand the difference.

Am I suggesting eavesdropping on every conversation? No. With new technology comes new responsibility. That works both ways. There is a fine line between being responsibly protective and irresponsibly nosy. You shouldn’t monitor to find out if your daughter’s friend has a crush on Kevin next door or that Mrs. Peterson gives too much homework or what schoolmate snubbed your son. You are there to start conversations and to be a safety net. To borrow from the national intelligence lexicon—and yes, that’s uncomfortable—you’re listening for dangerous chatter.

Will your teenagers find other ways of communicating to their friends when they realize you may be watching? Yes. But text messages and cellphones don’t offer the anonymity and danger of the Internet. They are usually one-on-one with someone you know. It is far easier for a predator to troll chat rooms and MySpace and Facebook.

There will be tough calls. If your 16-year-old son, for example, is visiting hardcore pornography sites, what do you do? When I was 16, we looked at Playboy centerfolds and read Penthouse Forum. You may argue that’s not the same thing, that Internet pornography makes that stuff seem about as harmful as “SpongeBob.”

And you’re probably right. But in my day, that’s all you could get. If something more graphic had been out there, we probably would have gone for it. Interest in those, um, topics is natural. So start a dialogue based on that knowledge. You should have that talk anyway, but now you can have it with some kind of context.

Parenting has never been for the faint of heart. One friend of mine, using spyware to monitor his college-bound, straight-A daughter, found out that not only was she using drugs but she was sleeping with her dealer. He wisely took a deep breath before confronting her. Then he decided to come clean, to let her know how he had found out, to speak with her about the dangers inherent in her behavior. He’d had these conversations before, of course, but this time he had context. She listened. There was no anger. Things seem better now.

Our knee-jerk reaction as freedom-loving Americans is to be suspicious of anything that hints at invasion of privacy. That’s a good and noble thing. But it’s not an absolute, particularly in the face of the new and evolving challenges presented by the Internet. And particularly when it comes to our children.

Do you tell your children that the spyware is on the computer? I side with yes, but it might be enough to show them this article, have a discussion about your concerns and let them know the possibility is there.