CLOSETED NARRATIVE: RHETORICAL INFLUENCES IN COMING OUT STORIES A SERIES OF ARTICLES

by

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CLOSETED NARRATIVE: RHETORICAL INFLUENCES IN COMING OUT STORIES

A SERIES OF ARTICLES

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has suggested that coming out is constituted by either the message, speaker, or audience, and with a recent focus on "coming out for yourself" it appears that queer people are the single force responsible in the coming out situation, but this is not possible. In any rhetorical situation, there must be consideration given to all three points of the rhetorical triangle- first the message, then speaker, *and* audience. The single-axis models we have been using to understand coming out are insufficient. Therefore, I suggest a new, three-dimensional model that better emphasizes the interaction between message, speaker, and audience. In this model, the way one delivers their coming out message is centered on the queer speaker's agency but constituted by the audience as well. These articles aim to connect with straight, cis audiences and reach across the aisle, bridging the rhetorical triangle and emphasizing the equilateral impact of both queer speaker and straight audience. Composed of various topics and genres exploring the impact of audiences on coming out stories, these articles may be read separately but are tied together by overarching themes. Each piece focuses on something different, from Ellen DeGeneres to tips on allyship. Similarly, these topics are explored through a multitude of genres, including commentary, rhetorical analysis, and personal narrative, each working to demonstrate the power of the audience role in coming out situations.

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Prologue

Previous research has suggested that coming out is constituted by either the message, speaker, or audience, and with a recent focus on "coming out for yourself" it appears that queer people are the single force responsible in the coming out situation, but this is not possible. In any rhetorical situation, there must be consideration given to all three points of the rhetorical triangle- first the message, then speaker, *and* audience.

This intertwining of each point in the rhetorical triangle does not appear in previous or current theoretical/academic understandings of coming out. Despite changes in our usage of the term, audience has historically held weight in moments of "coming out." Darnell Moore's "Coming Out or Inviting In?: Part I"[1] explains the early, pre-war, definition of "coming out" in relation to one's first sexual encounter with a member of the same sex (specifically for men in relation to another man), as opposed to its current usage as a marker of revealing one's (homo)sexuality to another, likely straight, person. This may be due to shifts in queer rhetoric brought in by the era of the Stonewall riots, or this change in definition, which moves focus from an act to an identity, may be related to what Eve Sedgwick describes in *Epistemology of the Closet*[2] as a circa-nineteenth century "shift in European thought from viewing same-sex sexuality as a matter of prohibited and isolated genital *acts*… to viewing it as a function of stable definitions of *identity*" (83). Either way, both straight/cis and queer people still rely on coming out today. According to Sedgwick, coming out remains important to audiences even after the Stonewall era because of both "the freshness of every drama of (especially involuntary) gay

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[1] Moore, Darnell L. "Coming Out or Inviting In? Part 1." *The Feminist Wire*, 12 July 2012. *Thefeministwire.com*, https://thefeministwire.com/2012/07/coming-out-or-inviting-in-reframing-disclosure-paradigms-part-i/.

[2] Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet.* E-book, Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2008, https://hdl-handle-net.ezproxy.tcu.edu/2027/heb30582.0001.001.

uncovering" (67) and homosexual paranoia (83-84); for queer people, it has become an integral part of "gay culture" even if no longer a necessary political act (68). This makes it clear that, though audience was historically the primary factor in coming out, our current understanding suggests that a straight/cis audience should no longer take precedence over the "truth" or a queer speaker wanting to embrace or share this aspect of themself.

This concept of either audience or speaker dominance does not fit the rhetorical triangle (message, speaker, and audience). The single-axis models we have been using to understand coming out are insufficient. The "revelation of truth" model fails to recognize the complex relationship between speaker and audience by focusing solely on the speaker's message, or undeniable "truth," while the "political imperative" model fails to recognize this relationship by only looking at the audience, or social aspect, of coming out. Likewise, the current emphasis on a "queer power" model does not consider the necessary influence of an audience. Therefore, I suggest a new, three-dimensional model that better emphasizes the interaction between message, speaker, and audience. In this model, the way one delivers their coming out message is centered on the queer speaker's agency but determined by the audience as well.

While I find the efforts of queer resistance, *disidentification*[3], and rhetorical efforts to reclaim agency in the coming out message extremely impactful and worthy of much attention, much of current theory and research focuses on this. I cannot help but notice a missing piece of the triangle– audience. Therefore, these articles aim to connect with those who might not think as much about coming out because they don't have to do it, our straight, cis audiences. Specifically, I hope to highlight what these audiences might not have considered before, simply because their experiences don't ask them to. Through the coming pieces, I hope to reach across the aisle,

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[3] Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

bridging the rhetorical triangle and emphasizing the equilateral impact of both queer speaker and straight audience.

As academic work, my "thesis" is built on research that informed the direction of my writing. However, this project could not reach the seat next to me, much less across the aisle, if it remained in an academic database where few who searched key phrases would find it. Moreover, I don't expect that most of us not searching for those key terms in an academic database want to read a 40+ page piece filled with complex theories and annotations. Therefore, I have written this for you: *Closeted Narrative: Rhetorical Influences in Coming Out Stories, A Series of Articles*.

Composed of various topics and genres exploring the impact of audiences on coming out stories, these articles may be read at your own pace, quite separate from each other. Of course, my hope is that you can read them all and see how themes connect and overlap throughout the series. Each piece focuses on something different, from Ellen DeGeneres to tips on allyship. Similarly, these topics are explored through a multitude of genres, including commentary, rhetorical analysis, and personal narrative. Originating in a closer look at the rhetorical situation of coming out, I include a segment of rhetorical analysis, and though this is only done once, I think it provides an example of work you can do to understand the implications of words and actions throughout the coming out process. Intentionally, I focus this project on a rhetorical audience without emphasizing rhetorical analysis as the main genre. In structuring this project primarily through commentary, I seek to make it digestible and enjoyable for anyone who reads it, hopefully keeping you all here through the final piece. Further, these articles are a *conversation*, one that doesn't need lofty language and citations. My goal is that we will continue our discussion after you read, whether you actually speak to me or you reach out to someone else in your life. Because of this, I also want to be open and vulnerable with you. Throughout these

pieces, I include personal experiences and emotions because 1) they inspired this project, but 2) I know many others have similar stories, many others have harder ones, and some of those people are in your life and loved by you.

A note on the word queer: While the term “queer” as a descriptor of LGBTQ+ individuals originated as a derogatory term used to point to some as oddities or persons of lesser value, we have taken it back. In reclaiming “queer,” we have built an inclusive space for people of various genders, gender expressions, and sexualities. In some circles, especially queer theory, the term is even more expansive and implies resistance to any dominant idea, view, or way. For the purposes of this project, queer will simply mean anyone who is not heterosexual/cisgender.

I’m so excited for our conversation, so glad you are here with me, and so thankful for your support.

– Amanda

Introduction

This project is not my coming out. At least not intentionally. Nevertheless, if you're reading this and don't already know, I suppose this will serve as my "coming out." Almost every person who knows that I'm gay learned so within the past year, and I revealed this part of my life to different people in different ways. I told some directly, hinted to others casually, and many were simply introduced to (or told about) my girlfriend. Though not every queer person has this luxury (Should we call it that?), I approached each "coming out" situation differently depending on the person I told. For me, informing someone of my sexuality, whether to and how to, is never something I do without forethought, even if it's a relatively quick decision. In making this decision, I generally consider this person's relationship to me, their views on queerness, and how they might react. Because of this, it feels like those around me influence this incredibly personal part of myself.

In terms of the rhetorical situation, made up of speaker (me), message (I'm queer/gay), and audience (the person I come out to), it seems that the audience plays a larger role than I expected, larger than I originally felt comfortable with. As I navigated these conversations and spoke to other queer people who had come out, I came to realize this teetering balance, and it led me to question just how much and in what ways audience shapes coming out rhetoric, or the way a queer speaker chooses to disclose this part of themselves. This project is the beginning of answering this question, and hopefully, it's the beginning of a shift in the narrative for at least some queer people and their audiences. In this introduction, I've invited you into a personal part of my life by coming out to you (perhaps this invitation came earlier for some), but I also invite you to question this rhetorical situation with me as I look at the importance of audiences, the

reasons queer people come out, and queer coming out moments from celebrities like Ellen DeGeneres, as well as my own coming our narrative.

I'm Coming Out to YOU

We may think of coming out as something that queer (gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, transgender, etc.) people do all on their own and that the audiences just hear, but this just isn't true. Despite what research on queer coming out strategies may suggest, this is never only about the queer speaker *or* their audience, and we cannot forget about the relationships involved in *every* coming out situation. The audience plays an integral role in the rhetorical triangle, made of message, speaker, and audience, so one cannot come out without an audience to hear that message. Importantly, when a speaker shares their message, they consider their audience to determine how they will deliver it. This occurs in any daily interaction where we consider what the people around us will think- *How should I dress for this event? How much text slang should I use in this message?* For those of us coming out, it's often questions like- *How can I make sure they see me the same way? Will I potentially lose this relationship?* No matter whether we say that "I'm taking back the power" of coming out, many of us know that we can never hold the power of audience reaction or the power to let go of how that reaction might impact us. As much as we want to think that queer people approach coming out with a take-it-or-leave-it mindset, that's often not the case.

See, I care about you. I love you. I care so much about our relationship, and I would be crushed if we lost that because this single part of who I am changed things. And if you and I don't have a personal relationship, rest assured that queer people in your life, whether out to you or not, have the same feelings about you.

We can go about saying "It doesn't matter what they think," and maybe it's true for some of the people in our lives and for the strangers we pass in the grocery store, but it is not true of

you. There are people in your life who value your opinion, your view of them, and your relationship, and it's highly likely that at least one of them is queer.

I have watched some of the people I am closest to cry and mourn and go days consumed with a detachment from loved ones because they came out to someone who didn't respond well, who showed disappointment or treated them differently because they expressed a truth about themselves. I am writing this with them in mind and with you in mind, you whom I love and with whom I want to maintain a good relationship. I'm thinking about many of you reading now.

Almost every time I have come out to someone, I have thought it through before revealing that I'm gay. This is especially true for those I have a significant relationship with (my parents, brother, extended family, friends, and even professors). I have never disclosed this part of myself to them, many of *you*, without considering how to go about it. It's a constant rumination, a dwelling on whether your view of me will change, and an ever-twisting spiral of planning how I'll say it so our relationship won't be tainted. Then, a repeated scrapping of every strategic move until the moment is upon us.

I wish it weren't this way. I wish I could always feel comfortable and safe in knowing that nothing could change or that I won't disappoint. Some make me feel that way, but many times I'm left in trepidation. As I've said, it might seem like queer people control much of the coming out narrative, but when we keep in mind the way we have to navigate the attitudes and reactions of the person we come out to, it's clear that these audiences (*you*) have so much impact. In truth, audiences have the capability to influence the coming out situation for better or worse. That's a bit scary as a queer person who is never done coming out to all the people I know and will know. Nevertheless, I know so many people who love me and love other queer people and who want those they love to never have to question how far that love might go.

This project is a series of pieces that considers the relationship between the queer speaker and their audience. From queer celebrities navigating this interaction to personal stories of my own coming out, you will see the impact of audiences in coming out experiences.

In all of this, *you* can change the coming out stories of so many people, making it more comfortable for the speaker and showing how much you care.

Why We Come Out; Why We Tell You

There are so many reasons queer people reveal their gender or sexuality. Some of them seemingly revolve solely around the person coming out, while others are more oriented toward wanting something of or with the person they tell. I offer a brief, limited list of the reasons someone might tell you they are queer.

Pushed Out

Unfortunately, there are some coming out situations in which a person is outed or pushed to come out before they are ready to share this information. When this happens, the audience plays a clear, likely too-heavy role in the rhetorical triangle of these moments, controlling the situation more than impacting it.

The circumstances of such a situation might include another party already knowing or having some sort of "proof" of an individual's identity. It might be that someone trusted with information shares it with another whom a queer individual might not want to inform. In some instances, a person may be "caught" (as if committing a crime) in a queer space, like a gay bar or LGBTQ+ student organization, or with their same-sex partner– a fear my girlfriend and I have when walking through my small hometown or even the nearest shopping mall. Then, an outsider may take this information to another for the fun of gossip, which travels all too quickly and may end up reaching an important figure, with whom the queer person has not decided to share their gender/sexuality. Other times the news is directly reported to these closer relations, and as a result, the queer person is left to explain, a potentially dangerous position to be in depending on the reaction they will receive.

Former star of The *Bachelor* Colton Underwood experienced a similar coming out situation after receiving an anonymous email threatening to release photographs of him visiting a spa known for its predominantly gay patronage. Wanting to get ahead of the release of the photos and a leak of his sexuality, Underwood told "Good Morning America" about being gay before he wanted to, out of fear. In cases like this, one's worry overcomes the fear of coming out, but that doesn't lower the stakes of the situation, and it can be even more painful or difficult if the speaker is not emotionally ready or if they are talking to an unsafe audience.

It's more often that outing comes from a confidant rather than an outsider. I've seen it happen with ex-partners or friends who tell others about the private information given to them during a relationship, without regard for the vulnerability or preferences of the queer individual. However, it often happens without malicious intent, whether someone lets it "slip" out or assumes the person they're talking to already knows. Again, even though there is no performance of ill will, a queer person is put in an awkward, risky situation, where they must come out to an audience before they intend to, if they ever intend to. In this case, two audiences play into the coming out, the first who reacted in a negative way by sharing privileged information and the future audience who likely hasn't created the safe space desired for coming out.

Activism

Though less popular now, there used to be a queer activist to come out, thereby encouraging others to do the same and displaying the normalcy of queerness. This is a political imperative, focused on the advancement of queer awareness and queer rights. Actress Anna Paquin's coming out served such a purpose when she announced her bisexuality in a 2010 public service announcement for the Give a Damn campaign, now True Colors United. The campaign, which

boasted that "Cyndi Lauper, Anna Paquin, Elton John, Jason Mraz, Cynthia Nixon, Whoopi Goldberg, Wanda Sykes, Sharon Osbourne, Clay Aiken and Kevin Alejandro all give a damn about equality," aimed to show celebrities in the LGBTQ+ community, highlight anti-queer violence, and encourage people to "give a damn" and act in allyship with queer people.

Coming out as a political imperative is most popular in times of political change for queer rights, such as during the Stonewall riots of 1969. It has fallen off as a motive for coming out, especially with more recent acknowledgment of the limitations of this political action and the potential effect of making individuals feel as though they should come out, whether they are ready or not. This is not to say that coming out with such goals in mind is inherently negative, but recent queer perspective suggests coming out for more personal reasons and emphasizes feeling safe before doing so. The political imperative view of coming out focuses almost solely on an audience, with little care for speaker needs. The audience in these cases may not determine whether the speaker comes out, but they can make the situation better for those who might inevitably come out because they feel they must.

Authenticity

Perhaps the most common response when asked why someone came out is that they wanted to live "more authentically." Highlighting this, the Human Rights Campaign released a guide entitled "Coming Out: Living More Authentically as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual+." The description of this project states, "We all deserve the right to live our lives genuinely, completely and honestly… For LGBTQ people, coming out is often a significant part of reclaiming this right and living in our identity publicly."

Though it certainly shouldn't be considered lying to avoid self-disclosure of something so personal, and often we just omit this fact from our discussions, keeping our gender/sexuality to ourselves often feels inauthentic. For those that are transgender/non-binary or with gender expressions outside of dominant ideas of "normal," this may be a bit more challenging, and living "inauthentically" may be especially difficult, impacting everyday experiences. I don't personally struggle with not meeting expectations through my gender expression (I'm a cis feminine woman who is not visibly queer). I didn't have much of an urge to come out until relatively recently when I started dating my girlfriend. Soon, omitting this aspect of my life in every conversation became exhausting and confusing to keep track of, as I had to think up a cover story about who I went to the State Fair with or where I was on Saturday.

In addition, living like this can be painful for many, especially in the case of trans individuals experiencing gender dysphoria with every inaccurate pronoun they hear. For many, it's also stressful to wonder when you might misstep and reveal something on accident, when someone else will spread your information, or when you'll get caught. For months before telling her parents, my girlfriend felt so anxious that each night she dreamt about people finding her out or reacting poorly to her news. It affected her ability to concentrate and to enjoy the moments she spent with her family because she felt like she was hiding a significant part of herself each time she would have mentioned our relationship but couldn't. Coming out, in this case, also eased the stress of carrying this secret from the most important people in her life.

What she wanted, like many of us, is the ability to freely talk about her experiences, thoughts, and relationships. It's somewhat comforting to know that one won't have to hide this part of themself after coming out, but the stress of wondering how the audience will react can delay this moment of relief. Further, even after disclosing your gender/sexuality to someone, it's

possible this audience will encourage you to live inauthentically around them or in general. Therefore, even when a queer person decides on coming out to live authentically for themself, the audience still impacts the situation, especially if they are closer to the one making the disclosure.

Pride

When the world around us tells us that our existence, happiness, or love is wrong, many queer people push back to celebrate those things. I come from a small conservative town in Texas where coming out is an incredibly bold act that will receive pushback. For so many, coming out is a declaration.

While some will stress that sexuality doesn't define a person enough to merit Pride celebrations or find displays of pride inappropriate emphasis on sexuality (contrary, they say, to straight/heterosexual displays), pride and Pride show an overcoming of oppression and a rejection of those that mark us as abnormal. When my girlfriend and I get dirty looks for holding hands on the street next to multiple heterosexual couples doing the same, celebrating our love shows an acceptance of ourselves in the face of opposition. Displays of Pride generally speak to other queer audiences in reciprocal affirmation, so coming out in celebration is seemingly unrelated to straight/cis audiences. However, it is surely a response to an anti-queer audience's abrasiveness. Showing a refusal of imposed embarrassment speaks directly to such audiences.

To Share

Sharing our lives with others is part of the human experience, and queer people want no different. It's common to gush over your crush or a first date or to tell your parents about a

project you're proud of. Whether it be that we want to share a part of our identity, an experience, something we've created, or a relationship, coming out can often be motivated by the simple urge to feel with others, especially those we love.

Queer writer Darnell Moore suggests a reversal of coming out to a new concept of "inviting in." Moore proposes a shift from an other-centered (audience-centered) coming out to this new person-centered (speaker-centered) inviting in, a move that gives the subject agency. Read simply, this understanding of inviting in would suggest a privileging of speaker over audience, but this return of queer agency makes the coming out audience all the more important because they are *chosen*. In an inviting in narrative, a queer person comes out only because they value you, feel safe with you, and want to share something precious about themselves with *you*.

My most important coming out experiences were a choice I made to share with important people in my life. I told one of my best friends early on because I wanted her to know that part of me. I told my roommates when I started dating my now-girlfriend because I wanted them to share in my excitement. Telling my mom, I invited her to see how happy this woman makes me. Telling my dad, I get to share this project that I'm proud of because I know he's always proud of me. With each differing audience, I've considered how to disclose this information, and I shaped it differently for each one depending on what and how I wanted to share. They each influenced when I would tell them or what words I would use, but it was their connection with me that led to all of these coming out stories that may not have happened if they were not the people they are. These friends and family are so important to me, and they've always made my happiness their happiness, my pride their pride, and by inviting them in, I get to share these even more.

Other Factors at Play

Any number of things can encourage or prevent someone's coming out, and almost all of them are in the audience's control.

Generally, queer people avoid coming out (if possible) to people who they've seen exhibit anti-queer behaviors or speech, as well as other displays of prejudice, because they feel unsafe. (*Note: If you're a queer person reading this, always prioritize your safety when coming out. And Note: If you are a non-queer person reading this, think about the fact that this is such a common concern.*) Hearing gay jokes from family members made it harder to come out to them even though I value their relationships and wanted to share this with them. Even when you don't personally participate in these behaviors, associating with people who do or existing in spaces with anti-queer discussions or imagery can mark you as unsafe. I haven't come out to many of the people from my hometown because of its overwhelmingly anti-queer atmosphere, discussion against queer books in libraries, and signs against drag queens in parades. My church, where I used to feel safe and welcome, no longer gives me a sense of home because I don't feel like I can come out to most of my congregation after hearing many assent to statements of "We can welcome them and show them they're wrong" and "I don't want the gays and the lesbians in my church." If you are in these spaces, many queer people will see you as unsafe unless you demonstrate otherwise.

Once a person senses they are safe, they are much more likely to come out to you, but beyond this, it is also incredibly important that they feel supported. Sending out messages of affirmation and belonging can make all the difference in someone's coming out narrative and the amount of energy and pain they must go through before disclosing this information. Showing care for other LGBTQ+ people, posting in support of queer efforts, and displaying your pronouns (if safe and comfortable) can all ease a queer speaker's concerns about coming out. However, as

noted in the earlier section, your support should never involve pushing someone out. Let the people in your life know you will support everything they are, and create that space as an open and understanding audience.

Ellen: Actor and Audience

When it comes to queer women, Ellen DeGeneres is one of the most well-known. This may relate to her very public coming out at a time when many criticized gay representation and many others felt pressure to conceal their sexuality. As a celebrity, Ellen had a very public coming out in 1997 during the fourth season of her situation comedy television show, *Ellen*. Faced with the potential of ruining her career based on audience reactions, both from actual TV viewers and a broader audience, Ellen rhetorically constructed a message that conveyed not only the fact that she identifies as gay but also the sensation that the coming out process has multiple difficult phases impacted by audience. By first playing the role of the audience to someone else's revelation of her sexuality and later becoming the speaker in "The Puppy Episode" (watch parts 1 and 2), Ellen shows her audience three distinct things through three distinct phases that play out: the struggle of navigating heteronormativity, the difficulty of deciding to come out, and the implications of various reactions.

Ellen Dates Men

Ellen DeGeneres and her character, Ellen Morgan, don't come out until the fourth season of *Ellen*, but that doesn't mean the character didn't date before then. Through the earlier seasons of the show, Ellen Morgan has brief flings with men, especially her ex-boyfriend Dan Dortmunder. This trend appears to continue with the start of "The Puppy Episode" (S4.E22), as Ellen goes out with Richard, a friend from college. While she clearly lacks a connection with Richard, Ellen quickly hits it off with her friend's producer, Susan Richmond (played by Laura Dern). Despite plenty of chemistry between the women, from making wishes on eyelashes to doing impersonations from a shared favorite movie, as she walks through the hotel Ellen turns into

Richard's room instead of going across the hall to Susan's. Ellen DeGeneres makes the connection between the women so obvious that audiences feel how they pull as they split up. Showing the expected motions of the night, Ellen moves to the man's room, clearly unaware of, or possibly rejecting, her connection to Susan in favor of the connection she "should" have with Richard.

Once in Richard's room, it's clear that he assumes they should be something more, as he lays his head on Ellen's shoulder, strokes her arm, and tells her "I just feel so comfortable with you." She responds in kind, but despite what she says, she looks anything but comfortable with the situation. She covers her slight grimace when he asks if she's seeing anyone, haltingly answering that she isn't before taking a gulp of her drink and looking away. It's only after she suggests that they don't rush into anything that Ellen makes her way to the door and into the hallway, where she runs into Susan. The two enter the producer's room, and after another display of chemistry, Ellen confides that Richard hit on her and shares the confusion the situation induced. She tells Susan, "He's so great, he's so smart and funny and gorgeous. I mean, he's everything. He's perfect… Why am I not interested?" Though Susan laughs as if the answer should be obvious, what Ellen DeGeneres portrays through her character is a battle with heteronormativity.

At this point, Ellen Morgan has not "come out" to herself, meaning she hasn't fully realized or accepted her queerness. However, because Ellen DeGeneres has tied her character's queer identity so closely to her own, through press coverage of the episode released just days before it aired, viewers are already largely aware of Ellen Morgan's sexuality. This becomes even more obvious now, as they can clearly see the signs of her attraction to another woman, and in having her character bypass these and attempt to logic an attraction to a man, Ellen effectively

shows audiences the experience of working through structures that tell us that "straight" is "correct" or "normal." For women-attracted-women, this often manifests as what lesbian poet and theorist Adrienne Rich terms *compulsory heterosexuality*, shorthanded to "comphet." Women like Ellen Morgan assume their attraction to men even when they lack reason to support this. Many lesbians (and other queer individuals) exhibit various signs of comphet, including hypothetical attraction to men. This comes through as Ellen Morgan describes all the characteristics that would theoretically make a man attractive, though she's never experienced that interest. DeGeneres shows the effects of comphet again after Susan expresses that she thought Ellen was gay and the titular character ends up back at Richard's door, whispering, "I'll show you who's gay" before dramatically kissing the man and attempting a sexual encounter (which Ellen would tell her friends ended quite passionately). Viewers understand that the character only pursues Richard because she wants to prove herself straight. This (attempt at) intimacy not motivated by attraction, love, or desire is another sign of comphet that DeGeneres points to through this episode.

Having not yet realized her own sexuality, Ellen Morgan is both the audience and the speaker of this coming-out moment, and her own bias towards heterosexuality makes this revelation much more difficult than it seems it should appear. Based on each of their interactions and Susan's own disclosure of her sexuality, television viewers realize Ellen's sexuality long before she does. In presenting her character's gay awakening as delayed from the viewers' perspective, DeGeneres shows how heteronormativity might influence a queer person's ability to come out to themself. Additionally, as she is her own audience, she depicts how limited perspectives of audiences, in general, make coming out to that person more difficult.

Ellen Comes Out

Once Ellen Morgan realizes her sexuality during therapy, she begins sharing it with other audiences. She starts with Susan, officially coming out for the first time. Stuttering and stammering as she stands in the airport terminal, Ellen the actor and Ellen the character come out, saying "This is so hard but I think I've realized that I am… I can't even say the word. Why can't I say the word? … Why do I have to be so ashamed, I mean why can't I just say the truth, I mean be who I am… I'm so afraid to tell people." With these words, DeGeneres might appear to suggest a fault in the speaker, and it's likely that she felt the same inadequacy her character expresses, but as the episode continues, she shows that her potential audiences inspire this lack of confidence when coming out. When she finally lands on "I'm gay," the moment is magnified by her leaning into a literal microphone that broadcasts her voice to everyone boarding the flight and everyone watching the show. This emphasis on her two-word coming out shows the gravity of this moment, as Ellen DeGeneres acknowledges that her sexuality is no longer something shared only with audiences who will support her, such as queer friends.

Considering her audiences, Ellen Morgan worries about coming out and living an openly queer life because of societal stigma and the idea that queerness is a sickness, and she dreads the resultant discrimination (also a concern for DeGeneres, whose career takes a severe hit after this episode). Because of the common views her potential audiences could harbor, Ellen begins her coming out, as many queer people do, with those she considers safest, first Susan, then her gay neighbor, Peter, whom she presumably invites to come over before her other friends for this purpose. Like other queer people, these characters are most expected to provide support. The disclosure becomes more difficult after this, with Ellen acknowledging the ease of simply telling her (straight) friends what they want to hear instead of telling them about her attraction to

women. However, since she isn't ready to talk to her parents, likely a more awkward conversation and possibly less accepting audience, she decides to tell these friends her truth. The order of people to whom Ellen chooses to come out to depicts the constant queer search for safety in these rhetorical situations. Each audience she spoke to offered various levels of security, impacting the moment she would tell them and how comfortable the situation would be.

Even though she'd determined that she would come out to her friends, the actual act remains daunting and difficult, primarily because she cannot tell how her audience will react. Ellen appears caught in the cycle of coming out anxiety that causes one to delay the moment in repeated fear. This happens as she stalls with each sentence before telling her friends "Thanks for stopping by" instead of revealing her news. Had she known her audience would support her in the aftermath of their discussion, Ellen likely could have told her friends (instead of having Peter accidentally out her) and enjoyed this moment with them. However, her friends had not yet given her enough indication of their openness before the interaction. Then, they continue to leave this anxious feeling open for a few moments even after Ellen confirms her sexuality, pushing Ellen to extend extra consideration for this audience by acknowledging the shock and giving them time. Through each scene of coming out, her character's selection of who to tell and when, and the noticeable hesitancy of her speech, DeGeneres outwardly depicts a struggle that is often completely internal so viewers might understand the fears and pressures one faces when coming out and how audiences can either alleviate or reinforce that.

Ellen's Reactions

Perhaps the most telling part of Ellen's coming out episode is the varied reactions to coming out, including her own. Interestingly, the first coming out reaction television watchers observe comes

from Ellen herself, and it's a fairly negative one. Once Susan tells the main character that she doesn't date men, Ellen immediately asks why, as if such a statement is nonsensical. Though she keeps her calm at first, she immediately looks uncomfortable with the news that her peer is gay and quickly becomes defensive, saying "It's not enough for you to be gay. You've got to recruit others." This dialogue allows DeGeneres to portray the popular push against the "gay agenda," a term building steam out of 1992, just 5 years before "The Puppy Episode" aired. In taking on the language of such anti-gay propaganda, Ellen first displays the ridiculousness of the concept, as viewers know that she too is gay and that Susan has no impact on that, and then depicts a potentially harmful reaction to coming out. The two end the night on poor terms, and when they meet up again, the relationship feels awkward until later Ellen comes out. When straight audiences (and possibly other queer audiences) react in this manner, these claims could harm both the speaker and their relationship with the person they've confided in. Placing this comment early in the episode, DeGeneres highlights the extremeness of the reaction, as well as the implications negative audience responses may have on the coming out situation.

Then, after Ellen herself comes out, DeGeneres presents an exhibition of various other coming out responses with a range of positive and negative connotations. None of Ellen's friends react angrily or discouragingly, but their words carry different degrees of positivity, and many could stand improvement. Not including Susan, who simply hugs Ellen tightly and smiles, reactions come from five characters: Peter (neighbor), Spence (cousin), Joe (friend), Audrey (friend), and Paige (friend). Peter may react best initially, excitedly telling his neighbor that he's proud of her and offering encouragement as she prepares to tell her other friends. However, he falls short with his outing of Ellen, which though accidental in this case still may pose a threat to the queer speaker. Spence also offers support, saying "I love and respect whatever you do," but

he follows this with a joke about being "very cool" with her bringing a woman home, a not uncommon sexual fetishization of lesbians. Likewise, Joe affirms Ellen, saying he's happy for her before telling the others to "pay up" to an alluded bet over Ellen's sexuality (it appears each of these characters has verbally speculated about this). Audrey commends Ellen, perhaps over-enthusiastically, telling the group she finds the news "super!" and asking her friend, "What should we call you? Gay or lesbian?" Though she may have good intentions, this level of eagerness might come off as a self-motivated need to appear non-judgemental. However, she and Joe later casually ask Ellen about her relationship with Ellen, something I have found queer people feel supported by. Contrastingly, Paige gives the least enthusiastic response, hesitantly saying, "Yeah… it's great. I love learning new things about my friends, and this is… new."

As each audience member responds in succession, viewers see the sitcom-style shifts in Ellen's face, from delight to concern, disappointment, and confusion. By volleying the quick contrast in responses, DeGeneres shows the varied impacts audiences can have even after the precise moment of coming out, which is often just as intimidating to the speaker as sharing their message. Fortunately, Ellen's friends are overwhelmingly supportive, allowing her to connect with them further and strengthen their relationships as they get to talk about her crush and experience new settings together. Had the negative aspects of their comments dominated their responses, however, Ellen would likely feel closed off from the group, may stop sharing or isolate, and could lose those friendships. DeGeneres' depiction of contrasting reactions shows the potential for audiences to shift the rhetorical situation and damage the relationship between themself and the speaker, but it also shows the power audiences hold to shape the rhetorical situation into an encouraging and caring one.

Overall, DeGeneres points to three moments in the rhetorical situation of coming out, each involving a level of audience influence. Ellen's initial coming out shows how heteronormativity limits a person's ability to accept the fact of one's queerness. In this case, it's her own bias, but this idea is also applicable to outside audiences with straight/cis-centered ideas and values. As Ellen comes out to others, she displays the value of feeling safe with audiences through the difficulty of self-disclosure. Finally, the reactions DeGeneres presents in the episode demonstrate the relationship-shaping potential of audiences after someone comes out to them. In total, the audience plays an integral role in each stage of coming out, shaping each moment alongside the speaker.

Advice for An Audience Ally

Throughout this project, I've presented several examples of the ways coming out audiences shape the rhetorical narrative and illustrated the importance of these audiences to queer people. In reality, you hold a significant capacity to change someone's coming out for better or for worse, and I hope that you'll want to demonstrate care for the queer people in your life. This may seem daunting or a bit difficult, especially if you have minimal experience with queerness, but this guide aims to provide you with simple things to keep in mind so that you can best support those you love, queer or not.

What to do before someone comes out to you

Audiences have immense power to shape the rhetorical situation of coming out before the moment even occurs. While queer speakers often choose the moment they come out, this choice is inarguably constituted by their intended audience, often in relation to the speaker's perception of that audience's attitudes towards queerness and their expected reactions. Sensations of safety and support greatly contribute to positive rhetorical situations and often lead to an earlier conversation rather than a delayed one. Here are some ways you can make the people around you feel good approaching you.

Show care for queer people

There are many ways to show your consideration of and support for queer people every day. Sharing your pronouns (by a pin, your email signature, or just stating them when you meet someone) can make trans and non-binary, as well as other queer folks, feel seen and respected. You can also make an effort to post about and spread queer campaigns or works, and/or you may look for queer-owned businesses to support. Further, care for other marginalized groups often

conveys values of justice, equity, and support for others, so making efforts to share or support efforts of Indigenous peoples, Black folks, differently-abled individuals, etc., may add to a potential speaker's sense of security.

Talk about queer people

Talking about queer people in a way that normalizes our existence in everyday spaces promotes acceptance and allows those around you to view you as someone willing to see them and their gender/sexuality as valid. And, your consistency with these discussions also has the potential to build understanding from non-queer people around you. If you have children at home, don't shy away from talking about someone's partner or using their correct pronouns. If appropriate, advocating for queer people is great, but these everyday talks don't have to be in-depth or exuberant; just keep queer people in the conversation with a non-negative perspective, making sure we are properly acknowledged.

Familiarize yourself with queer language and experience

Sometimes it's hard to keep queer folks in the conversation when you don't see them in your communities (they're there) or feel confident in your use of various terms or pronoun fluency. That's an okay place to start, but to show others you support queer people, begin familiarizing yourself with these things. An easy way to do this is just to increase your exposure. With social media, learning about diverse experiences is more accessible than ever. Find trans, genderqueer, gay, etc individuals to follow so you can casually gain an understanding of their experiences even while scrolling on your phone. These pages don't even have to be specifically queer-focused content; you can follow queer individuals who post the things you enjoy in your feed- bakers, interior designers, car nuts, fashion bloggers, etc (hint: you can also do this with people of color and others you want to increase your exposure to). Once you've started enjoying

content, go ahead and talk about it with others, staying conscious of the terms or pronouns you use to actively increase your fluency. You can certainly study up and practice other ways, and this may be really beneficial if you need a better understanding of definitions, but this type of exposure places queer people in day-to-day life and may increase your awareness of those already around you.

Mark yourself as safe

It is entirely possible for you to explicitly state that you are an ally and a safe person to confide in. If you have an office or similar space, you can put up a sticker/magnet/sign with pride coloring that directly says "You are safe here." You can also place this signage in your home, which is especially beneficial if young people live there or visit regularly. My aunt and uncle have a magnet on their fridge, mixed in with calendars and pictures, that reads in ROYGBIV hues, "You are now in a place that is: diverse, inclusive, accepting, welcoming, a safe space, for everyone." Its message is simple and clear and it takes up only a few inches of fridge space to tell anyone who comes into their home that they will be valued and accepted. This purposeful declaration of acceptance applies to anyone, but I find it especially impactful if you're in an area that is generally less inclusive, as queer individuals may associate the dominant attitudes with you (a reasonable link that serves to keep us safe). I have a friend who works in a church that recently held congregational discussions which included significant amounts of anti-queer speech, and she makes a point to wear subtle flashes of rainbow in her wardrobe to validate anyone who may recognize this and to tell them that she loves the queer people around her. This example also shows how you can mark yourself in less explicit ways, including earlier points like demonstrating care for queer people. Overall, giving as many indications of your acceptance

and support as possible will help those you care about feel safe with you as an audience, enabling them to initiate coming out more comfortably and with less fear.

Some things to avoid

In general, we all should avoid prejudiced actions and hate speech or jokes that degrade or make fun of a particular group. Just as showing respect for various minority groups might encourage feelings of safety, doing the opposite shows a lack of understanding and may make a queer speaker hesitant to come out, delay their coming out, or never come out to you.

Another thing that made me uncomfortable with sharing my sexuality long before I started the coming out process was gay jokes. When it comes to not making gay jokes, we often think of not saying "That's gay" as a term of disgust, but it's more extensive than that. Growing up, I frequently had adults say things like "Do you have a boyfriend?… or girlfriend, that's okay" but clearly in a teasing tone because it would be silly for me to entertain the thought of having a girlfriend. These moments always made me question whether these people would really be okay with my queerness, keeping me from feeling like I could come out to them.

On a similar note, it's a bit deflating I'm when talking to someone about a significant other and they assume I must be speaking about a man. These assumptions also make me wonder if this person is really safe and supportive. One of my best coming out moments was in talking to my roommate (who already displayed the earlier actions that made me feel safe) about the date I was about to go on. As I tried to approach this coming out tactfully, I worried she might ask me "his name," but instead she said, "Who is this person?" Immediately, I felt so much calmer. Even though I already knew her to be an ally, this small choice of words had a significant impact on my comfort in this coming out. Avoiding assumptions needs to happen at all moments, even early on or when talking about potential partners. Telling people "your future husband" or "when

you get a girlfriend" can be invalidating and cause the queer people around you to avoid coming out or to just close off. Staying mindful of these seemingly meaningless interactions can make a powerful difference for the queer people around you so they may feel more comfortable in this rhetorical situation.

*As a note, these practices work best when you do them regularly and in different settings. You shouldn't just employ them when you suspect someone of being queer or wanting to come out. First, this may make an individual feel pressured or awkward if they think you've singled them out. Second, many people, including myself, aren't "visibly queer" and would likely be assumed straight. Therefore, "before someone comes out" is more appropriately understood as consistently, *all the time*. Even after one coming out situation ends, a potential one may still exist, so keep these practices up whether you think you have someone queer in your life or not.

What to do when someone is coming out to you

Creating space and safety for these discussions to occur is important, and though the exact moment of coming out is much shorter, it's still extremely meaningful. And if you missed the mark on some (or all) of the actions from the earlier section, this provides another chance to confirm your support for someone. These are some ways you can show respect and affirmation for the queer people in your life as they navigate the often-difficult moment of coming out.

Listen

This may seem simple, but as important as this first bit is, audiences may react quickly before letting the message sink in. When someone is coming out to you, this is your time to hear them. You may not understand, and you may have questions, but take this initial moment to listen to the person confiding in you. Chances are they've thought out what they would say (based on

your earlier actions), and giving them the time and space to share without interruption shows your attention to your speaker and your care for this part of their identity. If you have questions, this isn't necessarily wrong, but keeping this conversation open by listening first is the best way to learn, understand, and maintain a safe line of communication while you and the queer speaker learn to navigate the shifts that come with coming out.

React small

Clearly, large negative reactions can cause harm, but over-enthusiasm may also feel uncomfortable. Some audiences want to display their support by showing excitement in the form of a big reaction. This intention is often guided by compassion, but many people coming out would rather you do something small. Coming out is often a tense and stressful situation, so shouts of acclamation or clapping could easily feel jarring. Further, many disclosing their sexuality/gender don't want this fact to be the actual center of attention, just acknowledged as a part of themselves. However, this does not mean you shouldn't react at all. Smiles, affirmative nods, and words of encouragement all positively impact the situation without drawing attention away from the person and toward the revealed fact. Reactions can be hard to control, but they're exactly what many queer people fear; you can relieve that.

Love big

Most crucial to shaping the rhetorical situation is how you show love and care for the person coming out. Importantly, love is more than welcoming or accepting a person, though these are also necessary. To fully love a queer person means *affirming* their identity. It is not enough to say a fundamental part of one's being is wrong but you "love them anyway." There is no "I love you, but…" Queer people are often in vulnerable positions, and we need more than the reassurance that you will let us exist with you. Support is necessary. Affirmation shows the speaker in your

rhetorical situation that you are not merely non-dangerous, but that you will uplift who they are in every aspect.

Some things to avoid

In relation to refraining from reactive outbursts, one should also avoid proclamations of "I knew it!" First, this plays into stereotypes about gender/sexuality that are not universal and are potentially harmful. Second, this announcement serves to invalidate or trump the queer speaker's coming out message (and all the thought and anxiety surrounding it), as if it were not theirs to deliver.

Similarly, one should absolutely not invalidate the speaker's disclosed gender or sexuality. Questioning them on "why," stating disbelief in homosexuality/trans-ness/queerness, or claiming the identity is a "phase," can damage both that speaker's confidence and trust, as well as your relationship with them. By affirming instead, you allow for a flow of communication where questions can be positive and answered in a spirit of fellowship rather than interrogation.

What to do after someone has come out to you

Love and support are ongoing, and we can all work harder and improve the way we care for those around us. Just like in our previous section, if you're reading this after someone has come out to you and you feel like your actions haven't aligned with tips for allyship, you still have the ability to change the rhetorical situation. The earlier sections are important in making the coming out moment more comfortable, but what follows alleviates potential pain for future days and years.

Show interest

When I came out to my roommates, they wanted to know about my first date and how we met. It was exciting and comfortable at the same time, and I felt not only accepted but invested in. I've come out to others with much less interest, those ready to change the topic and not bring it up again. My friends have shared similar stories of feeling rejection, even if it's silent. If someone discloses their gender or sexuality to you, it's most likely because they want your involvement in some capacity; they're *inviting you in*. It's upsetting when this invitation is ignored. One way you can show your desire to join them is by asking about someone's partner or a date. When my girlfriend's parents started asking about me, it made us both feel validated and cared for. As with reactions, we don't want anything over the top. Simply building on the conversation and asking about experiences can go a long way.

Treat them the same

The way you treat a queer person after they come out may not even cross your mind, but I promise that we notice even the smallest shifts in interactions. Overall, treat queer relationships as you would straight relationships, and treat trans and gender non-conforming people as you would any other person. Of course, this doesn't mean you should ignore their queerness. Remain considerate of how queer experiences differ because of bias and cis-heteronormativity that we navigate consistently. Likewise, make sure to not make assumptions about partners or pronouns. Really, treat people like people and recognize that all people have different needs…and that's not a bad thing.

Ask constructive questions

Questions are not always wrong. Many queer people are willing, some even happy, to answer questions if you show a genuine desire to learn/understand rather than to interrogate or invalidate. However, not everyone is comfortable with this, so be mindful to give space, don't

prod, and ask if questions are okay. If they don't want to answer questions, that's fine. You can search for some answers on the internet, and you might consider doing this before asking questions anyway. Even if this leaves you without the information you want, things don't have to be weird. No one is required to explain themselves. Just like questions can be okay, so can not knowing.

Ally yourself with the community

Supporting queer individuals in your life is highly important, but you cannot do this to the fullest extent without also caring for the broader LGBTQ+ community and aligning with their stances. Supporting your lesbian niece does not look like hugging her girlfriend at Thanksgiving and supporting politicians who would vote against same-sex marriage. Affirming your transgender brother doesn't mean using he/him pronouns and speaking against gender-affirming care. Full support requires solidarity for all queer persons and efforts.

Some things to avoid

First, one should work to not misgender or dead-name anyone who has come out to them. In general, try not to assume pronouns, but especially after they have been made known, respect them. I know mistakes happen (I make them too), and in these cases, most queer people will accept your apology if you show genuine effort. Still, make a conscious point to consider pronouns and names *before* speaking. This acceptance and support can be instrumental in genderqueer lives.

In consideration of vocabulary, remember to steer away from terms that imply a relationship is of lesser status than it actually is. You may use the same terms you would for a heterosexual relationship when talking about same-sex/queer partnerships. Your son is not "hanging out" with his "friend." He's dating his boyfriend. Sometimes you'll need to use

gender-inclusive terms like partner and spouse. Make sure you give these the same value as other relationships at this stage.

Finally, just because someone is out to you doesn't mean they've decided to invite someone else in, and you should not assume this information has been disclosed to anyone else. As noted in *Why We Come Out; Why We Tell You*, doing so could put a queer speaker in an awkward or dangerous situation. Take care to keep information to yourself, which can include someone's gender/sexuality, as well as their activities and who they spend time with. Further, if you know someone is not "completely" out or out to a particular person, allow them to make these moves in their own time. You should never push someone to come out. Making this decision before they are ready can create an anxiety-racking rhetorical situation with highly unclear outcomes, especially with an audience that appears less receptive.

Many of the items discussed can and should be practiced every day. A positive coming out situation stems most directly from respect and affirmation. Even if you don't know (that you know) a queer person, start employing these tips now and each day to build a rhetorical situation where speakers feel safe and appreciated. While these tips are broken down into before, during, and after, you may exist in all of these spaces simultaneously; if someone has come out to you, you still are a potential audience for someone not yet out. Likewise, you may be in a position to employ any of these practices on any given day, as queer people exist in all aspects of our lives. Overall, respect queer identities, relationships, goals, and choices.

Epilogue

Ending with a guide for allyship seems like a great way to wrap this all up in a bow, but there is still so much for you and me to do.

We must first acknowledge the limitations of this project, as with any research-based work. Most notably, I write from the positionality of a white cis-gender woman who came out in college, running in circles with many allies and other queer people. While not every coming out narrative of mine was entirely positive (some worse than others, many that may never happen), I've had a relatively easy coming out process- due in large part to my audiences. Queer experiences are diverse, different for each individual, so the needs of each queer person will vary. Further, queer people live intersectional lives, impacted by race, disability, religion, indigeneity, etc. These articles provide an overview of common themes in coming out stories, but they are certainly not all-encompassing. Some may have different desires and needs when coming out. Therefore, as you encounter each situation and apply these ally tips, move flexibly and with attention to the person you're in (rhetorical) relationship with.

I'm also continuing my efforts to be a better ally and work in solidarity with communities outside of my own, following their calls for action and checking my own biases. This will be especially important in my coming work as a Master's student of Rhetoric and Composition. I plan to focus primarily on women's, feminist, and queer rhetorics, but I know that will include looking to the voices of those who generally get overlooked in each movement. As I study, I want to dive deeper into the rhetorical triangle of coming out, adding in fellow queer audiences and hearing the narratives of those around me. I'll build my understanding of how queer people and allies rhetorically navigate spheres frequently dominated by anti-queer actions and rhetorics.

Overall, I want to keep this conversation going and growing. Queer resistance is incredibly important, but if we work together to make welcoming and affirming spaces, *resistance becomes relationships*. That is what I want– to be in a wonderful relationship with you.