

Lecture 4: Structures of Effective Arguments

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is William K. Zinsser's *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*.

Up to this point we have talked about how rhetorical speeches are *acts* as well as speeches. We have seen how they are bound up with the powers of interpretive communities who get to decide if things are true or false, and we have figured out some of the ways that a writer or speaker and an audience interact, so that the writer in some ways *creates* an audience. But that creation is limited by discourse conventions. In this lecture, we will focus on the ways that the large-scale structure of an argument in great part determines whether or not it will be accepted by an audience.

Organization

It would seem to make sense to begin with the building blocks of an argument—words, sentences, grammar—and steadily increase the size of the pieces we are working with. It would seem that way, but along that path, madness lies. In fact, it is far more important to understand the large-scale *structure* of arguments, how they are put together as a whole, and *then* dig into the details of the pieces. When I grade papers, or when I listen to (and mentally critique) speeches, I am always taken by the fact that the speakers and writers are always very concerned with grammar or with figures or with one-liners, and they rarely recognize that most of these problems (and I really do mean most) come from flawed structure or what might be better called “organization.” How you organize something is going to determine to a great degree whether or not your ideas get across. So in this lecture we are going to look at a variety of forms of organization and discuss their strengths and weaknesses. I will start with writing, because although it is often harder to write than it is to speak, it is also often easier to see the structure in writing.

The Dreaded Five-Paragraph Essay

I want to start with what one of my colleagues calls “the dreaded five-paragraph essay.” This *may* be how many of you were trained to write, but it is hard to assume that any more. There are just as many scholars and teachers trashing the five-paragraph essay, saying that it is boring and terrible and mindless, as there are people defending it. But I teach the five-paragraph essay to my students anyway because it *works*. It is not the most creative structure, and you will not surprise anyone with it, but you will find that many, many great speeches and articles and essays actually use the five-paragraph structure. I am not going to so much *teach* it right now as explain how it works and hope that familiarity does the rest.

A five-paragraph essay is composed of an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. At the end of the introductory paragraph you have a thesis statement.

The Five-Paragraph Essay

INTRODUCTION

} So what?

THESIS STATEMENT

IMPORTANT IDEA #1

IMPORTANT IDEA #2

IMPORTANT IDEA #3

} BODY

CONCLUSION

} "The Big Picture"

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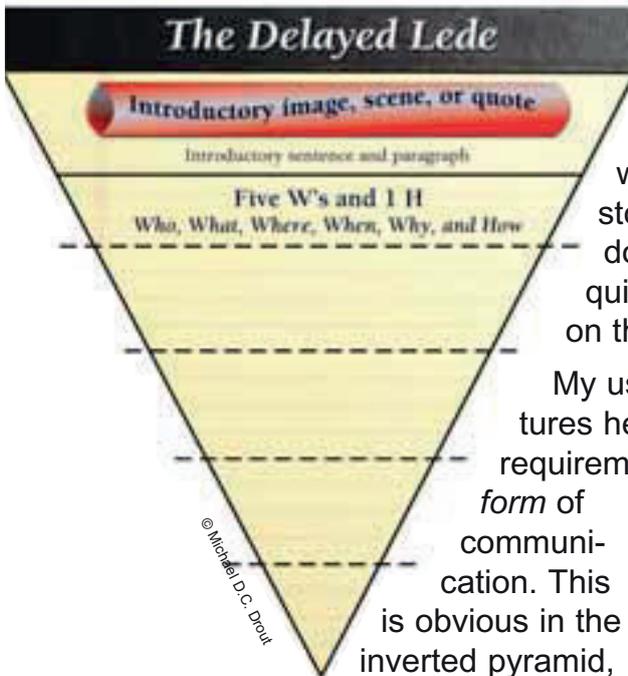
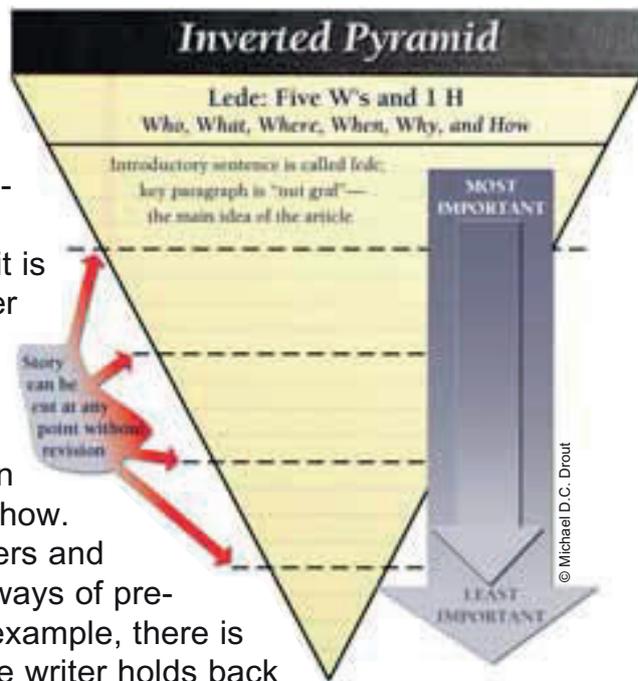
Then, in the three body paragraphs, you make three large points, one per paragraph (telegraphed in the thesis). Finally, for the conclusion, you show how all three body paragraphs fit together to support the thesis and then you end with "The Big Picture," or why it is important that your reader or hearer accept your argument. I am sure almost all of my listeners have written this kind of an essay. You can either see it as a straitjacket or as a very useful framework upon which you can build other things. I see it as both.

But the bigger rhetorical point is this: When you *use* this structure, you communicate seriousness: It is the standard form of an academic essay, and people respond to it. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and it follows the "rule of three," which is simply that people like things grouped into threes and they can remember them more easily.

But the five-paragraph essay is not by any means the only useful structure out there. There is a rhetorical structure to journalistic stories as well; in fact, there are several. The most famous is the "inverted pyramid," which was developed back when newspapers were laid out by hand. A writer would submit a certain number of column inches and the editor would physically cut the story with scissors in order to make it fit into the allotted space. "Inverted pyramid" structure organized all facts in the story in order of importance, so that what was lost at the end of the story was the least significant material.

This structure works admirably for some news stories because readers who are interested in further information can keep reading while other readers who stop early still get the most important information. But rhetorically it is not always effective, which is why other styles of story evolved.

The traditional newspaper story (including the inverted pyramid story) begins with the famous five w's and an h: who, what, where, when, why, and how. But because variation can make readers and hearers pay more attention, different ways of presenting this information evolved. For example, there is the "delayed lede," a story in which the writer holds back the five w's and an h until after giving an illustrative example.

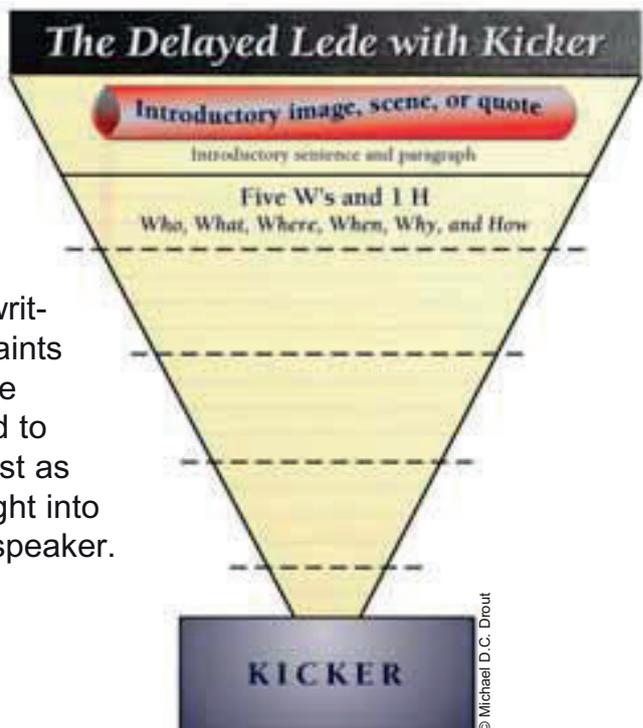


This structure is mirrored by the story that has the "kicker," a last line that gives new information or ties things up neatly. Note that the delayed lede can sometimes be used with the inverted pyramid but that the story with the "kicker" in the last line does not work as well with the kind of quick and dirty editing that can be used on the inverted pyramid.

My use of journalistic and academic structures here is meant to demonstrate how the requirements of a situation can structure the

form of communication. This is obvious in the inverted pyramid, which is structured

as it is to fulfill the needs of the editor. The strictures of rhetorical form also tend, paradoxically, to produce better writing: For some reason, the more constraints on a writer, the better the prose. But the form of writing should, ideally, be linked to the needs and desires of the reader, just as the form of speaking needs to be brought into line with the needs and desires of the speaker.



Sermons

The most thoroughly tested form in this area is, believe it or not, the sermon structure, which has been developed and polished for two millennia by some of the finest minds in Western culture. It is worth remembering that Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, and Yale were all founded for the express purpose of teaching young members of the clergy how to give effective sermons. Sermons, in England and America, were forms of popular entertainment and the situations in which most people encountered formal rhetoric. We see the structure of sermons used today in many political speeches and in other contexts as well.

The optimal structure for a sermon was finally worked out in the Middle Ages. Training to write and give such sermons was part of the *Ars Praedicandi*, the arts of preaching. There are thousands of medieval sermons (and even more from later periods) and most of them are unimaginably tedious. So I am going to turn to literature for what is supposedly the most perfect of all medieval sermons, Chaucer's "Pardoner's Tale."

Learned sermons contained six parts: (1) the theme (the speaker says what he is going to speak about), (2) the protheme, or introduction (in which the speaker references something from the Gospels), (3) the dilation on the text (in which the speaker *explains* what the Gospels mean), (4) the exemplum (the illustrative example, usually the most interesting part of the sermon), (5) the peroration (the application of the lesson, telling the reader what lesson to take away from the sermon), and (6) the closing formula (usually an exhortation to do good and a blessing of some kind). Chaucer's Pardoner does not in fact give a complete sermon, leaving out the most boring parts, the protheme and the dilation on the text. The lack of these less exciting sections are characteristic of popular rather than learned sermons.

Chaucer's Pardoner, one of the most intriguing and wicked characters in all of literature, begins his sermon by explaining how he will talk against the "tavern sins" of drunkenness, swearing, and gambling. He denounces these sins, pointing out how they all lead to disaster,

The Sermon

PROTHEME
Introduction: In a learned sermon, this is a reference to relevant Gospels

DILATION ON THE TEXT
Explains what the Gospel selection means

EXEMPLUM
Story, example from the world, not the Bible

PERORATION
Application of the Exemplum, moral of the story

CLOSING FORMULA
Blessing, invocation, charge to change behavior, request for money

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and quoting some of the key passages in the Bible that support his argument. He then turns to his *exemplum*, the story of the three drunken young men who decide to seek out Death and kill him. An old man tells them that they will find Death if they go down a crooked road. At the end of the road, they find much gold. One man is sent back to town to purchase wine to celebrate the find. While he is gone, the other two conspire to kill him when he returns. But when he is away, he decides to murder the other two by giving them poisoned wine. When he returns, the two others murder him, but then they drink the wine and die. Thus by going up the road, they have found death (rather than Death).

In the peroration, the Pardoner warns his hearers to avoid the sin of avarice (greed) and to see how it leads to death. Then he concludes with an offer of pardons for all of them.

You would be surprised how many absolutely contemporary political speeches have the same structure, though instead of going to the Bible for their commentary, they turn to texts like the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution. But the key is in fact the *exemplum*, the story. The minds of human beings are hard-wired to be interested in other human beings, and the brilliance of the structure of medieval sermons is that it allows a speaker *to tell a story* and then make that story have the point that the author wants. In fact, the biggest lesson of all rhetorical structures would be this: Find some way to tell a story. If you tell a story, about yourself or about someone else or even about your audience, you will get more attention and will be more likely to move the members of your audience in the direction you wish to move them.

Now that we understand various structures of arguments, we are ready to turn to their internal components, which must be in themselves constructed effectively in order to create the agreement that is the purpose of rhetorical speech or writing.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What is the “inverted pyramid”?
2. What comparisons can be drawn between medieval sermons and contemporary political speeches?

Suggested Reading

Zinsser, William K. *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006.

Other Books of Interest

Elbow, Peter. *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.