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Analysis and Critique: How to Engage and Write about Anything

Course Guidebook

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Professor Armstrong is the author of *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's "Morte d'Arthur"* (University Press of Florida, 2003) and *Sir Thomas Malory's "Morte Darthur": A New Modern English Translation Based on the Winchester Manuscript* (Parlor Press, 2009). Professor Armstrong is currently editor in chief of the academic journal *Arthuriana* and is at work on a critical study of geography in the late medieval Arthurian legend. ■

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Analysis and Critique: How to Engage and Write about Anything

Scope:

For thousands of years, writing has been a powerful way for us to share our thoughts and ideas. Even in the technologically saturated 21st century, we still express ourselves in writing almost every day. But all writing—whether it's an essay, a personal letter, or a detailed business report—is at its most effective and memorable when it's built on the fundamental critical and analytical skills that transform your words from good to great.

Regardless of your subject, your goal, or your occasion, this course will lead you on a path to more engaging and effective writing. One of the keys to effective writing is understanding literary genres and the ways their unique styles and characteristics can shape and inform your own voice. The first lectures of the course guide you through the five major literary genres: fiction, essay, poetry, drama, and autobiography.

From there, the focus shifts to the art of rhetoric and the ways it can help you adapt your writing to a variety of different situations. Some of the most applicable rhetorical concepts explored in this part of the course include deductive reasoning, commonplaces, and pathos. Your increased awareness of classical rhetoric will go a long way to helping you become a stronger writer by calling your attention to the basics of compelling analytical writing.

What about the act of writing itself, which can be daunting even to the most seasoned writer? The final section of the course is a step-by-step guide through the writing process that provides answers to frequently asked questions about each of writing's four major stages: researching, writing a first draft, editing, and rewriting. By the end of the course, you will know the feeling of having a masterful instructor standing right by your side as you learn to write about practically anything. ■

How to Write about Anything

Lecture 1

Pretty soon, you'll begin to grasp that what makes it possible to really engage with a piece of writing, to really understand and get inside it, is not simply coming up with answers to questions about the piece, but it's actually understanding what kinds of questions need to be asked in the first place.

If you are taking this course, then you are someone who cares about good writing—both how to appreciate it and how to produce it. Over the next 24 lectures, we'll explore several different strategies that will help you learn to read and think critically by examining important works from several major genres of writing. You'll also learn to use the reading methods and critical-thinking skills developed through the study of these genres to write more effectively for any occasion, situation, or goal.

Great writers are always great readers, so in this course we're going to spend a lot of time learning how to be active, engaged readers. And you're going to find out that this will help you to become an effective and persuasive writer.

Let's jump right in and take an example of a piece of writing and consider how or why it doesn't really work:

> They had but one last remaining night together, so they embraced each other as tightly as that two-flavor entwined string cheese that is orange and yellowish-white, the orange probably being a bland Cheddar and the white ... Mozzarella, although it could possibly be Provolone or just plain American, as it really doesn't taste distinctly dissimilar from the orange, yet they would have you believe it does by coloring it differently.

On reading this, what are your first impressions? I hope that your first reaction is that it is terrible writing, even ridiculous. This is deliberately bad writing—the 2003 winning entry from the annual Bulwer-Lytton bad writing contest. Most of us can recognize bad writing, but apart from deliberately

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Perfect, grammatically correct writing is not necessarily interesting or engaging.

bad pieces like the contest winner, we'd usually be slightly hard pressed to explain why the writing is bad, and what might be done to make it better. This course aims to help you both understand and recognize what makes writing good or bad, and then use that knowledge to produce strong and effective writing of your own.

The first unit of this course explores what the elements of successful writing are and how they depend on insightful reading, careful research, and rigorous analytical thinking. Successful writing requires us to develop active-analytical reading strategies (as opposed to passive-receptive reading habits). By examining excerpts from several novels and short stories, including the work of Jane Austen, Herman Melville, Edgar Allen Poe, and more contemporary writers, we'll learn how passive reading turns us into simple receivers of whatever a text has to offer (empirical information, emotional pleasure) while active, insightful reading empowers us to more effectively evaluate and interpret the meaning of what we read—making us better writers in the process.

Successful writing requires us to develop an effective and distinctive voice: a persona on paper that is both strong and flexible. We'll analyze the work of several well-known writers to learn how they create and develop their voices. We'll also study how these writers shift and modify their voices in response to changing circumstances or contexts, and how one writer often produces compelling writing in response to the work of another. We'll look at several examples of how authors anticipate, meet, and even shape readers' expectations.

Active, insightful reading empowers us to more effectively evaluate and interpret the meaning of what we read.

In addition, we'll examine the characteristics of powerful, persuasive prose to show you how to adapt and incorporate these strategies into your own writing. The essay is perhaps the richest and most varied genre for studying the characteristics of a good argument, and we'll study three classic essays from the English and American traditions to demonstrate effective strategies for starting, organizing, supporting, and concluding an argument. One of these essays is Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," which is subtitled: "For Preventing The Children of Poor People in Ireland From Being A Burden to Their Parents or Country, and For Making Them Beneficial to The Public," and which also includes the following lines:

> I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee or a ragout.

What is the first thing that comes to mind, besides the horrific image of parents cannibalizing their children? Well, the sheer ludicrousness of the idea, presented in such a formal, rational tone, is meant to provoke an extreme reaction. Writing, when it's done well, is never just words on a page—good writing invites interaction. The reader engages with the words, interacts with the language and ideas of the author.

While the writing of autobiography requires only that one mine one's own past for information, very often persuasive writing will demand that you do a little outside research—and cite that research appropriately—in order to make your point more effectively and persuasively. We'll address research issues in two lectures later in the course. The lectures on research will include segments on the effective and ethical use of online research tools, and special attention will be devoted to the evaluation and application of material discovered through Internet-based searches.

The final portion of the course deals with the writing and revision process. By the time you finish this course, you'll possess a set of rewriting tools that will allow you to assess both minor and major editing comments and decide if and how you want to implement suggestions for revision. The course also includes a lecture that examines 10 common errors in grammar and usage. It explains the rationale for certain grammatical constructions and conventions so you'll know when something is incorrect, and why.

So even though this lecture is introductory in nature, you're already on your way to becoming a better reader and writer. As we continue on in this course, you will gain increased ability to recognize good writing and to produce powerful writing yourself. ■

Suggested Reading

Barnet and Cain, *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature*.

Gardner, *Writing about Literature*.

Griffith, *Writing Essays about Literature*.

Guerin et al., *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*.

Harmon and Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*.

Kennedy and Gioia, *Literature*.

Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz, *Everything's an Argument*.

Roberts, *Writing about Literature*.

Exercise

1. Consider the passages below, and try to determine what makes them good writing. Is it the style, a certain vocabulary, a particularly vivid image? Jot down a list of things that you find striking or engaging, and try to determine why.

> The former tenant of our house, a priest, had died in the back drawing room. Air, musty from having been long enclosed, hung in all the rooms, and the waste room behind the kitchen was littered with old useless papers. Among these I found a few paper-covered books, the pages of which were curled and damp. ... The wild garden behind the house contained a central apple-tree and a few straggling bushes under one of which I found the late tenant's rusty bicycle-pump. He had been a very charitable priest; in his will he had left all his money to institutions and the furniture of his house to his sister. —James Joyce, *Araby*

> The great pullman was whirling onward with such dignity of motion that a glance from the window seemed simply to prove that the plains of Texas were pouring eastward. Vast flats of green grass, dull-hued spaces of mesquit and cactus, little groups of frame houses, woods of light and tender trees, all were sweeping into the east, sweeping over the horizon, a precipice. —Stephen Crane, "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky"

> Although it was so brilliantly fine—the blue sky powdered with gold and great spots of light like white wine splashed over the Jardins Publiques—Miss Brill was glad that she had decided on her fur. The air was motionless, but when you opened your mouth there was a faint chill, like a chill from a glass of iced water before you sip, and now and again a leaf came drifting—from nowhere, from the sky. —Katherine Mansfield, "Miss Brill"

How to Be an Effective Reader

Lecture 2

Almost anything can be read or interpreted insightfully—from long-acclaimed works of literature to the most mundane set of directions from one place to another.

In analyzing a piece of writing, you may start with reactions such as "I like it" or "I don't like it," but you don't want to stop there. These initial reactions are what I call precritical responses. The difference between a reader who is simply interested and one who is deeply engaged can be found in if and how those readers move beyond those precritical responses to think about how and why a particular piece of writing affects them in certain ways. Moving beyond the precritical can allow you to appreciate even writing that you might not really like. It can help you recognize the writer's skill, appreciate the effort the writer made, and admire the emotions he or she is able to make you feel.

Let's talk about a precritical response and how you can move beyond it so that you can become a more engaged reader. Remember, the key to becoming a competent writer lies first in being an attentive reader. So, let's take a famous passage and see what we can make out of it. Here are the opening lines of Herman Melville's classic *Moby Dick*:

> Call me Ishmael. Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen, and regulating the circulation.
>
> Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street,

and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can.

When I teach *Moby Dick*, I always ask students to give me an initial, precritical response to this passage. I want them to think about what feelings it gave them. Some students tell me, "I liked it" or "I didn't get what he was saying half the time." I'm always happy to get a student who says, "I'm excited to read the rest." Those are all precritical responses, so let's move past them and find out, using critical skills of engagement, why you might have any one of those reactions and how we can use those reactions as a starting point to achieve a deeper understanding of the text.

Let's start with those of you who responded with some version of "I liked it." Why did you like it? Well, for one thing, there's something powerful about the use of the first person and direct address, and the first three words of this text convey that this will be a work that does both. "Call me Ishmael"—the writer, or speaker, however we might imagine him, is talking directly to you, his audience, and telling you what to do. He goes on from there to tell you something about himself in the first person. This can be one of the easiest and most effective ways to grab your reader's attention—we all like to hear stories, and generally speaking, a first-person narrative gives us a deeply personal account that can be especially enthralling in that it allows us to see into the mind of another person.

A useful thing to remember when you're composing your own writing is that ... your audience can't immediately interact with you in the present moment, so above all you should strive for clarity.

But what about a more negative precritical response, such as "I didn't get what he was saying half the time"? Those of us living in 21st-century America probably don't have any idea what hypos are—nor do we commonly come across coffin warehouses, or funeral processions into which you could easily join. And very few people wear hats these days, so the idea of expressing your discontent by stepping into the street and knocking them off of people's heads just seems bizarre.

But we can learn something important from this seeming disorientation. It tells us that we are in a world that is not 21st-century America, and the very strangeness of the narrator's attitude and behavior in relation to our modern sensibilities helps contribute to a sense of having escaped to a different time and place. Finally, the tone, style, and this wry comment on hypos (which likely refers to melancholy) and knocking people's hats off their heads also has a little bit of humor about it—at the very least, we know we're in for a story that's not going to be totally devoid of light moments. Through careful reading, what at first seems like a rather impenetrable passage can, in fact, allow us to get into the work and understand something about the setting of the story and the characters who inhabit it.

You've already learned a little something about insightful reading and how it can enhance our understanding and our enjoyment of the written word. If you recognize powerful, clever, nuanced moments in a variety of written texts as a reader, you'll soon start to be able to work these into your own writing. A useful thing to remember when you're composing your own writing is that

The Benefits of Rereading

A piece of writing has several lives—at least two and potentially many more—and this is something you should be thinking of as you are working on your own writing.

The first life of a piece of writing is when you read it the first time, when you experience it as a brand-new text that you've never encountered before. The second life of a piece of writing occurs when you consider and then reflect on what it is you've just read—you may think of words that struck you in particular; certain details; and whether the piece is written in the first or the third person, set in the past or the present, or any one of several other aspects.

The third—and to my mind, arguably the most interesting—life of the text is the last one. After you've read it once, reflected on the text, and then read it again, you read through it yet again, armed with your precritical response and perhaps a few insights that you've gleaned from your initial read-through. This third life of the text is when you can really start to apply the principles of insightful reading.

with the written word, your audience can't immediately interact with you in the present moment, so above all you should strive for clarity. You should anticipate questions or moments of confusion, and you should consider the self-image you're conveying to your audience. How are they going to interpret you and your personality based on what you've written? ■

Suggested Reading

Barnet and Cain, *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature*.

Carpenter, *Reading Lessons*.

Gardner, *Writing about Literature*.

Griffith, *Writing Essays about Literature*.

Guerin et al., *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*.

Harmon and Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*.

Kennedy and Gioia, *Literature.*

Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz, *Everything's an Argument*.

Lynn, *Literature*.

McLaughlin and Coleman, *Everyday Theory*.

Roberts, *Writing about Literature*.

Exercises

1. Consider the three excerpts below and practice some of the techniques of insightful reading we've explored in this lecture. For each, try to determine the setting (time and place) and mood of the story (is it humorous? gloomy?) and make a list of words and phrases that stand out and that careful attention to which can help you find a way of engaging with the text.

> With this excellent resolve for the future, Goodman Brown felt himself justified in making more haste on his present evil purpose. He had taken a dreary road, darkened by all the gloomiest trees of

the forest, which barely stood aside to let the narrow path creep through, and closed immediately behind. It was all as lonely as could be; and there is this peculiarity in such a solitude, that the traveller knows not who may be concealed by the innumerable trunks and the thick boughs overhead; so that, with lonely footsteps he may yet be passing through an unseen multitude. —Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown"

Maman-Nainaine said that when the figs were ripe Babette might go to visit her cousins down on the Bayou-Lafourche where the sugar cane grows. Not that the ripening of figs had the least thing to do with it, but that is the way Maman-Nainaine was. It seemed to Babette a very long time to wait; for the leaves upon the trees were tender yet, and the figs were like little hard, green marbles. —Kate Chopin "Ripe Figs"

At the foot of these fairy mountains the voyager may have descried the light smoke curling up from a village whose shingle roofs gleam among the trees, just where the blue tints of the upland melt away into the fresh green of the nearer landscape. It is a little village of great antiquity, having been founded by some of the Dutch colonists, in the early times of the province, just about the beginning of the government of the good Peter Stuyvesant (may he rest in peace!), and there were some of the houses of the original settlers standing within a few years, with lattice windows, gable fronts surmounted with weathercocks, and built of small yellow bricks brought from Holland. —Washington Irving, "Rip Van Winkle"

2. Consider the list of words and phrases you made in exercise 1. Now, try your hand at rewriting each passage by substituting different words for those you've identified as key for engaging with the text. (What happens if you replace "Maman-Nainaine" with "Grandma" in the passage from "Ripe Figs"? How about if "fairy mountains" in "Rip Van Winkle" is replaced with "solid hills"?) What changes can be effected with just a few word substitutions?

How Literature Can Help

Lecture 3

It's always possible that your audience has only the time or inclination to read your piece of writing once, so you have to make that one time really count.

One of the basics of engaging with writing—as either an author or a reader—is to understand the genre, or type, of writing it is. An awareness of conventions of style, subject matter, and how other elements fit with a piece's perceived genre can help you become more keenly attuned to your own writing and help you to pay attention to considerations like the expectations of your audience. In this lecture, we focus on five major types of writing: poetry, drama, prose, essay, and autobiography. We'll explore the dominant features of each and then learn how understanding these features and their differences can make us better readers and thus better writers.

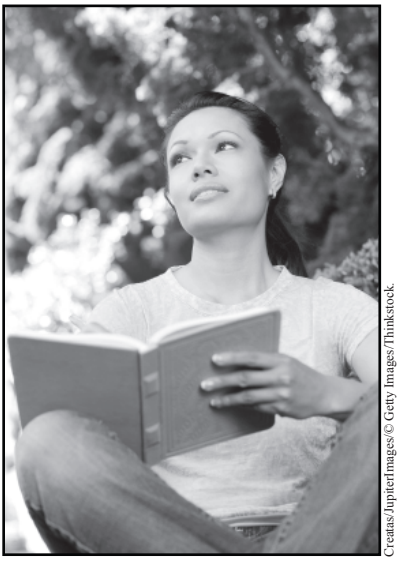
So if we have to briefly define each of these genres, what would we say? We might say that poetry is a form of writing that uses language in unexpected ways—by rhyming, by use of rhythm, or simply by patterning the language in unconventional forms.

The simplest way to define drama is to call it something that is performed in front of an audience. In a drama, we have to rely wholly on what we see and hear as an audience to make sense of the story: What the characters say and how they say it are what we use to determine state of mind, the relationships between them, and the plot of the drama that's unfolding. We have to also suspend our disbelief and imagine that somehow we are looking through what's often called the fourth wall—that which divides the audience from the actors on stage.

Prose fiction is perhaps the genre of writing most familiar to us. Types of writing that tell some kind of story—novels, short stories—are found everywhere. Within the genre of fiction we have all sorts of subgenres:

mystery, thriller, romance, historical fiction, science fiction, fantasy—the list goes on and on.

The essay is also quite easy to define in its broadest strokes—it is a piece of writing that seeks to persuade and inform, to support a particular position. Autobiography is quite simply the story of a life, told by the person who has lived it. As we've already seen, all of these genres might overlap with one another in interesting and provocative ways.



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By reading from various genres, you can learn conventions that can help you produce more engaging writing.

As a writer, you needn't limit yourself to the conventions of a single genre. You can use various conventions of writing in conjunction with one another to try and make a more powerful argument, or simply craft a more engaging piece of writing. But at the same time, just because you know how to employ the conventions of all of these genres doesn't mean that you should do that all at once.

As a writer, you needn't limit yourself to the conventions of a single genre.

Sometimes restraint can be the most effective strategy of all. You want to engage your audience, not completely overwhelm them, and while it may be impressive that you can work in a variety of genres, a display of this ability might not get you to your ultimate goal. The more you write, the more you will learn to walk this fine line between effective display and use of your writerly knowledge and simply showing off—something that is likely to turn off your audience and not help you in achieving your ultimate goal. ■

An Exercise in Using Multiple Genres

Let's consider how knowledge of the conventions of these various genres might be used to enhance something as mundane as a protest letter written to the local city council about something as commonplace as a leash law for dogs. Consider the following letter:

> Dear City Council:
>
> I am writing to ask that you consider establishing an off-leash area of the park for local dogs. Many other communities have designated off-leash areas for the pets of citizens, and these are usually carefully monitored and have strict rules about interaction between animals and cleaning up after them. This would be a positive thing for both the dogs and their owners. Thank you for considering this request.

Let's consider how we might punch this up a bit to make it more persuasive. First, let's think about how we might use conventions of poetry to grab the reader's attention. Perhaps we could find a more interesting choice of words to refer to the dogs, since they are the main focus of the letter. We could begin the letter with something like, "It is not for nothing that dogs are often referred to as 'man's best friend.' These furry, four-legged friends provide companionship and love to their owners." Here we have another poetic flourish in our use of alliteration in the second sentence.

From what other genres might we borrow? Autobiography seems to be obvious, as the writer of this letter would most likely not be in favor of doing something nice for dogs if she did not have some positive experience with dogs herself. Perhaps a line like, "As a dog owner for many years, and having lived in many different communities, I have seen first-hand how off-leash areas in parks are beneficial to dogs and provide members of the community—even those who are not dog owners themselves—a chance to enjoy watching these friendliest of animals romp, play, and interact with one another."

What about drama and fiction; could we bring those in? Well, we certainly could, but one thing we always need to consider as we work toward becoming engaging and effective writers is that you *can* have too much of a good thing. For example, you could add an imagined dialogue between the owner and his dog:

> Dog: "Oh please please please please could I run and play in this beautiful park?"
>
> Owner: "I would love to let you, but the law says I have to keep you on the leash."
>
> Dog: "But it makes me so happy to run free. And you have trained me not to jump on other people or dogs, and I know that you always pick up after me."
>
> Owner: "I know, buddy. I'm sorry that the city council members are such jerks."

This dramatic exchange is definitely attention grabbing. The argument is clear, succinct, and meant to play on our emotions. The emotional appeal can be a powerful one, but what's the drawback here? Some of the audience might find this approach a little odd and off-putting, and certainly no one likes to be told—even if it is in an imagined dramatic dialogue between a person and a dog—that your policy makes you a jerk.

Would employing conventions of fiction work better? Maybe. The above dramatic exchange could be rewritten to read more like a story, in which the owner of the dog looks at his pet and imagines him thinking the things he has him say in the dramatic monologue. Maybe he describes his "sad, wistful eyes" as he looks over the grassy field in the park; perhaps the author describes how he whines softly, how his ears twitch eagerly, how he looks hopefully up at his owner, wishing that he might be let off the leash just this once.

One thing that you will of necessity become quite skilled at as you work on your writing skills is knowing when to discriminate. Sometimes less is more, and the last thing you want to have happen is to have your main message become obscured by rhetorical flourishes that can overwhelm what it is you are trying to say.

Suggested Reading

Barnet and Cain, *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature*.

Carpenter, *Reading Lessons*.

DiYanni, *Literature*.

Gardner, *Writing about Literature*.

Griffith, *Writing Essays about Literature*.

Guerin et al., *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*.

Harmon and Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*.

Kennedy and Gioia, *Literature.*

Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz, *Everything's an Argument*.

McLaughlin and Coleman, *Everyday Theory*.

Roberts, *Writing about Literature*.

Exercises

1. Consider the following three passages and try to determine to what genre—poetry, prose, drama, autobiography, or essay—they belong. What are the elements of each that provide you with clues and help you make that determination?

I had made it to the shelter none too soon—the air was starting to feel damp, and I knew the rain was coming. I climbed the ladder and heaved myself onto the platform, and then almost lost my grip and fell backward; there was someone already there. "Careful!" he said and reached for my hand. It was Finn, my brother's friend. I let him help me up. "Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"This is my place," I said. It came out meaner, more accusatory than I had intended. "I mean, I usually wait for the storm up here."

"Sorry," he said again. "I didn't realize."

We looked at each other awkwardly for a moment. "That's all right," I said, "you can stay if you want."

The flames came
Over the brim of the world
A terrible, hungry sunrise
That ate and ate the earth
Well into the sleeve of night
And out the other side

Laura: "It won't be long now. Here, give me that."
Edie: "What do you want that for?"
Laura: "It helps with the pain. Maybe. Can't make it any worse."
Edie: "Does it hurt now?"
Laura: "Just every five to seven minutes."
Edie: "What should I do?"
Laura: "Go and get your grandmother." *Cries out*.
Edie: "Are you sure I should go?"
Laura: "Better now than five minutes from now. I think this baby's coming sooner rather than later."

2. As you may have determined, the first example is prose, the second is poetry, and the third is drama. Now, try and revise each of those examples, moving them from one genre to another (for example, try to make a poem out of the prose selection; take the drama selection and rewrite it so that it reads like prose). What did you discover in trying to make these changes? Did you have to invent details? Add description? Change words to be more or less "poetic"?

Shaping Your Voice

Lecture 4

The trick, as a writer, is to know for whom you're writing and what it is you're trying to convey.

In this lecture, we narrow our focus to prose fiction. In particular, we examine the issue of voice—this is sometimes called tone, style, or even diction. Voice is a critical component of any kind of writing, from the formal essay, to the letter to the editor, to the note you leave on your neighbor's windshield asking him please not to park in front of your driveway.

Let's consider the distinctive voice of a writer whose style is one of the most famous and most easily identifiable: Ernest Hemingway. His short story "Hills Like White Elephants" begins as follows:

> The hills across the valley of the Ebro were long and white. On this side there was no shade and no trees and the station was between two lines of rails in the sun. Close against the side of the station there was the warm shadow of the building and a curtain, made of strings of bamboo beads, hung across the open door into the bar, to keep out flies. The American and the girl with him sat at a table in the shade, outside the building.

Voice is a critical component of any kind of writing.

What is the adjective that comes to mind if you try to describe Hemingway's style in a single word? One descriptor that comes up often when critics talk about Hemingway is "spare"; "simple" and "clean" are other words often used to describe Hemingway's style. Hemingway's voice engages the audience by what we might call writing by indirection. His style is deliberately simplistic—some might say maddeningly so—but is a distinctive choice that marks his writing out from so many others'.

In this story, he describes the scene, what the characters say to one another, and some other details—like the strings of bamboo beads. But the reader is forced to fill in gaps, to try and figure out what the real story is about, since Hemingway does not tell us what any of the characters are thinking or feeling or give much description of their nonverbal behavior. For example, this opening doesn't say anything about how the man and woman look—are they excited to be going somewhere? Are they slouched in their chairs? We've got to work it out for ourselves as we read.

One of the most famous literary voices from the last hundred years must be that of J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield. Consider the following two versions of an opening statement from the main character of *The Catcher in the Rye*:

> Most likely, you will want to know my history—the details of my birth and adolescence, what it was like to grow up with distant parents, and other similar matters—but I would actually rather not discuss that part of my life.

Now consider this version:

> If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth.

Both of these passages have a particular voice, but one is arguably stronger, more arresting, more engaging than the other. Why is this the case? They both speak directly to the reader, as if Holden were having a conversation with him or her, and thus, they are arguably both very engaging from the start. And if you were to consider, on the basis of these sentences alone, which of these speakers you'd like to invite over to your house for dinner, most of us would pick the speaker of the first passage. Although he declines to tell the reader about himself, he does so rather politely.

The second speaker, on the other hand, comes across as somewhat emotional and angry. He uses coarse language, modifying the mention of his childhood with words like "lousy" and "crap," and the sarcastic mention of David Copperfield suggests a distaste for stories of the rags-to-riches variety. In other words, he seems unhappy, cynical, and maladjusted. Although you probably wouldn't want to have him as a houseguest, you probably are more interested in reading the story told by the second speaker than the first.

The second speaker has a realness and grittiness in his voice that makes his story compelling. There's a reason that polite, diligent, hard-working people rarely have unauthorized biographies written about them—it's just not as interesting to most readers as a life that is somewhat unconventional, in which the subject breaks rules or engages in bad behavior.

Choosing a certain kind of diction or sentence style contributes to the voice of a piece of writing, and by examining some famous writers and analyzing the voices they've constructed, you've gotten some idea of how important voice can be, and how just a few words or a certain arrangement can create certain expectations in your reader. ■

Suggested Reading

Barnet and Cain, *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature*.

Carpenter, *Reading Lessons*.

DiYanni, *Literature*.

Gardner, *Writing about Literature*.

Griffith, *Writing Essays about Literature*.

Guerin et al., *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*.

Kennedy and Gioia, *Literature.*

McLaughlin and Coleman, *Everyday Theory*.

Roberts, *Writing about Literature*.

Exercises

Consider the following information: "On December 12, Aloyisia H. Society and Gerard Dashing were married at the Ourtown Country Club. The bride wore a pink wedding gown with green accents. The groom wore a white tuxedo and high-top sneakers. There were 400 people in attendance. The bride had 12 bridesmaids, and the groom had five groomsmen. Because of a catering accident, there was no food at the reception. The DJ did not show up, so the bride's younger brother provided music for dancing with his harmonica. After learning of the catering accident, the best man ordered 50 pizzas from A1 Pizza Delivery. When the pizzas arrived, the best man and the groom's father had a brief argument as to who would pay for them. The best man tried to punch the groom's father but accidentally hit the bride instead. The bride and groom left the reception early to retire to the honeymoon suite at their hotel."

1. Rewrite the passage so that it sounds as if the words are being spoken by a 14-year-old girl talking to her friends.

2. Rewrite the same information so that it reads as if it is being conveyed by that girl's mother to her father.

3. Now imagine that a member of Congress is stating these facts in front of a panel of high-ranking government officials, and rewrite the passage again.

4. Revise so that this same information reads as it would if a father was explaining this to his six-year-old son.

5. Now imagine how the six-year-old would tell his best friend.

Knowing Your Reader

Lecture 5

Melville actually changed the ending in the American edition of *Moby Dick* so that Ishmael survived. Although perhaps he didn't properly anticipate audience reaction with the first version, his decision to actually change the outcome of his story demonstrates the power of an audience and the need to be attentive to them and their demands.

In our last lecture, we started to talk about the genre of fiction, and how important voice is. A cleverly constructed voice can tell you something about the characters of a story or the author of a magazine article. In this lecture, we discuss the other side of that coin: the importance of knowing your reader, and how to identify and, indeed, construct an audience. One of the most important factors in good writing is the writer's understanding of the nature of his or her audience. Perhaps even more important is understanding what particular information you need or want to convey to your audience. In other words, you have to know what you want to say, how you want to say it, and why you want to say it.

We're going to start by analyzing some pieces of writing to deduce the intended audience. We'll try to determine how writers construct an audience and convey respect for the audience—or fail to do so—and what the consequences of that may be.

Let's consider a piece of writing that both establishes a strong narrator's voice and constructs an audience, the opening of the classic short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. This is a

Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-106490.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman constructs her audience and creates a strong voice through her character's diary in "The Yellow Wallpaper."

story of a woman going mad. She and her family have rented a home in the country to try and find some sort of "rest cure" for what is ailing her, and the premise is that we, the reader, are looking over her shoulder at her diary.

She chronicles the time spent in this house, and over time, we are able to watch her descent into insanity as we read her words. Here's the opening:

> It is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer. A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house and reach the height of romantic felicity—but that would be asking too much of fate! … There comes John, and I must put this away—he hates to have me write a word.

So what do we make of this? We have a first person speaker who engages the audience by creating the sense of a conversation, and we are drawn in to the story by the fact that there's something fascinating about reading something meant to be private (her diary). The audience is even further drawn in by the fact of how we are witnessing a woman descending into madness while she herself seems unaware. The story gets weirder and weirder as it continues, with the main character describing how she sees a woman hiding in the pattern of the wallpaper of her room. In the narrator's words, this woman she sees "creeps" around the room at night.

At the climax of the story, she locks herself in the room with the dreadful wallpaper, and then we read the following words:

> Why there's John at the door! It is no use young man, you can't open it! How he does call and pound! Now he's crying to Jennie for an axe. It would be a shame to break down that beautiful door!

What are our reactions to those lines? Well the final line, about how it would be a shame to break down such a beautiful door, helps secure audience reaction in that it suggests how detached she is from reality if her husband is trying to break down the door and she doesn't consider why this might be. It really drives home how altered her mental state is.

But as good as this story is, it doesn't quite respect the audience as much as it should. Can you guess why? Is there anything that strikes you as wrong, or kind of a false note? Well, first of all, Gilman has hit upon a clever strategy to engage the audience—by creating the idea that we are reading the diary of a woman as she goes insane. But once we've got that premise established, it is a problem when we reach the climax of the story. Do we really think that the main character is pausing to write these sentences? What's happened here, clearly, is that we've gone from reading the main character's diary to reading her mind. We get the sense that the author was either hoping we just wouldn't notice or else that given the story's other strengths, we'd forgive her this one mistake. Either way, we as an audience might feel a little like the author wasn't offering us her full respect.

So we've talked about respecting your audience, but we should also be aware of how our writing constructs an audience—how our tone, our word choice, our style all signal whom the piece of writing is intended for. For example, let's consider two pieces of writing that convey the same pieces of information but are intended for vastly different audiences. These two quotes both describe the victory of William the Conqueror at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. Here's the first quote:

> The factors that led to William's victory are multiple and range from the mundane to the fantastic. Events quotidian and epic, natural and artificial, converged with extraordinary moments of luck, coincidence, poor planning and misfortune to produce a final conflict that seems as if it could have been lifted directly from the pages of Homer or Virgil.

Let's try to describe the intended audience for this passage. This piece of writing is a little bit long, with subclauses and more elevated diction. The syntax of the sentences—with their repetitive pairing of opposing ideas like "quotidian and epic, natural and artificial"—shows that the writer is consciously demonstrating his or her facility with language. The choice of words like "quotidian" indicates that this may be writing by and for those who are highly educated. Another clue about the intended audience is the final line, which references the works of the classical poets Homer and Virgil.

So who is the intended audience for this first passage? We can probably agree that the writer expects the readers to be highly educated, with knowledge of classical works. The seriousness of the tone also suggests that the readers are expected to be people who are at least dedicated amateur historians and possibly scholars conducting research on the topic of William the Conqueror and the Battle of Hastings. Here's a description of that same event in different form:

> William's conquest seemed unlikely at first, but a series of events—ranging from bad weather to bad luck—resulted in his surprising victory. The details of what happened make for a great story; it's one you'll never forget.

Obviously, this second passage is written a little more simply, and seems to be intended for a more general audience, one that maybe is only slightly interested in the topic or is new to this kind of historical reading. The author's approach here seems to be intended to draw people in, to intrigue them—the use of words like "luck," "surprising," and the final phrase "it's a story you'll never forget" all work to try and get the reader interested and to keep reading. The author seems to be saying here that historical information can be entertaining if it's presented in the right way. By contrast, the first passage seems to take as a given that the audience is already interested in the topic.

When you write, you construct not only an authorial persona, but you also construct an audience.

The second example is more simply written with more accessible language, but at the same time, it is not writing down to the potential audience. It writes *to* that audience, which seems to be imagined as a broad range of the population, anywhere from elementary school to adulthood. The second passage says, to almost anyone who starts reading it, "this could be written for me."

A chief lesson here is the idea that when you write, you construct not only an authorial persona, but you also construct an audience. No matter if you're writing the great American novel or a letter to the editor, on some level you have an idea of to whom you're writing. As the example of Charlotte

Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" shows, you can create a fictional idea of audience within whatever piece you're creating, which can add to the interest and engagement of the actual audience. But perhaps the most important lesson here is to always respect your audience. ■

Suggested Reading

Barnet and Cain, *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature*.

DiYanni, *Literature*.

Gardner, *Writing about Literature*.

Griffith, *Writing Essays about Literature*.

Guerin et al., *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*.

Kennedy and Gioia, *Literature.*

McLaughlin and Coleman, *Everyday Theory*.

Roberts, *Writing about Literature*.

Exercises

Your beloved Uncle Wilfred has died at the ripe age of 98. During his lifetime, he attended Youngblood Academy, served in the navy, married Aunt Sylvie, had three children—Ella, Peter, and David—and taught high school science. How and how much of this information would you convey to the following audiences.

1. An obituary in the local paper?

2. A letter to a good friend of yours who had met him on several occasions?

3. The Scholarship Committee, a body that you would like to see create a scholarship in his memory?

4. A former navy buddy of his who has not yet been informed of his death?

Try writing practice paragraphs to each of these audiences.

The Art of the Essay—How to Start

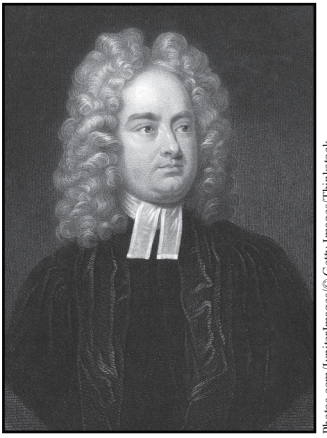
Lecture 6

You want to make your opening as effective and engaging as possible so that people will keep reading.

In this lecture—and the three that follow it—we'll look more closely at methods for securing the kind of responses you want for your writing. We'll do this by shifting our focus to the ways successful arguments are constructed: how to open an argument as well as how to organize, support, and conclude it.

We'll start by evaluating and critiquing the opening of one of the most famous argumentative essays in the English literary tradition: Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," in which Swift sets up a satirical argument that the Irish should adopt a policy of eating their own children as a solution to the problems of widespread poverty and hunger. Here's his first sentence:

> It is a melancholy object to those who walk through this great town or travel in the country, when they see the streets, the roads, and cabin doors, crowded with beggars of the female sex, followed by three, four, or six children, all in rags and importuning every passenger for alms.



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Jonathan Swift, whose satirical essay is a model of effective argumentation.

We haven't gotten to the satirical suggestion yet, but we do see in these opening lines a very successful blend of description and explanation that will subsequently serve as the foundation for his argument. You know from this single sentence what the problem is and why it's a topic worth making an argument about. So

right away, Swift has our attention and probably our sympathy. He proceeds to add both specificity and substance to his opening:

> Whoever could find out a fair, cheap, and easy method of making these children sound, useful members of the commonwealth, would deserve so well of the public as to have his statue set up for a preserver of the nation.

Here we have a specific articulation of what's at stake—nothing less than the future of the commonwealth! So now we understand the problem, and we've been given some idea of how grateful the whole British Empire would be to the person who found a solution—you can imagine that in the minds of the reader, ideas for possibilities for becoming this savior are starting to churn. As we'll see, Swift's tongue is planted more-or-less firmly in cheek at this point, but he's clearly demonstrated an effective strategy for opening an argument: description of the topic at hand and explanation of its importance.

Right away, Swift has our attention and probably our sympathy.

I also want you to notice that Swift doesn't lard his opening with melodramatic, universal claims or unnecessary generalities. In other words, he doesn't waste time trying to make his subject seem important by giving us vague, empty statements such as "Hunger is a serious problem that needs to be solved." While these kinds of general claims may have some element of truth to them, they don't do anything to establish the importance of this particular argument about this particular instance of poverty and hunger. By firmly fixing his argument in a specific time and place and making a substantial claim about what's at stake, Swift gives his audience a compelling reason to keep reading.

I'd also like to point out the degree and type of details Swift includes in his opening. We get some indication of how bad the situation is (the children are dressed in rags), but he holds off on giving us a full-scale account of the horrors. He recognizes that an effective opening requires only a few, carefully chosen, details; they must add substance to the introduction but not

become the main focus of the reader's attention. Here's what he says a few lines later:

> I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee or a ragout.

So what, then, is the "modest proposal" of Swift's title? Why, to have the Irish eat their own children of course! Obviously, this is a satirical essay, and he's actually commenting on the other offensive proposals that have been put forth to deal with the desperate situation of the Irish at the time. But for all its satire, Swift's essay is a model of effective argumentation, and we can learn a lot from examining it more closely.

So let's see if we can use Swift's strategy to make our own openings more effective; in other words, let's see if we can craft an introduction to an argument that balances a specific description of a topic with a substantial explanation of its significance. And let's see if we can do it without falling back on generalizations or distracting details.

Imagine you've submitted a request to your health insurance provider for coverage of a particular medical procedure—only to have that claim denied as medically unnecessary. You need to craft an appeal letter to your insurer that offers a compelling argument. Let's focus on just the first four or five sentences. Your goal should be to balance a description of your situation with an explanation of its importance. Here's an example of what *not* to do when faced with this kind of writing task:

> I am suffering from a skin condition which started during an especially stressful project at work (I am currently on medical leave because of this condition). My primary-care physician, prescribed a corticosteroid, but it didn't work. I recently got in to see a dermatologist, and she prescribed a UV-light treatment. I submitted a claim for this treatment, but it was rejected as medically unnecessary. I am requesting an expedited review of the decision.

What are the drawbacks here? First, while the writer does provide specific details, they end up describing a personal medical history rather than the main problem at hand. A few personal medical details are useful in this situation, but too many distract from the writer's main goal. Also, while the writer does try to explain that the skin condition is a significant problem and that its cause may have something to do with stress, we come away with no clear idea of what's at stake in this particular instance. Let's try rewriting these first few lines:

> I'm writing to appeal your denial of coverage of a UV-light treatment for a diagnosed skin condition; this treatment was prescribed by my dermatologist. Your denial states that the procedure is medically unnecessary. I am requesting an expedited review of this case as I am currently on medical leave from my job due to the above-mentioned skin condition and will be unable to return until I receive treatment.

This version provides fewer personal medical details, but the ones that are included are specifically relevant to the problem of denial of coverage. They do not distract from the primary purpose of the letter. We also receive a clearer sense of what's at stake and thus have more persuasive evidence for an expedited review of the case. In a case like this, the opening can make or break you. Don't start out bland and vague and save the firepower for several paragraphs later—you've got to persuade your reader early on that at the very least, it is worth it to keep reading. ■

Suggested Reading

Griffith, *Writing Essays about Literature*.

Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz, *Everything's an Argument*.

Ramage, Bean, and Johnson, *Writing Arguments*.

Exercises

1. Imagine you've submitted a claim to your health insurance provider for a particular clinical procedure only to have that claim denied as

"medically unnecessary." Draft the opening two paragraphs of an appeal letter meant to convince your insurer that the procedure must be covered. Try to balance a specific description of the situation with an explanation of its importance. Avoid general or universal claims. Gauge the effectiveness of your opening by using the "what?/so what?" litmus test discussed in the lecture.

2. Look at the introduction to an old e-mail you've written—one that attempts to make an argument about something—and measure its effectiveness using the "what?/so what?" litmus test. Then use the strategies and examples we've studied to help draft a more specific and substantial version of that introduction. Use the "what?/so what?" test to determine if your new version is more powerful and persuasive than the original.

How to Organize an Argument

Lecture 7

[A sequence or series], like all devices, has to be used with restraint. If you do too many sequences, you might as well be writing a grocery list.

Our last lecture dealt with introductions, but even the strongest introduction can't save a written argument that lacks coherence. By examining how arguments are structured and presented, you'll learn how to more effectively guide your readers from one point to the next and how to avoid structural flaws that may obscure your argument. In order to do this, we spend some more time with Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal."

How do you organize a piece of writing? You might have lots of things you want to say and no clue how to get those things onto the page in coherent form. With some kinds of writing, a chronological structure works well—you start at the beginning and go on to the end. But sometimes, the most important parts of a text might be in the middle, and you don't want your readers to have to hunt for them. Another perfectly acceptable way to organize an argument is the basic five-paragraph model, expanded as necessary. In this model, your first paragraph states your main claim; paragraphs two, three, and four (or however many you need) each offer supporting points for that idea; and the final paragraph reiterates your main claim.

These approaches can work well as a basic argumentative structure, but I've found that the best way to guide your readers is to establish the key terms of your argument as early as possible and then return to and expand on those ideas throughout the piece. This kind of approach can easily work in concert with the basic five-paragraph or chronological approaches, but it adds a layer of sophistication to your argument that might otherwise be lacking.

Once the key terms and ideas of your argument are in place, the process of organization becomes a matter of consistently referring back to, linking, and developing those terms and ideas. What do I mean by key terms? Let's look at a classic example to get an idea. We recall from earlier lectures that Swift's "A Modest Proposal" makes a satirical argument that the Irish should

adopt a policy of eating their children as a way to end poverty and hunger. Let's take a look at how Swift establishes the terms of his argument:

> I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee or a ragout.

Obviously one of Swift's greatest challenges is to convince his audience to put aside the notion of children as children and replace it with the notion of children as food. And not just any old grub, but rather quite tasty food that can be served, Swift assures us, at least four different ways, maybe six if you're venturesome enough to try a fricassee or a ragout. To press this new association even further, Swift would have his audience know the following:

> A child will make two dishes at an entertainment for friends; and when the family dines alone, the fore or hind quarter will make a reasonable dish, and seasoned with a little pepper or salt will be very good boiled on the fourth day, especially in winter.

The lesson we can take from Swift is that there are innumerable ways to define a word and the concepts associated with it—even a word as seemingly straightforward as "child." In fact, the very absurdity of Swift's attempts to redefine a child as a food source is evidence of how good writers can—and must—convince audiences to see the topic on their terms. Of course, once you've committed yourself to redefining a word or concept, you must follow through by reiterating and developing the new connections you want your audience to make. That is to say, once you've introduced them to your language, you have to keep speaking it and expanding the vocabulary. Swift is an expert at using this strategy to organize his argument. He goes on to say:

> I have already computed the charge of nursing a beggar's child ... to be about two shillings per annum, rags included; and I believe no gentleman would repine to give ten shillings for the carcass of a good fat child, which, as I have said, will make four dishes of excellent nutritive meat.

Swift continues to affirm the child-as-food connection, but now he adds an extra twist. He takes an entirely logical next step by addressing the issue of economics and commodification—and he does this by running his own cost-benefit analysis of child as livestock. By this point, we're so far onto Swift's turf and so deeply immersed in his language, terms, and meanings that we cannot help but follow along. We've already accepted his notion of child as food and made it our normative definition (or at least suspended our disbelief). In order to keep going and follow his logic, we have to recognize that this is a deliberate exercise in absurdity—but we keep going because through this satire, an important point is being made.

You should approach the organizing process as though you are trying to teach your readers a new language with its own particular vocabulary and grammar.

So, organizing an argument requires you to establish some sense of continuity as you move from one point to the next—that's a basic premise of any writing guide. But establishing that continuity involves more than making sure you have effective transitions between paragraphs and points. Rather, you should approach the organizing process as though you are trying to teach your readers a new language with its own particular vocabulary and grammar—one for which you've set and developed the terms.

In addition to establishing the key terms and ideas of an argument, the process of organization should involve careful attention to transitions. If the links from one point to the next aren't there—or aren't strong enough—the argument won't be as effective as it could be. The easiest, and most successful, strategy for crafting transitions is the repetition-variation approach. By that I mean taking a word or phrase from the end of one paragraph or section of an argument and using it, preferably with some slight variation, as the beginning of the next paragraph or section. Another form of transition—somewhat less elegant but certainly effective when used judiciously—is the sequence or series. A sequence or series can be a dynamic form of transition, but you need to be careful about boring your readers with too many lists.

By this point, you've learned how to begin an argument, and you've acquired some strategies for organizing your writing. But even the most engaging opening and the cleverest structure will be useless if you don't adequately support your argument—if you don't tell your reader, as clearly as possible, "so what?" In our next lecture, we'll look at strategies for supporting your claims and making your argument as persuasive as possible. ■

Suggested Reading

Griffith, *Writing Essays about Literature*.

Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz, *Everything's an Argument*.

Ramage, Bean, and Johnson, *Writing Arguments*.

Exercises

1. Look back at the last written argument you crafted—whether a grant proposal, a business presentation, or a letter to your boss requesting a raise. Did you include a paragraph or section early in the piece that helped establish and define the terms and ideas of the argument in a way that was favorable to you or that supported your main claim? Did you refer back to and develop those terms and ideas as your argument unfolded? If not, draft such a paragraph and include it in the piece. If so, try revising the paragraph or section and making it even stronger.

2. Go back to the paragraphs I asked you to draft during the lecture about your idea of "government"—how you think it should be defined and what ideas you believe should be associated with it. Study the transitions you made from one paragraph or section to the next. How did you link your points and ideas? Try revising one of those transitions using either or both of the two strategies we've studied (repetition-variation and sequence/series).

Supporting Your Argument

Lecture 8

It's true that association, speculation, and the appearance of correlation can actually have a really persuasive effect on an audience. ... Nearly all forms of advertising and marketing rely in some way on the willingness of people to be persuaded by claims and arguments based on speculation and association.

In this lecture, we'll build on our discussion of how arguments can be organized by examining a closely related quality of persuasive writing: the selection and presentation of evidence. More specifically, we will study key strategies you can use to more effectively support a written argument.

Our first key strategy: Evidence does not explain itself. It's never sufficient simply to refer to a piece of evidence in your writing and expect readers to make a link between it and the claim you're trying to support. To write persuasively, you have to show your readers how and why your proof is relevant to your argument.

If it works for you, try thinking of yourself as the prosecuting attorney on "Law and Order." It's not sufficient for you to walk over to the evidence table, point out the murder weapon, and proclaim, "Ladies and gentlemen, this is the actual weapon used in the homicide. Thank you very much for your time. I know you will find the accused party guilty of murder." A good prosecutor would need to offer a detailed and comprehensive explanation that connects the gun and the alleged killer. She or he would want to cite forensic reports, crime-scene photos, testimony from eye witnesses, and any other sources that would help convince the judge and jury that the murder weapon is a valid piece of evidence and supports a guilty verdict.

Our second key strategy is to provide a direct link between your evidence and your conclusion. Very likely you've encountered arguments in which proof was offered up without any concrete reason why the evidence should be interpreted a certain way. Arguments that rely on statistics or the findings

of scientific studies are especially prone to this particular failing. My favorite example is the raft of arguments out there for and against the health benefits of drinking coffee. I like coffee—a lot—and I'm always hoping to read a solid argument in favor of drinking more of it.

While it's easy to find articles that tout the benefits of coffee drinking, it's not so easy to find articles that use evidence convincingly and responsibly to make that argument. It's not a lack of evidence that causes this problem. In fact, there is quite a substantial cottage industry among researchers who devote their time and energy to examining the effects of caffeine consumption on rats. I have no doubt that these studies are, on the whole, well conceived, carefully conducted, and scientifically valid. The problem comes in where articles and blog entries draw on such research to support arguments about whether coffee is good or bad for humans, and in what quantities we should or should not consume it.

Admitting that alternative viewpoints exist can have the seemingly paradoxical effect of strengthening one's own argument.

To be specific, the subjects of the scientific studies are rats, not humans, and caffeine is not the same thing as coffee. Of course it's easy to conflate caffeine and coffee, but any argument that relies on evidence taken from a caffeine-rat study must include some explanation of how those effects, positive or negative, can support a conclusion about the effects of coffee drinking on human beings. Without careful explanation of how this evidence needs to be considered and attention to the context and differences between rats and humans, the argument is nothing more than speculation based on possible association. The claims you make based on evidence must be direct and definitive and show a clear cause-effect relationship.

Our third key strategy for supporting an argument is the use of concessions. Admitting that alternative viewpoints exist can have the seemingly paradoxical effect of strengthening one's own argument. This may seem counterintuitive to some writers: Why acknowledge the validity of some idea that may compete with your own? Wouldn't that undermine the argument you want to make?

As we'll see from the following examples, just the opposite is true. Rather than undermining an argument, concessions can actually strengthen it. By acknowledging and dealing with counterevidence, you establish yourself as a trustworthy commentator on a particular subject.

Here's an example of a concession from Thomas Paine's "Common Sense":

> Some writers have explained the English constitution thus; the king, say they, is one, the people another; the peers are an house in behalf of the king; the commons in behalf of the people; but this hath all the distinctions of an house divided against itself; and though the expressions be pleasantly arranged, yet when examined they appear idle and ambiguous.

What exactly is Paine conceding here? Well, he's acknowledging that other writers have offered an explanation of Great Britain's government that sounds well-balanced and rational—yet, as Paine argues, this appearance of balance and rationality belies a hierarchy of power that favors elites while granting little authority to commoners.

Paine uses this concession to highlight, by contrast, the possibilities for government in America that he will sketch out later in the essay. It's important to recognize here that Paine uses a concession to highlight and support his own position. In other words, he's not necessarily giving ground to his opponents; rather, he's sketching out their argument as a way of bringing his own views into sharper relief—underscoring the best parts of his case even as he shines some light on the weakest parts of theirs.

It's also important to recognize that Paine is using this concession to bolster his own credibility—mainly by demonstrating his thorough understanding of other points of view. His concession shows that he's done his homework and can offer a detailed assessment of the pros and cons of other possible positions on this topic.

When it comes to supporting an argument, we've identified three crucial points: first, the need to explain how a particular piece of evidence helps you make your case to an audience; second, the need to provide a connection

between evidence and conclusion that is direct, definitive, and based on cause-effect; and third, how acknowledging the arguments of others can serve to strengthen your own argument. ■

Suggested Reading

Griffith, *Writing Essays about Literature*.

Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz, *Everything's an Argument*.

Ramage, Bean, and Johnson, *Writing Arguments*.

Exercises

1. Choose an editorial column from your favorite newspaper and examine the way the author uses evidence to support her or his argument—what kinds of explanations (if any) does she or he include to connect that evidence to the editorial's main claim? Try rewriting the column—see if you can offer more convincing connections between the evidence and the claim.

2. Find a letter to the editor that you disagree with and draft a response that challenges the letter-writer's position; include at least one concession that helps highlight, by contrast, your own position on the issue.

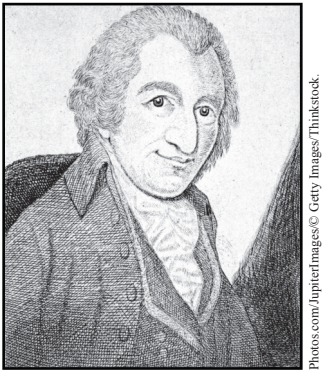
Finishing Strong

Lecture 9

We can glean from Swift's closing lines an important reminder and a striking example of how conclusions can be used to anticipate and refute, in advance, charges that an argument for some broader goal or cause is actually self-serving. You don't have to follow Swift's over-the-top style, but we shouldn't hesitate to emulate the spirit of his conclusion when we perceive that some similar possibility of a personal attack will follow in the wake of us making our own arguments.

In the previous three lectures, we've studied strategies for starting, organizing, and supporting arguments. Now we focus on methods for crafting more effective conclusions—how to wrap up and finish off your presentation of an argument in ways that solidify your claims, make your case, and perhaps even leave your readers wanting to hear more about the issue.

You've probably been told at some point by an English teacher that conclusions must include a summary of the highlights of an argument. This is certainly true: An effective conclusion should include some sort of recapping of the main ideas that structure your argument. But you should not simply repeat verbatim what you say in your introduction. A little variation shows that you've really thought about wrapping this argument up in a compelling and engaging way.



Photos.com/JupiterImages/© Getty Images/Thinkstock.

Thomas Paine's strong conclusions influenced the American Revolution.

What else should you do with a conclusion? How can you effectively finish an argument by doing something other than—or more than—summarizing for your readers the key points you've made? Here again, our famous essayists, Thomas Paine and Jonathan Swift, can provide some answers. Let's look first at Paine's final two paragraphs in "Common

Sense," keeping in mind that just prior to these paragraphs, Paine does provide his readers with the kind of summary we are discussing.

> Under our present denomination of British subjects we can neither be received nor heard abroad: The custom of all courts is against us, and will be so, until, by an independence, we take rank with other nations.
>
> These proceedings may at first appear strange and difficult; but, like all other steps which we have already passed over, will in a little time become familiar and agreeable; and, until an independence is declared, the Continent will feel itself like a man who continues putting off some unpleasant business from day to day, yet knows it must be done, hates to set about it, wishes it over, and is continually haunted by the thoughts of its necessity.

The strategy Paine uses is one you certainly can and should follow in crafting your own conclusions. This is a negative consequences conclusion—meaning he uses these last few lines to underscore the negative things that could happen if readers are not persuaded by his argument and fail to support his vision of governmental reform.

I want to emphasize here that Paine is not using the negative consequences approach as a scare tactic—he knows that few readers, especially those who are still uncertain as to the validity of his argument, are likely to be persuaded by apocalyptic claims. But he also knows that his readers are likely to respond if presented with a clear statement of what the ultimate consequences may be if they choose not to accept his argument.

What we learn from Paine is that effective conclusions can underscore ultimate consequences without resorting to ultimatums.

In other words, what we learn from Paine is that effective conclusions can underscore ultimate consequences without resorting to ultimatums. Stating ultimate consequences is like saying, "if we do not do *x*, then *y* will happen," whereas stating an ultimatum is like saying,

"you'd better do *x*, or else *y* is your fault." Ultimatums put a tremendous (and needless) strain on the writer-reader relationship and are likely to alienate undecided readers. Stating something as an explanation of ultimate consequences doesn't put your reader in as defensive a position.

Let's take a look at another example of an effective conclusion—this one from Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal." Swift offers a version of Paine's negative consequences approach, but he provides an extra twist—a variation that I call the no viable alternatives strategy. Recall that Swift's satire—following the structure of classical Latin satires by Horace and Juvenal—proposes an outlandish solution to a seemingly intractable problem. In this case, the problem is the pervasive poverty in Ireland, and the solution is to allow poor parents to sell their children to the rich so the rich can devour them as tasty and satisfying meals.

Swift is mocking both the British imperialist treatment of Ireland and a prevailing impulse among politicians and reformers of his day to suggest simple, cure-all solutions to complex social and economic problems. In his conclusion, Swift offers a direct challenge to those who would support such naive attempts at social engineering:

> I desire those politicians who dislike my overture, and may perhaps be so bold as to attempt an answer, that they will first ask the parents of these mortals, whether they would not at this day think it a great happiness to have been sold for food, at a year old in the manner I prescribe, and thereby have avoided such a perpetual scene of misfortune as they have since gone through by the oppression of landlords, the impossibility of paying rent without money or trade, the want of common sustenance, with neither house nor clothes to cover them from inclemencies of the weather, and the most inevitable prospect of entailing the like or greater miseries upon their breed forever.

Swift's conclusion suggests that alternatives to his proposal for changing the status quo aren't likely to be viable. Notice that he doesn't launch a direct attack on any particular plans that other writers have offered; rather, he points out that such plans are not likely to work unless and until their

authors consider the causes and implications of the problem as fully and as carefully as Swift has. He also offers a kind of litmus test to determine whether alternative proposals would be as viable as his: asking the parents of impoverished children if a particular proposed solution would be something they would choose. Including your own version of Swift's litmus test—a criterion against which alternatives to your claim must be measured—is a powerful strategy for persuading readers that you offer the best solution to the problem at hand.

A third tone you can take in your conclusion is the positive consequences strategy. Here your goal is not to point out the negative things that may occur if readers do not accept your claims but rather to underscore the fact that some potentially positive things will not be manifested. An argument that stresses the negative potential outcomes in its conclusion can be powerful, but one that manages to end on a hopeful note could be more persuasive.

So what lessons should we take away from this final lecture in our four-part series on crafting successful arguments? I cannot stress enough the importance of using the conclusion to recap the main thesis and key points of your arguments. I would also strongly encourage you to go beyond a basic summary and explore the three strategies we've covered here: negative consequences, no viable alternatives, and positive consequences. I'd also urge you to think about ways of using conclusions to pique your readers' curiosity as Paine did. Finally, I hope you'll be mindful that you may need to use a conclusion to preemptively defend yourself against challenges that would seek to undermine your claims. If you can anticipate how someone might argue against you, you'd better address it head-on rather than ignore it. ■

Suggested Reading

Griffith, *Writing Essays about Literature*.

Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz, *Everything's an Argument*.

Ramage, Bean, and Johnson, *Writing Arguments*.

Exercises

1. Rewrite the final two paragraphs of Thomas Paine's "Common Sense" (see above) by following a positive consequences strategy (perhaps not as difficult a task as it sounds, given that we have the benefit of 200-plus years of hindsight and examples of the good things that could happen if the colonies achieved independence from Britain and formed themselves into a new nation).

2. Draft a negative consequences conclusion to Henry David Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" (discussed in the lecture)—not a gloom-and-doom scenario but a thoughtful and persuasive discussion of what the consequences would be if democracy devolved rather than evolved in the ways Thoreau imagines.

The Uses of Poetry

Lecture 10

You would not be alone if you were thinking that the definition of poetry is probably something like the U.S. Supreme Court's infamous definition of pornography, which is "I can't define it, but I know it when I see it."

In this lecture, we explore how understanding poetry can help us become better readers and writers. First, what do you think poetry is? You may think of definitions like "a poem rhymes," "it has a particular rhythm or pattern," or "it uses words in unusual ways." Consider the following piece of text:

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

If you hear this read aloud, you might think it's not a poem but instead a note of apology. In fact, it is a very famous poem by William Carlos Williams. Part of what makes it a poem is not the words themselves but how the words are laid out on the page. You'll also notice that phrases and sentences are cut in unusual places—places you would not expect to find a pause in everyday writing.

This poem has no punctuation—the only guide to how to read the piece is where the line breaks occur. By popping up in unexpected places, they call our attention to certain words or combinations of words that we might not otherwise notice. For example, the word "saving" has its own line; this makes us ponder, maybe, if it is not just the saving of the plums that is being referenced, but some larger, deeper idea of saving. Similarly, "forgive me" stands alone, also raising in the minds of the readers possible larger ideas about forgiveness in general.

The final two lines of the poem also seem to mark it as something not typical of a note left on the kitchen table. Apologizing for eating the plums doesn't require the writer to tell the reader how the plums tasted—that's a little extra poetic flourish. And that final word, "cold," is interesting in that it really doesn't describe what the plums tasted like but instead the fact that they had been in the icebox, and it thus calls us back to that word, "icebox," early in the poem. That's another word that may have caught our attention, in that it's archaic. So the choice of that word tells us something perhaps about the age of the poet or gives us an idea that the speaker of the poem lives sometime in the past.

Let's take a look at John Donne's elegy "On His Mistress Going to Bed." Donne was one of the most revered poets of the English Renaissance, and his work today remains some of the most studied and enjoyed in English literature. Read these lines from the middle of the poem:

> Licence my roving hands, and let them go
> Before, behind, between, above, below.
> O, my America, my Newfoundland,
> My kingdom, safest when with one man mann'd,
> My mine of precious stones, my empery;
> How am I blest in thus discovering thee!
> To enter in these bonds, is to be free;
> Then, where my hand is set, my soul shall be.

We could spend days unpacking this poem—it is a delightfully clever play on the idea of exploration, referencing the discovery of what Europeans thought of as the New World. There is also a double entendre or two. How

would you describe the tone of the poem; what are some words that spring to mind? “Joy” might be one, “delight,” or even “ecstasy.” If the words weren’t enough to convey the speaker’s happiness, then the exclamation point in “How am I blest in thus discovering thee!” certainly does.

What else makes Donne’s poem so compelling? One of the most important elements of this poem is metaphor, which is similar to another poetic device, simile. A simile makes a comparison between two things by using the words “like” or “as.” An example of a simile would be “her eyes were like the ocean” or “her eyes were as blue as the ocean”; a metaphor would be if you simply said “her eyes were oceans.” In the case of Donne’s poem, the metaphor is that his lover’s body is an undiscovered country ripe for exploration.

Metaphor and simile can be effective devices for engaging a reader’s attention.

Metaphor and simile can be effective devices for engaging a reader’s attention, as can devices like synecdoche: when you use a word describing a part to mean the whole. For example, in the classic line “all hands on deck,” the word “hands” stands in for “people.” A close relative of this device is metonymy: when a word that describes something associated with an idea is used in place of the logical word. The classic example is “The White House said today.” Obviously, the words “White House” are standing in for the president and his or her representatives.

But how can reading and understanding poetry help us with our own writing? We can learn to recognize skillful treatments of language that help the words on the page add up to more than the sum of their parts. We can also be conscious of making more dramatic choices in our style and diction. What I think is most important is that poetry can intrigue us, can get us to think intensely about a certain subject in new or unexpected ways, and can also simply delight us with its use of wordplay. ■

Suggested Reading

Barnet and Cain, *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature*.

DiYanni, *Literature*.

Gardner, *Writing about Literature*.

Griffith, *Writing Essays about Literature*.

Guerin et al., *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*.

Kennedy and Gioia, *Literature.*

Roberts, *Writing about Literature*.

Exercises

Each of the sentences below is written in fairly straightforward, plain prose. Rewrite each so that you make use of figurative or poetic language to punch up the sentence. Example: "She had blonde hair." Rewrite: "She had hair the color of ripe wheat."

1. It was a cold and rainy day.

2. She was a tall, thin woman with brown eyes and short, dark hair.

3. The countryside had lots of green hills and trees.

4. He was excited to learn that his sister was coming home soon.

Poetic Diction and Syntax

Lecture 11

English has an unusually large vocabulary drawn from a number of different languages that come from different branches on the family tree of languages. A lot of other languages have no need of books like a thesaurus. This huge smorgasbord of words in English is one of the great things about our language—but we have so many options that it can also be problematic.

In this lecture, we deepen our discussion of poetry by focusing on issues of diction and syntax. As we do this, we'll address the need to pay attention to matters of connotation, association, and the particular difficulties caused by the nature of the English language—which is one of the few languages that has so many synonyms that it's necessary for every schoolchild to learn to use a thesaurus.

Consider the following sentence: "We have to come up with some kind of scheme to deal with this." Upon hearing this, what are your immediate reactions? Is the person who said this honest and trustworthy? Why? What you're probably focusing on is the word "scheme." What if the sentence had read "We have to come up with some kind of plan to deal with this"? How do you feel about the speaker now? Honest? Trustworthy? Or maybe you can't tell one way or another.

It's not just word choice that can have an impact—word order also is important.

If you look up "scheme" and "plan" in a dictionary or thesaurus, you'll find that they are usually given as simple equivalents of one another. But in addition to a word's definition, there is also a word's connotation to consider. In American English, as well as some other versions, the word "scheme" has negative associations—it connotes something illegal, underhanded, deceptive.

So we've established that word choice is an important consideration when you're writing and that learning about this from poetry can help make

your writing more engaging. But it's not just word choice that can have an impact—word order also is important. What I'm talking about here is syntax, or the grammatical ordering of a sentence so that it makes sense.

For example, the sentence "The king married the queen" makes perfect sense; if we were to mess with the syntax so that the words read "Queen king the the married," this makes no sense at all. The sentence "The king married the queen" is a perfect example of the most common sentence structure in English: subject-verb-object. But listen to just three sentences in a row using that structure: "The king married the queen. They lived in a castle. They were good rulers." Do you want to keep reading if the whole paper or article follows this structure? Probably not. Why? Because it's boring! Now what if we changed the syntax a bit? What if we said "The king and queen—they got married. In a castle they lived, and ruled well." That might seem a little stilted, but hands down it's more interesting than the first version.

Poetry can be a good teacher when it comes to understanding syntax as well as word choice, and perhaps the poet to most famously play with matters of syntax is E. E. Cummings. Here is the opening of Cummings's "anyone lived in a pretty how town":

> anyone lived in a pretty how town
> (with up so floating many bells down)
> spring summer autumn winter
> he sang his didn't he danced his did.

What do you think of these lines? Even though we can't do a really accurate "translation" by simply correcting the syntax or changing the word choice, we get some images and some idea of what the poet is trying to convey. Let's start with the basics—there's someone who lives in a town, and it seems as if there are church bells that ring in this town, throughout the year, and this person maybe sings and dances or maybe doesn't.

Now, you could make all sorts of interpretations that are very different from what I've just suggested, but you get the point that even though the syntax is confusing, some images can be discerned if we think hard about it. And it's that mystery—it is what is hard (or initially confusing) about this poem—that

makes it so good and so interesting. I wouldn't suggest you just throw the words of your story up on the page in random order and leave it to your reader to sort out, but you could try to vary your word order as a means of engaging your reader.

The more you read—of all kinds of writing—the better you will be as a writer. Of course, the other piece of advice is simply to write, and to have as many eyes as possible look at what you are writing. This is a case where you certainly *can* learn by doing, and the more you do, the better you get. Practice what you've learned from these lectures over and over and over again. ■

Suggested Reading

Barnet and Cain, *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature*.

DiYanni, *Literature*.

Gardner, *Writing about Literature*.

Griffith, *Writing Essays about Literature*.

Guerin et al., *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*.

Kennedy and Gioia, *Literature.*

Roberts, *Writing about Literature*.

Exercises

Consider the following sentences. Rewrite each so that the syntax is different, and consider what effect this has. In some cases, you may need to combine two sentences into one. Example: "She was tired after a long day at work." Rewrite: "After working a long day, she was tired."

1. I was driving along the road. I saw my favorite coffee shop and decided to stop.

2. There is nothing better than hot coffee with cream and sugar on a cold morning.

3. I balanced my coffee, scone, and wallet as I went back to my car.

4. I drove around for a while before I was able to find the on-ramp.

Drama—Writing Out Loud

Lecture 12

The award-winning writer Sherman Alexie ... when asked what advice he has for young writers ... often tells them to take a drama class or some acting lessons. And this is because good writers are very often asked to read their work aloud, and sometimes they have to take questions. If they aren't at least halfway decent performers, then the audience is going to be somewhat bored, no matter how much they might actually love the written works of the author.

Drama is performance. All the information we get about characters, situations, and plot points in a dramatic production has to come out of the mouths of the actors on a stage. Understanding the generic conventions of drama can help make us better readers and better writers—especially if we are writing something that is meant to be read aloud. Writing intended only or primarily to be read on the page can get away with things that writing meant to be performed out loud cannot. This lecture will focus on understanding how drama can help you become a better "out loud" writer.

Let's start by considering the following wedding toast:

> John and Jane: You guys are the best! I hope you have many long happy years together. Congratulations!

Nothing wrong with that, you might be saying—it's clear and to the point. But now consider this second toast:

> John and Jane: May the best day of your past be the worst day of your future, may your home always be too small to hold all of your friends, and may you live as long as you love and love as long as you live.

Which toast would you prefer to receive at your wedding? The second toast does a beautiful job of wordplay, parallel sentence structure and symmetry,

creative use of images, and words appropriate to the occasion. But even the most beautiful words are going to suffer if they are delivered awkwardly, and that first, simple toast can seem superior when read clearly and sincerely. It's all about the delivery.

You may be thinking, I really don't need to express myself with the spoken word all that often, so this is not something I need to think about. But at some point in your life, you are going to have to do something dramatic in this sense—whether it's giving a presentation at work, defending yourself in traffic court, or proposing to your significant other. Each of those situations will go far more smoothly if you keep some basic rules of dramatic performance in mind.

Even the most beautiful words are going to suffer if they are delivered awkwardly.

Let's take an example of a famous speech. The St. Crispin's Day speech from Shakespeare's *Henry V* is one of the best-known speeches in Shakespeare and serves as a good example for our purposes today because it is making an argument. First, some quick background information: In 1415, King Henry V of England crossed the English Channel to press his claim to the French throne. For reasons that are too complex to go into here, he had with him only a small band of warriors—some estimates place the size of the English contingent at around 6,000, while the French army numbered around 36,000. Just before the battle, King Henry V gave his men a speech of encouragement to try and compensate for the overwhelming odds against them.

Whatever it was that Henry really said, Shakespeare undoubtedly vastly improved it in his version. Just before the speech begins, the king's cousin Westmoreland laments that there are so few of them on the battlefield and expresses a desire for some of the men who chose to stay in England to join them in battle. Here's the king's response:

> What's he that wishes so?
> My cousin Westmoreland? No, my fair cousin;
> If we are mark'd to die, we are enow
> To do our country loss; and if to live,

The fewer men, the greater share of honour.
God's will! I pray thee, wish not one man more.

So how does he begin? The king acknowledges the situation but chides his cousin for expressing concern about their numbers. He acknowledges that there are relatively few of them, but he characterizes this as a bonus: There will be more honor to go around. He then turns his attention to those members of the host who may still be having doubts about the battle they are about to fight, announcing:

Rather proclaim it, Westmoreland, through my host,
That he which hath no stomach to this fight,
Let him depart; his passport shall be made,
And crowns for convoy put into his purse;
We would not die in that man's company
That fears his fellowship to die with us.

In other words, if you don't want to fight, we'd rather have you leave, for it means more honor for us. In one move, Henry has made sure that everyone who fights with him is there willingly. Henry then uses a series of emotionally laden images to further persuade his listeners. He paints a picture of life after the battle, when the men are safely home and greeted as heroes; he characterizes the upcoming battle as a glorious struggle that will confer honor upon those who participate; and he says that even in their old age, when they've forgotten everything else, the men will remember the feats they did on St. Crispin's Day.

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King Henry V of England, whose St. Crispin's Day speech inspired his army to fight against extreme odds.

According to Henry, not only will those who fight beside him earn honor and nobility, but their names will be on everyone's lips. This speech is a brilliant example of knowing your audience, turning a bad situation to your advantage, and persuading people of the rightness of your cause so that they back you eagerly. And then Henry concludes with some of the most famous lines in all of literature, words that are majestic and powerful and poetic, that in one fell swoop ennoble all those who fight beside him, as he goes so far as to emphatically include himself as their equal:

> We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
> For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
> Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
> This day shall gentle his condition;
> And gentlemen in England now-a-bed
> Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here,
> And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
> That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.

So what do we take away from this dramatic example? When it comes to words meant to be read aloud, presentation style is key—words read aloud need inflection, emphasis, and a certain degree of enthusiasm for them to be effective. And perhaps more than with any other kind of writing, you need to really prepare. In other words, practice what you are going to say before you get in front of a microphone and try to say it. Whether it's an office presentation or a political speech, walking through it at least once out loud will help you do a better job.

What else? Well, as always, know your audience! King Henry V certainly knew his and was able to appeal to all their ideals and values. Make sure you're not talking down to or over your audience, and try to be appropriate. But perhaps most important is the need to really be sincere. ■

Suggested Reading

Barnet and Cain, *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature*.

DiYanni, *Literature*.

Gardner, *Writing about Literature*.

Griffith, *Writing Essays about Literature*.

Guerin et al., *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*.

Kennedy and Gioia, *Literature.*

Roberts, *Writing about Literature*.

Exercise

1. The following exchange between two characters can be understood in a variety of different ways depending upon how the director and actors decide to play the lines. Rewrite the scene as a piece of prose fiction, rendering the mood of the scene as (1) angry, (2) excited, (3) sad, and (4) indifferent. What cues or clues do you have to give your reader that a playwright may choose to leave ambiguous?

Mother: "You're late again."
Son: "I'm not late. Your clock is wrong."
Mother: "No, your watch is wrong."
Son: "In any event, I'm home now."
Mother: "Where were you tonight?"
Son: "Out with friends"
Mother: "Which friends?"
Son: "You don't know them."

What You Can Learn from Autobiography

Lecture 13

TMI—too much information—is one of the most common and devastating mistakes you can make in a situation that calls for written self-presentation.

This lecture begins our examination of the value of autobiographical writing, and we'll be studying several extremely powerful tools that autobiographers use to achieve their writing goals. Our ultimate aim is to learn how those tools work and how we can incorporate them into our own work.

Whether you're crafting an online personal profile, a professional bio blurb, or a job application letter, the challenges of creating a written self-portrait can be daunting. What experiences and qualities should you highlight, and what approaches are most effective? When should you give lots of detail, and when should you hold back? Through careful analysis of excerpts from the autobiography of one of America's most famous and successful individuals—Benjamin Franklin—this lecture reveals several strategies you can use when faced with a writing task that calls for self-presentation.

When it comes to autobiographical writing, the best way to be effective is to be selective.

Successful autobiographical writing is kind of like being the favorite guest at a dinner party—you have great stories to tell, but they don't go on too long, and your stories make the other people at the dinner table feel included. Personal anecdotes from successful autobiographers can be wonderfully instructive because they show us how to describe our best qualities without coming across as arrogant. As we'll see, when it comes to autobiographical writing, the best way to be effective is to be selective.

Let's start with an anecdote from Benjamin Franklin's autobiography:

> I disliked the trade, and had a strong inclination for the sea, but my father declared against it; however, living near the water, I was much in and about it, learnt early to swim well, and to manage boats; and when in a boat or canoe with other boys, I was commonly allowed to govern, especially in any case of difficulty; and upon other occasions I was generally a leader among the boys, and sometimes led them into scrapes, of which I will mention one instance, as it shows an early projecting public spirit, tho' not then justly conducted.

The Teaching Company Collection.

Benjamin Franklin as a boy. Franklin skillfully wrote about the early abilities that would eventually serve him as a leader.

The strategy Franklin follows in this anecdote from his early childhood is one I call IAA—which stands for interests, abilities, and achievements. Most occasions that call for autobiographical writing require us to describe at least one—and sometimes all three—of these areas. Franklin begins by telling us something about his general affinity for water- and boat-related activities—and also, by way of contrast, that he's not terribly interested in being bound into a formal apprenticeship for a conventional trade. Franklin is also presenting himself as someone whose interests blend fairly well with his abilities. Although he has a facility for things aquatic and nautical, the straightforward way in which he presents this information doesn't come across as bragging or boasting.

What really stands out, even in this very short piece of autobiographical writing, is a sense of overall unity of interests and activities at a very young age. And the skills he seems to be gently pointing to have to do with being a leader—so he's setting the stage for future events that will undoubtedly be

an important part of his autobiography. From the beginning, he has a focus that is guiding him as he selects stories and events to relate to his readership.

When faced with the often daunting prospect of writing about your life in order to achieve a specific goal, it's all too easy to respond by pushing as much information as you can at your readers. Give your readers only the most important, pertinent details up front. If they want to know more, they know how to find you! I recently had the opportunity to attend a lecture by an amazing scholar, and while the talk itself turned out to be spectacular, the experience was marred by the fact that the person who gave the introduction took 25 minutes to recount the speaker's activities and accomplishments—while the speaker herself only ended up lecturing for about 35 minutes.

For most of us, in most writing situations, how we present our achievements and accomplishments is the thing that will matter most. For an example of how to approach this dimension of autobiography, let's look at another excerpt from Franklin:

> There was a salt-marsh that bounded part of the mill-pond, on the edge of which, at high water, we used to stand to fish for minnows. By much trampling, we had made it a mere quagmire. My proposal was to build a wharff there fit for us to stand upon, and I showed my comrades a large heap of stones, which were intended for a new house near the marsh, and which would very well suit our purpose. Accordingly, in the evening, when the workmen were gone, I assembled a number of my play-fellows, and working with them diligently like so many emmets, sometimes two or three to a stone, we brought them all away and built our little wharff.

This anecdote is instructive: Note the way Franklin presents his achievements. In particular, note the balance he strikes between individual accomplishment and collaborative effort. It may seem to be a minor point, but it matters a great deal when your writing goal is to convey your accomplishments without seeming arrogant or overblown. One of the most powerful—and relatively easy—tactics a writer can employ in autobiographical situations is to alternate the use of personal pronouns so as to provide a mix of "I" and "we" statements and descriptions.

So what have we gained from studying Benjamin Franklin's approach to autobiographical writing? First, we learned the value of confining personal information to the three key areas of interests, abilities, and achievements. Remember also that your autobiographical writing will be that much more powerful and persuasive if you can find a way to connect your individual accomplishments to a broader collaborative effort. Finally, try presenting your faults or failures as part of a larger process of self-development—indications of talents that were not fully realized. Put another way, make sure your vices appear more like virtues in the making. ■

Suggested Reading

Freedman and Frey, *Autobiographical Writing across the Disciplines*.

Smith and Watson, *Getting a Life*.

Exercises

1. Choose an event from your personal or professional life that you believe exemplifies some of your best qualities or skills. Use Franklin's strategy of presenting at least some of these qualities or skills as not-yet-fully-realized.

2. Choose an event from your personal or professional life that allows you to define yourself through your relations with other people. Describe this event in such a way that your individual talents and skills are made apparent through your interactions with others.

Writing and Leadership

Lecture 14

Autobiography is perhaps the richest and most underused source of practical knowledge for anyone seeking to present herself or himself as qualified to take on a leadership role and make effective use of it.

In this lecture, we're going to expand on the important link between autobiographical writing and leadership. The subject of leadership—its different qualities, its various styles, its capacity for success or failure—has garnered massive amounts of attention in the fields of business, education, government, and athletics. Actually, there is hardly a field where leadership is *not* the center of attention. Many of the books, seminars, and workshops offered on leadership are based on sound research in the fields of management and organizational studies. Some are based on less substantial evidence or offer little more than pep talks, without any clear way to actually apply this stuff to your own life. But none of them that I've encountered focuses on the crucial and generative link between writing and leadership—or, to be more specific, how the study and practice of autobiographical writing can help you better understand how leadership skills are developed.

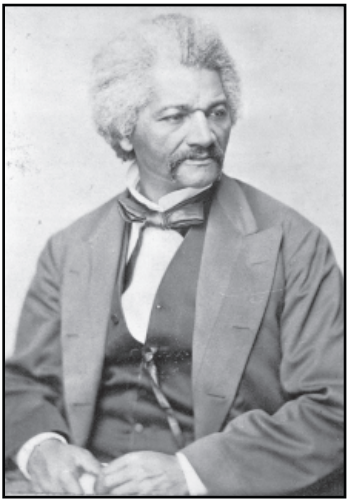
The study of autobiography can also help you see how different approaches to leadership are defined. It can also give you concrete examples of how you can put these strategies into practice to achieve your professional and personal goals.

To help us better apprehend the link between autobiography and leadership, we continue our study of Benjamin Franklin's life story, and we add some examples from the autobiographical work of another figure: Frederick Douglass. In this excerpt from an account of Douglass's boyhood in the 1820s, he describes how he learned to read—something slaves were expressly forbidden to do:

> The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted

into teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read. When I was sent of errands, I always took my book with me, and by going one part of my errand quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return. I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood. This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge.

Every time I read this passage, I'm astonished by how insightful Douglass is when it comes to forging an emotional connection with his readers—soliciting their sympathy while never putting himself in a position to be pitied.



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The abolitionist Frederick Douglass wrote three effective autobiographies.

What similarities do you see between Douglass's and Franklin's childhood anecdotes? Certainly both excerpts evince a general sense of resourcefulness and ingenuity—specifically an ability to get others to help them achieve their goals. And both show how determined and dedicated their authors are to their respective tasks. But it's important for us to see how both writers also use their autobiographical anecdotes to implicitly suggest that good leaders need to exist in a kind of reciprocal relationship with those around them. Reciprocal, in this case, does not mean a relationship of equals; by any measure, both Franklin and Douglass benefit far more from these interactions than their peers do. Still, the autobiographical descriptions underscore what you can gain by writing about yourself not simply as a representative of or for a group—but as someone for whom reciprocity is a crucial function of leadership.

The take-away point here is that whatever events or achievements you choose as the centerpiece for the autobiographical writing you've been called upon to do, take the time to imagine and then describe them through some connection with other people: people with whom you've worked, people you've supervised, people who are part of whatever network you've served as a leader.

Another thread that runs through nearly every great autobiographical text is a judicious and effective use of emotional expression.

Another thread that runs through nearly every great autobiographical text is a judicious and effective use of emotional expression. By judicious, I mean an expression of feeling that is not made for an overt dramatic effect. In fact, in most cases, the more intense and emphatic an autobiographical representation of emotion is, the less effective it is. By contrast, an understated approach carries with it a much greater chance of establishing an intimate connection with readers. To illustrate the effectiveness of emotion expressed in a minor rather than a major key, let's take a look at an especially poignant event from Franklin's *Autobiography*—the death of his son from smallpox and his guilt for not having the child inoculated:

> In 1736 I lost one of my sons, a fine boy of four years old, by the small-pox, taken in the common way. I long regretted bitterly, and still regret that I had not given it to him by inoculation. This I mention for the sake of parents who omit that operation, on the supposition that they should never forgive themselves if a child died under it; my example showing that the regret may be the same either way, and that, therefore, the safer should be chosen.

I want to emphasize that there is no requirement for Franklin to include these brief remarks on his loss or the feelings he experiences as a result. He could have left them out with no consequences, personal or professional. Yet he makes a deliberate decision to include this event—and to take care to describe it in a way that directly connects his individual loss to something much larger than himself. It's easy enough to recognize the selflessness Franklin evinces—his willingness to share this information for the sake

of his readers—and there's no reason to suspect that he has some ulterior motive or agenda.

At the same time, however, we would be remiss as students of Franklin's work if we didn't note that his decision does, when taken within the broader context of the *Autobiography* as a whole, add considerable credibility to his role as a leader and garner him significant sympathetic support. It's not a self-serving move in a direct sense, but it does have the ultimate effect of enhancing his status as a representative figure who speaks for and to a larger group. Franklin's strategy for establishing leadership is what we might call the use of soft power—the ability to achieve one's goals by establishing intimacy and cultivating personal connections with a larger public body.

So what have we learned from Franklin and Douglass—and how can we apply it to our own autobiographical writing? Keep in mind that autobiography is a rich source of knowledge for understanding how leadership skills can be developed and how different styles of leadership can be employed to help you achieve your goals. You would be well served to follow the models of Franklin and Douglass and present yourself as a leader who establishes productive reciprocal relations with those around you and never allows an individual accomplishment to be represented without some connection to those with whom you serve.

Keep in mind also the potential benefits of judicious emotional expression when the occasion requires you to write about your interests, abilities, and achievements. When the circumstances of a writing situation are such that an expression of emotion could work in your favor, remember that less really is more, and a low-key pitch and understated tone will draw your readers closer, inviting them—as an effective leader does—to listen longer and hear more of what you have to say. ■

Suggested Reading

Freedman and Frey, *Autobiographical Writing across the Disciplines*.

Smith and Watson, *Getting a Life*.

Exercises

1. Choose an event from your personal life and write a short autobiographical description, patterned after Franklin's brief treatment of his son's death, that puts your private experience in service to a broader public problem or issue.

2. Imagine you've just received a promotion that puts you in charge of a group of people who previously were fellow employees at the same level. Now draft an e-mail—using some of the autobiographical strategies we've studied in the excerpts from Franklin and Douglass—to help establish your position as a leader while maintaining a productive relationship with your former peers.

The Rules of Rhetoric

Lecture 15

The art and practice of posing rhetorical questions in order to communicate more effectively was one of the concepts that ancient and classical thinkers like Quintilian, Aristotle, and Cicero first studied and articulated. In other words, it's not as if classical rhetoric somehow evaporated or disappeared once we moved into the Modern Period, although a lot of people actually seem to think that this is the case.

In this lecture, we take a broader look at some of the concepts that serve as the foundation for successful arguments and autobiography. These ideas really serve as the foundation for almost all forms of effective writing.

Four of the most readily applicable rhetorical concepts that you can use to strengthen your writing are commonplaces, stasis, deductive reasoning, and inductive reasoning. A commonplace is a piece of truth that is wrapped up in easily recognizable language. The notion of truth I mean here is not some empirical fact—rather, it's some thought that's familiar enough to a certain group of people that they're going to respond positively to it, even if they can't always precisely identify why. An example of a commonplace for most Americans is the notion that we have a right to the pursuit of happiness. It's one of the most widely recognized and accepted ideas from the Declaration of Independence, and I think it's safe to say that the majority of U.S. citizens, no matter what their politics, would respond positively if a writer were to invoke this idea. The use of commonplaces can give the reader a feeling of solidarity, and then the writer can move on to address other points that might generate disagreement. In other words, it's a way of getting everyone into a similar, comfortable intellectual space before you start to present a case that may not be so familiar to them.

The next concept is stasis. In classical rhetoric, stasis refers to the general agreement between opposing parties about what the terms of the argument are. Parties that are in conflict often won't agree on a common definition of the argument's terms and therefore can't move beyond that initial

disagreement. You can see how the concept of stasis is related to the notion of the commonplace—both hinge on the need for agreement.

So why should stasis matter when it comes to writing? Just as effective writers must make an effort to identify commonplaces that are relevant to their readers, they also have to make an effort to identify the terms of an argument and recognize when those terms have been agreed upon and when they have not. I'm not suggesting that writers must always strive for stasis or that they must change their terms or viewpoints in order to do this. But it's possible to craft a powerful piece of writing simply by showing readers how and why stasis has not been achieved with regard to a particular issue: to identify the terms that are problematic and to clarify the overall scope and the content of the debate, even if it seems that the debate itself can't be resolved.

Deductive reasoning is the kind that many people are familiar with from detective stories and murder mysteries.

In addition to a lack of stasis, one of the reasons that certain debates are not easily resolved is because the writers who address the issue don't make effective use of different forms of reasoning to appeal to their audience. This brings us to our next two rhetorical concepts: deductive and inductive reasoning. Deductive reasoning is the kind that many people are familiar with from detective stories and murder mysteries. Deductive reasoning begins with a generally accepted declaration or premise—something that most people take to be true most of the time. The writer then uses that premise to make sense of a specific event, occurrence, or phenomenon.

The opening lines of Jane Austen's famous novel *Pride and Prejudice* set up just such an occasion for deductive reasoning by establishing a general premise about the circumstances of wealthy, unmarried men, and as you may recall that opening line is:

> It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

Indeed, a lot of the characters in that novel are young men with fortunes and young women with the potential to be wives. So we might, then, read the whole rest of the book in light of that opening claim, and so long as the characters act or speak in ways that seem to affirm Austen's foundational premise, everything that happens within the fictional world of the novel makes sense.

As you might guess, not all instances of reasoning follow the deductive pattern. Sometimes a process is inductive—meaning a writer will examine particular events or subsets of phenomena and use them as the basis for then constructing a premise that would apply to any events or incidents that are similar to that one. In other words, to reason inductively is to move from particulars to generalizations. If we were to rewrite *Pride and Prejudice* following an inductive pattern, we would begin not with those famous first lines, but we'd begin by describing the words and actions of each single male character, assessing any differences and oddities of behavior, weighing them against similarities—and, ultimately, identifying the most common traits linking them to each other. Our descriptions would probably take into account how each single male interacted with female characters who could be potential wives, and we'd want to make it apparent to our readers that the men with more money generally seemed to be operating under the assumption that getting yourself a spouse would be a necessary thing to do. Inductive reasoning opens up lots of potential theories, but it's up to the writer to decide which ones are most important to identify for the reader.

Inductive reasoning can be put to effective use in your writing, and you should always keep it in mind as an alternative to the deductive process—especially when you're faced with a writing task that compels you to describe a wide range of evidence and try and make sense of it for your audience. As the ancient and classical rhetorical scholars would remind you, as the writer, you are in charge of determining what commonalities in your evidence are most worthy of being presented as truths that should be universally acknowledged. ■

Suggested Reading

Crowley and Hawhee, *Ancient Rhetoric for Contemporary Students*.

Exercises

1. Use the process of induction (in relation to whatever content/subject you like), and craft a thesis or main claim for an argument.

2. Use the process of deduction (in relation to whatever content/subject you like), and craft a thesis or main claim for an argument.

Invention and Arrangement

Lecture 16

Kairos was so intriguing and significant for ancient rhetorical figures that the idea was manifested in the form of an actual mythical creature. The surviving depictions of Kairos show a human form in what we'd call, I think, a precarious balancing act—it's trying to grasp new opportunities without losing hold of what he already possesses.

The goal of this lecture is to enlarge the critical frame we've created through our study of commonplaces, stasis, and inductive and deductive reasoning in order to better illustrate and explain two broader areas of ancient classical rhetoric—invention and arrangement. We'll look at how elements of invention and arrangement can help us build stronger arguments, especially in the areas of business and professional writing.

"Invention" is a rhetorical term that refers to the process by which we generate arguments—meaning how we come up with the topics we write about. When business management gurus urge people to "think outside the box," they're really asking for versions of what we call invention. "Arrangement" is a rhetorical term that refers to the way arguments are organized—it's the formulas and the expectations that dictate the way a piece of writing is structured. The classic five-paragraph essay is an example of formula-based arrangement.

I'd like you to do what the ancient Greeks did when they were involved in the invention process and needed to generate ideas and arguments.

I'd like you to do what the ancient Greeks did when they were involved in the invention process and needed to generate ideas and arguments. First, consider the kairos of your situation. Kairos refers to the opportunities that a particular set of circumstances might present to you—and it also refers to the need to time your response so as to make the most of whatever opportunities have presented themselves. In other words, kairos is really about saying—or writing—the right thing in the right way at the right time.

Kairos needs to be part of our writing tool kit insofar as it serves to remind us that each writing situation is unique in some way, and that when we're in the middle of the process of invention, we'll do ourselves a huge favor if we attend closely to each situation's contingencies, demands, and opportunities. Put another way, never assume that one writing moment is the same as another, and always enter into each writing task without a preconceived notion of what argument you'll make or exactly how you'll make it.

Please don't mistake my meaning here—I'm not suggesting that the concept of kairos requires you to change your core beliefs or take a position that undermines your own ethical standards. In fact, one of the benefits of maintaining a flexible stance and an awareness of changing circumstances is that it puts you in a better position to articulate and circulate your beliefs should the opportunity present itself.

The ancient Greeks also offered a tool to help make those "kairotic" moments—analogy. Analogy is simply drawing connections between two things that may not necessarily be associated with each other by a particular audience. If the issue you're writing about doesn't seem to have a kairotic quality to it, you can create that kairos for yourself by constructing an analogy that links your idea with something that's part of the current zeitgeist. The take-away point is two-fold: First, kairos is incredibly powerful; second, good writers can create their own kairos by using analogies to connect their subject to something that stands at the center of everyone's attention. In the process, they can invent new arguments that lead to deeper and more meaningful discussion of the issue at hand, and they can get more people to focus on it.

Kairos is crucial not only for the invention process but also for arrangement—meaning it can inspire you to modify or even radically restructure those received formulas for how things like a business letter or a memo should look, or it can cause you to rethink and revise the terms and the language you might use when you're writing one of these. Moving beyond received models and conventional instructions—when the opportunity, circumstances, and timing seem right—can be a powerful way of setting your writing apart from everyone else's.

So what can you do to not only invent new ideas and arguments but also create new arrangements for them? An important addition to your writing tool kit should be a virtual permission form that states that you are no longer required to begin a piece of writing by crafting the introduction. Don't start at the start—start somewhere else! The reason is if you're crafting an introduction to something that you haven't yet written, you're undercutting the possibility that in the very act of writing, you might discover something new and important to say about your topic.

Instead of following a pattern, pick an aspect of your topic that seems most interesting or challenging and develop that in as much depth as you can. If, in the process of developing that point, you conceive of some new aspect of your topic, go ahead and develop that next—and don't worry about transitions; you can build those back in later. Your goal should be to use the writing process as a means of discovering what elements of a subject deserve the most attention. It's only by letting go of conventional formulas and expectations that writers can imagine new ways of arranging the arguments and the knowledge they've both invented and discovered. ■

Suggested Reading

Clouse, *The Student Writer*.

Crowley and Hawhee, *Ancient Rhetoric for Contemporary Students*.

Exercises

1. Most of the time, we don't recognize kairotic possibilities until after the fact (i.e., if only I had seen that connection between idea A and idea B, or if only I had worded the sentence this way instead of that). Using the benefit of hindsight, go back to a piece of professional writing and revise it to capitalize on that missed opportunity.

2. Rearrange the traditional business memo formula. How would you organize or word it if you didn't have to worry about meeting conventional expectations for how a memo is supposed to look and sound?

Ethos and Pathos

Lecture 17

Some of the most compelling writers we've studied in this course—particularly Benjamin Franklin and Frederick Douglass—were actually students of classical rhetoric.

In our last lecture, we talked about two of four major concepts in classical rhetoric—invention and arrangement. In this lecture, we analyze another two rhetorical concepts—ethos and pathos. These ideas are particularly useful in writing situations where you are attempting to persuade somebody to give you something—like job application letters or grant proposals. Ethos means the perception that readers have of your reliability or character; pathos means inspiring emotion in your readers, especially feelings of sympathy.

There's nothing intrinsically ethically problematic with simple pathos-based appeals, but as a general rule, attempts to persuade are much more successful when they combine pathos and ethos. So how do you establish ethos? Generally speaking, ethos is established through patterns of behavior. Figures in the public eye have established an ethos based on what's widely known about their actions. "That's all fine and good," you might be saying, "but how do I construct an ethos in a piece of writing if the audience doesn't actually know me personally?" In this case, you have to demonstrate expertise, and/or you've got to speak from a position of authority in the writing itself. In order to make your writing have the greatest pathetic appeal, you need to establish your ethos fairly early on.

Attempts to persuade are much more successful when they combine pathos and ethos.

Let's look at an example that models a mix of ethos and pathos. In this case, we're going to return to Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*—a text that's intended, in its broadest terms, to persuade its audience to support the abolition of slavery. In the first part of the quote below, Douglass establishes his ethos—his authority to speak on this subject.

> I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom come nearer to it than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time.

So how does Douglass establish his ethos and his right to speak on the matter of slavery? First and foremost, there's the fact that he was a slave. But here, when it comes to the particular matter of slaves knowing personal information like their birth dates, he establishes himself as someone who has paid close attention to this issue specifically—and thus someone who has a right to comment on it. Douglass establishes ethos by providing specific information. He tells us how slaves reckon or remember their birthdays, and his language here indicates that he has asked numerous slaves if they know their birthdays—he's done research into the matter.

Notice how carefully he qualifies his statements. He acknowledges that there's some outer limit to his knowledge, and this further enhances his ethos—he's cautious, he's reliable, and he does not claim to know things that he can't know. This balance of humility with authority is part of what makes his writing so powerful and also so persuasive. So that's the establishment of ethos—and I think we can agree that Douglass does a pretty good job of this. He then continues on to work some pathos into this passage by saying:

> A want of information concerning my own [birth date] was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood. The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege. I was not allowed to make any inquiries of my master concerning it. He deemed all such inquiries on the part of a slave improper and impertinent, and evidence of a restless spirit. The nearest estimate I can give makes me now between twenty-seven and twenty-eight years of age. I come to this, from hearing my master say, some time during 1835, I was about seventeen years old.

What makes this so pathetically powerful is that Douglass takes a relatively understated tone. He offers a matter-of-fact discussion of slave-holding culture's practice of keeping slaves ignorant of such basic personal information as birth dates. When he does this, he doesn't pile on negative adjectives—he doesn't even really characterize the practice as specifically as he could have. He keeps the tone calm—the lack of this knowledge, he says, is "a source of unhappiness"; it's very understated, "a source of unhappiness." He's confused as to why he can't know this information, and we get a very circumspect description of his master's attitude. So the understatement Douglass uses here allows us to imagine the reality as somewhat more unpleasant, and he does not come across as trying to prey on our sympathies. He presents the facts straightforwardly, and most readers will feel sympathy for his situation—why can't a slave even know his or her own birthday? Of course, he doesn't understand why one group of children could know their birth dates and another group would be ignorant of this information for no other reason than the color of their skin.

In order to really appreciate and recognize this understatedness, we have to remember that Douglass is speaking to an audience of mostly white Northerners. Douglass was strongly aware of the need to introduce them to the nature of slave-holding culture, but he needed to do that as judiciously as possible. The concern here is that his audience might become so emotionally overwhelmed by the description of the horrors of slavery that they would just stop listening. Perhaps even worse than the possibility of overwhelming his audience would be if they listened and thought his story was so incredible that it couldn't possibly be true. Douglass has to take care so that his audience does not disbelieve him, but at the same time, he also recognizes that pathos is a powerful tool for persuading his audience to join the antislavery movement.

While Douglass's example really drives home how the ideas of ethos and pathos work, you don't need to have lived through a horrible situation in order to establish a compelling ethos—nor do you need to recount horrific events in order to get a pathetic response from your audience. So, what you can take away from today's lecture is an understanding of how ethos and pathos can work together—and how it's usually more effective to have more ethos than pathos to create a really compelling piece of writing. An

awareness of the elements of classical rhetoric that we've covered in this lecture and the two before it can help you become a better writer, simply by calling your attention back to what we might call the basics of good writing. You may never use the words kairos, ethos, or any of the others, but knowing and understanding them will definitely be a benefit. ■

Suggested Reading

Crowley and Hawhee, *Ancient Rhetoric for Contemporary Students*.

Exercises

1. Draft the first two paragraphs of a fundraising letter for your favorite charitable cause. How will you establish your ethos such that people will feel comfortable enough to donate money at your request?

2. Imagine you are organizing a community blood drive and need to compose a flyer asking people to participate. How would you generate sufficient pathos to convince donors to show up?

Finding What You Need

Lecture 18

The writer Umberto Eco, whose medieval murder mystery *The Name of the Rose* has become really a classic, tells a story about how he had decided that in *The Name of the Rose*, the poison in the book would be applied to the corners of the pages of a book that was read by medieval monks, and the monks in the story would be poisoned through the act of licking their fingers before they touched the corner of each page to turn it. Without thinking this through too much, he wrote to an acquaintance who specialized in plants, and he asked that friend if he knew of some substance that could poison someone if it was administered in this way—but Eco neglected to say that he wanted to know this as part of research for a novel he was writing! Understandably, this acquaintance replied with something like: "Um, yeah, I don't think I'm going to be able to help you with this."

In this lecture, we move our attention to a more practical concern of writing—the process of conducting research. There are several writing situations in which you might find yourself needing to do research, from a college paper to a magazine article to a letter to the editor. In other words, almost any type of writing can be improved with a little research.

Before you begin, it is most helpful to try and identify what your objective is. Is it to prove a particular position or support a belief that you hold? Is it to educate your audience on a certain topic? Is it to entertain? After identifying your objective—however nebulous it might be at this point—your next action will be to find your hook, or the way into your research. For example, let's say you want to write a murder mystery. If that's all you know—and that's totally fine at the earliest stages—then starting research can seem like a really daunting task, as you could just start looking things up and reading about them and never stop. But maybe you could find a way to give yourself a clearly defined way in—for example, you might start small and decide to look up the articles about every murder that's occurred in your town in the last 20 years. Or you could decide to model yourself after certain mystery

writers, in which case you might start by reading the works of those writers to get some inspiration.

In addition to finding a hook, it is imperative that you have some sort of schedule. This can be really general, something as simple as "This week I'm just reading and taking notes; next week I'll start writing"—or it could get really specific, something like "Monday: two hours reading, a half-hour drafting ideas." I promise you will be more productive and focused if you give yourself a schedule and some deadlines.

How do you actually begin to do research? You might start with an Internet search: It's quick and easy. The problem here is also one of the most exciting things about the Internet—that millions of pages of information will be at your fingertips almost immediately. How do you sort through this information? Better yet, how do you decide which information is useful and which is not? That's the tough part, and I'm going to try and give you some tips to make this a little easier.

There's absolutely a time and a place for Internet research; however, relying on the Internet as your sole source of information can be dangerous.

There's absolutely a time and a place for Internet research; however, relying on the Internet as your sole source of information can be dangerous. I have found that the information on Wikipedia is more or less reliable, but this is also a source that can be altered by anyone. It's not rigorously fact-checked, and Wikipedia entries can be slanted depending on the interests of the person writing the entry.

Academic websites are a reliable source both for basic information and to guide you to other reliable sources of more specific information. If a site has an "edu" ending, this would tend to mean that it is affiliated with a university. If you want to research microbes in space, you can bet that you'll find the most reliable information in a scientific journal like *Nature*. Other reliable sources of information are long-established scholarly entities, like the Encyclopedia Britannica or the Oxford English Dictionary. You also

absolutely want to stay away from sites that sell research papers on a variety of topics. These are simply tools for helping people plagiarize.

For scholarly writing, I can't stress enough how important it is to actually go to the library. Many electronic resources that would be helpful with a project like this can only be accessed from libraries. There are a lot of databases that can help you with this kind of writing, including many geared toward particular fields. If you're not sure what the most useful databases are for your field of interest, ask a librarian.

Here's something to remember as you're wandering the stacks of your library looking for a particular call number—once you find the book you're looking for, don't just take it off the shelf and walk away; take a moment to stop and look at what books are around the one that you just grabbed. On a related note, when you're conducting research you may find an article or book that you thought was going to be helpful, but it's clear from the first page that it doesn't actually relate directly to your topic. Do not just put it down and forget about it—spend a few minutes perusing the notes and the Works Cited section. Very often when you do this, you might find a reference to another article or book—or a point being made that does relate to what you're working on.

Pixland/Thinkstock.

Even in the Internet age, libraries are crucial sources of information.

I talked earlier about the importance of having a research schedule. The activities of researching and writing are necessarily going to overlap, but it's important to have an idea of how long the one and the other will generally last. At a certain point when you're still researching, you may get a really clear idea of how you want to open your piece. Should you not start writing just because you're not into your writing week yet? Of course not. If you feel inspired to write, you should start—while keeping in mind that you may change what you've written, or you may throw it out altogether once you've

done a little more research. By the same token, at a certain point you may have to make yourself stop reading and start writing. In our next lecture, we'll talk about putting all your research efforts to work as you start the process of writing. ■

Suggested Reading

Bullock, *The Norton Field Guide to Writing*.

Lynn, *Literature*.

MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers.

Oliver, *The Student's Guide to Research Ethics*.

Exercises

1. Pick a text we have discussed previously in this class, and try entering it in a variety of different online search engines—Google, Yahoo, Bing, and so on. Is there a difference in terms of which or what kind of pages come up? Which of these webpages seem reliable as documentary sources for a research project involving this topic? How can you tell?

2. Repeat this exercise, but this time use your local library's database or the MLA catalog. What is different about the sources you discover?

3. Now, go in person and find a scholarly book on one of these topics or pieces we've discussed. Look around to see what other books are nearby. What did you observe?

Using What You Find

Lecture 19

In order to cite properly, you need to be able to find the quote you have in mind. It does you absolutely no good—trust me on this one, no good—if you think: "I remember that being in the middle of some book that had a brown cover," and then you spend precious time searching for it.

Now that you've mastered some of the basics of finding information, you need to start figuring out how to keep track of it. Everybody works and thinks differently, so it may be a matter of doing this a few times before you figure out which style of information storing and sorting works for you.

The most important and useful advice I can give you is simply to start early. In exchange for your audience's time and interest, you have an obligation to know what you're talking about. This means you need to read up on your topic and absorb the information. Then you'll need to review a lot of your research materials so that you have an understanding of other points of view on your topic. Next, you need to be able to articulate your own position in respect to those other points of view. Finally, you have to make a convincing case as to why your particular focus or argumentative position is important.

If you're in the early stages of your project and not quite sure what approach you want to take to a particular topic, you might start with reading through the material you've collected and using tabs to identify pages that contain material you find interesting and relevant to your topic. After you've gone through an initial reading of your material, it's time to take more detailed notes. The way I tend to work is by taking notes on a particular text, either in longhand or on the computer. When I do this, I try to sum up a scholar's general argument and then note particularly interesting points individually—making sure to identify on which page they appear.

When I've worked my way through taking notes on a text, I either print the typed notes or staple my handwritten notes together. This way, when

it comes time to start the drafting process, I can read through my notes to remind myself what's important about a book rather than having to reread it. I am always careful to write down my own questions or counterarguments as they come to me, so that I don't forget a flash of insight.

Another variation on this note-taking approach is the note card version—many of us probably learned some form of this in high school. It's just what it sounds like: You write a quote or an important argumentative point on each note card. In the top corner of the card, you should also designate who the author is, which text the idea or quote comes from, and which page number you found it on. The benefit of this approach is that it's a little more flexible, because you can shuffle the cards to further organize your research by subpoints.

One of the trickiest things is to make your voice heard while using the work of other experts as a means of support.

When you're organizing your research into an article, one of the trickiest things is to make your voice heard while using the work of other experts as a means of support. You want to make your research support your idea, but you need to give proper accreditation where it's due. The best way to generate an original argument for a research project is after doing your research, decide what your particular stance is on a topic, and then try and articulate your position. Generate a rough outline indicating where supporting points could be helped by the use of secondary sources. When you're doing this, you absolutely need to identify critics who have expressed opinions that disagree with your own. Sometimes an opposing view or counterargument can help you prove your own point; you can even use a counterargument as a way of structuring your own argument.

One of the major dangers when writing a research paper is the issue of plagiarism, which you need to avoid at all costs. In a nutshell, plagiarism is using the words or ideas of others without giving proper credit where credit is due. There is obvious, outright plagiarism, and then there is accidental plagiarism, which is what you have to guard against most vigilantly. Let's say you've read lots and lots of books and articles on your subject; you've

taken lots and lots of notes; and you've become an authority on the topic. This is great because it means that you've internalized much of what you've been reading. The danger is that your original thoughts on a particular topic may somehow get mixed up with what other scholars have to say. As you're reading over your notes or note cards, you might forget whether they contain what a scholar said about your topic or your own reaction to what you were reading.

This is why I tend to note direct quotes by putting quotation marks around sentences or phrases I find important—or if I'm paraphrasing, I might write something like: "Professor Eminence spends two pages discussing the history of Malory scholarship, focusing particularly on where early 20th-century scholars went wrong." Now when it comes to my research, I might be in full agreement with Professor Eminence's thinking about how early 20th-century scholars were wrong in a particular area, and I can say that—but I also need to cite Professor Eminence as having made this argument first.

Even if I arrive at a conclusion or position on my own, independent of another scholar, once I start doing research and discover that other scholars have already observed this point, I need to make sure that I give them credit. Actually, when you discover that what you thought was an original insight on your part is, in fact, a point that someone else has already made, you should be encouraged that you seem to be thinking like the experts. ■

Suggested Reading

Bullock, *The Norton Field Guide to Writing*.

Lynn, *Literature*.

MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers.

Oliver, *The Student's Guide to Research Ethics*.

Exercises

1. For each passage below, even though you don't know the research sources, can you identify where the citation fails and what the red flags are?

Many Malory scholars now disagree with Eugène Vinaver's argument that Malory composed eight separate tales; several, in fact, argue that Malory's text is the "most comprehensive before the modern period" and others have gone so far as to suggest that it is "the first novel." In any event, we can agree with Dorsey Armstrong that Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* is something "new and original" (33).

People have always told stories. Back in the Middle Ages, people wrote some of the most popular stories ever to be told. Medieval people liked stories about knights, combat, and ladies in distress. Today, people tend to like the same kinds of stories, but with a modern twist.

Studies have shown that when light-rail moves into a neighborhood, property values go down. Neighborhoods with light-rail stations are noisier, more prone to crime, and more likely to incur instances of vandalism. It is estimated that if a light-rail station were to be built in this neighborhood, all property values would drop by at least ten percent.

2. Correct the citation format in the examples below so that it conforms to MLA style. Now correct it so that it conforms to APA style. Repeat for Chicago style. Notice the similarities and differences.

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*; quote from page 1 (published by Penguin Books in London, 2002): "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."

Dorsey Armstrong's *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's Morte d'Arthur* (published in 2003 by University Press

of Florida, in Gainesville) quote from page 1: "The particular construction of gender in Malory's text is critical to any attempt to engage with its narrative project."

Ryan Schneider's *The Public Intellectualism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and W. E. B. Du Bois: Emotional Dimensions of Race and Reform* (published by Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2010), quote from page 137: "Despite the epic-heroic, sacrificial connotations of their rhetoric, Du Bois and Stewart refuse the argument that violence is a morally just and ethically viable means of bringing about the kinds of radical changes in the social order necessary to ensure reciprocal relations across the color line."

Getting Started—Writing First Drafts

Lecture 20

I cannot tell you how often I see students who hand in a paper that begins a little wobbly, but by the end, they've expressed some wonderfully original insight that they didn't have when they started. This phenomenon is called "writing your way to an argument," and while this is wonderful, what would be ideal is if this happened in the first draft of a paper or an article or a letter, and that the writer then had time to go back and revise—keeping that insight they achieved at the end as the guiding force that now drives the paper forward.

Sometimes the hardest part of producing a polished piece of writing is simply the act of getting started. The blank screen on the computer or the blank sheet of paper in front of you can seem particularly daunting if you have several ideas and you're unsure where to start—or even worse, if you know you need to compose something but feel as if you have no ideas. Let's look at some techniques that can make starting a piece of writing seem a little less formidable than might at first seem to be the case.

Let's say you are writing a letter to apply for a job. First, you might do some free-writing or brainstorming—for example, you might make a list of the specific qualifications that the job requires, and then you might make another list of your own qualifications. Lists like these can help you figure out how to organize your letter. Maybe you're currently a gardener, but you want to apply for a job as an editorial assistant. Should you mention your current job as a gardener first, or should you maybe mention before that the fact that you were an English major in college and that you wrote for your college's newspaper?

Obviously, while you certainly should discuss your current job, you don't want that to be the first thing you mention in a letter like this. You might want to do a little research—research about the company to which you're applying. Maybe you'll discover that you and the CEO are from the same small town in the Midwest or that you went to the same college. As long as you can manage it without seeming forced, it might be helpful to include these details in your letter—so instead of writing, "When I was in college I

wrote for my school's newspaper," you might write, "During my junior year at St. Excellence College, I was a reporter for the *St. Excellence Daily*, the campus paper."

What if you are feeling blocked even about beginning the brainstorming stage? I'll give you a few strategies that have worked for me and for friends and colleagues of mine. One thing that works against us as we attempt to get started with a process of writing is the desire to produce a really good piece of prose. Sometimes in order to get to the good writing, you have to slog through some garbage. In other words, one way to get to a point where you produce something decent is to give yourself permission to write poorly. Giving yourself this permission can really be liberating: It allows you to type ideas or points in no particular order, with poor grammar, bad spelling, and incomplete sentences. The key here is to simply get whatever ideas you have out of your head and onto the screen.

Finding a writing partner or a writing support group is a great way to get yourself motivated.

After a break—it's extremely important to take a break and come back to your writing with fresh eyes—you can come back and take a look at what you've written, and then you can start to think about how the pieces that you've put on the page could be rearranged into something that resembles a coherent argument. Another thing to realize is that very often the process of writing itself can help you figure out what it is you're trying to say.

Finding a writing partner or a writing support group is a great way to get yourself motivated. If you know that you have a deadline when you actually have to hand something to someone else, who will in turn be passing something he or she has written to you for your comments, you can usually manage to get some words down on the page.

Serving as a reader for someone else's work can also make you a better writer. As you edit a friend's writing—as you're looking for the thesis, as you're circling supporting points that aren't satisfactorily fleshed out—you're also learning more about writing in a way that you can apply to your

own work, and you can apply it almost immediately. As I've suggested several times before, if you want to improve your writing, read as much as you can—the more you read and write, the better you'll become at both. ■

Suggested Reading

Bullock, *The Norton Field Guide to Writing*.

The Chicago Manual of Style.

Clouse, *The Student Writer*.

Griffith, *Writing Essays about Literature*.

Lanham, *Revising Prose*.

———, *Style*.

MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers.

O'Connor, *Words Fail Me*.

Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*.

Trimble, *Writing with Style*.

Tufte, *Artful Sentences*.

Exercises

1. Imagine that you have just been asked to write a paper—the main argument is up to you—on an often-anthologized story (such as William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" or James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" or some other short story that you have read relatively recently). Set yourself a strict limit of 15 minutes and allow yourself the ability to "brainstorm" or "free-write" anything that comes to mind and that interests you about this text.

2. Set your free-writing aside for at least an hour—preferably a day. After that time, come back to it and see if you can find at least two thesis statements that look like they could be promising as you set out to write a five- to seven-page paper on the story you've selected.

Editing—Finding What's Wrong

Lecture 21

Because [the editing] stage is so crucial and can make the difference between a piece of writing that's okay and one that's actually great, I have reminded you over, and over, and over again to give yourself the opportunity to put a piece of writing aside—even if it's just for an hour—and then come back and look at it with fresh eyes.

Many people find writing an essay, letter, or other piece of text such a draining process that when they reach the end, they just want to get the thing out of their sight—so they hand it in immediately. If they've waited until the last minute to work on this assignment, then often there is really no choice. This is a major error. While getting the darn thing written certainly feels like the biggest part of the writing process, editing is arguably just as important—and in some cases, it's more important than the actual writing itself.

When it comes to editing, there are two basic models at opposite ends of the spectrum: There's the line-by-line approach, and then there's the holistic approach. A line-by-line approach is just what it sounds like: You start with the first line of the piece—you read through it and each successive line as carefully as possible, revising the phrasing, the word choice, and so on.

The holistic approach is about stepping back from the work and taking a macroscopic view. This approach allows you to ask questions about the piece: What is it trying to say? How does it say it? You can then change or rearrange chunks of the paper—and then you gradually work down to the level of word choice and punctuation. Most people tend to use a combination of these approaches. In this lecture, we explore how to best use elements from each editing style on a piece of text with serious macro-level problems.

Let's consider the classic example of the five-paragraph essay. The idea with a five-paragraph essay is that you have an introductory paragraph, then you have three paragraphs of supporting evidence, and then you've got a concluding paragraph that sums up your argument. Quotes can often

work in the interest of supporting your points—they function as concrete evidence that work to prove what you're trying to say. But all too often, I see students including quotes as if they're just trying to fill up space, with very little commentary or discussion of the quote. You cannot simply find a quote that works to support your main claim, plug it into the paper, and leave it to your reader to figure out how it fits. A good rule of thumb is that if you are including a quote of three lines, you should spend at least an equal number of lines explaining why that quote is important.

When you're taking the holistic approach, the first thing you should do after reading through the essay is to try and state in a sentence what the main argument of the essay is. A good way to check for this in your own writing is to try and underline your main claim—and ideally, your main claim should be stated somewhere near the end of the first paragraph (unless it's a very long paper). Your reader should be able to tell almost immediately what the main point is.

Your reader should be able to tell almost immediately what the main point is.

The key for a paper to be strong and organized is for the writer to make every supporting point connect back explicitly to this main claim. So our next step in trying to determine how well or poorly an essay connects back to that claim would be to write an outline of the paper as it stands. This doesn't have to be in formal outline style; for me, the easiest thing to do is just write a sentence or a couple of phrases for each paragraph. In this way, we quickly identify the basic structure of the paper—and if you look at it closely, you can see where it might fall apart.

After you've identified some flaws in the broad outline of the paper, you can try and revise the outline to make the paper stronger. Once you've dealt with the larger sweep of the paper, you can start to focus in on some of the details. As you rewrite, you want to make sure that it's absolutely clear how each point works to support the main claim. You want to make sure that the quotes you've selected actually do the work that you want them to do. Are there other quotes that might help you make your point a little bit better or a little more clearly? You might want to replace them now. As you rewrite, you'll also want to check for awkward phrasing and out-and-out errors. In

our next lecture, we'll get down to the business of rewriting an essay from start to finish. ■

Suggested Reading

Bullock, *The Norton Field Guide to Writing*.

The Chicago Manual of Style.

Clouse, *The Student Writer*.

Griffith, *Writing Essays about Literature*.

Harmon and Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*.

Lanham, *Revising Prose*.

———, *Style*.

Lynn, *Literature*.

MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers.

O'Connor, *Woe Is I.*

———, *Words Fail Me*.

Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*.

Trimble, *Writing with Style*.

Tufte, *Artful Sentences*.

Exercise

1. Below is a short essay. Using the techniques described in the lecture, work through the essay, identifying (1) what its main claim is, (2) how it is structured, (3) whether the supporting points work or not, and (4) which issues of phrasing, punctuation, and so on, if left unattended, will detract from the major claim of the piece.

Beowulf is one of the greatest works of English literature. It was written in a language called Old English that looks very little like Modern English. Because of this, you need to take a special course

on Old English just to be able to read it in the original language. It is worth the effort, however, because it is a great poem that is not so great if you only read it in translation. In *Beowulf*, the hero, named "Beowulf" fights three different monsters—Grendel, Grendel's mother, and a dragon. All of these fights are important, only one of them is really important in terms of defining Beowulf's identity.

The first fight Beowulf undertakes is against a monster named Grendel who has been attacking the mead hall of King Hrothgar of the Danes for twelve winters. Beowulf hears of this trouble and journeys across the sea to offer Hrothgar his assistance. He seems to do this because he likes a challenge, and he wants to establish his reputation as a great warrior. After he defeats Grendel, he has to fight her mother, who lives at the bottom of a lake. This fight is a little more difficult for Beowulf because he has to fight her underwater, but he still wins. Finally, after he has been king of his people for 50 years, he has to fight a dragon. There is a big debate as to whether or not Beowulf does the right thing because in the end he dies and leaves his people without a king, they are sure to be attacked by the Swedes once he has died.

Some quotes from the poem show how important Beowulf's identity is, and they also show that reputation is really important in this society. When he arrives at Hrothgar's court, he says that "I had a fixed purpose when I put to sea/As I sat in the boat with my band of men,/I meant to perform to the uttermost/what your people wanted or perish in the attempt,/in the fiend's clutches. /And I shall fulfill that purpose,/prove myself with a proud deed/or meet my death here in the mead-hall." (632-638) When he's fighting Grendel the narrator tells us that "Hygelac's kinsman kept thinking about his name and fame: he never lost heart" (1529-1530). At the end, when Beowulf fights the dragon, he makes a formal boast "I risked my life/ often when I was young. Now I am old,/but as king of the people I shall pursue this fight/for the glory of winning, if the evil one will only/ abandon his earth-fort/ and face me in the open." (2510-2515) Indeed, the final lines of the poem, eulogizing Beowulf, note that "it was said that of all the kings upon the earth /

he was the most gracious and fair-minded / kindest to his people and keenest to win fame." (3182–3184).

If we consider all this evidence together, it seems clear that his first fight, with Grendel, is the most important. It establishes Beowulf's reputation and sets the scene so that he can win other battles, including the one with the dragon. The fact that his people seem to think that it is positive that he sets out to "win fame" shows that according to the values of this society he is doing what he is supposed to. And he couldn't do that if hadn't fought Grendel.

Rewriting—Fixing What's Wrong

Lecture 22

Very often, the problems that occur in the later sections of a paper or in portions of a letter arise from the fact that the writer has not really articulated a clear main position.

In the first step of the editing process, we've identified what some of the issues are, and we've thought about some ways to improve the problem areas of an essay. Now it's time to put our thoughts into action and start rewriting. As I've said before, step one is always make sure that you are working with a clearly articulated main claim. If your main claim is clear and you keep it foremost in your mind, then often the supporting points simply fall into place, and the structure is logical from the outset. If you're not sure of what exactly it is you're trying to argue, then the paper or letter or article can wander.

You may be thinking—and you may be rightly thinking—that the editing and rewriting process is really easy to describe and demonstrate when we're dealing with an academic essay. The essay is a form that's trying to make an argument, so it's relatively easy to spot weaknesses. But what about other types of writing?

Let's consider something that's not an essay. How about a letter to your mayor, asking her to get behind renaming something in honor of John and Jane Smith—a couple that has been very active in charitable activities in your community? Let's consider a first draft of this letter and then see how we could maybe make it better.

> Dear Peggy,
>
> I absolutely idolize John and Jane Smith, I cut out every newspaper article I read about them. They are always giving money to good causes and helping people live better lives. I've never heard of them asking for recognition for all the good things they do. I just think they deserve to have some recognition after everything they've

done for people in our community, and in other communities, and for the arts, and for cancer research and special education needs. I think we should name something after them, even if it's just a rock in the Community Park. Please help me honor John and Jane Smith.

Sincerely,

Rita Neighbor

What does this letter have going for it? It's definitely sincere and heartfelt, but the writer is so eager to get this recognition for John and Jane Smith that she doesn't seem to have taken much time in the writing of the letter—the words come out kind of breathlessly; they're sort of tumbling over one another, as if she was just writing every thought the moment it came into her head.

How would we start to edit this and make it stronger? Let's start from a holistic perspective. The first thing that strikes me is that the letter writer starts out by talking about herself. That's all very nice, Rita Neighbor, but the goal of this letter is not to let people know what Rita Neighbor thinks about John and Jane Smith but rather to get recognition for them. Rita Neighbor's longtime interest in their philanthropy can certainly be used to support her desired objective, but she needs to make John and Jane Smith the main focus from the beginning of the letter, and she needs to move herself to a secondary position.

We can also zoom in on John and Jane Smith's accomplishments—as of now, they're listed kind of haphazardly. These accomplishments are all very important, but they should each get their own moment within the letter. Finally, we might need some indication that other people besides Rita Neighbor think this is a good idea.

On a finer level of detail, a few things leap out. First, when you're writing a letter to the mayor, even if she has been your best friend since kindergarten, you probably want to address her as "Mayor Friendly" rather than "Peggy." There are also some grammatical and mechanical errors: The first sentence is a run-on due to a comma splice, and there are some moments where the tone

is far too casual. Examples include “I’ve” instead of “I have” and “they’ve” instead of “they have.”

After identifying and editing in terms of some of the major issues, we can rewrite the letter so that it’s more powerful and more effective. Here’s the revised version:

> Dear Mayor Friendly:
>
> As I’m sure you are well aware, local residents John and Jane Smith have changed our community and many others through their generous acts of philanthropy. I have followed their charity work for many years and been consistently impressed with how they have given large sums of money to causes as diverse as the arts, cancer research, and special education. I and many others in our neighborhood would like to honor the Smiths by renaming Neighborhood Park, John and Jane Smith Park.
>
> Although it is a small, token act of recognition, we hope that it would be meaningful to the Smiths since it is their neighbors who wish to honor them. Those of us interested in making this happen would be grateful if you could tell us how to go about setting the wheels for this in motion.
>
> Sincerely,
>
> Rita Neighbor

What’s different? This letter is no longer about Rita Neighbor’s long, individual idolization of the Smiths, but it’s about the Smiths themselves. Her longtime interest in their activities, however, is still useful—as she can cite the different areas in which the Smiths have made significant charitable contributions. Her writing tone is a little more formal, and she also takes care to indicate that she is not alone in this request. Finally, she asks the mayor for information on the steps necessary to make the renaming of a park possible—she indicates that she is willing to take an active role to accomplish whatever needs to be done.

So what is the most important thing to take away from this lecture? State a main idea that is as clear and specific as possible. If you keep this main idea firmly in your mind as you write, and then you explicitly connect supporting points back to it, chances are you'll find that your writing flows much more naturally. The structure of your writing will be easier to figure out, and your audience will be better able to follow you.

Never assume your audience understands the point you're trying to make.

A related point is make sure that you never assume your audience understands the point you're trying to make. For example, if you find a quote from a text that you think helps make your point, you cannot simply insert it into your essay. Always spell things out—signpost, in other words, so that your audience doesn't have to work too hard to follow whatever it is you're trying to say. You now have the basic tools to assess what needs to be edited in a piece of writing, and you have some guidelines for how to go about making those changes. ■

Suggested Reading

Bullock, *The Norton Field Guide to Writing*.

The Chicago Manual of Style.

Clouse, *The Student Writer*.

Griffith, *Writing Essays about Literature*.

Harmon and Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*.

Lanham, *Revising Prose*.

———, *Style*.

Lynn, *Literature*.

MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers.

O'Connor, *Woe Is I.*

———, *Words Fail Me*.

Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*.

Trimble, *Writing with Style*.

Tufte, *Artful Sentences*.

Exercise

1. Take the edited version of the sample essay from Lecture 21 (below) and, using the skills we've practiced in that lecture and this one, rewrite the entire essay so that it is clear, coherent, well supported, and free from errors of punctuation and mechanics.

While on the surface "The Yellow Wallpaper" seems to be about one woman's descent into insanity, closer analysis reveals that the story is really a comment on the gender inequality of Gilman's day, as the depictions of male characters, the description of the narrator's bedroom, and the symbolism of the yellow wallpaper make plain.

From these and other similar comments the narrator makes throughout the story, it's clear that she feels helpless in the face of the male authority of her husband and brother. She seems not to have a say in her own recovery—for example, she's unsure exactly what kind of medicines and tonics she's taking—and she uses negative words like "forbidden," which suggest that she is being ordered to do things—or not to do them—against her will.

In addition to the description of how the men in the narrator's life seem to have taken away the narrator's free will, the description of the bedroom functions to cast an ominous and forbidding aura over the narrator's situation. Her description of the bedroom starts off very positively—it's a "big airy room, with windows that look all ways and air and sunshine galore"—but then the description gets more ominous. She comments that it must have been a nursery at one time because of the bars on the windows, and then perhaps a gymnasium because there are rings mounted on the wall. Other details in her description—the bed is nailed to the floor, and the bedposts look as if they have been "gnawed on"—all combine to

produce the image of imprisonment. The images conjured up by this description of the room point clearly toward a comment on gender inequality, especially because the narrator says her husband insisted that she take this room for her own.

By far, however, the most compelling piece of evidence that this is a story about gender issues and not simply insanity is made clear through the yellow wallpaper of the story's title. It is ripped in places—clearly deliberately torn—and the narrator tells us that "the color is repellent, almost revolting: a smoldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight. It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others. No wonder the children hated it! I should hate it myself if I had to live in this room long." As the story progresses, the hideous wallpaper preys upon the mind of the narrator, who has been forced by her husband to spend long hours in a room that she detests. Eventually, the narrator hallucinates what is arguably a metaphor for her own situation. She tells us that she sees a woman behind the pattern of the wallpaper and says: "Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over….. And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern—it strangles so…." The word "strangles" in this passage, along with the description of the woman as being behind the pattern and trying to get out, all suggest that there is something about the quality of being a woman, rather than being insane, that is at stake in Gilman's story. The story concludes with the narrator imagining that she and the woman in the wallpaper are the same person, and just like the woman behind the pattern, the narrator chillingly "creeps" around her room in an act so obviously insane that her husband faints at the sight of it.

Taken individually, the depiction of men, the description of the bedroom that sounds more like a 19th-century lunatic asylum than a nursery, and the narrator's obsessive hallucinations involving the yellow wallpaper could all be considered important elements in a story about one woman's descent into insanity. When we consider

them altogether, however, it becomes clear that the narrator's madness is a direct result of issues of gender inequality: Her husband dictates her rest cure and then assigns her a room that's more prison than anything else. Once in that room, the narrator's feelings of imprisonment, the feeling that her situation is literally killing her, manifest themselves in her hallucination of the woman in the wallpaper, who stands as a symbol for the narrator herself. "The Yellow Wallpaper" uses the idea of madness or insanity to demonstrate the dangers of sexual inequality in American society of the time.

Avoiding Common Errors in Grammar and Usage

Lecture 23

A famous story tells how Winston Churchill was reading through proofs of a piece he had written, and he noticed that his editor had rewritten his sentences so that there was no preposition at the end. In the margins, Churchill wrote back, "This is a situation up with which [I] shall not put."

In the last lectures, we discussed the revision process, one of the most important—but also most overlooked—stages of producing an effectively written piece. Many of the strategies we discussed are also useful tools for avoiding the common errors in grammar and punctuation that are the topic of this lecture. For example, we talked about how important it is to set aside a piece of writing and then return to it with fresh eyes, allowing you to better spot places that need revision. Even better is to ask for someone else to look it over for you. One of the easiest and quickest ways to spot errors and awkward moments is simply to read your piece out loud. Reading aloud forces you to slow down, and your eyes are less likely to skip over a typo.

One of the easiest and quickest ways to spot errors and awkward moments is simply to read your piece out loud.

Let's look at 10 of the most common errors that I have seen in my experience teaching college-level writing. The common error that I find the most distressing is the incorrect use of "I" when it should be "me" and vice versa. Which of the following two sentences is correct: "It was such a wonderful time for Michelle and I" or "It was such a wonderful time for Michelle and me"? The answer is the second sentence. The reason is that the compound object "Michelle and me" is the object of the preposition "for"—and because of this, the first-person pronoun has to be in the objective case. An easy way to check for the correctness of our first example would be to take "Michelle and me" and make it singular. Now we have "It was such a wonderful time for I" or "It was such a wonderful time for me." For most

of us, we don't even need to know the rule—our ear tells us that the second sentence is correct.

The second common error is that of subject-pronoun agreement. Which of these sentences is correct: "If a person has a complaint, he or she should contact the Human Resources Department" or "If a person has a complaint, they should contact the Human Resources Department"? Sentence two is simpler and more economical—but, in fact, it is incorrect. The reason is that "person" is singular, but "they" is plural; in other words, they don't agree. That sentence could easily be corrected by simply turning "person" into "people"—"If people have complaints, they should contact ... ."

By using a sentence like "If a person has a complaint, he or she should contact ... ," not only do you manage to have your pronouns agree—person, he, and she are all singular—but you also avoid the pitfall of using gender-exclusive language, our third common error. When I was in high school, I was taught that when you were trying to get your pronouns to agree, it was all right to use "he" to stand in for the universal subject—thus, "If a person has a complaint, he should contact ... ." This didn't seem quite fair to me, and by the time I got to college, the grammar police seemed to agree. At this point, it was suggested that subject-pronoun agreement be achieved by composing sentences like "If a person has a complaint, he or she should contact ... ." This solution also seemed somewhat unsatisfactory, as did the more streamlined: "If a person has a complaint (s)he should contact ... ."

Today, I think the smartest thing to do is try and follow the rules about subject-pronoun agreement and gender-inclusive language as closely as possible. The easiest way to do this is to use a plural construction throughout: "If people have complaints, they should contact ... ." Or if you're really committed to using the singular form, the word "one" works nicely: "If one has a complaint, one should contact ... ."

Another common error that I see all too frequently is the misuse of apostrophes. Students tend to add apostrophes where they are not needed or omit them altogether. The construction that trips most people up is the tiny word "its" in its various forms. The problem here is that apostrophes can be used to show possession and are also used in contractions. When you turn "it

is" into "it's," that is when you use an apostrophe; if you are merely stating that something belongs to "it," there is no apostrophe. There is one easy rule to remember: Possessive nouns always use an apostrophe, but possessive pronouns never do.

Number five on our list of errors is the misused comma. This is a major issue when it comes to writing properly structured sentences. In many of the papers I've graded, commas seem to have been sprinkled randomly throughout. Commas should be used to separate ideas in a sentence, to separate multiple adjectives describing the same thing, and to prevent confusion when the meaning of a sentence would otherwise be unclear.

The sixth of our top 10 common grammar and punctuation errors is misplaced or dangling modifiers. A dangling modifier can be a word or a phrase that is referring to a word or idea that is not clearly present in the sentence. See if you can figure out what is wrong with this sentence: "After being lost for years, John Smith discovered the crown jewels hidden behind a staircase." Most of us can probably figure out what that sentence is trying to say—that a guy named John Smith found the crown jewels, which had been lost for some time. The way it is written, however, the phrase "after being lost for years" is misplaced—the sentence reads as if John Smith, and not the jewels, had been lost.

Number seven on my list is the rampant use of the word "ironically" when the speaker or writer really just means "coincidentally." Newscasters in particular seem to be in love with "ironically," and they consistently use it when they shouldn't. Let's take this example, which was uttered by a sportscaster on the late-night news not too long ago: "The team will play its next game in Toronto—which, ironically, is where their coach began his career 25 years ago." Is it ironic that the coach is going back to the place where his professional career began? In fact, it's coincidental. Here's an example of the correct usage of irony: "Ironically, the fire station burned down."

Number eight on our list of common errors is misspelled words. Granted, with modern word-processing programs, a lot of these errors get caught on the computer screen, but some words may slip through. For example, I have

had students misspell the proper names of authors and characters that they are writing about. If you do this in any context, it's going to cause you to lose credibility in the eyes of your audience. Take a look at the list below of 50 commonly misspelled words.

Fifty Commonly Misspelled Words

Have a friend test you on these frequently misspelled words.

1. acceptable
2. accidentally
3. accommodate
4. argument
5. believe
6. calendar
7. category
8. committed
9. conscience
10. conscientious
11. consensus
12. definite
13. discipline
14. embarrass
15. exhilarate
16. fiery
17. foreign
18. gauge
19. guarantee
20. harass
21. height
22. hierarchy
23. immediate
24. independent
25. indispensable
26. inoculate
27. jewelry
28. judgment
29. leisure
30. liaison
31. library
32. license
33. maintenance
34. maneuver
35. medieval
36. memento
37. millennium
38. minuscule
39. mischievous
40. occasion
41. occurrence
42. pastime
43. receive
44. referred
45. reference
46. schedule
47. separate
48. supersede
49. vacuum
50. weird

Another common error in usage has to do with the problem of words that sound like other words. Most frequently, I see this error in the phrases "could have," "should have," and "would have"—as in "I could have gone to the park, but I had a lot of work to do." The problem comes from the penchant of English speakers to contract words in order to speak more quickly: "I could've gone to the park." The contracted form sounds an awful lot like "could of," and people frequently write these forms unthinkingly.

The final common grammar and usage mistake is the frequent misspelling of the various forms of "there" and "your." "They're going to put their stuff over there." Although when spoken it sounds as if the same word is used three different times, in fact three different spellings are required. "They're" is really a contracted form of "They are." "Their," as in "their stuff," indicates possession. The spelling differentiation helps to keep this meaning distinct from the final form, in which "there" indicates a location. These are easy mistakes to make—and again, this is why it's always a good idea to set your writing aside for awhile and then come back to it with fresh eyes. ■

Suggested Reading

The Chicago Manual of Style.

Clouse, *The Student Writer*.

Gordon, *The Deluxe Transitive Vampire*.

Griffith, *Writing Essays about Literature*.

Lanham, *Style*.

O'Connor, *Woe Is I.*

———, *Words Fail Me*.

Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*.

Trimble, *Writing with Style*.

Truss, *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*.

Tufte, *Artful Sentences*.

Exercise

1. Identify the errors in the sentences below and then rewrite them so that they are correct.

They're dog is tired, he's been playing in the backyard all day.

To who did her give the present?

She brought plenty of food for us to eat: salad's, muffins, and hamburgers.

Its hard when someone breaks there promise.

Your not being very nice to him.

The Power of Words

Lecture 24

If I had to give you one piece of advice for becoming a more engaged reader and a more effective writer, it is simply to read and to write as much as you can.

I began this course with an example of appallingly bad writing. What I would like to do in this final lecture is discuss an example of wonderful writing, in the hope that it inspires you to keep up the practice of writing and reading long after this course is over. I've chosen the American classic *Walden*, by Henry David Thoreau—a text that is in some respects both essay and autobiography. Here are the opening lines:

> When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only. I lived there two years and two months. At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again.

Thoreau is not often given credit for the beauty of his prose, probably because most readers are drawn to his work by the ideas he expresses rather than the manner in which he expresses them. The Thoreau most people know and understand is primarily a thinker and an activist. His status as a writer is something of a secondary concern, if it is a concern at all.

The opening paragraph of *Walden* is among the most carefully crafted pieces of writing in all of American literature.

But the opening paragraph of *Walden* is among the most carefully crafted pieces of writing in all of American literature. It's not only a lucid summary of the book's content, but it's also a really elegant reflection of its overall structure. In other words, you can find in these few lines a microcosm of the most intriguing and most

important ideas that *Walden*, as a whole, has to offer, and it's also a model of the form that those offerings take.

Moreover, the passage provides a kind of guide for how to read *Walden* insofar as it establishes the terms of the relationship between narrator and reader, and it also mirrors the relationship between Thoreau and the social world from which he partially and temporarily withdrew during those two years and two months on the shores of Walden Pond.

Let's start by looking at that sense of partial and temporary withdrawal—because for many scholars it's the most important thematic dimension of *Walden*. While many people think of Thoreau as withdrawing from the world because he wanted to get away from its burdens and preoccupations, it's also true that his larger purpose in getting away was to better understand those burdens and the preoccupations that go along with them by giving himself a new relationship to them, one that involved less participation and more observation. His purpose was not to leave his home environment, but rather to give himself a chance to view and experience it from a position that was slightly off-center. We can think of Thoreau as wanting to hold his life in Concord at arm's length.

We can see this in the content and the structure of those opening lines. Each detail builds on the next to tell us something more about how he removed himself from his previous life. These details are held together like links in a chain—each phrase is discrete but connected to all of the others by a series of commas to form a single complete sentence, which creates a sense of distance and a sense of connection all at the same time. The very structure of that sentence compels us to recognize the narrator's desire—and Thoreau's desire—to maintain a link to the world while, as I said, holding it at arm's length.

The remove is not permanent though. Just as the conclusion of *Walden* advises readers to break away from their own social worlds so they can learn something new about them, so too does the opening paragraph emphasize the need to eventually lessen that distance and ultimately reengage with the social world.

Finally, this structural pattern of the opening lines—carefully marking out a series of steps that take one away from that which is known and familiar, and then eventually acknowledging the need to turn back around again and look at the familiar with new eyes—is itself a guide for how to read *Walden*.

Each chapter, and all the chapters taken together, follows a similar pattern: a deliberate movement outward and away from the status quo, away from that which is recognizable and easily comprehended—followed, eventually, by a return to the same territory where we started. Yet because of the removal and displacement we've experienced, we're now sojourners with a different feel for the ground we've walked before. Thoreau's piece is a masterful example of engaging an audience—he conveys to his audience his main argument not just in the content of his words, but in the style with which he executes his argument.

If you really want to be an astute, engaged reader and writer, then my best piece of advice would be: Be promiscuous—read everything you can; write whenever you can. You can make yourself a beautiful space in which to write. Write with a pen or a pencil, on the computer, on the back of an envelope. Read everything you can—editorials, short stories, histories, biographies, novels, poems, plays. The world around us is filled with words; take in as many as you can, and then give us some back. ■

Suggested Reading

Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz, *Everything's an Argument*.

McLaughlin and Coleman, *Everyday Theory*.

Roberts, *Writing about Literature*.

Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*.

Tufte, *Artful Sentences*.

Exercises

1. Take an issue about which you feel strongly, and draft an opening paragraph of an argumentative essay. Paying attention to all the issues we've discussed in this course—concerns about audience, tone, style, establishing an ethos, using powerful language, and so on—make sure that your main claim is clear and specific and that you point toward the direction your argument will go.

2. Now write the concluding paragraph to an essay on this same topic. Remember that a strong conclusion recapitulates the main points of your argument without simply restating what you wrote in your introduction.

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Credits

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