THE RHETORIC OF AN EXCELLENT ESSAY

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The word *rhetoric* is thrown about in mostly negative ways—accuse someone of employing *rhetoric* and you have implied a lack of sincerity or content (which is why the commonly used phrase is "empty" rhetoric). Yet in its classical sense, rhetoric means the use of language (whether in speech or text) to *persuade* an audience. Let's consult the rhetoricians of Ancient Rome, for example.

The Roman teachers were acutely aware of the role of audience. Quintilian—who taught oratory in the early years of the Roman Empire—speaks of arguing before "judges" because an audience was likely to be a person or group that was going to make a decision on your proposal.

In a similar way, your college paper proposes an argument to a professor in the hopes of receiving a good grade. It's important for you, then, to consider the rhetoric of your essay.

The Romans divided rhetoric into five canons. The second canon, arrangement (dispositio), had to do with how a text was structured, particularly with respect to arguments and appeals to a deliberative body. Here's how you can structure your own essays.

EXORDIUM (OR INTRODUCTION)

Quintilian and Cicero believed that the purpose of an *introduction* was to win the trust of your audience. The introduction (*exordium*) of your academic paper is very important, but many students fail to develop a compelling opening. You were probably taught that the *introduction* is where you discuss the subject and purpose of your essay, but is there something more you should include?

To paraphrase Henry James, you should use your introduction to *reshape the reader* into a person who will be receptive to your ideas, so your introduction should be both engaging and appealing.

Consider the introduction of C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*:

> Everyone has heard people quarreling. Sometimes it sounds funny and sometimes it sounds merely

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unpleasant; but however it sounds, I believe we can learn something very important from listening to the kinds of things they say. They say things like this: "How'd you like it if anyone did the same to you?"—"That's my seat, I was there first"—"Leave him alone, he isn't doing you any harm"—"Why should you shove in first?"—"Give me a bit of your orange, I gave you a bit of mine"—Come on, you promised." People say things like this every day, educated as well as uneducated, and children as well as adults.

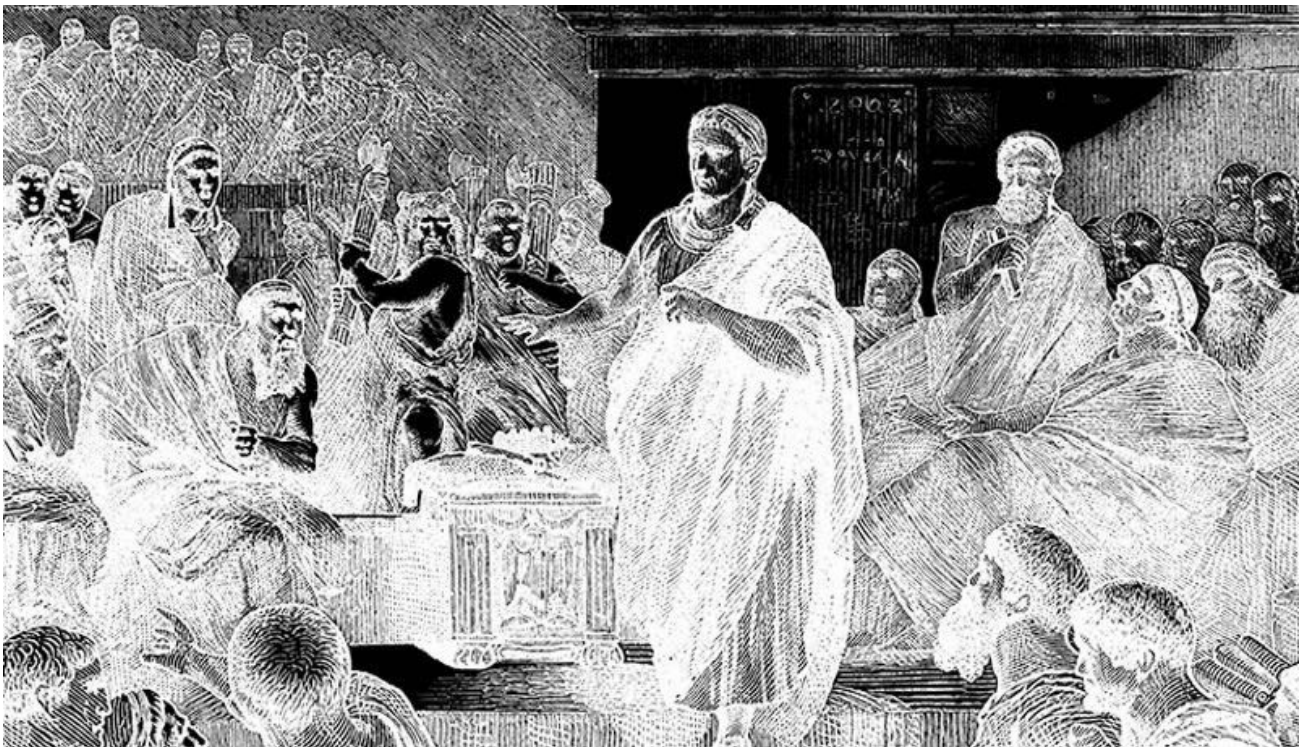
Notice that Lewis has not announced his topic or told us what his book will prove: what Lewis has done is cleverer. He begins with his own experience, understanding that, if readers can make a personal connection with the introduction, they will be more receptive to his forthcoming argument.

NARRATIO (STATEMENT OF THE FACTS)

An account of the facts is necessary because you must convince professors that you know the particulars surrounding the topic (*narratio*). This is complicated because professors are usually familiar with the issues already. Therefore, your *narrative* should encourage them to consider your subject from a point of view uniquely your own.

PARTITIO (POINT OF DIVISION)

As much as professors might value storytelling, the purpose of the *narratio* is to set up the *partitio*, or the academic thesis that places on you a burden of proof. Your claim should be debatable and state politely but unequivocally where you stand on the issue.



CONFIRMATIO (PROOFS OR VALIDATION)

A thesis requires validation (*confirmatio*). Proofs entail citing authors and their books, peer-reviewed publications, learned societies, government or university-level research, statistically sound surveys, applicable theories, philosophical systems, and classical traditions.

Selecting the proper sources can seem overwhelming with all the information that your college library provides (along with its ever-expanding electronic database). However, it helps to think of yourself as a new participant in an ongoing discussion that began long before you joined in. Ask yourself, What are the important voices involved in this academic conversation? Which ones seem to compel my attention the most? This should help you select the best proofs to validate your argument.

CONFUTATIO (REBUTTAL)

Finally, professors expect you to address points of view that run counter to your argument (*confutatio*). Failure to do so means that you risk the professor bringing up these counterpoints in the comments section of the rubric (which usually means a lower grade for your essay).

Arguments are rarely the statement of bald facts, so they have weaknesses that you need to address. For example, attorneys must rely on faulty witnesses and so raise the concerns about the integrity of testimony themselves rather than having the opposing attorney do it on cross-examination.

HOW DO ALL THESE WORK TOGETHER?

These canons do not translate into the essay-outlines you were taught, since Roman teachers were often discussing rhetorical moves that appeal to audiences. Because a paragraph can be a microcosm of an essay,

sometimes the canons are more easily observed when writing on the micro-level.

Take this passage from Wayne C. Booth's study *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, where he discusses a controversy surrounding Jane Austin's novel Emma:

> It may be that if we look at Emma and Knightley as real people, this ending will seem false. G.B. Stern laments, in *Speaking of Jane Austen*, "Oh, Miss Austen, it was not a good solution; it was a bad solution, an unhappy ending, could we see beyond the last pages of the book." Edmund Wilson predicts that Emma will find a new protégée like Harriet, since she has not been cured of her inclination to "infatuations with women." Marvin Mudrick even more emphatically rejects Jane Austin's explicit rhetoric; he believes that Emma is still a "confirmed exploiter," and for him the ending must be read as ironic.
>
> *But it is precisely because this ending is neither life itself nor a simple bit of literary irony that it can serve so well to heighten our sense of complete and indeed perfect resolution to all that has gone before*. If we look at the values that have been realized in this marriage and compare them with those realized in conventional marriage plots, we see that Jane Austen means what she says: this will be a happy marriage because there is simply nothing left to make it anything less than perfectly happy [emphasis added].

Notice how Booth uses the aforementioned rhetorical moves interchangeably within the space of two paragraphs?

In the beginning of the first paragraph, Booth offers an account of the history of prior criticisms that surround Emma as a character (*narratio*). Booth does not expect us to take his word, so he offers a sampling of the voices (*confirmatio*) that remain unsatisfied with the ending in Emma. After Booth provides an account of the criticism (*narratio*), he asks a tacit question. All experienced writers ask this question in some form when the time comes for them to choose the necessary measure of risk involved in academic writing (*partitio*).

The point of the *narratio* is to set up the *partitio*, which is often the answer to a question. The question can be stated or unstated, but the teachers of rhetoric often phrase it as, *what does all of this lead me to say*?

Booth in the second paragraph is led to say that the critics of Austin's novel have missed the point by focusing on the wrong thing (*confutatio*). Booth is able to turn the complaints of the critics on their heads, and he also strengthens his own argument in the process. Booth then illustrates how effective it is to set up your academic paper by contrasting your cardinal claim with its counterpoints.

Of course, this is just one of many acceptable ways to present a solid academic thesis. However, if your opposing points of view are as faulty as Booth presents his own to be, then it would give you an undoubted advantage to present your argument as a rebuttal (confutatio).

PERORATIO (CONCLUSION)

Cicero argued the importance of reminding the audience of the main issues involved in your argument at the closing (*peroratio*). He also claimed that an ending could arouse sympathy for a speaker or his cause.

Students often believe that their conclusion should restate the points they made in the introduction. While reminding the professor of your key arguments is appropriate, each academic paper is something of a journey where someone is invited to share in the traveling. As with all journeys, you also want to offer some perspective at the end.

In *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare has Mark Antony

say at the funeral, "Bear with me./ My heart is in the coffin there with Caesar,/ And I must pause till it come back to me." C.S. Lewis in *The Four Loves* talks about friends being "side by side, absorbed in some common interest." As you lead a professor to the end of your shared journey, you want them by your side.

Like Antony over the pyre of Caesar, you want them for a moment to pause.