

Lesson Plan: Identifying Rhetorical Strategies in Argument

Katherine Masters

Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

Lesson: Identifying Rhetorical Strategies in Argument

Timeframe: 50-60 minutes

Target Audience: College or university students at a remedial writing level, both second language learners and native speakers

Materials needed: laptop, internet access (<http://www.21cb.net/ucla-asians-in-the-library-girl-responses/> , <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FNuyDZevKrU>), whiteboard marker, “Body Paragraph” worksheet, “The Rhetorical Triangle” worksheet, “Rhetorical Strategies of Idea Development” worksheet, “Letter to Alexandra Wallace” homework assignment

Objectives: After the lesson, students will be able to

- recognize the similarities between successful oral and written argument.
- assess an argument for its rhetorical strengths and weaknesses.
- discuss the rhetorical makeup of argument successfully to others.
- translate the basic argumentative skills they learned today into the writing they will be expected to produce in their basic, five-paragraph, in-class essays and final exam. (**Note: 100A instructors teach students to write complex, multi-paragraphed, genre-specific, out-of-class essays that do not follow the five-paragraph model. However, the expectation of their timed, in-class argument is that they will be able to produce a coherent, logical, intelligent argument in one hour; thus, a five-paragraph structure is allowed and promoted for only this type of writing. Students at this level need to learn to develop a legitimate argumentative structure before they are allowed the freedom to manipulate it in effective and meaningful ways.**)

Background: This lesson is for English/LLD 100A, a rhetoric-based composition course that students may take if they are not able to pass the Writing Skills Test (WST). Students in English/LLD 100A are a complex group of students who may come from a working class or lower middle class background, who may be the first in their families to attend college, who may have gone to an economically impacted and overpopulated high school, who may have a learning or other disability, and who may be second language learners, which in itself can be broken down into several “categories” of second language learning (one of many complex examples is that native-born students whose parents spoke another language in the home and who perhaps received their first English language instruction at four or five years old when they began school have significantly different reading and writing obstacles than students who arrive to the U.S. in their early teens, having spoken little to no English their entire lives).

Students in English/LLD 100A have an intense first two weeks of class where, as the weakest writers and readers in the school, they are required to learn a brand new lexicon of rhetoric and

understand it well enough to write their first paper on a rhetorical analysis of a piece of writing that they wrote for a previous class. They must write about their writing, a complex task for any student, let alone a remedial student. Although complex, it is an important assignment and one that is extremely beneficial to the students. However, it is also a very intimidating assignment. Therefore, I always like to start my lessons by exploring concepts related to the lesson that they already know. I often begin by bringing in media, technology, and pop culture – where they can see the complex ideas that they are learning about play out in a non-threatening, everyday space that they are used to seeing and engaging in.

The lesson involves YouTube video clips of arguments produced in the past year by two young women at UCLA. One argument is rhetorically flawed in many ways, while the other is a good model of a strong written argument. Students dissect both arguments for their rhetorical appeals and strategies (or lack thereof) to better understand why one argument was so incoherent, while the other was an almost perfect representation of a five-paragraph essay. I have explored portions of this lesson before in class and allowed students to participate in group discussion about the video clips involved in this lesson, but I have never really allowed students to critically think and write about the videos afterwards because I have never had time to develop it further. After reworking this lesson for the Faculty Writing Workshop, I am confident that this lesson will allow students a chance to engage in critical thinking and writing, even after they receive the lesson. Students also get to take on a role that they do not often get to assume: that of the teacher. In the end, they teach the YouTube student whose argument is flawed the importance of rhetorical strategies in producing clear writing, and suggest to her ways that she can improve her argument.

Introduction to Lesson [5 minutes]:

Throughout the first two weeks of this course, you have been given many different handouts on rhetoric, rhetorical analysis, appeals, and strategies. You have taken a diagnostic in-class essay and have started work on your first out-of-class essay, a rhetorical analysis of a paper that you wrote in a previous course. In two weeks, you have been overwhelmed with rhetorical concepts that are new and foreign to you. Today, I am going to show you that all of these terms you are learning are not as overwhelming as you think. You use them all of the time, every day, unconsciously, in any communication where you are attempting to argue with or persuade someone. Today, we are going to look at two oral arguments. We are going to take these strategies that seem so complex on paper, and analyze them in a different and less intimidating medium – video. By the end of the lesson, rhetorical strategies will not seem so daunting, and you will be teaching them to others.

Procedure [approximately 40-45 minutes]:

Step 1: Review of the handouts [8-10 minutes]

Let us take a look at the three handouts that you received last week: the body paragraphs workshop, the rhetorical triangle, and rhetorical strategies for idea development. *First review the rhetorical appeals, then the rhetorical strategies, and then the body paragraph outline. Two of the three handouts allow for visual learners to better understand the concepts presented, as they contain diagrams, as well as text.* Ask if there are any questions so far.

Step 2: Preview of first video clip [3 min]

Does anyone know who Alexandra Wallace is? Has anyone seen her “Asians in the Library” YouTube video? *Explain the context surrounding the video. Alexandra is a former UCLA student who uploaded a racist rant against Asians talking on their cell phones in the library during finals week last Spring 2011. She immediately received so much backlash from it that she felt threatened to go to class. UCLA student union petitioned to have her expelled. Although UCLA upheld her first amendment right to freedom of speech, they condemned her actions. Alexandra was so ostracized by the UCLA community that she quit school.*

(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/19/alexandra-wallace-student_n_837925.html)

What is sadly ironic about this is that UCLA is the university that Mike Rose, the author of the book(s) you are reading, *The Mind at Work* and *Lives on the Boundary*, went to graduate school and where he is now a professor in the Department of Education. UCLA, the alma mater of a man who has given his adult life to equity in education, is the same institution where Alexandra Wallace spewed such hate.

Step 3: Show first video [3 min]

Let us turn now to the video. *As students watch video, have them take notes on the following: What is Alexandra’s purpose for creating the video? Who is her audience? What is her thesis?*

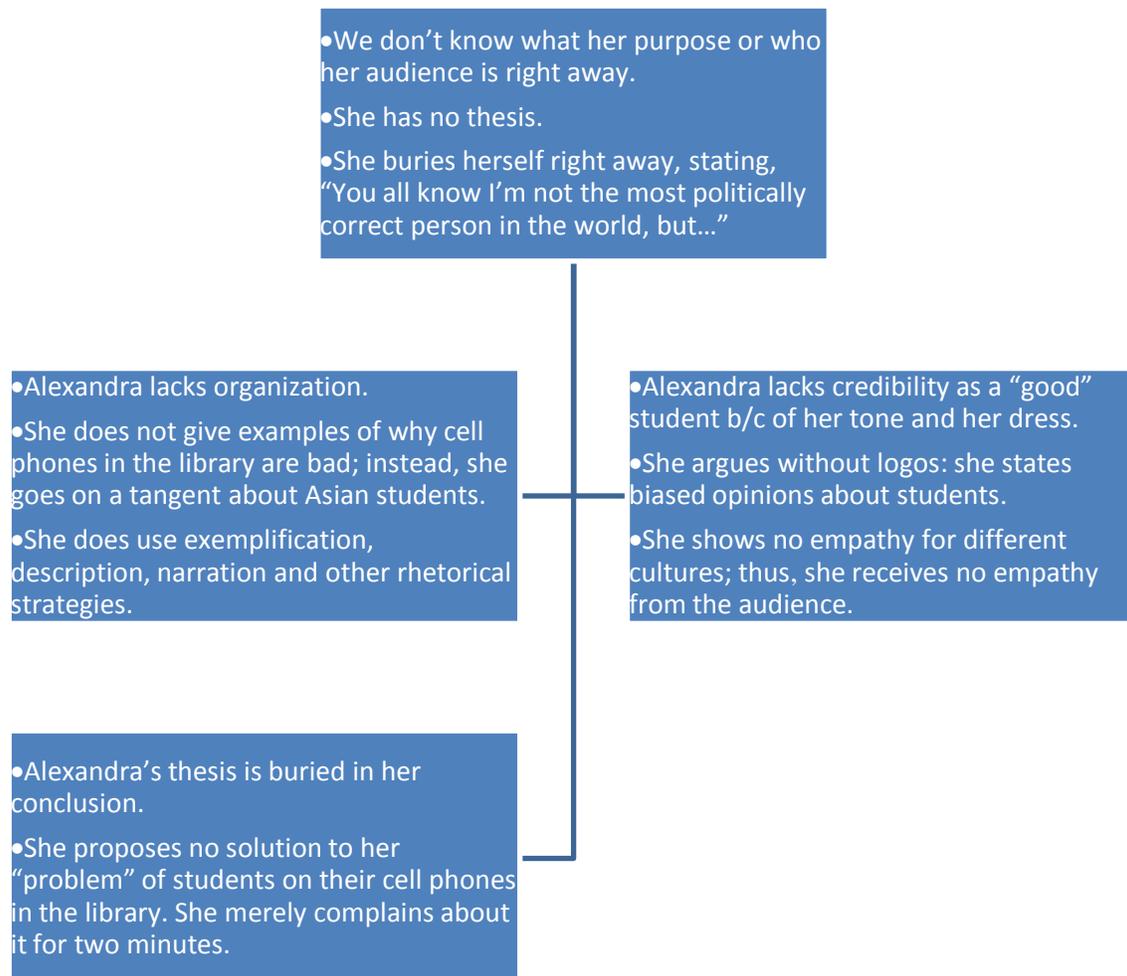
Video link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FNuyDZevKrU>

Step 4: Analyze first video [10 min]

Facilitate discussion about the video: How did it make you feel? If you rip away her racist diatribe (I know this is hard), and look solely at the structure of her argument, what do you see wrong with her argument? What is her purpose? What is her thesis and where does it sit within her argument? What rhetorical appeals and strategies does she use? Did she use any of them effectively? Did she use any of them ineffectively?

If students are struggling with this discussion, depending on the time you have in lecture, replay the video, stopping at relevant points for discussion.

Use the whiteboard to diagram what the students see in Alexandra’s argument. As they voice their opinions, you might create something like the following chart on the board, representing their ideas visually for them, so they can see the illogical format of Alexandra’s argument (see next page):



A Sample Diagram of Alexandra Wallace's Argument

Step 5: Preview of second video clip [3 minutes]

This was posted by a UCLA alum who attempts to educate Alexandra on diversity, culture, and colonialism. It comes off as thoughtful and to the point.

Step 6: Show second video [5 min]

As students watch the video, have them take notes on the following: What is the young woman's purpose for creating the video? Who is her audience? What is her thesis? Have them keep in mind other rhetorical strategies as they watch the video.

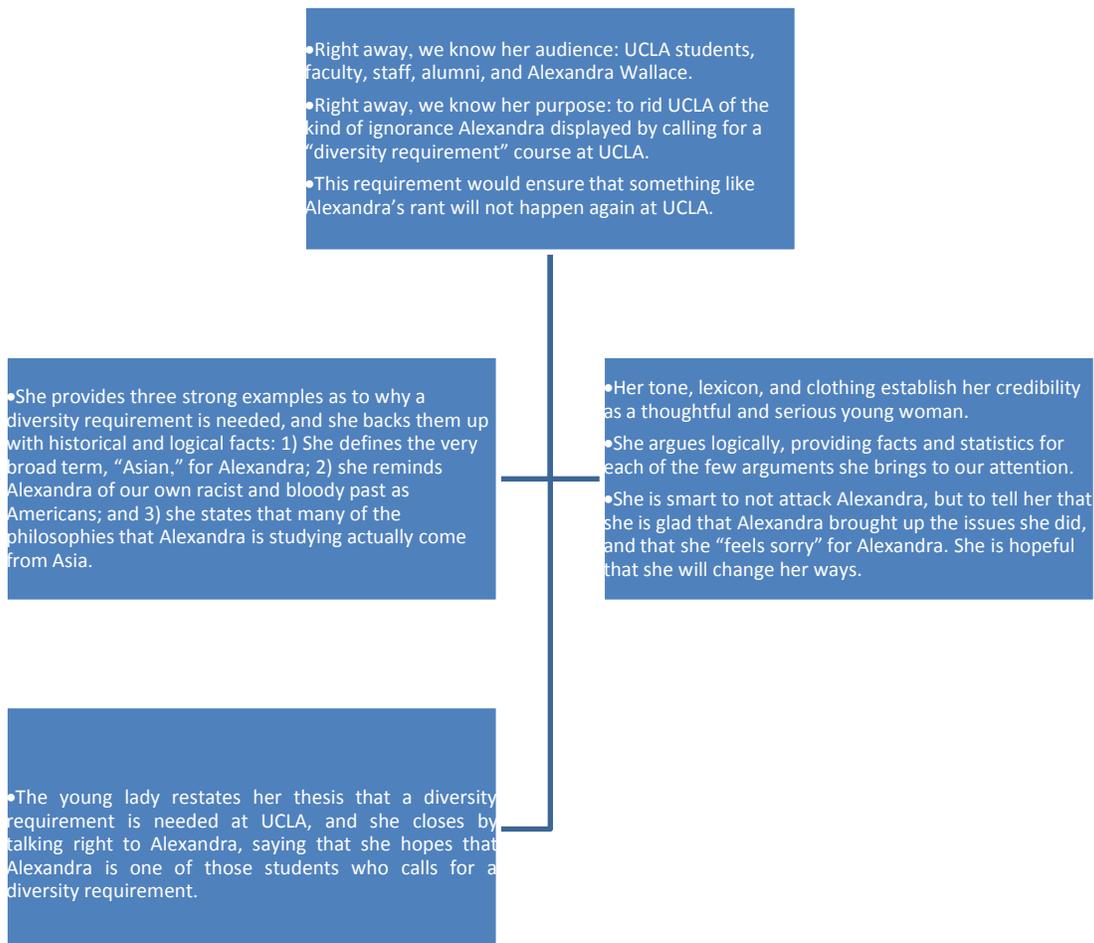
Video link: <http://www.21cb.net/ucla-asians-in-the-library-girl-responses/>

Step 7: Analyze second video [10 min]

Facilitate discussion about the video: How did it make you feel? Look at your "Body Paragraph" worksheet and reflect on the structure of the young lady's argument. What do you see? What is her purpose? What is her thesis and where does it sit within her argument? What rhetorical

appeals and strategies does she use? Did she use any of them effectively? Did she use any of them ineffectively?

Next to Alexandra’s argument, use the whiteboard to diagram what the students see in the young lady’s argument to Alexandra. As students voice their opinions, you might create something like this diagram on the board, representing their ideas visually, so they can see the very logical and effective format of the young lady’s argument:



A sample diagram of student’s rebuttal argument against Alexandra

Closure/Evaluation [5 min]:

Assign homework assignment “Letter to Alexandra Wallace” (**pass out homework handout**). Your homework is to write Alexandra Wallace a letter about why her argument was unsuccessful (aside from the obvious racist rant). Help her look at her argument and thesis. Her main thesis statement is that **people should not talk on their cell phones in the library**. From what you now know about rhetorical appeals and strategies, point out to Alexandra the flaws in her argument and suggest to her ways that she could have improved it. Do not be angry with her – take the high road. You may briefly mention how her video made you feel, but be sure to remain positive in your attempt to help her understand rhetoric. End your letter with a positive note, too – perhaps that you hope that she has learned her lesson, and that in argument, every word and every strategy counts.

Lesson Analysis:

From the less complex lessons I have created on these videos, I know that students really enjoy the use of technology in the classroom. The two videos I use in this lesson are relatable: these are college students who are unconsciously exploring rhetoric, and the videos are recent, posted in the spring of 2011. It is also a relevant topic, as many of the themes present in the women’s arguments are themes that are present in the novel we read for class, either *Lives on the Boundary*, or *The Mind at Work*, by Mike Rose. Reading about rhetoric is a critical element to this course, but since students come into 100A with such weak writing and reading skills, providing them with a non-threatening genre of argument (YouTube videos) allows them that “Aha!” moment, where they can see that rhetoric is not a massive puzzle, but an art that they have always used, since they first were able to form oral arguments. I think that this lesson will assist students in moving the concept of rhetoric from their unconscious to their conscious.

Writing about writing is very difficult, and it takes a strong writer and reader to do it well. I can see that this assignment might be difficult for some learners in the classroom. During the first two weeks of 100A, students may feel overloaded with the amount of material they receive about rhetorical analysis. Trying to understand all the terminology and concepts may take more than two weeks of lectures; therefore, I think that instructors of this lesson should have patience when reviewing the homework assignment at the end of the lecture. If responses are not to one’s expectations, I think that perhaps a follow-up lecture on the same themes would be appropriate.

“Tell me and I’ll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I’ll understand.”

-- Chinese Proverb

Sources:

Bruno, Crystle. "Body Paragraphs Workshop." San José State University Writing Center.

Handout. 2011.

Hadley Porter, Helen. "Rhetorical Strategies of Idea Development and Organization." Montana

State University Writing Center. Handout. 15 Feb. 2011.

<http://www1.english.montana.edu/wc/Information/rhetorical-strategies>

Montecillo, Alan. "The 3 Best Responses to UCLA Girl's 'Asians in the Library' Rant." Video.

SuenLabs Media, 2011. Web. 8 Feb. 2012. <http://www.21cb.net/ucla-asians-in-the-library-girl-responses/>

Sunderman, Paul. "The Rhetorical Triangle." Handout. 8 Feb. 2011.

www.csus.edu/.../Advertisements%20and%20the%20Rhetorical%20Triangle.doc

"UCLA Student Racist Rant." Video. YouTube, 2012. Web. 8 Feb. 2012.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FNuyDZevKrU>

**Rhetorical Strategies of Idea Development and Organization: Montana State University Writing Center
Helen Hadley Porter**

Retrieved on Feb. 15, 2020 from <http://www1.english.montana.edu/wc/Information/rhetorical-strategies>

When planning and writing an essay, writers must discover a focused thinking strategy which will help them to develop their ideas as well as organize them coherently. Unfortunately, often there is no assigned structure or rhetorical approach in a writing task; all the writer may have is an understanding of the topic and his/her purpose. Writers need to understand what a rhetorical strategy is, how a writer discovers an appropriate one to use, and how to recognize a strategy when he/she has used one. Only then can the writer make the choices necessary to consciously and critically draft and revise.

Rhetoric is the study of effective thinking, writing, and speaking strategies; rhetoricians analyze and evaluate what works and what does not work in a specific context. Composition and rhetoric studies writing contexts, how texts are created, how texts interact, and what features make up an effective written text. To be effective, a text must be developed and organized with a clear context and purpose in mind. Writers must first recognize the rhetorical context, the writing situation, and the purpose their text will serve in this particular context. Writers then need to articulate this purpose and choose specific rhetorical strategies which will achieve it. Depending on the writing context and the writer's thinking style, many writers draft first, then analyze their strategies. Other writing situations demand that writers plan first, then execute their strategies. All writers check and recheck their thinking strategies as they revise their work.

Narration is storytelling and is frequently paired with specific and concrete description in essays with an expressive purpose. An autobiographical, writer-focused, or personal experience essay will basically be a descriptive narrative with event, character, and setting developed with specific sensory details. It may be written in the first or third person point of view, in the past or present tense, and in chronological or non-chronological order. It may contain dialogue or be written in a conversational or non-standard voice. An introductory paragraph written to capture the reader's interest may be a descriptive narrative. An example used to support an idea may be a descriptive narrative too.

Description is present in all strong writing because it provides the significant details which explain ideas. Action verbs, sharp adjectives and adverbs, and precise nouns create powerful details. These concrete details are the force that carries the more abstract ideas; careful word choice and sentence structure are crucial elements of descriptive writing. Strong description relies on sensory details—what we see, hear, taste, smell, and feel to create an impression the reader can experience.

Exemplification is the use of examples to explain or elaborate an idea. An essay cannot be just a series of examples; the examples must be unified by a controlling idea. Paragraphs are often developed examples which illustrate a point. But no example can replace logic and evidence; it can only serve to elaborate or clarify a point. Strong writers use examples in all rhetorical situations and within all other rhetorical strategies regardless whether the purpose is to express, inform, or persuade. Examples can help explain definitions, comparisons, processes, classification groupings, and causal relationships. One common use of example is as a vivid and exciting introductory attention-getter. Transitional devices which signal exemplification include for instance, in fact, specifically, to illustrate, such as, for example.

Definitions are necessary to clarify abstractions, explain unfamiliar terms, or distinguish one idea from another similar idea. A short essay may be an extended definition using other rhetorical strategies to develop the main concept. A paragraph's purpose may be to define an idea. A term can usually be defined briefly. But avoid the use of the clichéd according to Webster's definition. Definitions should create meaning, not just report undigested information. Other rhetorical strategies such as exemplification, classification, and comparison are necessary when creating a richly detailed definition.

Comparison and Contrast are methods of organizing and developing ideas and often serve as an essay's primary rhetorical strategy. Many assignments, whether they are essay exam questions or essay prompts, demand that the writer explain two or more ideas, one in terms of the other. Comparisons examine similarities; contrasts examine differences. Both thinking strategies may be used, or a writer may chose to look at only one. Comparisons such as

analogies help to clarify complex ideas. Comparisons such as metaphor and simile help to create description with figurative language. Contrasts on specific criteria often aid in supporting evaluative judgments.

The organization of a compare/contrast essay necessitates very careful planning. There are two methods of structure: the side by side (block) method and the point by point (alternate or back and forth) method. The side by side method describes each group separately, but the writer must be very careful to describe each item according to the same criteria. Two descriptions, however strong and interesting, do not constitute a comparison. Because each item is discussed in a block, there will be only one essential transition between the items.

On the other hand, a point by point comparison demands very clear transitions, and lots of them, because each criterion (not each group or item) is examined separately. This method allows for more in-depth exploration of the similarities and differences and may be more appropriate when the writer wants to persuade the reader to accept an evaluation. A whole essay based on the compare/contrast strategy usually will rely on this organization; each paragraph will examine one criteria and one item. Clear transitions which indicate comparison include also, in the same way, likewise, similarly. Contrasts are indicated by although, but, however, on the other hand, still, yet, nevertheless, in contrast.

Process analysis explores how a phenomena works. A basic cookbook recipe is a process analysis: a descriptive chronology of the stages in the development of a controlling idea. Laboratory reports are also examples of process analysis, as are many reports on scientific research. Observation papers in the social sciences may also be descriptions of a process. Descriptions of or directions for technical procedures demand the use of process analysis. Historical information is also often presented in this chronological order. Usually the writer must go beyond a mere blow-by-blow narrative and use analytical skills to examine why each step is important to the process and to the final product. A clear controlling idea is necessary; otherwise the reader is left wondering what the point was? The essay must be unified by this thesis, and the transitions between steps need to keep the essay cohesive. If process analysis is used as a secondary method of idea development, for example to explain the historical background of a topic, make sure that the description of the process is pertinent to the controlling idea. Organized writers use strong signals of process analysis: first, second, finally, before, after, meanwhile, as, since, when, then, at the same time.

Division and classification is an important rhetorical strategy when the writer wants to analyze and then group similar items or divide one item up into parts. Classification examines more than one item and then separates the items into groups according to their similarities on a specific principle or criteria. Critical thinkers rely on the power of classification during the analysis of complex information. Research results may need to be classified before they can be reported. A description or explanation may need to be divided up into useful categories so that the information is organized and meaningful.

By breaking down the whole into manageable and useful parts, a thinker can reach more reliable conclusions. Division breaks one item into meaningful parts and then examines the parts in relationship to the whole. Writing assignments which call for analysis are often asking the writer to parse an idea, event, or text according to specific principles or features. What these principles or features are depends on the discipline and the purpose of the analysis.

Analysis of Cause and/or Effect is a very effective method of idea development and organization which is necessary in almost all rhetorical situations. The exploration of the causes of a phenomena demands that a writer critically analyze the origins of that phenomena. Often, causal analysis is the focusing rhetorical pattern of an essay. Or a significant part of an essay may be an examination of causes followed by an examination of effects. Or a writer may chose to focus on the analysis of effects with little mention of the original causes. An essay, a paragraph, or a point may rely on this essential critical thinking strategy. Many essay examination questions are asking for analysis of cause and effect. But many writers do not recognize when they need to use this rhetorical approach when more in depth critical analysis needs to be developed.

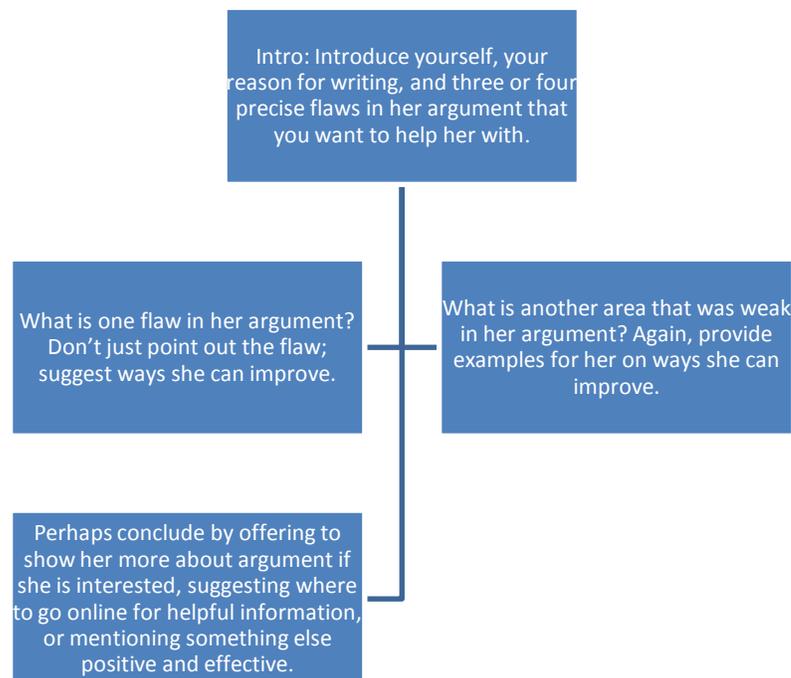
Look for and use important indicators of cause and effect thinking: because, as a result, accordingly, therefore, so, thus. Clarify the exact relationship between the ideas. Ask why, why, why when developing cause and effect relationships. Cause and effect analysis is often used in conjunction with argumentation, so this rhetorical strategy is fraught with danger. Test for faulty logical connections: when correlation or simultaneousness is mistaken for causality or when there is insufficient evidence to support the causal relationship.

Homework: Letter to Alexandra Wallace

Your homework is to write Alexandra Wallace a letter about why her argument was unsuccessful (aside from the obvious racist rant). Help her look at her argument and thesis. Her main thesis statement is that **people should not talk on their cell phones in the library**. From what you now know about rhetorical appeals and strategies, point out to Alexandra the flaws in her argument, and suggest to her ways that she could have improved it. Do not be angry with her – take the high road. You may briefly mention how her video made you feel, but be sure to remain positive in your attempt to help her understand rhetoric. End your letter with a positive note, too – perhaps that you hope that she has learned her lesson, and that in argument, every word and every strategy counts.

Guidelines:

1. Although you do not want to write a five-paragraph essay as a letter, you do want a beginning and ending to your letter. Give Alexandra your **purpose** for writing her. Obviously, you are going to use the **genre** of letter writing, so although we have not gone over this genre in class, keep in mind some things you already know about the format and tone of a letter. Alexandra is obviously your **audience**, so as one college student to another, how would you approach her? Using what you know about **rhetorical appeal and strategy**, teach Alexandra not only by telling her how to construct an argument, but also by providing her a great example – your letter.
2. Type and double space your work.



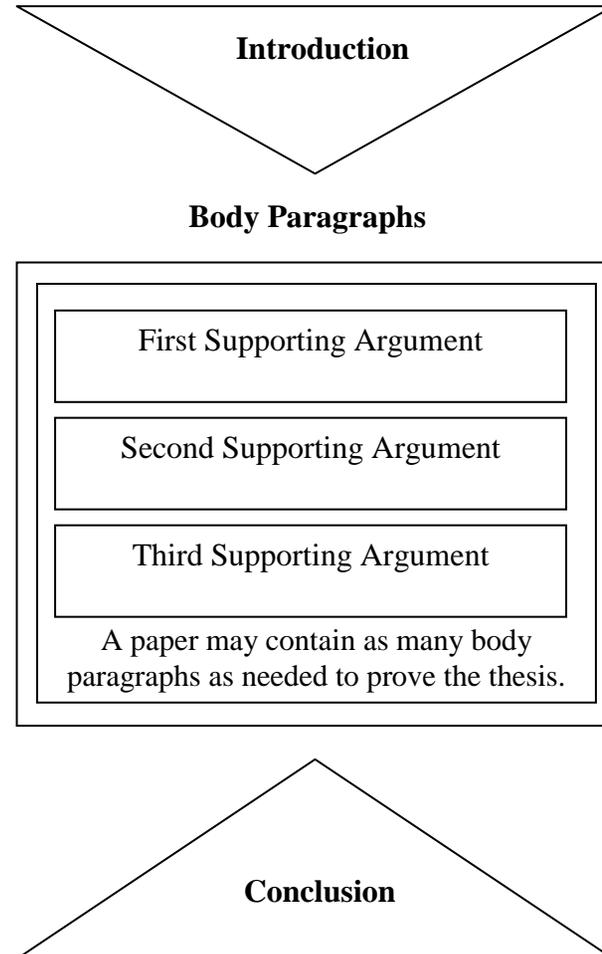
Body Paragraphs Workshop

Anatomy of an Essay

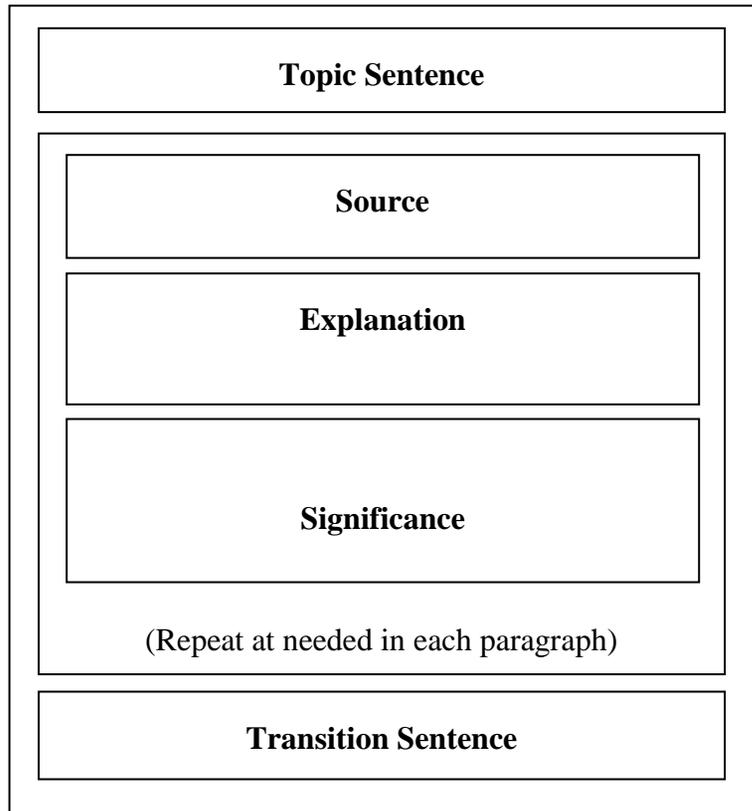
- **Introductory Paragraph**
 - Introduce the issue.
 - Provide the arguments that will form the body paragraphs.
 - Refute any counterpoints to the argument.
 - End with the thesis statement.

- **Body Paragraphs**
 - Begin with a topic sentence that reasserts the thesis.
 - Support the argument with information from sources such as journal articles or scientific studies.
 - Provide 1-2 sentences explaining each quote.
 - Provide 1-3 sentences indicating the significance of each quote.
 - Ensure that the information supports and is relevant to the thesis statement.
 - End with a transition sentence that leads into the next body paragraph.

- **Concluding Paragraph**
 - Stress the argument of the paper.
 - Briefly summarize main points.
 - Provide an effective close for the paper.
 - Leave the reader with a meaningful idea or question



Anatomy of a Body Paragraph



Topic Sentence

- A sentence that reflects the argument of the thesis statement.

Source

- An informative sentence or group of sentences quoting or paraphrasing a book, journal article, or other source that supports the argument or thesis of the paper.

Explanation

- **Quote**: one to two sentences that clarify the information provided by the source in your own words.
- **Paraphrase**: Since a paraphrase is information from a source in your own words, you should have already clarified or explained the source.

Significance or So What?

- One to three sentences that specify the significance or importance of the source to the argument of the paper.

Transition Sentence

- A sentence that leads into the argument of the following body paragraph.