A Summary of the Four Rhetorical Styles of "Pattern- Process" Academic Writing with Annotated Bibliography[1]

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Like any other element of English language teaching, the area of writing has gone through a series of theories and practices. One of the many is the pattern-process approach (Reid, 1993, p. 29). This approach marked a departure from a focus on grammatical accuracy towards writing based on audience and, related to this article, the *purpose* of writing. This approach to composing is where we see the concept of the thesis statement, supporting ideas, topic sentences, paragraph cohesion, and ***rhetorical styles*** that reflect the ways that English language writing presents, argues, or solves issues. It is this approach that is used in US academic writing (Reid, 1993, p. 29). The structures mentioned above are also the same rhetorical structures that students are expected to demonstrate mastery of on the Test of Written English (TWE), the written portion of the TOEFL. This paper will summarize the four rhetorical styles of academic writing associated with this approach.

How can the pattern-process approach help EFL academic writers? According to Ferris and Hedgcock (1998, p. 6), research with ESL writers who are inexperienced writers in their L1 show that they often do not have a sense of direction that their writing should take, and they often "experience difficulty organizing information" (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998, p. 6). In other words, they may know what the assignment is and what they need to write about, but when it comes right down to it, they just do not know where to start, what to put in the middle, and how to end the paper. This pattern-process approach gives them the tools to overcome these all too familiar problems because it proposes teaching academic writing by rhetorical styles. These rhetorical styles present writing based on the *purpose* of the writing. For example, if your *purpose* for writing is to have your readers visualize something—your house, your best friend, your classroom, and so on—you would use the rhetorical style: **description**. Each of the rhetorical styles is related to a specific rhetorical *purpose*. (The section I entitle "The Rhetorical Styles of Academic Writing" will examine the rhetorical styles individually.)

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However, as good as it seems, there are detractors. Many people argue that because the pattern-process approach uses rhetorical styles and models of those styles to direct student writing, that it might make students focus more on the rhetorical forms than on their own self expression. Students may get the idea that writing is something like pouring words into some kind of pre-designed pattern. In doing this, they might suppress their own voices in their writing. These are legitimate concerns (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998, p. 98).

The above authors address these concerns and offer some guidance for avoiding these problems. First, they stress that educators should use models as guidelines rather than as exact patterns to be strictly followed. They also say that we should be careful not to use the models "mechanically," nor to use them "prematurely." In other words, make sure that the students have a clear understanding of the features, characteristics, and rhetorical purposes of whatever rhetorical style is being taught before showing them models of that particular rhetorical style (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998, p. 99).

It is my own experience that students are grateful for a pattern to hang on to. Learning to write is like learning to do almost any other thing. Consider learning to walk for example. First we crawl; then we hang on to anything that is available, and then we walk on our own. With writing, first we put words together to form sentences. Then we consider meaning when we put those sentences into paragraphs. And finally, we are given a writing assignment with a specific rhetorical purpose (e.g. My Summer Vacation). Writers need to know that writing about a certain topic will include a rhetorical style with its specific characteristics or a combination of rhetorical styles. Once they *know* those characteristics, they can use them in any way that they feel will suit their writing purpose.

Having said that, the following section will review the basic characteristics of the four rhetorical styles associated with academic writing.

The Rhetorical Styles of Academic Writing

Like every big, seemingly insurmountable problem, as many of our students regard academic writing, problems are better solved by breaking them into their constituent parts. The parts or *types* of academic writing include: **(1) Description, (2) Narration, (3) Explanation (Exposition), and (4) Argument.** Essayists will use the style or combination of styles that serve their rhetorical purpose. However, because of the complexity of and unfamiliarity with writing that most students have (in L2 *and* L1), they should tackle these styles separately. Then, when they gain proficiency in writing, they can combine them in any way that suits their rhetorical purpose. If a student can gain mastery of these rhetorical styles, if they can describe, narrate, explain, and argue, they can successfully take on any kind of writing assignment.

Sounds good, right? In the following paragraphs, I will look at the basic characteristics of each of these four styles. For specific information on these styles, see the **Annotated Bibliography** at the end of this article for a list of books that explain the styles in more detail.

Description and Narration

I put description and narration together because they are similar in the way the writer presents information. They are "presentational." And because of this characteristic, these two styles are usually taught first (just look at a few books on composition to confirm this claim—*see the Annotated Bibliography*). They are typically easier for students to master because they are merely reporting something that already exists.

With ***description***, the writer describes something—a place, an object, a group, a person. The writer not only describes, but also attempts to paint a picture with words. The reader should be able to *see* what the writer is describing. Beginning descriptive essays could ask students to do something as simple as describing a common, everyday object such as a notebook or a pencil. Later assignments can ask students to describe something more complicated – their bedroom, a person, or a location. One time I asked my students to go to a nearby museum, choose a room and write an essay describing everything in the room.

Narration is similar to *description* in that it is also presentational. However, instead of painting a picture, this rhetorical style asks the writer to tell a story. It is particularly useful within the other two rhetorical styles of *explanation* and *argumentation*. A good story can certainly illustrate an explanation or help prove a point or opinion.

A typical *narrative* essay may ask writers to recount a significant event or occasion in their past. A narrative essay might describe a typical day at school. It may even tell how a particular process is done or carried out. Students who write a narrative essay, will learn the skill of sequencing actions as they originally occurred or arranging the action logically so that the reader can follow the story (Smalley & Ruetten, 1995, pp. 50-51).

The next two rhetorical styles, *explanation* or *exposition* and *argumentation* ask much more of the writer. Instead of just describing something or recounting or telling a story, these two ask the writer to move from the concrete to the more abstract.

Explanation

This rhetorical style, as the name indicates, asks the writer to make something understandable though an explanation. There are several strategies the writer can use to do this depending on the situation:

1. **Comparison and contrast:** This strategy explains something by showing how other things are related to it—by making a comparison *(how it is like this)* or by showing what is different about it *(how is it not like this).*
2. **Analyzing a process:** We can understand something by explaining how it works.
3. **Analogizing:** Sometimes it helps to understand something if we can explain it in the form of an analogy—a seemingly unrelated topic, which can illuminate our topic.
4. **Showing cause and effect:** Another very common technique that we all use when trying to explain something. We show how something came about (cause) and we show what effect it has on something else.
5. **Illustrating:** When we use this strategy, we show where whatever we are trying to explain occurs or where it can be found.
6. **Dividing:** To explain something, we commonly break that thing down into its constituent parts. "It's comprised of this and this..."
7. **Defining:** When we define something, we make a distinction between it and everything else. "It's this, not this nor this..."

As you are probably thinking, these explanatory strategies involve much more analytical skills than either *description* or *narration.* In fact, instruction in just this one rhetorical style could easily take up an entire semester. The ***argumentative*** rhetorical style is even one more step up the ladder of writing complexity.

Argument

The reason that the rhetorical style of argument involves a higher level of complexity is that it requires the writer to take a stand on an issue and to try to persuade, through various rhetorical strategies, the reader to agree with that premise. Or as Donald, Morrow, Wargetz, and Werner say, "an argument is a structure of facts and ideas logically arranged to arrive at a conclusion" (1996, p. 298). As I mentioned above, the purpose of this style is to persuade or convince the reader to agree with your opinion, not an easy thing to do.

However, as in *explanation,* there are several strategies that a writer can use to accomplish this. The first thing to consider is the characteristics of an argumentative essay:

1. The writer should have an opinion that can be defended and supported logically. This is the thesis of the essay. Obviously the thesis cannot be based on faith or belief, personal preference, or on established fact *(the sun will rise in the east).* These things cannot be argued logically and effectively in this type of essay (Smalley and Ruetten, 1995, p. 324).
2. Objections to the thesis should be recognized and answered either through *concession* (this is true, but...) or *refutation* (it is not true that...).
3. Even though the writer may feel passionate about the thesis, the *tone* of the essay should never be hysterical or fanatical sounding. The argument should rely on reason and facts rather than emotion.

Another thing that is essential to a good argument is knowing what makes a fallacious argument. The books *Writing Clear Essays* by Donald, et al., *and Logic and Contemporary Rhetoric: The use of reason in everyday life, by* Kahane and Cavender, provide a very thorough explanation of the various features of faulty or fallacious reasoning (see the Annotated Bibliography).

Once again, you may be thinking that you could spend an entire semester on teaching and exploring the elements of argumentative writing. I would certainly agree. However, it would be well worth the effort. You can easily see that this style, particularly, can teach much more than just writing. It can teach ***thinking,*** a skill so lacking in almost many aspects of life.

Conclusion

When I first started teaching academic writing, I remembered the rhetorical styles from undergraduate school, or maybe it was graduate school. I know that intuition is not a reliable source for making decisions which should be proven through legitimate research, but I *felt* that students needed some way to chip away at the problem of academic writing a little piece at a time. This is the process of analysis. To analyze (understand) something means to break it into its smaller parts. Experienced writers use a combination of all or some of the rhetorical styles to accomplish their writing purpose, but using all the styles is obviously too much to ask our students to do when they are learning to write. Therefore, in order to make learning and teaching writing easier and more understandable, we should break the process into its smaller parts, in other words, ***description, narration, explanation,*** and ***argumentation.***

Annotated Bibliography

Bates, L., Lane, J., & Lange, E. (1993). Writing clearly: Responding to ESL compositions. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.

This book is all about student essay correction and evaluation. The authors talk about how to respond to content and sentence level errors, how to help students to assess their own errors, and how to develop a scheme for grading papers. This is an especially good feature, one that I have adapted for my own essay evaluation. The authors present a good way to make subjective grading more objective and useful for students.

Donald, B., Morrow, B., Wargetz, L., & Werner, K. (1996). Writing clear essays. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

This book could be used as a classroom textbook or as a good reference for the writing teacher. The authors talk about the organization of an essay including the thesis statement and supporting ideas, and how to expand the supporting ideas into paragraph topic sentences. Chapters deal with individual rhetorical styles starting with Narration, then Description, Explanation and individual chapters on the sub-strategies of explanation, and a chapter on Argumentation. They also include two chapters on writing about literature and writing a research paper.

Ferris, D., & Hedgcock, J.S. (1998). Teaching ESL composition: Purpose, process, and practice. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

This is a GREAT book. The authors start out with a review of issues in ESL writing including a brief

history of research in ESL writing. They examine the connection between reading and writing. The next

chapters are about syllabus design and lesson planning for ESL writing classes. They have a chapter on

responding to student writing and one on peer response and another on writing assessment.

Hamp-Lyons, L. ed. (1993). Assessing second language writing in academic contexts. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

This is a collection of articles on writing assessment. It is divided into the following sections: The Writer,

The Task, The Reader, and Relating the Assessment to the Academic Community.

Kahane, H., & Cavender, N. (1998). Logic and contemporary rhetoric: The use of reason in everyday life. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Another really excellent book. If you were teaching a semester course on argumentation, this definitely

would be a book to consider using. It only has two chapters on writing; the

other chapters are eye-
opening discussions on reasoning and thinking with titles such as: Good and Bad Reasoning, Fallacious
Reasoning, Psychological Impediments to Cogent Reasoning: Shooting ourselves in the foot, Language,
Advertising, and Managing the News, among others. It is a very approachable book with cartoons and
quotations.

Reid, J. (1993). Teaching ESL writing. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
The author begins this book with a history of ESL writing instruction including a summary of the various
writing approaches including Pattern – Process. She continues with an overview of ESL writing, then
teaching issues, curriculum and syllabus design, the first weeks of an ESL writing course, EAP writing,
responding to writing, and evaluating writing. She finishes with an important chapter on the teacher as
a professional.

Smalley, R., & Ruetten, M. (1995). Refining composition skills: Rhetoric and grammar. Pacific Grove, CA.: Heinle & Heinle.
This writing textbook starts with the paragraph with topics such as prewriting and writing the topic sentence, unity and coherence. The following chapters deal individually with the rhetorical styles of Narration, Description, and Explanation (Exposition) on the paragraph level. The following chapters introduce the essay with thesis statement, introduction, supporting paragraphs and conclusion. In the essay chapters, the sub-strategies of explanation are explained: The Example Essay, Comparison and Contrast, Classification, Process, and Cause and Effect. The book ends with the Argumentative Essay and a chapter on grammar review.