

Read NY TIMES

5 Use natural, simple prose—the simpler the better. You can come back later and add small touches of elegance if you have a mind to (“punitive” in the *Lear* example above was doubtless just such an afterthought), but initially keep it simple. Simple prose is clear prose. And simple prose, if smooth and rhythmical, is readable prose. Let your ideas themselves do the impressing. If they look banal to you, there’s only one remedy: rethink them. Don’t try to camouflage their weakness with razzle-dazzle rhetoric. You’ll razzle-dazzle yourself right into a bog of bull.

6 Make your opener full-bodied. If it’s splinter-sized—a mere two or three sentences long—your reader is apt to conclude that you are short on ideas and thus are only going through the motions. Experience will have taught him, as it’s probably taught you, that these conclusions are usually justified. (Of course there’s always the glorious exception that makes a dictum like this look silly.) On the other hand, if your opener is barn-like, your reader is apt to conclude that you lack any sense of proportion. He’ll take one look at it and groan, “Has the author no mercy? Does he think he has to put *everything* in his first paragraph?”

7 Consider occasionally using a dramatically brief initial sentence—say, 4 or 5 words in length. It will compel you to begin with a definite assertion, give your grateful reader a firm handle on the sentences that follow, and offer him the enchantment of surprise. (Most opening sentences seem to run in the neighborhood of 18 words.)

8 If possible, organize your opening paragraph so that the biggest punch—the strongest statement of your thesis—comes at the end. (Note the *Shrew* example above.) This particular organization has three advantages: it enables you to build toward a climax, it gives you an easier entry into your next paragraph because of the springboard effect, and it saves you from having to repeat yourself.

## 5 Middles

*My style of writing is chiefly grounded upon an early enthusiasm for [Thomas H.] Huxley, the greatest of all masters of orderly exposition. He taught me the importance of giving to every argument a simple structure.*

H. L. MENCKEN

When you begin an essay, you may have clearly in mind exactly what you’re supposed to be doing and how best to do it. If so, you’re fortunate. Most people don’t. The entire concept of essay-writing is fuzzy to them. This chapter is for the bewildered majority: it’s an attempt to bring into sharp focus the *what* and the *how* of the business. The *what* part of it I’ll explain with the help of an analogy, out of which I’ll draw up a concrete checklist of reminders. The *how* of it is rather more complicated because it involves the very process itself. At the risk of putting you to sleep, what I’ll do is follow an imaginary advanced student right through the various stages of writing an essay, after which I’ll provide you with a model short essay written by an actual student. This will enable you to see what the finished product might look like.

What, you may ask, has all this to do with “middles”? Well, you are going to see that the middle section of an essay is inseparable from the opening, since it consists of the development of the opener’s thesis; and you will see that the middle is also inseparable from the process whereby the thesis is arrived at, since it amounts to a coherent retelling of that process.

First, the *what* of it. When you write a term paper, a final examination, or even a lab report, you are engaged in what’s elegantly called “expository” writing. Expository writing might be defined as “informative writing.” Its primary goal is to *explain*.

exposition — Latin *expositus* —  
to expound

Implicit in most expository writing, however, is a second goal: to persuade. The two goals almost invariably go together since it's hard to explain something—a political issue, a historical event, a novel, a philosophy—without taking a position on it; and once you take a position you naturally want others to accept it as enlightened. That gets you into the realm of reasoning—the realm of persuasion. The whole point, finally, is to have your reader respond with: “Yes, I understand now. You’ve convinced me.”

From this you can see that your situation as an expository writer is closely analogous to that of a prosecuting attorney, society's professional skeptic-persuader. The analogy bears developing, for once you fully grasp it, you will understand the gist of essay writing.

### The analogy

Even before the trial actually gets underway, our prosecutor is already about his important first business, which is sizing up the nature of his audience, the rather motley jury (analogous to your *readers*). How sophisticated are they? What are their interests, their prejudices, their intellectual capacities? Are they a solemn bunch, or do they smile at his little witticisms? The answers to these questions will determine the delivery he uses, even to some extent the evidence he chooses for presentation to them. He's lost many decisions in his younger years simply through misjudging the character of the jury, but he's naive no longer. Now he takes this preliminary testing-and-probing period very seriously. (You as a writer, of course, must rely on intuition, the laws of probability, and guesswork, which makes your task more speculative, but certainly no less important.)

Now he's ready to begin. He could spend six months in Florida every year if he could simply announce: “Ladies and gentlemen, the defendant, Sam Smith, is guilty. You can tell it from the mad glint in his eye. The State rests.” Unfortunately, the jury will oblige the prosecutor to *prove* Sam Smith's guilt, and only facts plus cogently reasoned argumentation can prove anything. So, he begins by stating the essence of his case (the *thesis*) in carefully formulated language: “The State will prove that the defendant, Sam Smith, with malice aforethought, attempted last March 26th to level City Hall with his

tank.” Then the prosecutor spends the bulk of his remaining time calling forth witnesses (the *evidence*) to prove his case, saving his star exhibit (the still-smoking tank) for last so that the impact will be greatest. All the while, though, he is doing a number of equally important other things: foxily anticipating and defusing the contentions of the defendant's lawyer; demonstrating his own mastery of the facts of the case; clarifying what's really at issue and what's not; defining his exotic legal terms so that the jury can make sense of them; supporting each new assertion with a wealth of factual proof; quoting authorities either to buttress his case or to freshen his eloquence; underscoring the logical sequence of his evidence; and providing the spellbound jurors with a running summary of how the pieces of the case interconnect.

Finally, he makes a closing appeal to the jurors (the *conclusion*) in which he neatly recapitulates the high points of his case—he knows they have short memories—and explains in the clearest possible way why his version of the case is the only one a reasonable person could accept. He ends on a note of triumph: “And last, ladies and gentlemen, you have Sam Smith's own tank before you, his fingerprints on its wheel, the plaster of City Hall still clogging its treads, and ‘Down With All Bureaucrats’ blazoned on its sides, with ‘bureaucrats’ misspelled exactly as Mr. Smith has always misspelled it.” The prosecutor has followed the age-old formula of debaters: “Tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em, tell it to 'em, and then tell 'em what you've told 'em.” \* Following this formula has not only made it easy for the jury to grasp his argument, it has made it almost impossible for them not to grasp it.

### The checklist

As my analogy shows, there are many parallels between the prosecution of a legal case and the prosecution of an essayist's case. In fact, virtually everything our prosecutor did finds an exact correspondence in successful essay writing. I want to underscore only the major points, though.

\* The formula works, of course, only when it's kept discreetly veiled. The trick is to follow it without appearing to; otherwise your presentation will sound mechanical and repetitious.

At the top of the list is *a sure sense of the audience*. If you ignore the special character of your audience—your jury—you might as well not even begin. It would be as unrewarding as to tell a locker-room joke to your grandmother. (I'll go into the question of audience in more detail later.) After a sure sense of audience come five other essentials, which I recommend that you take a moment to memorize. You will find these in virtually every successful essay:

- (\*)
- 1 A well-defined thesis or position
  - 2 A clear plan of attack
  - 3 Solid evidence
  - 4 Strong continuity of argument
  - 5 A persuasive closing appeal

To understand what each of these elements really involves, let alone to appreciate their importance, you must see them in action, so let's now follow our imaginary advanced student through the various stages of writing an essay. This will give you the added advantage of seeing the kind of preparatory work out of which strong openers and middles are born.

## The hypothetical case

Suppose the student's assignment is: "Write a 1500-word essay discussing your views on capital punishment." What position should he take? Well, this particular student thinks he already knows—he happens to be against it\*—but since he is now an experienced writer, he resolves to suppress his notions until he has thoroughly researched the subject. It's partly a matter of self-respect: he doesn't want the facts to end up embarrassing his intelligence. In addition, though, he wants his essay to reflect that he has open-mindedly investigated

\* Before continuing this account, I should point out that the views and arguments I will attribute to the student are "his," not mine. I've never researched the subject of capital punishment myself, so my own views on it are as unformed as they are uninformed. Unfortunately, the poor student is made to suffer the consequences of my ignorance. The whole point of this fictional re-creation, though, is to show how an essay might be generated and structured. The arguments themselves are irrelevant.

the issues—the pros as well as the cons. He knows that if he doesn't actually do this, he won't be able to anticipate and defuse his reader's objections to his contentions—a crucial element in persuasive writing, just as it is in the courtroom.

So he studies the subject, *recording all the evidence* he discovers: examples, statistics, quotations from authorities, arguments. That's step one. Step two is to *organize his facts*. For this he uses lists. Eventually he comes up with a list of about 20 arguments favoring the abolition of capital punishment and another list of 20 arguments favoring its retention. Having done the necessary homework, he now arrives at step three: *weighing these arguments*. This enables him finally to decide which of the two positions is most convincing to him.

Unfortunately, though, that decision is more intuitive and unconscious than it is rational. As a result, while he now has a firm conviction that the case against capital punishment is the stronger one, the actual proof of that position hasn't yet crystallized in his mind. There's the rub. Until he can prove it to himself, using a conscious, coherent line of reasoning, he knows he won't be able to prove it to his reader. The shotgun approach—a blast of unconnected reasons—is out of the question. His essay must be able to say, in effect, "Here's my position, and this is why any sensible person would accept it." Translated into practical terms, this means showing his reader precisely *how* he reached his position, step by step.

So, he goes back once again to his list of arguments. His aim is to work out a blueprint. The arguments are already roughly organized, but now he must *classify them into major groups*—moral reasons, economic reasons, political reasons, legal reasons, etc.—and analyze how they all add up, how they interconnect. This is a crucial part of the writing process, he knows, for his reader will expect the proof of his thesis to be divided into neat, logically developing *stages*, and this is precisely what he is doing now.

A related task, while he's classifying his arguments, is to decide the *sequence* in which to present them. This is a tactical decision. Some of the reasons, he realizes, are clearly more persuasive than others. Should the most persuasive ones all come first, or should he build his arguments from least persuasive to most persuasive, or should he mix them? Or would he be wise to eliminate most of the marginally

persuasive reasons and go for quality rather than quantity? He puts himself in the reader's shoes and decides that if *he* were reading this essay cold, he'd be most convinced by quality, not quantity, and also by an increasingly persuasive order of arguments. Such an order would be agreeably climactic.

He's virtually ready to begin writing now. He's got the *arguments* he needs, the *support* for these arguments, the *coherent grouping* of them, and the most *tactical sequence* in which to present them. In addition, during the ordering process he has weeded out all that is either irrelevant or marginally persuasive (he hopes), so that what he is now going to give the reader is a trim digest of his case. One important thing remains, however, and that is to get clear in his mind the *nature of his audience*.

Two years ago it never occurred to him to size up his audience, for two years ago he wasn't writing expressly for his reader; he was writing simply for himself. Now, though, persuasion is vitally important to him, so it's become part of his standard procedure to second-guess his reader's needs, his taste, his level of sophistication. He knows that this will determine, among other things, his choice of *tone* (serious, bantering, ironic, indignant), his *diction* (elegant, informal, tempered, blunt), his *sentence structure* (complex, occasionally complex, simple), and his *mode of argument* (technical, non-technical, objective, subjective). All these decisions are crucial, for they define the "voice" and posture he thinks are most appropriate for the occasion.

In this case his audience is well defined: it will consist solely of his philosophy professor, Charles Watson, a bright, serious-minded free-thinker who is always warning his students, "Be polemical, but also be practical."

With Professor Watson clearly before him in his imagination,\* our

\* A clarification is necessary here. I am *not* endorsing the gutless practice of "writing for the teacher"—i.e., giving the teacher (or any reader, for that matter) what you presume he wants to hear at the expense of what you yourself genuinely believe. That's an intellectual and moral sell-out. I *am* recommending, though, that the writer remember who his reader is in order to communicate with him in a manner that is likely to be understandable and winning to him. For example, you don't talk to a three-year-old child the way you talk to an adult, although you may be saying essentially the same thing to both. You use language that the child is apt to understand; you work from where his

student finally starts writing. He opens with a brief, fascinating history of capital punishment and its relevance as a social issue. This consumes most of two paragraphs. Then he ends his introduction with a firm position statement:

*thesis*

This gradual trend toward the abolition of capital punishment reflects a growing awareness that such extreme punishment doesn't make sense. It doesn't make sense economically, it doesn't make sense morally, and it most clearly doesn't make sense pragmatically.

*plan of attack*

This thesis sentence provides him (and his reader) with an immaculately lucid, simple structure for his essay. It allows him to plunge directly into an explanation of the economic reasons in his very next paragraph:

Considered from a coldly economic point of view, capital punishment is a waste of human resources. Instead of killing a man, society should take advantage of his ability to work and pay restitution.

The succeeding sentences in this paragraph develop support for that contention—part of the support being an example of a country that has tried this plan successfully. His next paragraph develops other economic reasons buttressing this one, with the strongest reserved for last:

Nor let us overlook the staggering court costs. With capital punishment, a single, speedy trial is unheard of. Almost invariably a case will be retried repeatedly as the condemned person exhausts every possible appeal and delay.

head is, not yours. Similarly, a lawyer doesn't argue a case before a rural jury in the same way he would argue it before the Supreme Court. That's not dishonesty; it's common sense and good manners (consideration). The argument remains the same, but the presentation of it changes to suit the nature of the specific audience.

He ends the section with a succinct summary of his arguments up to that point.

With this stage of his argument completed, he moves on to the next, the moral reasons. These, he knows, are stronger. New paragraph:

*trans.*

But beyond the mere economics of the issue, capital punishment is a moral outrage. First, it is a basic violation of the Judeo-Christian ethic, the cornerstone of our democratic society.

He supports this contention by quoting authorities such as Jesus, Clarence Darrow, and George Bernard Shaw, all of whom argue that compassion rather than merciless revenge is the most civilized form of justice. (Here he takes the opportunity to counter a probable objection—the Old Testament notion that “an eye for an eye” is just—with the Old Testament commandment superseding it: “Thou shalt not kill.”) Then, in a new paragraph, he moves on to his second argument in this group:

Furthermore, capital punishment—which is essentially a lynch mob by proxy—lowers the standards of public morality. In effect, it encourages barbarism by the state—indeed, it brings society down to the level of a ruthless murderer. Once the state has the power to murder with the grace of the statute book, historically it loses all sense of proportion. We have seen this happen in Great Britain in the 18th century, when even the pettiest crimes were thought fit for punishment at the gallows.

After developing this point, he's ready for his third and strongest moral argument, which he sets off in another new paragraph:

*signposting*

Finally and most seriously, capital punishment strikes at the very basis of morality itself. Morality rests upon the fact that we are mortals, frail and imperfect in our understanding, not infallible. By contrast, capital punishment presumes that man can set himself up as God, and that juries never make mistakes. The moral presumption in this is surely as great as that of the criminal who takes the life of his victim.

Now he begins his main attack—the pragmatic reasons. With the gusto of Churchill on D-Day he opens a new paragraph:

Both economically and morally, then, capital punishment simply doesn't make sense. But the most damaging indictment against the practice is pragmatic: it fails to achieve its purpose, which is the deterrence of crime. Now why does it not deter a criminal? Because it rests upon a false assumption: that murder or rape, for example, is committed consciously, is premeditated. But this is patently not the case. Most capital crimes are crimes of passion, committed unthinkingly in the heat of the moment. The criminal never considers punishment.

To support that reasoning, he cites statistics to show that the vast majority of murders are committed within the family, and that states with the death penalty have no lower murder rate than states without it. He also cites once more the example of Great Britain, where public execution of pickpockets did not prevent the spectators from being deprived of their wallets.

Moving to a new paragraph, he next argues:

So capital punishment doesn't work. But when we try to force it to work, we find that we can't even administer it fairly. First, there is the economic bias: the rich can always pay their way out, while the poor will die. Second, the meting out of the death penalty often depends upon *whom* you kill, for human life is not valued equally.

Here he gives examples of criminals who were executed for killing public figures, while fellow criminals who killed people of lesser renown were paroled in three years.

This brings him to his conclusion. He succinctly recapitulates his chief arguments and draws out the full implications of them, saying, in essence, “Here's what follows if you don't buy these arguments.” Then he ends with a sentence neatly summarizing his case:

The evidence all in, the conclusions are inescapable: economically the proponent of capital punishment is a waster, morally he is a bankrupt, and pragmatically he is a fool.

## The model

What follows now is an actual essay written by a student named Danny Robbins, a college junior at the time. It's a splendid example of all five points on our earlier checklist, but especially of #2: a clear plan of attack. This is about as well organized an essay as you are likely to see. It also illustrates the truth of George Bernard Shaw's observation: "Effectiveness of assertion is the Alpha and Omega of style. He who has nothing to assert has no style and can have none: he who has something to assert will go as far in power of style as its momentousness and his conviction will carry him."

order - Chronological  
signposting - evidence to support point

## The Character and Purpose of Caesar

Octavius Caesar in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* embodies all the ideals of ancient Rome. His pursuit of world power at any cost is consistent with the militaristic, male-oriented society of which he is a part. The Roman spirit, it seems, is so deeply ingrained within Caesar that there is absolutely nothing else in the world of any importance to him besides strength and conquest. In fact, he seems so one-dimensional a character that he may not be a true character at all. I think he is merely a symbol—a voice that recurs in the play not to capture the imagination or make one learn something about human nature but rather to provide a measuring stick by which one can calculate change in Mark Antony.

Certainly there are aspects of Caesar's character that cry out for further development by Shakespeare. He is so young, yet acts so old. And nowhere does Caesar show the sensitivity, curiosity, or frivolity one might expect from a 23-year-old. It seems that if Shakespeare really wanted to make Caesar a provocative character, he could have done something with these qualities. But he doesn't. It appears that Caesar is so type-cast, so stereotyped as a Roman, that the reader or spectator must view him for what he stands for rather than what happens to him in the play. No matter what the situation, his actions are perfectly Roman. And in this manner, it appears that his function is like that of a "constant" in a mathematical equation, a figure of never-changing value. Antony would be the "variable" in the equation. He is changed by the passion of Cleopatra, and Caesar's function is to provide contrast for this. Caesar, then, must not change. Three instances, covering the entire time span of the play, bring this out.

In Act I, Caesar criticizes Antony behind his back for the good

times Antony has in Egypt. The play has just begun, and Caesar is already telling Lepidus that

From Alexandria  
This is the news: he fishes, drinks, and wastes  
The lamps of night in revel; is not more manlike  
Than Cleopatra, nor the queen of Ptolemy. . . .  
You shall find there  
A man who is the abstract of all faults  
That all men follow.

(I.4.3-10)

This is Caesar's very first speech, and in it one finds a 23-year-old man condemning pleasure. Caesar cannot understand why Antony does not take up arms with the triumvirate, why pleasure comes before duty. This opening speech is a clear disclosure of Caesar's personality. But perhaps more importantly Antony's values are being compared to Caesar's. Not only do we see the things that Caesar values—masculinity, work, ambition—but it is significant that Antony is the subject of Caesar's first lines. In the total scope of the play Antony is the "subject" of all of them, whether he is mentioned by name or not.

Then in Act II there is another, more telling, glimpse into Caesar's character. He and Antony are trying to patch their damaged relationship. But Caesar pursues reconciliation in a purely utilitarian manner. He is a Roman first, a friend second. Caesar acts purely as a soldier. And he is concerned with Antony as merely a once-famous soldier who can help him defeat Pompey. Caesar is so wrapped up in his quest for world power that he will sell his sister "whom no brother / Did ever love so dearly" (II.2.150-151) to Antony to get Antony's support. Antony seems to go along with Caesar to appease him for the moment and end the conversation. Nevertheless, the end result is that the shallowness of Caesar's nature is exposed again. He, unlike Antony, shows no regard for the beauty of human relationships. He is concerned only with using people to advance his military goals. The fact that Caesar shows no love or compassion—not even for his sister—highlights the relationship between Antony and Cleopatra.

Caesar acts no differently in the final Act of the play. In fact, he appears more ruthless. After Antony's death, Cleopatra seeks mercy from Caesar. Caesar—who in the war against Antony has just slaughtered many men in his own self-interest—says:

She [Cleopatra] shall soon know of us . . .  
How honorable and how kindly we  
Determine for her. For Caesar cannot live  
To be ungentle.

(V.1.58-61)

This is, of course, a joke. Caesar has murdered Pompey, Lepidus, and Antony. The "mercy" Caesar plans for Cleopatra is to use her as window-dressing for his conquests. He wants to use her as a public display of his "generous heart." Proculeius lets slip this notion: "let the world see / His nobleness well acted" (V.2.44-45). For the first time Caesar is making an outward show of pity and kindness and, true to his nature, he is sincere about none of it. Furthermore, the sparing of Cleopatra's life has a military purpose—to make him look good in the eyes of his subjects—just like everything else he does.

Thus Caesar's character never changes from beginning to end. He is not to be pitied or even contemplated to any great extent by the audience. Caesar acts simply as a standard by which one can study the effects of Cleopatra's love on Antony. Shakespeare seems to be using Caesar as a symbol of Roman society, a yardstick by which Antony's deviance from Roman ideals can be measured. There is nothing deep or stimulating about the man. His traits are negative and obvious, so obvious that I think Shakespeare made them this way on purpose. Caesar is supposed to be a model Roman, whereas Antony is supposed to be—and is—a richly complex human being.

### The model analyzed

To help you consolidate what you've learned so far, I am going to critique this essay in terms of the five-point checklist:

1 *A well-defined thesis or position:* Like our earlier imaginary student, Danny did the necessary headwork before actually beginning to write. All that preparation gives him two enormous advantages: he can write boldly, because he really knows what he knows; and he can set forth his arguments lucidly, because he understands exactly how they interconnect. The opening paragraph illustrates both advantages.

His thesis is clear and deliciously controversial:

I think he is merely a symbol—a voice that recurs in the play not to capture the imagination or make one learn something about human nature but rather to provide a measuring stick by which one can calculate change in Mark Antony.

It's also placed right where it ought to be for greatest effect—at the climactic end of the opening paragraph. He leads into it with *I*

*think*, which primes us for a major assertion (this is the first appearance of *I*) and which also discreetly implies his recognition that the assertion may be considered debatable by the reader. We are to know, in other words, that he isn't arrogantly advancing this notion as a statement of fact, but rather as an opinion. Nonetheless, it is a firmly held opinion, and we admire his courage for stating it so unequivocally. He's not waffling with us; instead, he's boldly crawling out on an interpretive limb, just as I advised you to do in the concluding remarks of chapter 3. The entire opening paragraph, in fact, is refreshingly direct in manner—another example of the front-door approach in action.

2 *A clear plan of attack:* Basically the opening paragraph is asserting three things, each one leading to the next:

A Caesar embodies the Roman ideal.

B In fact, he is *nothing* but the Roman ideal—that is, he is one-dimensional, a walking symbol.

C From *B* we must infer that his dramatic function is to serve as a yardstick by which we can measure the change in his fellow Roman, Mark Antony.

Danny knows that if he can prove points *A* and *B*, he can persuade us that his thesis (*C*) is, at the very least, probably valid.

In the second paragraph, he contents himself largely with amplifying on points *A* and *B* (principally *B*). But when he gives us the sentence, "No matter what the situation, his actions are perfectly Roman," we can feel ourselves being primed to *view* these concrete situations, for there is where the proof obviously lies. And, sure enough, here it comes: "Caesar, then, must not change. Three instances, covering the entire time span of the play, bring this out."

The plan of attack could hardly be more explicit—or more beautifully simple: three major examples, one per paragraph. This is what Mencken had in mind when he spoke of "the importance of giving to every argument a simple structure." Note, too, the fine positioning of this curtain-raising sentence. Like the earlier thesis sentence, it rounds off its paragraph, thus providing its own transition directly into the proof (paragraphs 3-5). Not a word is wasted.

Danny's plan of attack is made even more transparent by the