

Writing with Style
Conversations on the Art of Writing

Third Edition

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This brings him to his conclusion. He succinctly recapitulates his chief arguments and draws out their full implications—and perhaps especially the implications of *ignoring* them. He's 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, who was 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 strategy. 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."

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 typecast, so stereotyped as a Roman, that the reader or spectator must view him for what he stands for rather than for 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 up 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 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 ideas 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’ll critique this essay in terms of the five-point checklist:

1. *A well-defined thesis:* Like our earlier imaginary student, Danny did the necessary headwork before actually beginning to write. All that preparation gives him two advantages: he can write boldly, because he really knows his stuff; 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’s 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’ll advise you to do in Chapter 9. The entire opening paragraph, in fact, is refreshingly direct in manner—another example of the front-door approach in action.

2. *A clear strategy:* 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* (chiefly *B*). But when he says, “No matter what the situation, his actions are perfectly Roman,” we can feel ourselves being primed to *view* these concrete situations, for this 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 parallel structure in the opening sentence of each of his three supporting paragraphs makes his strategy even more transparent:

- a. “In Act I, Caesar criticizes Antony . . .”
- b. “Then in Act II there is another, more telling glimpse . . .”
- c. “Caesar acts no differently in the final Act of the play. In fact, he appears more ruthless.”

What reader isn’t grateful for such clear signposting of the argument? We notice, too, a progression in the persuasiveness of the examples. Each is

stronger than the last, thus building toward an intellectually and aesthetically satisfying climax.

3. *Strong evidence:* Danny has chosen representative examples "covering the entire time span of the play." He quietly draws this to our attention to defuse the possible objection that the evidence is stacked (for example, all from the first half of the play). In addition, on four occasions he has quoted actual lines, which greatly enhances the concreteness of the examples. Many students would simply argue by generalization, assuming that the reader will supply the appropriate textual support. Danny properly does the supporting himself. All the reader need do is read and enjoy.

4. *A clean narrative line:* There are no bumps in this essay. Each sentence, each paragraph, is hinged on the one that precedes it. Danny was able to achieve this fine continuity because he had a clear plan of attack: he knew what he wanted to say and what he had to prove. When you know precisely where your essay has to go, you can "tell" your argument as simply and coherently as if it were a story, which in a sense it is.

But the continuity is also the result of careful craftsmanship. Note, for instance, all the parallel structuring: the way paragraph 2 repeats the pattern of paragraph 1; the way each of those paragraphs ends with a key sentence; the way paragraphs 3–5 all begin alike; the way the closing paragraph looks back to the opening paragraph, and so forth. We have *patterns* here. They organize the ideas for us; they silently tell us how the pieces of the argument relate to one another.

5. *A persuasive closing:* The final paragraph is a beautiful wrap-up: succinct, bold, and complete enough to gather in all the major points the essay has been making. We feel them now fixed in our memory.

The Importance of Continuity

What follows is really part of the "Final Tips" section that concludes this chapter, but since it's both lengthy and vitally important, I want to discuss it separately.

Good writers are sticklers for continuity. They won't let themselves write a sentence that isn't clearly connected to the ones immediately preceding and following it. They want their prose to flow, and they know this is the only way to achieve that beautiful effect.

But how are these connections to be made? The better the writer, the less need he has for mechanical means of connecting his ideas, too

many of which tend to clutter an argument. Instead, he relies chiefly on a coherent understanding of what he wants to say, a simple style, the occasional repetition of key words, and the careful use of pronouns such as *this* and *that*. In manner he resembles a furniture maker who uses interlocking tongues and grooves to do the work of nails and screws.

Sometimes, though, a situation will require a more explicit connective—such as when the direction of the argument is turning or when an idea is to be paralleled or contrasted with an earlier idea. In these situations, the writer will call upon a conjunctive adverb or brief transitional phrase to signal the kind of thought that's coming next. I call this "signposting" an argument. Here he has choices within choices. As Rudolf Flesch points out in *The Art of Plain Talk*, some conjunctive adverbs are bookish—that is, used chiefly in print—whereas others are conversational and for that reason less stuffy. In the list below, the bookish ones are followed in parentheses by their conversational equivalents. Keep in mind, though, that the equivalence in each case is approximate, not perfect. Note, too, that the bookish adverbs can afford you greater variety *and* precision of meaning—which is doubtless why we encounter them more often in books than in conversation:

above all	in particular
accordingly (and so)	instead
admittedly	in summary
again	likewise (and)
also	moreover
besides	more specifically
but	(for example)
certainly	nevertheless (but)
consequently (and so)	nonetheless
finally	on the other hand
first	rather (however, instead)
for example	second
for instance	similarly
furthermore	so
hence (therefore)	still
however	then
in addition	therefore
(besides, also)	though
in conclusion	thus (therefore, so)
indeed (in fact)	to sum up
in fact	yet