## The Three-Part Argumentative Essay Structure

NOTE:  This model is not to be used as programmatic or as a blue-print for writing a paper. Using it in this way can lead to overly mechanical writing because the boundaries between the three parts often blur, and so the parts themselves are rarely as distinct in practice as they are in theory.  Nonetheless, it does serve as a nice way of thinking about an issue, organizing a paper, and checking that the paper has a complete thesis after it has been written.

1) **The Problem**:  Every argumentative paper must address a "problem" in the text.  This "problem" can be something that prevents you from understanding the text (a crux) or can be a particular thematic or imagistic pattern that affords deeper insight into the text.  The Problem section of the thesis is, basically, the textual phenomenon that you are going to analyze.  It should be evident enough that you do not need to prove its existence, though you will probably need to point it out to your reader.  If someone can argue against it, it's not part of the problem, it's part of the solution.  HINT:  Statement of the problem usually serves as the best way to begin a paper, since it cuts through all the junk that can litter an otherwise nice introduction.

2) **The Solution**:  This is what you are trying to prove.  If your problem is a crux, how do you construe the text?  If it is a thematic or imagistic pattern, then how precisely does the pattern work?  What is it doing there?  The solution needs to be proven through a process of logical argumentation.  If you pick a problem with an obvious or uncontroversial solution, one so facile that it does not need a process of logical argumentation to persuade your reader, then the whole paper will be BORING.  Since most papers are pretty boring anyway, you should avoid obvious and uncontroversial Solutions to minimize the damage to your readers' (and grader's…and so your own) psyches.  If you find your paper is pointless and boring, you either need a more interesting Problem or you need to delve into your Solution more deeply.

3) **The Relevance**: Okay, so you've described your Problem and argued through it in your Solution, but why does it matter?  What does it all mean?  Why should we care?  Somehow you must explain why your Solution to the Problem is important.  The danger to avoid here is overstating the importance of your Solution.  Remember, your Solution won't change the world, so don't try to make it seem like it will.  In literary analyses, a good guideline is to stick to how your Solution will improve your readers' general understanding of the text or texts examined.  Don't go any further than that and claim that your Solution, for instance, explains the entire development of western culture or anything like that.  Also, the Relevance must grow out of the Solution, so make sure you argue through your Solution so as to lead directly into the Relevance.  Think of it, if you want, as the last stage of the Solution.  This is tough to do well.  Really tough.  Really really tough.  Think long and hard, because the Relevance is usually the most difficult part of the paper.  HINT: The Relevance is most often placed in the conclusion of the paper, but there is nothing at all wrong with including it in the introduction as well.

**EXAMPLE #1**:

Prompt: Analyze the structure of Plato's *Symposium*.  Why might the text present a series of speeches rather than a single definitive speech?  How does this structure affect the philosophical argument of the text?

1) **The Problem**: Socrates' definitive speech comes at the end of a long line of other speeches that it refutes and replaces.  Because the preceding speeches have been entirely supplanted, they seem to contribute nothing to Plato's philosophical argument.  So why are they there?

2) **The Solution**:  Through careful analysis of each speech's central points and the transitions between the speeches, we can see that none of the speakers thinks independently.  They each build upon aspects of the previous speeches in progressively constructing and refining a concept of Love.  Instead of contradicting the preceding speeches entirely, Socrates, just like the other speakers, appropriates the core points of each speech and discards the rest in constructing his own definition of Love.

3) **The Relevance**:  The other speeches therefore not only display the various mistaken views Plato's audience might hold (and so force them to re-assess their own beliefs), but also reassert the structure (if not the actual steps) of the ladder of love through which the philosopher achieves the "Ocean of Beauty" according to Socrates.  The structure of Plato's *Symposium* emphasizes that love and philosophy are processes to enlightenment rather than enlightenment itself.  Yet at the same time, by placing Socrates at the apex of this ladder, Plato also indicates the truth and importance of his speech, since it structurally parallels the end of the ladder, the "Ocean of Beauty."

**EXAMPLE #2:**

Prompt: Trace an image throughout Homer's *Odyssey*. How does the poem use the image? Does the image change signification over the course of the text? What is its significance? How does it key into deeper issues in the text?

1) **The Problem**: Olive trees and olive wood appear not infrequently in the *Odyssey*. Each time the image appears in books 1-7 and 13-24, the olive wood plays a role in whatever help Athena gives Odysseus. It is not associated with Athena in book 9, however, when he uses an olive wood stake to blind the cyclops Polyphemus. Appearances of olive wood:

   a. 5.260 – handle of the axe with which Odysseus builds a raft to escape from Calypso

   b. 5.527 – bushes under which Odysseus sleeps after Athena saves him from a shipwreck

   c. 9.427 – stake with which Odysseus blinds Polyphemus the cyclops

   d. 13.426 – tree under which Odysseus and Athena plot revenge against suitors

   e. 23.214 – marriage bed of Odysseus and Penelope that serves as final test of Odysseus

2) **The Solution**: Olive wood marks moments when Athena (goddess of olives!) helps Odysseus. Odysseus does not perceive Athena when she helps him (twice!) in book 5, and since Odysseus narrates book 9 himself, it is possible that the olive-wood stake marks for the audience another moment when Athena aids Odysseus, but her assistance is not explicitly represented because Odysseus, who narrates the episode, did not perceive her.

3) **The Relevance**: When Odysseus reaches Ithaca in book 13 and meets Athena, she praises him for his cunning and he rebukes her for not helping him from the time he sacked Troy until she led him from the shore of Phaiakia to Alkinoos' palace. The use of the olive imagery to indicate Athena's presence in 9 makes both his rebuke and her praise ironic, as they only emphasize the

ignorance and impotence of even the most cunning and resourceful of mortals before the awesome power of the divine.

## ORGANIZING THE PAPER

- **Do not** organize chronologically unless you are tracing something that develops over the course of the narrative!!!!  Consider what a mess we would have:
  - o In our case, organizing the evidence chronologically would place the cyclops incident in the middle of our analysis, where it shouldn't be because that is the problematic instance of olive wood.  Furthermore, our clearest examples of the connection between Athena's aid and olive trees, and so the ones we should probably put first, are 5.527 and 13.426, which are neither the first examples nor contiguous.  If we organize chronologically, we would begin with a rather unclear example.
- **Do not** organize the paper by the evidence (one paragraph per piece of evidence).  This too would be messy:
  - o In our case if we organize by evidence, then we will end up repeating stuff since several examples work the same way or indicate the same thing.  Do we really need separate paragraphs or sections for examples as clear as 5.527 and 13.426?  Such an organizational principle also would only account for a very small portion of the paper, and leave us with a disorganized heap of evidence that would need to be sorted through before any further argumentative steps could be made.
- **Do** consider your Problem and your Solution and decide what sequence of logical steps will best get from the Problem's beginning to the end of the Solution.  Organizing in this way will automatically provide clear transitions between the passages and discourage plot summary

because you will be prioritizing the argument rather than the evidence. You may event want to put aside the evidence while structuring your argument.

- o We need first to point out that the olive trees all benefit Odysseus, then that Athena's help occurs in conjunction with the olive trees. For each section, we should start with the clearest examples and move on to the more subtle ones. Note that the clearest examples of helping olive trees are not the clearest examples of their connection with Athena's aid! Organizing by example would cause a disaster here! From these two points we can argue that olives signify Athena's divine aid, and therefore that the olive-wood stake in book 9 may indicate her unseen presence. This leads us to argue that Odysseus does not mention her because he did not see her, and, finally, that his encounter with her in 13 ironically expresses his mortal impotence.

- **Do** use the conception of the three-part thesis to help you formulate your sequence of logical steps! Often your paper can be organized by viewing each section as a miniature paper, with its own Problem, Solution, and Relevance. Each section and subsection begins with a set of facts provided by the preceding section (Problem). It then uses these facts to argue a point (Solution) and concludes with this point's significance to your overarching argument (Relevance). The next section picks this Relevance up in turn as its own starting point. The process repeats until it reaches a natural end. Depending on the nature of your paper, you may need to have separate sections that you draw together later, but then each section should be organized along the lines of this concept.

Forecasting Organization

## Three-Part Structure

I.  Introduction: introduce the thesis (thesis = idea)

    A.  Focus the argument

        1.  Gain attention

        2.  State necessary background information

        3.  State necessary definitions

        4.  Cite pertinent data or statistics

        5.  Establish the controversy

        6.  Establish the direction of the argument

    B.  State the three-part thesis (this sentence is the controlling idea for the entire argument)

        1.  Make the sentence one declarative sentence (the thesis is **never** a question)

        2.  A Something (X) is true for these three reasons (A, B, C) C this is the basic format of the three-part thesis (see the examples below)

        3.  Use three parallel grammatical constructions for the three reasons of the thesis C words, phrases, or clauses

        4.  Ensure that the three reasons, once developed, will prove the main idea of the thesis C A the something is true@

        5.  Craft this sentence well since it is the key to the whole paper (A bad thesis leads to a bad paper)

        6.  Write the remainder of the paper with the thesis in mind (Every word, phrase,

or clause should advance the argument)

    C.    Include transition (applies to the entire paper)

        1.  Flow smoothly from the introductory section to the **thesis** statement at the end

of the introduction

        2.  Maintain focus on the main idea

        3.  Avoid the Abump@ or Agap@ between the introductory section and the

**thesis**

II.  Body: write **three** body sections, one each for each of the **three** reasons of the **thesis**

    A.  Include transitional devices

        1.  Include transitional devices

        2.  Flow from the **thesis** statement to the first body section

        3.  Flow from proof to proof inside each body section

        4.  Flow from one body section to the next

        5.  Keep the **thesis** statement in mind at all times

        6.  Restate the wording or a rewording of the **thesis** throughout the paper (if the

**thesis** wording or rewording occurs only in the introduction and conclusion, you

probably have not proved the **thesis**

    B.  Prove each subheading of the **thesis**

        1.  Cite data, reasons, and examples (proof)

        2.  Keep the **thesis** in mind at all times

        3.  Use sound reasoning and logical thought supported by proof

    C.  Follow this example:

1. Start by stating the appropriate **part** of the **thesis** to be proved

2. Give the first proof (proof 1)

3. Use transition

4. Give the second proof (proof 2)

5. Use transition

6. Give the third proof

7. Use transition (proof 3)

8. Continue in this fashion until you have proved the section of the **thesis**

9. Write a concluding statement for the section

10. Each body section should be so interwoven around the **thesis** that the reader can read each section in isolation and reconstruct one third of your **thesis** statement, including the main idea

11. One of the most frequent mistakes in writing the body sections is proving the one section of the **thesis** but not relating it to the main idea of the **thesis**, the thrust of the argument (A something is true@)

12. Remember:

    a.   Be specific

    b.   Do not forget the **thesis**

III. Conclusion: write the conclusion of the argument

   A.  Include transition

   B.  Summarize by briefly restating each proof used in each body section

   C.  Restate the **thesis** (breaking it into **three** parts to begin each section of summary)

    D.   Write the concluding statement

        1.   Ensure that it pertains to the **thesis** (do not create a new **thesis**)

        2.   Ensure that it is not tacked on so you have a concluding statement

    E.   Do not introduce new information in the conclusion

    F.   Pay attention to transition throughout the conclusion

## Sample **Thesis** Statements

1. Because they address universal ideas, because they use symbolic expression, and because they appeal to basic human emotions, myths are similar from one culture to the next. (**Three** parallel adverb clauses)

2. From one culture to the next, myths are similar in that they address universal ideas, use symbolic expression, and appeal to basic human emotions. (**Three** parallel noun clauses Athat they@ is understood to be in front of Ause@ and Aappeal@)

3. Myths are similar from one culture to the next in their ability to address universal ideas, to use symbolic expression, and to appeal to basic human emotions. (**Three** parallel infinitive phrases)

4. From one culture to the next, **three** common characteristics of myths are addressing universal ideas, using symbolic expression, and appealing to basic human emotions. (**Three** parallel gerund phrases)

5. From one culture to the next, myths are universal, symbolic, and evocative. (**Three** parallel adjectives)