Using the Enthymeme as a Heuristic in Professional Writing Courses

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Some time ago, my wife ordered merchandise from a mail-order house known for its quality housewares. Three months later, after having received neither her order nor word of it, she received this letter:

WE REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT WE EXPERIENCED DIFFICULTY IN HANDLING YOUR ORDER. YOUR ORDER IS NOW BEING SHIPPED IN THE MOST EFFICIENT AND FASTEST WAY.

IF YOU HAVE RECEIVED YOUR MERCHANDISE, OR HAVE MADE AN ALTERNATIVE ARRANGEMENT WITH US, PLEASE REFUSE DELIVERY OF ANY UNNECESSARY SHIPMENT.

PLEASE FEEL FREE TO CALL US COLLECT FOR ANY QUESTION YOU MAY HAVE OR MAKE ARRANGEMENT FOR US TO PICK UP THE MERCHANDISE AT OUR COST.

AGAIN, WE SINCERELY APOLOGIZE FOR THE DELAY AND INCONVENIENCE CAUSED BY OUR ERROR. WE THANK YOU FOR YOUR UNDERSTANDING AND PATIENCE REGARDING THIS MATTER AS WE LOOK FORWARD TO SERVING YOU IN THE FUTURE.

This is a remarkably unhelpful form letter. My wife already knew the company was having trouble with her shipment, but the letter neglected to tell her when or even if she would receive it. She called them (a long distance call, and not toll free) to find out what the letter could easily have told her, and she wondered why they had not saved their expenses and her time by writing an effective letter in the first place. It is a standard form letter, probably sent automatically after a certain number of days and used to forestall customers' inquiries. The letter writer might argue that the response faithfully follows the good-news format—it states the good news (although the first sentence is neither good news nor even news at all, and the second sentence is good news in only the most general sense), it gives necessary explanations, and it seeks to retain goodwill and "make a sale." Yet it didn't do much good, because the writer did not analyze my wife's particular context and resolve her particular problems.

The Reliance on Formats

In the following pages, I will offer a methodology for letter and memoranda writing which exchanges an emphasis on forms for one
on rhetorical analysis. Ultimately, training in rhetorical analysis helps students exercise and refine the analytical and analogical thinking needed for any discipline; that is, a professional writing course can serve, as Carolyn Miller says, to "present mechanical rules and skills against a broad understanding of why and how to adjust or violate the rules, of the social implications of the roles a writer casts for himself or herself, and for the reader, and of the ethical repercussions of one's words—effects which emphasize the fundamental nature of the humanities" (617). But before addressing how a professional writing course advances a liberal education, or even why to adopt a new methodology, it would be instructive to look at the causes for a letter such as the one which opens this article. Certainly, cost is a consideration, it being cheaper to mail form letters than have secretaries research and write personalized letters; for a mail order business, though, especially one whose clientele pay substantial prices, this strategy may be penny-wise and pound-foolish. However, the two causes I want to discuss pertain more to the concerns of a writing class: the writer's reliance on forms, and the lack of analysis of context and audience.

Elizabeth Harris refers to reliance on formats as a kind of "language engineering," which holds that "the use of language to construct whole discourses in real situations can be taught by simple prescription and imitation" (629). Writers, in other words, know forms and rely on them as though format alone frees them from analyzing individual contexts. If textbooks are any indication, many professional writing courses are organized around patterns—the "modes" of writing—with chapters on description, narration, exposition, and argument as well as refinements such as technical description, progress reports, and proposals. Further, nearly all textbooks divide letter and memorandum writing into good news, bad news, and persuasive categories, and into direct, indirect, and motivated appeal patterns of organization. These basic categories and patterns, which Kenneth Burke calls "innate forms of the mind," can help students understand the unfamiliar world of professional writing. But beyond this, these patterns have limited usefulness. Further, textbooks organized around such patterns reflect what Miller sees as our society's bias toward empirical investigation, a bias which emphasizes arrangement over invention. For writers who rely on patterns, content is separate from form, meaning from its articulation. Results are discovered prior to selecting the right vehicle of presentation, and "form and style become techniques for increasingly accurate transmission of logical processes or of sensory observations" (Harris 614).

Teaching modes, though, seems to approach the process from the wrong end. To paraphrase John Gage, emphasizing the modes assumes that knowing formulae leads to knowing when to use them ("Towards an Epistemology" 4). But these broad categories are abstracted patterns of products rather than strategic processes for writing; they accurately describe the forms that letters take, but they
do not suggest which form any one letter should take. Also, the categories or patterns themselves are sometimes problematic. A goodwill letter, for example, is frequently classified as good news, which takes a direct form; yet, as the saying goes, any good business letter is also a sales letter. A bad-news letter, which would take an indirect form, also needs to sell the reader on continuing to do business with the writer despite the news. Nor are writing contexts easy to categorize. A memorandum requesting that office workers volunteer to work on a Saturday for charity might be seen as good news or as a sales pitch, while a claim letter might be organized by direct, indirect, or even motivated appeals. But even if a context were able to be clearly categorized, the modes do not offer much advice for analyzing it and determining the specifics of the response.

An emphasis on modes rather than analysis, then, expends problem-solving efforts on molding communicative strategies to fit preconceived forms, rather than molding strategies to fit the conditions of the contexts, and retards rather than improves students' rhetorical skills. Of course, good teachers will teach rhetoric, yet students seem predisposed to believe that writing is like building a model. If they know the rules and follow instructions, they can build an artifact. They are predisposed to a formulaic approach—through a scientific bias, or through perhaps cognitive immaturity—and while good teachers mitigate the ill effects, textbooks encourage them.

Balancing modes with context analysis helps a writer learn to consider the facts of a case, his or her own intentions, the audience's knowledge of the facts, and the audience's probable attitude towards the writer's intentions. Consequently, the writer's professional writing should become more informative and more personal. In the next few pages, I want to argue that employing the classical enthymeme to teach letter and memoranda writing offers a manageable and useful methodology for producing these ends.

Using the Enthymeme

First discussed at length by Aristotle, the enthymeme is defined as a "rhetorical syllogism." It is often described as merely a syllogism with one proposition suppressed; more significantly it differs from the syllogism in that it addresses matters of probability, it need not adhere to strict rules of validity, and it employs ethical and emotional as well as logical proofs (McBurney 132). It serves persuasive purposes in those wide areas of human affairs for which formal logic does not apply, including many business and technical situations. As Gage notes, the enthymeme can help students analyze "the essential variables of any rhetorical situation," that is, the question at issue between writer and reader, the writer's position and strategies for presenting it, and the assumption that serves as common ground between writer and reader and as the basis for the writer's argument ("Teaching the Enthymeme" 40).

The enthymeme helps also with arrangement, not by giving
students a formula, but by offering them a strategy. As Gage notes, an enthymeme includes the various things a student must take up to produce an effective letter—definitions, assertions, and evidence; through analysis of the context and subsequent development of an enthymeme, the student gains a clear understanding of the parts and a good idea of how they should fit together to achieve the desired ends. To make clearer the development of such a structural enthymeme, let me turn to an abbreviated account of a hypothetical classroom assignment.

A Sample Assignment

Students are asked to construct a cover letter to accompany a questionnaire they are sending to the faculty of their college on campus. The questionnaire asks the faculty to describe their students’ academic and professional writing needs; the results will be used for a report that suggests to the business and technical writing committee in the English department ways to improve the classes. In the context of this assignment, students have been authorized by Professor Martello Tower, head of the committee, to write the report as part of an independent project, and they have been warned that such studies have been attempted before with limited success: most of the teachers answer the objective questions, but few complete the questionnaire even though the questions are clear. Some faculty have told students who attempted previous similar projects that the questionnaire was a waste of time and that there was no need for another fact-finding report. Further, rumor has it that some faculty are unwilling to write essay responses because they have seen examples of bad prose pilloried recently in a series of articles published in the student paper, and they don’t want their writing to be the next example held up for ridicule. Without complete data, however, the students’ report will be seriously flawed, so they must write a cover letter that persuades the faculty to complete the survey.

Students given this assignment receive little help from the traditional patterns for professional letters. Should they use the direct approach since their letter will convey the good news that students will receive better instruction as a result of their survey? Or should they use the indirect approach because it will convey the bad news that faculty are expected to spend substantial time completing a student’s questionnaire? Or should they use the persuasive approach because they have to motivate the faculty to complete the questionnaire? Rather than attempting to force the letter into a predetermined category, the enthymeme encourages students to establish what they think their audience should accept and do—that is, it helps students clarify the letter’s policy and determine the argument that will effect it.

Students can easily determine the policy for the letter: faculty should complete the questionnaire. Students then look for reasons, or proofs, for the policy in the realm of fact or consequence. As
Gage notes, policies, and for that matter value statements, rely on such proofs, so "it is generally most productive for students to revise their logic toward facts and consequences of the issue and let the values and policies speak for themselves, as they always will" ("Teaching the Enthymeme" 45). Thus, students need to discover good reasons supporting their policy and build an enthymeme around these reasons. Although some modern philosophers question this shift from "is" to "ought," rhetoricians have long recognized this maneuver as natural in practical situations in daily life. It allows students to argue for a state of affairs that, once accepted, naturally leads the faculty to answer the questionnaire.

In their search for the enthymemic strategy that will convince the faculty, students are guided by certain restrictions: the assertion must lead readers to the policy; the assertion's support must be related to it by an assumption acceptable to both writer and readers; and the support must make the assertion sufficiently convincing. It is at this point in their thinking—during their search for good reasons—that students explore the context, because a good argument depends upon a particularized context; and students must be able to find answers about the background and attitudes of their readers if they are to produce an effective letter. It is also at this stage that students work the hardest: it isn't easy to find a way to persuade people to do something they are not predisposed to do. But this stage, too, as I want to discuss later, offers student writers the broadest benefits.

A reasonable enthymeme for this assignment would assert to the faculty that "completing this questionnaire will improve your students' chances for academic and professional success," and it would support this assertion by arguing that "the resulting report will improve the classes needed by these students." The assumption is reasonable—that improving the classes improves students' chances for success; and the policy is itself a reasonable consequence of the enthymeme, provided only that faculty are concerned to help students prepare for their professions. This assumption granted, the faculty need to be shown that the report will help improve the course.

This enthymeme is not the only available argument for this particular situation. A student might argue that "completing the questionnaire will make your job easier, because it will improve your students' ability to communicate with you," or that "completing the questionnaire will improve the college's reputation (and hence bring prestige and all that follows from it) because it will help produce graduates who in the business world bring credit to the college's program." The assumptions for both alternatives are reasonable—that students who write better make teachers' jobs of grading and teaching easier, and that successful professionals give prestige to their alma mater. And both lead to the policy, provided only that teachers agree they should find ways to remove non-productive time-wasters and work to bring their college prestige.
Once students have decided upon their enthymemes, they spend class time discussing the benefits and potential pitfalls of each. In the first alternative, for example, the writer needs to be careful not to use or even imply sloth as an appeal, and in the second, not to use or imply greed as an appeal. While students consider the effectiveness of their arguments for their specific purpose and audience, they realize that numerous functional strategies exist, and so realize the freedom—and the responsibility—involved in real-world writing.

The organizational decisions required for effective argument are relatively easy for students to grasp because they have become closely acquainted with the context through their analysis and through their development of an enthymeme. Further, the enthymeme presents them with a finite and manageable number of steps to cover in order to complete the argument. Each term of the enthymeme must be adequately defined for the reader; the minor premise must be adequately developed with evidence; the assumption must be stated or easily inferred; and the resulting conclusion and the policy derived from it must be presented. As the authors of *The Craft of Writing* say, the enthymeme "lays out the steps the writer must take in order to move from his introduction to a declaration of his thesis" (Brandt et al. 51).

The structure suggested by the enthymeme might end up looking like one of the traditional forms mentioned at the beginning of this paper, but, significantly, the student's strategy derives inductively from a knowledge of purpose and audience. A suggested organization for my example, along with the enthymeme, follows on page 47.

While this is certainly not the only way in which this argument can be structured, it does present a reasonable way of effecting the intention, and it offers more practical advice than does the "indirect method," which suggests only that the writer open with a neutral buffer statement, follow with reasons for the bad news and state it, and finish with a positive close. Based on their analysis of the context, students know that they must ask for a favor that some of the faculty will find unpleasant, so they do not wish to broach the request immediately. In looking for common ground, they look at undisputed terms, and consider the assumption that is by definition agreeable to the readers. In this case, probably all faculty members agree about the importance of students' academic and professional success, and none denies that improving required courses will improve students' chances for success.

These points lead the students towards a definition of that improved course, allowing them to indicate not only what the course does but also to assert its importance. This section itself leads to the central part of the letter: how the questionnaire will improve the course. This crucial section relates how the questionnaire will be used to write a report and argues why the report will be effective. Students next need only describe how the readers can participate and ask for their participation. The letter closes with a policy request and
Sample Entymeme

A [Completing this questionnaire] \(\rightarrow\) [your students' chances for academic and professional success] B

BECAUSE

A\(^1\) [the subsequent report] \(\rightarrow\) [classes needed by your students] C

Suggested Organizational Strategy

1. Define "B": The students attend the university in order to prepare for successful careers; the faculty help them prepare.

2. State "C" \(\rightarrow\) "B": Improving classes will improve students' skills, and thus their chances for success.

3. Define "C": What is business writing? How can it help students?

4. Define "A\(^1\)": What is the report designed to do? Who authorizes it? Who will see/use it? Who will write it?

5. Prove "A\(^1\)" \(\rightarrow\) "C": A good report will tell business writing teachers what faculty in the Business College think their students need; this exchange of information will help business writing faculty design more appropriate courses.

6. Define "A": What are the instructions for filling out the questionnaire? (State importance of completing all questions; mention confidentiality.)

7. State policy: The faculty of the Business College should complete this questionnaire.
highlights a good reason for agreeing to the policy.

Below is a sample letter. The letter runs to almost a page—a length some business writers might be uncomfortable with. Yet the "one-page guideline" is, of course, arbitrary—another example of "language engineering." Any letter's context must determine just how long or short the letter should be; context must likewise determine the extent to which the enthymeme's parts are developed. My illustrative context demands a developed argument from students: past attempts at surveying faculty have been unsuccessful, so good reasons have to be offered. Also, it is important to note that this particular audience—academicians—is likely to read a longer document. So, while brevity may be a virtue, it is also a relative virtue; a formulaic demand to "cut the letter by a third" might well cut its effectiveness altogether. While students should strive for conciseness, they should also be sure that their letter, however long, has a chance to succeed.

A Letter Using the Organizational Strategy

Dear Professor Gecko:

Define "B" and

Because you are committed to helping your students prepare for successful professional careers, wouldn't you spend thirty minutes if you thought this time could make a real improvement in the classes your students need to become successful?

State "C" → "B"

One class you could help improve is English 304, Business Writing. In a recent survey of alumni of the Business College, 92% ranked effective communication among the top three skills needed for professional success. English 304 helps develop your students' skills in communication: it teaches them to analyze various contexts in which business writing is found, it shows them the forms and the styles most used in business writing, and it gives them practice in applying their knowledge in numerous writing assignments. English 304 does a good job, but the business writing teachers want to make this course even better.

Define "C"

To help do so, the English Department has accepted my proposal for an independent study project; I will prepare a report that details improvements the faculty of the Business College think should be made in the course, improvements that will help students improve their academic writing and their subsequent professional writing. The report will go to the chairperson of the committee, Professor Martello Tower, who will consider its recommendations this summer when the committee is scheduled to revise the course.

Define "A1"

A thorough, informative report is needed so that the authoritative advice of you and your colleagues can be transmitted to the English Department. Without the cooperation of all the faculty in the Business College, the English Department will be less able to make the course as helpful as it can be for your students.

Prove

"A1" → "C"
Define "A"

To gather the data necessary for this report, I am asking all the faculty in the Business College to complete the enclosed questionnaire. As you will see, it contains both objective questions and three brief essay questions, and I ask that you complete all of the questions so that my recommendations will be as accurate as possible. Your responses, of course, will be strictly confidential.

Won't you take a few moments now to complete the questionnaire? When you are finished, just put it in the enclosed envelope and give it to your departmental secretary; I will pick them up on March 25. Your cooperation will be appreciated by me, by the teachers of business writing, and, I am sure, by your students.

Sincerely,

Buck Mulligan

Benefits of Using the Enthymeme

The enthymeme helps students see the degree to which they must analyze rhetorical contexts if they are to write effectively, and it offers them a heuristic for generating and selecting among options regarding content and organization. It helps them determine the degree to which audiences understand terms in an argument and the amount and kind of evidence audiences require. It shows them how to be sure that proofs are logically tied to assertions via assumptions, and how to verify that subsequent letters are complete and able to effect their ends. By analyzing these concerns, students can learn to write effective letters, and as they become more competent with this heuristic method, their letters will become better—that is, more likely to do their job, a result any business person can appreciate.

Quite beyond a narrow concern for finding the best way to win an argument or make a sale, this approach induces students to meditate on readers' opinions. At the very least, such meditations can humanize the writer, making it less likely that he or she will use impersonal appeals to company policy as a way of closing off examination and discussion of an issue, thereby failing to address the reader's concerns. For instance, in my example, students consider the perspective of Professor Tower: what sort of information does he want? In what ways will he use this information? They also consider what further questions they need to ask themselves about Professor Tower. They also consider the perspectives of the audience, the business teachers: what do these faculty know about writing? What can they say about writing? What do they know about the course at present? Adjusting what one wants to say to what it is possible to say in a given context creates an openness to the attitudes of others that broadens one's own attitude.

The benefits of the enthymemic method are not, of course, restricted to business letters or to the business world in general, but
apply to any context in which good reasoning is beneficial. As Kenneth Burke has argued for over fifty years, meditation on the perspectives of others offers numerous and important advantages. The enthymeme creates a context which allows students to "see around the corner" of their own perspectives and critically examine their own assumptions. It enables them to see, and requires them to examine, reasonable alternatives to their own stances on issues.

The enthymeme offers students a way to see discourse, in Harris's terms, as "nothing less than relations of meaning, structure, and function" (634). Because writing is self-discovery—at least to the extent that it explicitly articulates alternatives that might otherwise remain inchoate in the mind—a writer who examines a context and develops an appropriate response gains satisfaction not only by completing the task but by formulating and presenting his or her attitude on a particular topic of some importance. The more writers question their own attitudes, the more they stand to learn. We can say that an approach which offers these possibilities helps students to see other frames of reference, to see analogies, to hypothesize and deduce. That is to say, using the enthymeme leads writers to question their own attitudes. In the light of a customer's position, writers might question, for instance, their own preconceived and uncritical response to a customer's request for a refund or adjustment; they might question their company's policies regarding refunds or claim adjustments; or they might even begin to question some of the business principles which serve to ground their own orientation. Through analogical and deductive thinking, writers can consider alternatives agreeable to all.

One might argue that using the enthymeme requires writers to spend more time on a letter than does the traditional method. However, such an argument, like the rule for the length of business letters, confuses means and ends: just as brevity for its own sake may cause a writer to omit information required for a successful letter, so speed as an end in itself can easily produce a shoddy and ineffective product. Strictly from the point of view of the bottom line, spending extra time to achieve one's goals is more cost-effective than rushing towards failure, as my wife would tell the mail order house. From a broadly humanistic point of view, time spent thinking about what one wants to say, and to whom, and for what reasons, might produce the identification and cooperation which Burke sees as necessary for a human and humane society.

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Notes

1 For another example of how the enthymeme can be used in an assignment, see "Using the Enthymeme to Improve Business Letter Writing," in the Association for Business Communication Bulletin 49 (1986): 30-33. This article shows how the enthymeme improves students' abilities to write effectively.

2 Those familiar with Gage's essay in Rhetoric Review will see how much my suggestion owes to his article. I also find helpful Lawrence Green's College English article and Brandt's The Craft of Writing, both cited below.

Works Cited


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