A Qualitative Approach to Academic Writing

by editor Sue49 (currently offline)

When it comes to academic writing, a great many teachers insist that their students use what they call “The Five Paragraph Essay.” In fact, it seems to have become the organizational tool of choice in a great number of high schools and colleges today. It is a simple format that can give a variety of short essays some structure. One is expected to assert a thesis statement in an introductory paragraph, explain or develop that thesis in three supporting paragraphs, and then both prove and summarize it in a concluding paragraph. Now, as a teacher myself, I am not about to suggest that this format is either inappropriate or ineffective. No, it works perfectly well—but only for the extremely limited number of tasks or topics that lend themselves to it.

Effective writing simply is not a quantitative task. It is, instead, a highly qualitative venture. “Miss Feather’s Rule of Three,” a qualitative way of thinking and analyzing, can be applied successfully to any academic writing task—from short essays or journal abstracts to research papers, dissertations and even scholarly volumes.

My high school debate coach, Miss Feather, taught us to think, plan, and speak in three’s. She drilled us in this basic organizational pattern until it became part of us. Miss Feather taught us that every academic or scholarly piece of writing or speech fulfills one of three purposes. Each of these pieces consists of three parts. And, finally, each of these three parts consists of three sub-parts. Eventually, we became quite fluent in her “Three Speech.”

We compose messages in order to inform, persuade or entertain others. If the purpose of your message is to inform your audience, you want to let your audience know something or help them to understand something better. If the purpose of your message is to persuade your audience, you want to inspire your audience to think, feel or do something differently. And if your purpose is to entertain, you want to move your audience to either laughter or tears.

Your message will consist, then, of three parts—an introduction, a body and a conclusion. Too often, teachers leave their discussion of organization and structure at that—be sure that your writing has a clear introduction, body and conclusion. Many fail to tell us what to do within each part of the whole. This is where Miss Feather diverges from the rest of pack. Within each part of the message, there are three important steps that must be taken in order to accomplish your end.

Miss Feather’s Rule of Three became so deeply ingrained in us that we thought,
dreamed and conversed in “Three Speech.” A typical debater lunch conversation in Miss Feather form, then, might start like this.

"Will you look at that ugly poster over there? It looks like something my little brother would do, and he's a rather backward three-year-old. I think these posters should be scrapped. They have no artistic qualities; they have no persuasive elements; and they just don't get the message across."

Now, let's use this conversation starter as the basis of our examination of Miss Feather's Rule in each of its three parts.

Part One: The Introduction

In this portion of your message (approximately one-sixth of its overall length if you really want a quantitative measure), you have three tasks to accomplish. You must: 1) grab your audience’s attention; 2) establish your thesis statement, and 3) provide your organizational plan. Let’s look at each step in a bit more detail.

First, you need to grab your audience’s attention. You might begin with an interesting quotation, a startling statistic, a personal story, or even a question that will lead your audience (readers or listeners) to your specific topic. In our debater lunch scenario, that “grab” was: “Will you look at that ugly poster over there? It looks like something my little brother would do, and he’s a rather backward three-year-old.”

Next, you need to establish your thesis statement. Connect your attention-grabbing lead to the specific topic that you will cover. That topic should be stated in a single declarative sentence. This is, in fact, the single most important sentence in your piece, so it should be simple, direct and clear. It indicates exactly what you will cover, what you will prove or support in your message. “I think that these posters should be scrapped.”

Finally, you need to provide your organizational plan. This, the second most important sentence in your piece, is a crucial step too often neglected by writers and speakers. At this point, let your audience know, in brief, just how you will proceed to cover the topic you have chosen. In other words, lay out an outline of the “proof” you will offer in the work. In this case, we know that three points will be covered in the piece: “They have no artistic qualities; they have no persuasive elements; and they just don’t get the message across.” Why is this step so crucial? It is rather like a contract. Letting your audience know exactly what points you do intend to cover in your message means that (generally speaking), your readers or listeners can hold you responsible for doing what you said you intended to do.

Part Two: The Body

In the body of your message (consisting of approximately two-thirds of the whole), you need to cover (in order) each point that you isolated in your organizational statement. It may take a paragraph, a page, or even a chapter to cover each point, depending upon the complexity of the message you are constructing. Quantity is not the issue here. What is important is that you fulfill three tasks when it comes to each point. Each main idea should be clearly: 1) explained, 2) supported, and linked. So, using the first main point in our sample organizational plan, “these posters have no artistic qualities, persuasive elements, and getting the message across,” let’s explain, support and link.

Explain what you mean when you say that “These posters have no artistic qualities.” Make it clear to your audience. In this case, our speaker or writer might explain in this way: “These posters are just plain ugly. They were obviously done very quickly—there are no drawings or graphics on them. The lettering is uneven,
etc."

It is important, then, to support what you have to say. Provide an example or some other form of "evidence" (quoted material—statistics, results of a study, a sample case, etc.) to back up your point. "It is very important that advertising be done with great care. According to Dr. Ima Great Artist, Director of the HooHa University Department of Advertising Art and Design, 'effective posters should be done neatly and should include beautiful drawings or graphics.' In her book, Poster Power, Dr. Artist goes on to point out that social scientists have proven that such care results in greater audience acceptance."

Finally, you need to link what you have to say to what has come before and what will come after. Connect your point to the specific topic or thesis statement, and indicate how it leads you to your next point. "As Dr. Artist has so clearly shown, artistic quality is critical when evaluating the effectiveness of any individual poster. In fact, the higher the quality, the more likely it is that audiences will be persuaded to act upon the poster's message."

It is now time to fulfill these three tasks with your next main idea. In this case, your next paragraph might begin, "Persuasive elements in posters include..." Move on to explaining, supporting and linking the idea that "they have no persuasive elements." And, finally, do the same with the point that "they just don't get the message across." Explain it, support it, and link it.

Part Three: The Conclusion

In this ending portion of your message (consisting of approximately one-sixth of the whole), you need to complete the following three tasks. When you wrap up, you need to: 1) summarize, 2) prove your thesis, and 3) let your people go. It's actually like doing the Introduction in reverse.

First, you need to summarize. Briefly restate the main points that you covered. "We can see, therefore, that artistic qualities, persuasive elements, and the ability to get the message across are all critical when evaluating the effectiveness of posters."

Next, restate your thesis. Put that statement in completed, proved and/or supported terms. "In this case, then, it is clear that our posters simply do not measure up. They should be scrapped."

And, finally, let your people go. You grabbed your audience's attention at the outset—now you need to give it back. Making a reference to your opening lead, carrying it full circle, can be very satisfying for both readers and listeners. "So, if you really want to drive the point home, don't rely on backward three-year-old brothers to do the work!"

There are times when The Five Paragraph Essay just won't do. And yet, its overall intent is extremely valuable and even, in some cases, quite workable. It is, of course, important to structure your academic messages well. But, in the long run, remembering what you need to do when you compose your messages may be more effective than remembering how long it should be. So, try following Miss Feather—in three's.