

Gita Trelease
Our Monsters, Ourselves

Lesson Plan on the Rhythm of Argument

Lesson objective: To understand how argument develops

Total estimated time: 40-45 min

Additional outcomes: Students learn to recognize the kinds of writing that make up paragraphs and how these different kinds of sentences function to develop an argument. Understanding this helps students actively shape their arguments; in addition, they learn to identify strengths and weaknesses related to argument in their own work and that of their peers. Finally, they gain a vocabulary we can all use to talk about these aspects of writing.

Assignment sequence that's underway: I use this exercise in Unit 2, but it would be useful in any unit.

Work completed before class: Students have written a draft of their second essay. I ask them to bring a copy of this to class.

You'll need a large set of colored markers/pencils (3 per student) for this exercise and a good essay (I use a sophisticated student essay).

1) I tell my students that though this is a simplification, there are basically three kinds of writing that together make up the rhythm of the argumentative paragraph *and* the essay. They are: a) description; b) analysis; and c) claim, reflection, or argument. We then discuss how these kinds of writing relate to evidence: description is text that becomes evidence when analysis shows what the evidence means; claim or argument tells us why or how the evidence matters. I ask students to choose three markers and designate one for each kind of writing. (5 min)

2) First we look at the introductory paragraph(s) of an essay. After students have read the paragraph, we work as a group to identify these kinds of writing in the paragraph. I read each sentence aloud, and the students tell me what they think it is. We get a chance to discuss their answers as well as some subtle writing techniques. For example, in a descriptive passage, it's not unusual to find what I call "slanted summary," that is, summary that is shaped by the writer's choice of verbs and adverbs that actually function as mini-claims. Students will often remark that analysis is like a mini-claim but that it relates directly to the quoted or paraphrased text. Finally, I ask students what they noticed about the kind of writing in the introduction. It is primarily claim and evidence. (10 min)

3) I then ask students to color-code a section of the essay (I'd recommend one or two paragraphs in the middle of the essay). When they've finished, I read at least one paragraph out loud and we talk about the distinctions they've made. Again, I ask them to characterize what they see. This time, they talk about the large role analysis plays, as well as where the claims tend to occur (the beginning and end of paragraph). (10 min)

4) Next I ask my students to turn to their own essays and color-code them. Depending on the length of their essays and the amount of time you have to spend on this, you may choose to not do the whole thing but instead to focus on the beginning and a couple of body paragraphs. Again, I ask them what they noticed about their work. In my experience, students will notice that they don't have a lot of description in their introductions and that in the body paragraphs, they lack claims or don't have sufficient analysis. (15 min)

6) Optional: when the students have finished, we do a little process writing: what did you notice? What work do you have to do now? Is there anything you need help with? (5 min)