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ABSTRACT

Many basic writers, who are virtually unable to create a coherent paragraph, are nonetheless capable of presenting orally well-constructed narratives of depth and feeling. Thus, teachers must try to get students to harness the strength of their oral abilities to improve their writing skills, and Kenneth Burke's pentad may provide a key. Burke's pentad of five key terms (act, agent, agency, scene, purpose) can act as building blocks, making up a rough outline, for sentences, paragraphs or longer stories. In effect, the pentad allows the students to play the role of reader for their own writing. Numerous examples demonstrate how the pentad and a worksheet based on the pentad can be used to show students how to attain three goals: (1) how to construct sentences; (2) how to construct paragraphs; and (3) how to [de]construct sentences. A chart, devised on a word processing program and distributed to the students, can be used to map out the five elements of the pentad for a sentence or paragraph. The charts can also be used to teach students what may be missing from their writing. While this system is no instant cure for any basic writer, it does allow students to utilize their strengths. The use of Burke's pentad translates the writing process into terms that the students have a greater hope of understanding. (Numerous examples of the charts used to map out the pentad are included.) (HB)

Kathryn Rosser Raign

Burke's Method of Dramatism and Its Use as a Tool For Teaching Developmental Writing

I have always been amazed by my basic writer's ability to tell a story. In fact, I cannot recall the number of times students have come in at my request to discuss papers made up of sentences almost wholly incomprehensible. When I point out a problem sentence to the student and say, "Now tell me what this means?" he or she usually gives a blank stare and says something like, "Well, I don't know; I was trying to tell you what happened, but I guess it didn't work. I don't know how to write what happened." Originally when I found myself in such a situation, I would begin the standard drill--Where is the subject? Where is the verb? This approach rarely worked well; in fact, it rarely worked at all. But when I put the paper away out of sight and then asked the student, "Ok, now **tell** me what you were trying to say," the situation evolved differently. Usually the student resisted, expecting another English Teacher trick, but once I convinced the student I simply wanted him or her to tell me a story, not write one, the student underwent a complete metamorphosis. I have had students who could not compose more than one or two brief paragraphs over a week's time, suddenly regale me with a thirty-minute story. Why is this? Why can these students orally present well-constructed narrative, yet not translate those thoughts into writing?

One obvious answer is that what Walter Ong (1981) terms "the new secondary orality (p. 38) has encouraged students to privilege their oral skills rather than their writing skills--a natural development in Ong's view (1981) because while humans are innately verbal beings, writing is a false and artificial construct (p. 40). The world of secondary orality is the world

of radio, television, and film. However, while these are oral mediums, they require listeners to have some level of literacy (Ong, 1981, p. 47). For example, the currently popular television show *Northern Exposure* demands a high degree of literacy from its viewers; in one episode the viewers' ability to follow the plot line is based on the assumption that they will recognize that the character Buck from *Call of the Wild* is a dog not a human. Ong explains that (1981), "Secondary orality . . . is to varying degrees literate. . . . [However,] this situation does not automatically create sensitivity to literature or equip everyone with the ability to write well, but it can be made to work toward such goals" (p. 47). Unfortunately, the methods Ong suggests for reaching this goal, courses which attempt to sensitize students to the presence of this secondary orality, are generally too content specific and complex to benefit developmental writing students. So how can students be taught to harness the strength of their oral abilities and use it to improve their writing skills? I believe an adaptation of Burke's pentad (1981), the theory of dramatism (Burke, 1981, p. xvi) supplies the key. Burke's pentad of five key terms (act, scene, agent, agency, purpose) is based on the principle that all communication is action resulting from some form of motivation, and readers may use the five terms to analyze communicative motives in literature (Burke, 1981, p. x). And while basic writers may do little if any literary analysis, they do need a method for constructing and [de]constructing their own writing--this is where the terms of the pentad become useful. In effect, the five terms of the pentad can act as building blocks, an outline if you will, for both simple sentences and larger blocks of discourse such as the paragraph.

A logical question at this point might be, why the pentad? Why not just use the standard journalist's questions, who, what, when, where, why, and how? Possibly limiting

the heuristic to just those questions without the corresponding pentad labels, might be effective; however, I have learned from experience, that while developmental writers may have weak writing skills, they normally do not have weak cognitive skills. Consequently, the frustration that they feel because they are unable to effectively express in writing the often complex ideas that they are thinking and verbalizing causes them to have a low tolerance for failure in the classroom. This coupled with the insecurity and anger many of them feel because they are in what they consider "remedial" courses, makes them less than receptive to what they consider "simplistic" approaches. Consequently, I have learned that adapting my teaching methods to the developmental writing course does not involve lessening the amount of theoretical material I present, it simply means presenting it differently.

For example, this past semester, one of the teaching assistants I was mentoring had a student in a writing course who could not write a coherent essay. When he received his first grade, a very low C, he was outraged. In desperation, his teacher sent him to me. After I calmed him down, I began explaining to him the difference between writer and reader based prose. He absorbed the information like a sponge. The next day, I heard from his teacher that this formerly combative and resistant student had spent an entire peer editing session explaining writer based and reader based prose to his classmates, who were obviously impressed. Not only did his self-esteem improve, so did his writing. An explanation of Burke's theory of dramatism, in accompaniment with the application of the pentad, can have a similar effect on students. And finally, as Burke himself states, "If you ask why, with a whole world of terms to choose from, we select these rather than some others as basic, our

book itself is offered as answer" (xv). I have chosen Burke's terms rather than some others equally simple because they are grounded in proven theory, and this paper is offered as answer.

Burke states in A Grammar of Motives (1981) that the book's intention is to "inquire into the purely internal relationships which the five terms bear to one another, considering their possibilities of transformation, their range of permutations and combinations--and then to see how these various resources figure in actual statements about human motives" (p. xi). This range of possibility is true of any five terms a writer might employ to write a sentence. For example, if a teacher were to give a student five words and ask him or her to "write" a sentence, a number of permutations would be possible based on arrangement and placement. The same is true of the words a writer can attach to the terms of Burke's pentad. The five key terms can be arranged in alternate patterns to create various types of sentences.

Linda Flower (1981) also uses the term "transformation" in her discussion of Writer and Reader-Based prose. She claims that what inexperienced writers fail to do is transform their egocentric, writer-based prose into prose intended for a reader, reader-based prose (p. 268). Simply put, the writers do not translate what they think into something someone else can read. Thomas Farrell noted a similar phenomenon in 1977, claiming that students who move from orality into writing tend to "make assertions that are totally unsupported by easons, or they make a series of statements which lack connections of the most complex, multi-leveled sort" (p. 40). These absences, he explains, are perfectly acceptable in oral communication where the underlying assumption is that listeners will request further information when they need it. The pentad can aid students in learning to supply these

"absences" that prevent their writing from functioning effectively on a literate "Reader-based" level by helping them identify the standard units of meaning within a block of discourse.

It may sound as though I am suggesting that the students learn to identify the grammatical units of sentences, the very method I criticized previously. However, the units of the pentad, because of their reliance on the same concept of motivation that powers oral communication and because of the graphic element that I have incorporated, offer students a much more concrete and consequently, workable solution. More specifically, "Students only solve the problems they give themselves to solve" (p. 4), Anne Berthoff (1978) has aptly stated, and the proper application of the pentad will allow students to discover those problems (absences created by the students' use of oral communication methods within a literate medium) that have formerly remained hidden to them. In effect, the pentad will allow students to play the role of reader for their own writing in a way formerly unknown to most of them. Students fail to fill in the absences in their writing because they do not realize they exist; they are unable to establish the necessary distance between themselves and their writing that would allow them to view it as a reader rather than a writer. Simply put, "they do not have a method for . . . formulating critical questions " (Berthoff, 1978, p. 4).

Burke's theory of dramatism, properly utilized, can be such a method. In the remainder of this paper, then, I will offer examples of how the pentad and a work sheet based on the pentad can be used for three purposes: teaching students to

- construct sentences
- construct paragraphs, and

- [de]construct sentences.

I will begin by discussing the theoretical basis for using Burke's pentad to accomplish these tasks.

The five key terms of Burke's pentad, with the addition of co-agent, which Burke considered a further division of agent, approximately parallel the standard parts of speech within the sentence. For example:

Agent is the subject.

Act is the verb.

Scene is normally described in a prepositional phrase.

Co-agent is the object.

Agency is again a prepositional phrase which modifies the subject.

Purpose is embedded within a "because" clause which concludes the sentence.

The terms of the pentad work more successfully than the standard grammatical terms because they represent parts of a drama that have equivalents in oral speech--they identify actions based on units of corresponding meaning rather than arbitrary linguist codes, and as Farrell notes (1977): "Oral communication is attentive to the sensual (the concrete) and is more disposed to describing actions than to creating abstractions" (p. 450). Furthermore, when the elements of the pentad are placed within a chart as in the later example, students are able to see more effectively how the components of the pentad work together. For example, Agent is simply, "Who did it?" Act, though it corresponds with subject, asks the more concrete question, "What happened? What are we dealing with?" Scene, has to do with physical location, "Where did this act take place?" Finally, Agency is "What did they do it with?"

and Purpose--"Why did they do what they did?"

Now, these questions, though they tend to engender concrete answers, may prompt abstractions; for instance, in response to the question of scene, the answer may describe a mental rather than physical state. And the agent could be an emotion, such as passion--he hated her with a passion.

To make the postulated role of the dramatic even clearer, the key terms of the pentad correspond to a certain degree with the elements of the solution in the game *Clue*--Miss Scarlett killed Col. Mustard, with a knife in the library. The only element missing is the purpose, an omission which is also frequent in the writing of basic writers who tend not to support their ideas unless they are reminded to do so (Farrell, 1977, p. 456). The pentad and the accompanying chart, by graphically emphasizing such an absence, force students to acknowledge their omissions. Obviously, not every sentence requires each element of the pentad, and forcing students to use them may cause them to write sentences that are ". . . to a degree formulary" and full of cliches and generalizations . . ." (Farrell. 1977, p. 456); however, such unnecessary abundance is certainly preferable to gaping absences, and students can later be taught to edit out the unnecessary verbiage.

Now obviously, in a given situation, a student may not use each of these terms, and some such as agency and scene may shift positions within the sentence depending on the student's intended meaning; however, instructors should encourage students to include purpose statements; in fact, when they are creating sentences, the instructor should encourage students to include every possible element. Depending upon which of these building blocks the student uses, he or she can create a very simple or highly complex

sentence. Furthermore, arranging the parts of the sentence in terms of action should aid students in understanding more completely the basic rules of syntax and grammar within a sentence. For example, if a student wanted to communicate what she did yesterday and how she felt about it, she could use the pentad to construct a sentence in the following way.

First the student would consider agent, who did something? In this case, she did. Next she would consider act--what happened? The student could answer, "I hit someone." Then she would consider, co-agent, who did she hit? In this case she hit Marcia. Then she would deal with scene--where did she hit her? The student could answer, "In her face." Next, the student would consider the question of agency--what did you hit her with? The student could say, "My fist." Finally, the student would turn to the question of purpose--why did you hit her? She could answer, "Because I was mad at her."

So now the student has the following elements to incorporate into her sentence:

Agent (noun) I

act (verb) hit

Co-agent (object) Marcia

scene (prepositional phrase) in the face

Agency (prepositional phrase) with my fist

Purpose (because clause) because I was mad at her.

Now the student needs to form these elements into a sentence by placing them in a chart such as the one that follows, which was created using *Wordperfect*.

Agent	I
Act	hit
Co-agent	Marcia
Scene	in the face
Agency	with my fist
Purpose	because I was mad at her.

Another student could produce a sentence such as this:

Agent	I
Act	read
Agency	a book
Scene	in the library
Purpose	because it was a class assignment

Now, just as the pentad can be used to help students construct individual sentences, it can be used to help students construct sentences that will build paragraphs. For example, rather than just building one sentence that contains each of the five elements, the student could build five sentences that not only contain each of the five elements but also each answer the question asked by each of the five elements. Now remember, the examples included are student writing, and any given student could answer the questions of the pentad in a different way because though it is very prescriptive in that it asks for specific types of verbal units, this method is also fairly loose in that it is not content specific. It must also be

remembered that this paragraph is by no means an example of what all student writing should be. In fact, this paragraph is rather weak. However, this exercise encourages students to produce actual blocks of text--a task many developmental writers find daunting. Also, this rough paragraph can then be used as rough draft for a discussion of revising. An example follows.

The student began with a topic sentence:

> Two friends, Jan and Leslie, fought each other last week with food because of a misunderstanding.

Agent: Who started the fight?

Agent	Jan
Act	got
Co-agent	angry
Scene	during homeroom
Purpose	because someone said Leslie said she was fat.

Act: What occurred? Explain the act itself

Agent	The fight
Act	started
Co-agent	between the two girls
Agency	when Jan threw potatoes at Leslie
Scene	during lunch
Purpose	because she angry about what she heard.

Co-Agent: What did the co-agent do?

Agent	Leslie
Act	threw
Co-agent	jello at Jan
Agency	
Scene	
Purpose	because she knew she had never said Jan was fat.

Scene--Explain why it happened where it did?

Agent	The cafeteria line
Act	supplied
Co-agent	the girls
Scene	
Purpose	with an abundance of ammunition.

Agency: What did they use to commit the act?

Agent	Jan and Leslie
Act	fought
Co-agent	each other
Scene	
Agency	with food instead of words
Purpose	because of a failure to communicate.

Purpose: What caused the fight?

Agent	Friends
Act	often fight
Co-agent	each other
Scene	
Purpose	just because they won't listen.

Two friends, Jan and Leslie, fought each other last week with food just because of a misunderstanding. Jan got angry during homeroom because someone said Leslie said she was fat. The fight started between the two girls when Jan threw potatoes at Leslie during lunch because she was angry about what she heard. Then Leslie threw jello at Jan because she knew she had never said Jan was fat. The cafeteria food line supplied the girls with an abundance of ammunition. Jan and Leslie fought each other with food instead of words because of a failure to communicate. Friends often fight each other because they don't listen.

Just as filling in the blanks can help students create text, filling the blanks with portions of already existing text can help students discover blanks in their sentences, helping both students and instructors pinpoint the problem, as in the examples below that were taken from actual student essays. In the first example, I help a student analyze a thesis statement.

	Original		Revised	
Agent	Every senior		Every senior	
Act	looks forward		looks forward	
Counter-agent	to prom night		to prom night	
Scene	in high school		in high school	
Agency	by counting the days left and planning every detail		with anticipation	
Purpose			because it's the biggest night of the year	

Problem: Although the sentence above is grammatically correct and does contain each of the necessary elements, the student does not use the correct form (with) of prepositional phrase. To correct the problem, the student can either choose to eliminate that element of the sentence, or use the suggested "with" to introduce agency. The student must also add a purpose to the sentence to clarify its meaning. A second example follows on the next page.

	Original		Revised	
Agent	Many people		Many people	
Act	fear		were afraid	
Co-Agent			of dying	
Scene	about Luby's Cafeteria massacre		after the Luby's Cafeteria massacre	
Agency				
Purpose			because they had come close to death	

Problem: The original sentence has no co-agent, and no purpose. Also, the scene must take the primary position because it establishes the time frame.

I do not claim that this method is an instant cure all for any and every basic writer. Unfortunately, it is not, and it will work very well with some students and not at all with others. What increases the likelihood of success is that this method allows students to utilize their strengths. Our students are, for the most part, the product of a secondarily oral society. They have been conditioned to think graphically and orally first and verbally

second. The method outlined in this paper enables students to put their verbal skills to work in a graphic medium. In effect, I have attempted to translate the writing process into terms that the students will have a greater hope of understanding, so that they may in turn translate their own thoughts and words into a form readers will understand, and only if we can present material in a form students can understand and use, do we have any hope of reaching them.

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