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AUTHOR Danis, M. Francine
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ABSTRACT

Both enthymemes and visual pedagogy speak to the capacity--and the need--of humans to make a coherent story out of the scraps of information they possess. Three possibilities exist for building on the connection between enthymemes and pictures when teaching argumentative writing--using visual aids to help students: generate material, suggest a structure, and symbolize the finished project. One image of a completed argumentative essay is a "Y Bridge": the claim is a bridge, a crossbar sitting on top of the capital Y. John Gage, in his textbook "The Shape of Reason," presents the enthymeme as a device which helps writers generate arguments by remaining conscious of their audiences. Students then need to decide how to arrange their arguments. To help students recall that they have considerable flexibility in this task, composition teachers can use the analogy of a simple toy--a spindle onto which are dropped a series of brightly colored shapes. In constructing an argument, an arranger must consider the attitudes and knowledge of the onlooker as well as the arranger's own preferences. A device used in creative writing, the mask of the detail monster, can be used with students generating arguments. Students make paper masks with eyeholes and work in pairs; writers read their arguments, listeners raise the mask to ask a question when statements need further elaboration. Visual pedagogy can help students and teachers to design "webs of meaning" as successful as E. B. White's fictional spider Charlotte. (Ten illustrations are included.) (RS)

M. Francine Danis
Our Lady of the Lake University
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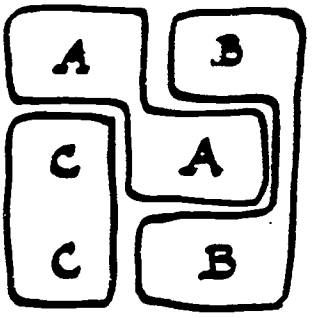
Draw Me an Enthymeme:

Visual Pedagogy and Verbal Organization

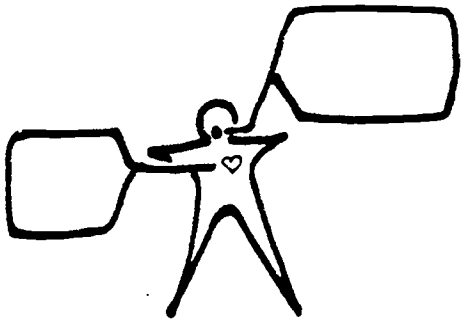
The word "enthymeme" somehow reminds me of a name for a prescription medicine--maybe a eucalyptus-scented arthritis rub. Actually, you'll recall that the word refers to a syllogism with one premise omitted or unstated. We could picture the classic example of a syllogism (updated with inclusive language) in a tidy geometrical form: "All human beings are mortal. Socrates is a human being. Therefore, Socrates is mortal."



All humans are mortal.
Socrates is a human.
Socrates is mortal.

That's all neatly spelled out. However, enthymemes don't engage in quite that degree of explicitness. The Greek roots of the term suggest something in the mind or in the soul, so we could visualize an enthymeme by picturing someone uttering our

classic example of a syllogism, but not needing to make each part explicit: "Hey, even Socrates is going to die; after all, he's only human." Kept in the mind (not hidden, but not spoken because not necessary) is that premise, "All human beings are mortal."



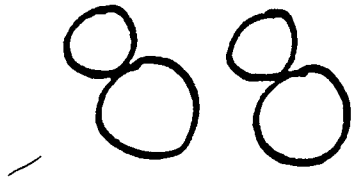
ἐνθύμησις

Most of us human beings, however, don't typically structure an argument by first creating a syllogism and then whacking off part of it. That feels too pedantic--and too inefficient. Instead, we assert what we believe, and we give reasons (or perhaps rationalizations)--i.e., we begin with enthymemes, even though we don't generally call them by that name.

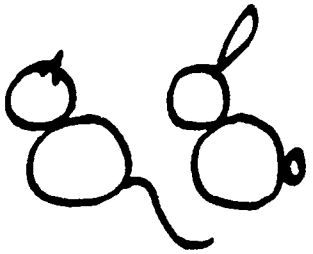
I suspect that our inclination to employ enthymemes may even precede our ability to use language. As infants, we discovered rapidly that a cry, a gesture would suffice to bring satisfaction. We didn't need to spell everything out; we weren't yet able to do so. We had to trust the powers of those around us to construct meaning from a small amount of information. Since we were expressing very basic needs, a truly minimal "vocabulary" plus a modicum of parental sensory awareness proved sufficient.

As we grew, most of us retained that sense of economy: we continued to exert the least effort to get the most reward. Though our elementary teachers never instructed us in discourse theory, we unwittingly practiced Grice's rules of conversational cooperativeness: make your contribution as informative as necessary and as brief as politeness allows. Those maxims acknowledge human economy of effort in both directions: as communicators, we tend to be lazy, and as receivers we tend to overload quickly. We'd rather be intrigued than bored.

Now, what does all that have to do with enthymemes and visual pedagogy? Both speak to our capacity--and our need--to fill in the gaps, to make a coherent story out of any scraps of information we possess. Visually, we can demonstrate that tendency with a set of circles:



It takes only a few penstrokes, the addition of two sets of distinguishing features, to turn those identical circles into images of recognizable animals.



We see the same process at work in verbal form in Stanley Fish's story of the names on the chalkboard. In his article, "How to Recognize a Poem When You See One," Fish tells of a day when he arrived early in a classroom for a graduate poetry seminar. Still on the board from Fish's linguistics class earlier in the day were the following names:

Jacobs-Rosenbaum

Levin

Thorne

Hayes

Ohman (?)

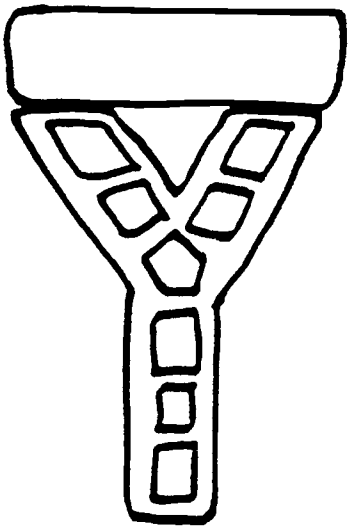
When the next students arrived, Fish told them the words on the board constituted an example of the seventeenth-century religious poetry they'd been studying, and the group immediately set to work creating interpretations which involved Jacob's ladder, the ascent to heaven by means of a rose tree, and references to the Virgin Mary as the rose without thorns.

As these examples remind us, all we need as readers are a few significant clues (including a hint about context), and our curiosity goes to work. The corollary, of course, is that we as writers need to provide the right pieces for our readers so they can construct for themselves the meaning we intend.

How do we build on that connection between enthymemes and pictures--that link of unspoken assumptions--when we teach argumentative writing? I see three possibilities: one, using visual aids to help students generate material--in other words,

as a device of invention; two, using visual aids to suggest a structure--that is, as a device for organization; and three, using visual aids to symbolize the finished product--in other words, as a way to represent the process of delivering ideas.

It may be useful to begin at the end, with a simple image of the completed argumentative essay. One such image I've developed is a diagram which I call the Y-bridge. The claim is a bridge, a crossbar sitting on top of the capital Y. I want, say, to convince my audience that teaching with visuals helps students with verbal organization. I want readers to travel this bridge with me, but first I have to make it strong enough to support those who traverse it. If I make a claim, my audience will naturally ask "Why?" The answer to any "why?" is a "because" statement, an assertion which upholds the claim. So I play with a visual pun and create a Y-beam--or a series of them--to hold up my thesis. I say, for example, that visuals are fun for creators and spectators--they allow room for playfulness in teaching and learning.



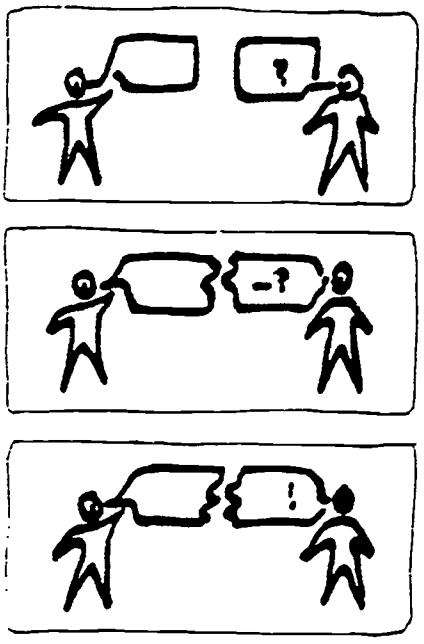
But reasons in turn have to be filled out, developed with evidence. Thus I represent the Y as being stabilized, filled in, like the architectural device of filling a hollow structure with bits of rubble. Hoping, of course, that my evidence to support the pedagogical value of playfulness isn't rubble, I stabilize my reason by using chunks of statistics, stories, quotes, and so on. I may draw on my personal experience (e.g., the Español Rapido class where we threw beanbags while we counted by fives in Spanish); I can use theoretical justification (say, drawing on Ken Bruffee's idea that we have a longer memory for how we learned something than for the discrete information); I can draw on empirical studies (like a recent bit of research showing that students studied harder and remembered more in classes where teachers used humor) (Chrispens and Bainum).

The Y-bridge not only stands for a series of complex cognitive processes, it also demonstrates the role of the enthymeme: here again I'm taking a premise for granted. I don't need to say to readers, "All pedagogical devices which humanely help students to learn argumentation are valuable."

Visualizing the general structure of the final product is helpful--and is sufficient for some people. But we can also begin at the other end. How do we come up with material to structure, anyway? For guidance on this generative, inventive aspect, I turn to the work of John Gage.

Gage, in his textbook The Shape of Reason and in several articles, presents the enthymeme as a device which helps writers generate arguments by remaining conscious of their audiences. In other words, Gage regards dialogue (whether actual or imagined) as a vital element in creating an argument.

I can represent Gage's approach visually by picturing two people whose dialogue balloons keep being modified as the writer recognizes that she cannot impose her view on her reader but must instead, to use Gage's term, "earn" the conclusion.



The accommodation and mutual shaping of ideas takes place because the writer searches for shared values with the reader--in other words, for an enthymeme, an unspoken bond between them. On the basis of that shared assumption, the writer can formulate one or more reasons which the audience may find acceptable. I.e., Gage's approach assumes that writers and readers can learn from and with one another.

Admittedly, there will be times when writers and readers are both so closely identified with their own assumptions that they cannot open their eyes to someone else's view. As Jim Corder puts it in his eloquent piece "Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love," when somebody else's utterly different story confronts our own, we may not be able to respond in helpful or even rational ways. We may face what Corder describes as

> the flushed, feverish, quaky, shaky,angry, scared, hurt, shocked, disappointed, alarmed, outraged, even terrified condition that a person comes to when his or her narrative is opposed by a genuinely contending narrative.(21)

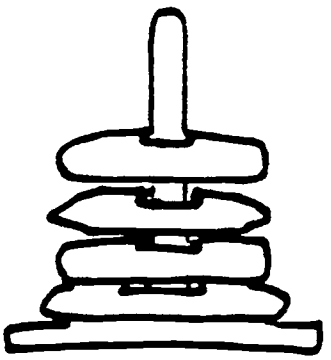
Usually, though, our students will be dealing with less-threatening writing situations. They'll find, having moved through Gage's process, that they've spun out plenty of material. Now they run into the problem of deciding how to arrange it all. Here again, visual pedagogy comes to the rescue.

First, a general word about the value of creating a large, unifying shape. In talking about ways to plan a piece of writing, I quote one of my recent Advanced Composition students, Jennifer Johnson, who wrote that when she was a child she had difficulty putting together jigsaw puzzles--until someone showed her how to assemble the frame first.

Puzzles, of course, are usually less complicated than argumentative frames. For one thing, with arguments we're not

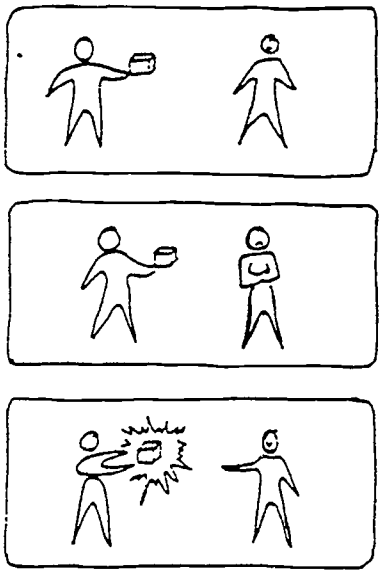
just working toward completing someone else's picture; we're deciding how our own verbal and conceptual picture will look. We're starting from scratch.

To help students recall that they have considerable flexibility in this task, I offer the analogy of a simple toy--one of those spindles onto which you can drop a series of brightly colored shapes. The spindle represents the unifying thread (if I may mix the metaphor), and the blocks are the "chunks" of thought with which the writer is working. The blocks can be set on the spindle in different arrangements, depending on the arranger's preferences--and in constructing an argument, the arranger must also consider the attitudes and knowledge of the onlooker. Thus there can be a bit of dialogue even here.



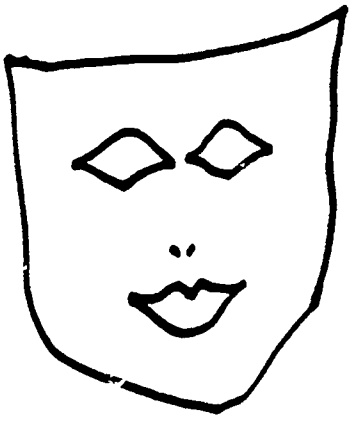
But in an engaging argument, the very chunks or blocks of thought are not precast; they must be shaped as well as arranged. To represent that range of complexities, I sometimes use the analogy of the sales presentation: introduce the subject;

acknowledge and deal with hesitations the client might have; demonstrate advantages; and reiterate the sales pitch. Once again, we have enthymemes at work: publishers' reps, for instance, aren't likely to come into our offices uttering syllogisms like "All handbooks which explain terms in a clear manner are worthy of your attention. Our handbook, etc."



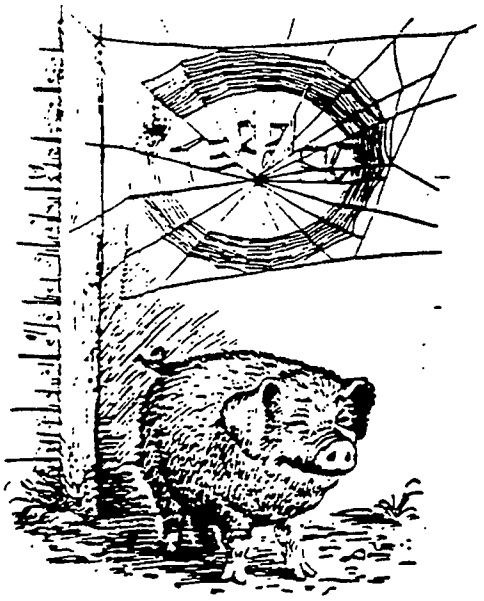
But even the sales formula, helpful as it is in suggesting an easily comprehensible structure, remains insufficiently nuanced: it stresses the role of the agent and fails to emphasize the necessity of the agent's learning along with the client. Thus my latest adaptation is to import into my regular composition classes a device I've used in creative writing--the mask of the detail monster (Willis). Students make simple paper masks--ferocious or friendly--complete with eyeholes. Then they work in pairs; the writer sets aside his mask and reads his

argument aloud, slowly; the listener stays alert for statements which call for further elaboration. Each time such a statement is heard, the Detail Monster raises her mask and asks a question.



Fortunate writers pair up with monsters who are alert and inquisitive, monsters who point out where the writers have left gaps in their logic or their language. Once again, the dialectic aspect comes into play here (with an emphasis on the element of play). The mask is a new persona--a helpful facade for those who would otherwise regard criticism as impolite. The physical act of raising the mask--along with subsequent discussions of the process--will, I hope, remain embedded in students' minds, encouraging them to keep raising and anticipating questions as they read and write. If they enter fully into the spirit of the mask--a spirit that someone has called "serious play"--writers will find themselves helpfully enmeshed in the proverbial web of meaning.

Having referred to that often-cited "web of meaning," I can't resist ending with a final image, a tribute to E. B. White. His fictional spider, Charlotte, really knew how to spin an enthymeme, an argument with a clear aim: to save her friend Wilbur from the fate of the typical plump pig. Charlotte spun her premises from simple phrases, but her artistry accomplished her goal. I believe that visual pedagogy will help our students, and us, to design equally successful webs.



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