



*Putting on the Sunglasses:
The Argumentative Thesis
as the Keystone to “Good”
College Writing*

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In his essay “What Is ‘College-Level’ Writing?” Patrick Sullivan suggests the following standards for defining college-level work:

A student should write in response to an article, essay, or reading selection that contains at least some abstract content[, which] should demonstrate [. . . a] willingness to evaluate ideas and issues carefully[, s]ome skill at analysis and higher-level thinking[, t]he ability to shape and organize material effectively[, t]he ability to integrate some of the material from the reading skillfully[, and t]he ability to follow the standard rules of grammar, punctuation, and spelling. (16–17)

My own experience with what is and is not “good” college writing has been based on both my experience as a peer writing tutor at Indiana University (IU) and my contemporary experience in the undergraduate classroom setting. I’ve seen both sides of the college writing process. The essence of the shift from high school (or other precollege) writing to college writing is the shift from indicative writing to explicative writing. What I’ve seen suggests that the trick to teaching good college writing is teaching the argumentative thesis statement. Sullivan’s other concerns (grammar, structure) are subordinate to teaching students how to effectively articulate their thoughts—once the initial thinking

process has been modeled and the student is more comfortable, *then* the other concerns can warrant greater focus.

In the high school model, the first paragraph usually has some sort of catchy introduction, often personal, that ends in the topic of the paper. These topic sentence theses are usually benign enough. A quick glance through my own high school writing is telling: “What has made [Superman] such a huge icon, one of the great American heroes? That is what this report intends to show” (from my sophomore year) and “In light of [evidence], the United States should re-assess its policy towards Cuba to reflect [a] post-Cold War ideology, of rapprochement rather than isolation” (from the end of my senior year). While these sentences do indeed introduce the topic of the essay to the reader, they *only* introduce. Since college writing is more focused on argument and couched positions, these sorts of introductions become outmoded rather quickly in the transition from high school expectations to college ones.

The way in which IU (my frame of reference) goes about breaking incoming students of this habit is by requiring a first-year composition course.¹ The curriculum is designed to use mass media criticism as a structural model for students to begin writing argumentatively. To this end, the course begins with essay summary and response assignments and works its way up to analysis and a film comparison. Students are made to integrate their readings into their writing, and (theoretically) to use the strategies from the readings as models to explicate their own ideas about the material they are discussing.

The problem with this sort of modeled approach, however, is that the students often seem unable to integrate ideas in assigned readings with their own. One common concern of many of the students I talked to or tutored throughout their semester of first-year composition was that they were unsure how to acknowledge the author’s critical stance while at the same time incorporating their own observations and arguments into their essays. Students would sometimes create a reading of an advertisement or a film in advance, and then fabricate evidence within the piece itself to fit the interpretative vision they thought they were supposed to have. The students had misunderstood their instructor’s criticism, and misread it as an enthusiasm for the

specific sort of criticism voiced in the article: if the student had just read Deborah Tannen or Naomi Wolf, for example, they turned in essays that were ostensibly feminist even though their own language clearly indicated their ambivalence toward or even active disagreement with the very views they thought they were supposed to present.

This is much the same problem as in the 1988 John Carpenter movie *They Live*. In the film, the central character (played by Roddy Piper) discovers sunglasses that reveal certain humans to really be imposter alien monsters. These aliens have a hypnotic device that beams out sleep-inducing waves, and makes anyone who isn't wearing the sunglasses see them as normal humans. These aliens have absolute control over media as well: with the sunglasses, the real messages of billboards and magazines become evident—"Obey," "Reproduce," "Consume," "Conform," and so on. At one point in the movie, Piper's character tries to convince his friend Frank to put on the sunglasses, knowing that Frank will understand Piper's bizarre behavior once he's seen this for himself. The problem, though, is that Frank *won't* put on the sunglasses. They fight for several minutes. At the end of the fight, Frank puts on the sunglasses and realizes his error.

This conflict could, perhaps, have been averted had Piper's character presented himself differently—let the sunglasses speak for themselves, for instance—rather than merely asserting over and over that Frank "Put on the glasses!" It seems like this method of presentation might be the key to teaching the transition to college writing as well—if a student's high school-style paper is asked "So what?" and thus *forced* to become argumentative, or is compared with an academic essay on the same topic, it seems as if the student should be more able to see the differences between what he or she is doing versus what he or she is expected to do.

The easier thing, and I think the thing that happens more often resultantly, is that like Piper in the movie, students are frontloaded with impatient demands. One of the advantages that should be better exploited is that the students generally are already familiar with the popular culture they're studying. In their book *Saturday Morning Fever: Growing up with Cartoon Culture*, Timothy and Kevin Burke emphasize the connections that

mass culture forms between strangers: “People I didn’t know had the same experiences as me even though they lived hundreds of miles from me!” (83).

With this in mind, perhaps such a curriculum (at IU or anywhere) could be slightly shifted to accommodate the innate cultural knowledge that the incoming students have. Rather than watching, say, *American History X* in class, primed for viewing racism, for what may be the first time (or a time that is chronologically close to the first time), watch something that students already have some basic familiarity with—*Superman*, or a Disney movie, or *Sesame Street*—something that there is experience with from a world without critical perspective. Then, the experience of viewing isn’t a new one, but a revelation equivalent to putting on the sunglasses.

The ideas that have been indicated in texts to the students about the social view of masculinity, or of advertising culture, or any of the sorts of altered perspectives that can lead to the shift to the critical—the argumentative—mindset will more readily jump out, since the experience is not a new one with a new critical lens, but a familiar one with a radically altered perspective. With these new perceptions, then, students should be better able to understand the sort of writing that is expected of them, and can proceed with that writing—argument based, evidential, and original.

Note

1. An extraordinarily common practice, to be sure. However, since assuming that approaches from school to school are the same would seem to go against the very explicit purpose of this volume, I’ll deal with the specific setup of the IU approach. It also seems worth mentioning here that my experience with this first-year course has been limited to conversations with instructors and former students, as well as tutorials with students enrolled in the class. Thus, though I have an outsider’s perspective, I feel it is an educated one.

Works Cited

Burke, Timothy, and Kevin Burke. *Saturday Morning Fever: Growing Up with Cartoon Culture*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1998.

They Live. Dir. John Carpenter. Videocassette. Orion Pictures. 1988.

Sullivan, Patrick. “An Essential Question: What Is ‘College-Level’ Writing?” *What Is “College-Level” Writing?* Ed. Patrick Sullivan and Howard Tinberg. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2006. 1–28.