

Introduction

Problems Rhetorical and Substantive

For well more than a decade now, researchers have been reporting how in the act of drafting we recognize and solve rhetorical problems – how we evaluate and synthesize sources, set local rhetorical goals, then seek to achieve them. (See all of Flower, Flower et al; Carey and Flower; Kantz, Bryson et al.) But if the literature on solving such problems is thick, our understanding of how we articulate the substantive problem that occasions our efforts to solve them is quite thin. By “substantive problem” I do not mean the local and ongoing struggle toward the discovery and articulation of meaning, but the significant question whose answer justifies the effort, the problem in the world or mind whose solution repays our time spent writing and our readers’ spent reading. We criticize the writing of our students and colleagues on many grounds, but none is more common – or devastating – than the observation that they have failed not just to solve a problem, but even to *pose* one that we think “interesting.” And as teachers, we experience no failure more common than our inability to explain what we mean by “pose” or “interesting” or “problem” and what it is about a text that elicits such criticism (but for “interesting” see Davis, and Kaufer and Geisler, and for “problem,” Carter).

Our sense of a “good problem” is most acute when we don’t see one anywhere in a paper, but most immediately when we don’t see one in its introduction. These two paragraphs introduced papers written in a first-year humanities course, responding to the question “What can we learn about Athenian values by comparing the appeals that the Corcyreans and Corinthians made to Athens early in Thucydides’ *History*?”

1. In 433, Corcyra and Corinth disputed which should rule Epidamnus. Because they could not settle the conflict, they each sent representatives to Athens to appeal for its help. Corcyra emphasized how they could help Athens in the coming war while the Corinthians appealed to history and

the just thing to do. Since Athens was the birthplace of Socrates and Aristotle, it would be easy to think they would side with justice, but after debating among themselves, the Athenians decided to support Corcyra. It's important to understand the values that Athens rejected before the war, because we could be misled when they explain some of their cruel actions during the war. The speeches describe the values of justice, honor, and tradition, which the Athenians reject, and the values of pragmatism and self-interest, which they probably really believed in.

2. When Corcyra and Corinth disagreed over control of Epidamnus, they went to Athens to ask for help. The Corinthians appealed to Athens' sense of justice, while the Corcyreans appealed to their self-interest. When we think of justice we think of Socrates and Aristotle, so it would be easy to think that the Athenians would side with Corinth. But they sided with Corcyra. We have to understand the values that Athens rejects and accepts, because we could be misled about their real motives when they appeal to justice to defend some of their actions later in the war. Athens rejected the Corinthian values of justice, honor, and treaties, and accepted the Corcyrean values of future self-interest.

We might tell the writer of the first that when he found his substantive problem he solved a rhetorical one, the other that she has a rhetorical problem because she has not yet found a substantive one. But we ought not be surprised if the nuances of that usage escape them (indeed, it is a distinction not clearly, much less consistently made in much of the published literature on rhetorical problem solving). So as not to confound rhetorical problems with substantive ones, I will refer to a difficulty in general and to the local on-line struggles to create text in particular as small-p "problems"; to the substantive problems that occasion the struggle as PROBLEMS, specifically as we *articulate* them in introductions as justification for claiming our readers' time. My substantive PROBLEM in this paper has to do with problems and their articulation as PROBLEMS, particularly in introductions; among my local rhetorical problems as I wrote this paragraph was constructing an introduction that distinguished problems from PROBLEMS clearly.

Work on Introductions and Problems

The slight practical knowledge we have about introductions comes from the standard handbooks, most of which trivialize the slim legacy of classical advice about forensic *exordia* into banalities like "State what you are going to talk about" and "Catch the readers' interest with an anecdote or fact," as if in the real world we choose what to read on the basis of whether

our interest is piqued in the first sentence or two. That may be true as we browse through a popular magazine, but who reading these words has stopped reading a student paper because it opened in a boring way? In our professional worlds, most of what we read we read because we must, regardless of its opening charms. And as for formulating PROBLEMS, I know of only two texts that usefully address the matter at all, but both talk around their cognitive structure and neither explains how to articulate them persuasively (Flower, 1989; Young, Becker, and Pike). Two do address the structure of introductions, but both aim at technical writers and do not consider how the rhetorical articulation of a PROBLEM maps onto its cognitive structure (Mathis and Stephenson, Anderson). The rest that I have seen are not just useless, but often counterproductive.

Theoretical studies have gone only a bit further. Rhetoricians have debated at length the ontology of what I think they would call the problematic of a situation in the form of what Bitzer (1968, 1980) has called the “exigence” of the situation that demands a rhetorical response. But they have left what counts as exigent substantially undefined, as if it were a primitive in the system (see also Patton, Scott). In composition studies, the problem of articulating PROBLEMS in introductions has been pursued hardly at all. Hashimoto has unpacked the banality of most textbook advice. Another study contrasts how problems are defined in information sciences and in the philosophy of science, but does not distinguish a PROBLEM from a problem or address the articulation of either (Carter).¹

Two other studies, both quite important, I think, have examined the ways that introductions to journal articles socially construct PROBLEMS in different fields (Bazerman, MacDonald), but neither decomposes the general concept of problem in a way that lets us understand how its cognitive structure informs its rhetorical articulation. The notion of PROBLEM lurks behind the inquiry into novelty by Kaufer and Geisler, but they do not attempt to map what counts as novel into its articulation (though as I will suggest later, there are analogues in their discussion of novelty and the components of a PROBLEM). In a series of useful studies, John Swales and his colleagues have mapped introductions in scientific, technical, and, more recently, in academic texts (Swales, 1984, 1985, 1990, 1992; Dudley-Evans, Crooks, Harris; for a more general discussion of problems see also Hoey and Jordan, 1984, 1988).

While Jordan, Hoey, and especially Swales broke important ground in this area, articulating PROBLEMS is, I think, a problem richer than even

these careful and detailed accounts suggest. And I know of only one study that examines how the introduction to a student paper influenced judgments about its author (Berkenkotter, Huckin, and Ackerman). But their methodology derives from Swales', does not address the underlying concept of PROBLEM, and is, I think, in one crucial regard, mistaken.²

The Consequences of our Ignorance

This gap in our understanding has exacted a cost on the performance of our students.

First, posing and solving PROBLEMS is what most of us do, but most of our students, both undergraduate and graduate, seem unaware of not just how to pose a PROBLEM, but that their first task is to find one. As a consequence, they often seem just to "write about" some topic, and when they do, we judge them to be not thinking "critically," to be writing in ways that are at best immature (Berkenkotter, Huckin, and Ackerman), at worst incompetent. Yet many of our students who do not seem to engage with academic PROBLEM-solving, in fact, do. Their problem is that they are ignorant of the conventional ways by which they should reveal that engagement; ours is that we have no systematic way of demonstrating to them the rhetoric of doing so.³

Second, students who do not understand how to articulate a PROBLEM lack a heuristic that would help them not just articulate one, but even know how to go about looking for one that their readers might judge "interesting" even once they articulated it. We have no systematic way to show them how to do that either.

Third, the introduction to any text profoundly influences how we interpret and evaluate the rest of it (Kieras 1978, 1980; Meyer 1977, 1985), but we do not understand how a writer's initial formulation of a PROBLEM influences how we evaluate its solution. If we do not understand how an introduction shapes a reader's response to what follows it, we cannot create a pedagogy that shows students how to anticipate those responses.

And there are costs to our theorizing: The formal analyses by Swales and others rest on an empiricist methodology based on counting and categorizing, so we do not know whether introductions have a text structure explicable by an account of discourse more robust than one based on accumulating examples and generalizing from them. We have no way to

understand the structure of introductions in the context of other or larger structures.

My object is thus both conceptual and pedagogical: I will describe how we articulate PROBLEMS in prototypical introductions, in order to offer a heuristic not only for articulating a PROBLEM persuasively, but for finding or inventing one in the first place.⁴ This pedagogical objective rests on a structural account of problems and PROBLEMS that both reflects and reinforces a view of discourse structure more complex than that ordinarily used in composition studies, but not so fine-grained as to be useless for practical application. In Part I, I will describe how the cognitive structure of a problem informs the rhetorical structure of its articulation in introductions. In Part II, I will describe (i) how introductions influence judgments of whole texts, (ii) how some students have responded to a pedagogy that teaches an explicit rhetoric of PROBLEM formulation, and (iii) what it is about one kind of PROBLEM that makes it so difficult for them (and us) to engage with it. In Part III, I will discuss some practical issues in teaching PROBLEMS and suggest further research.