

Essay Methodology I: Writing good claims.

CSC 300

Wednesday, October 1, 2014

Flashback: High School/ First Year

What were some of the rules for writing an essay that you learned in high school (or earlier)?

What were some of the strategies you used to get a good mark?

Making the Transition

High School Rules

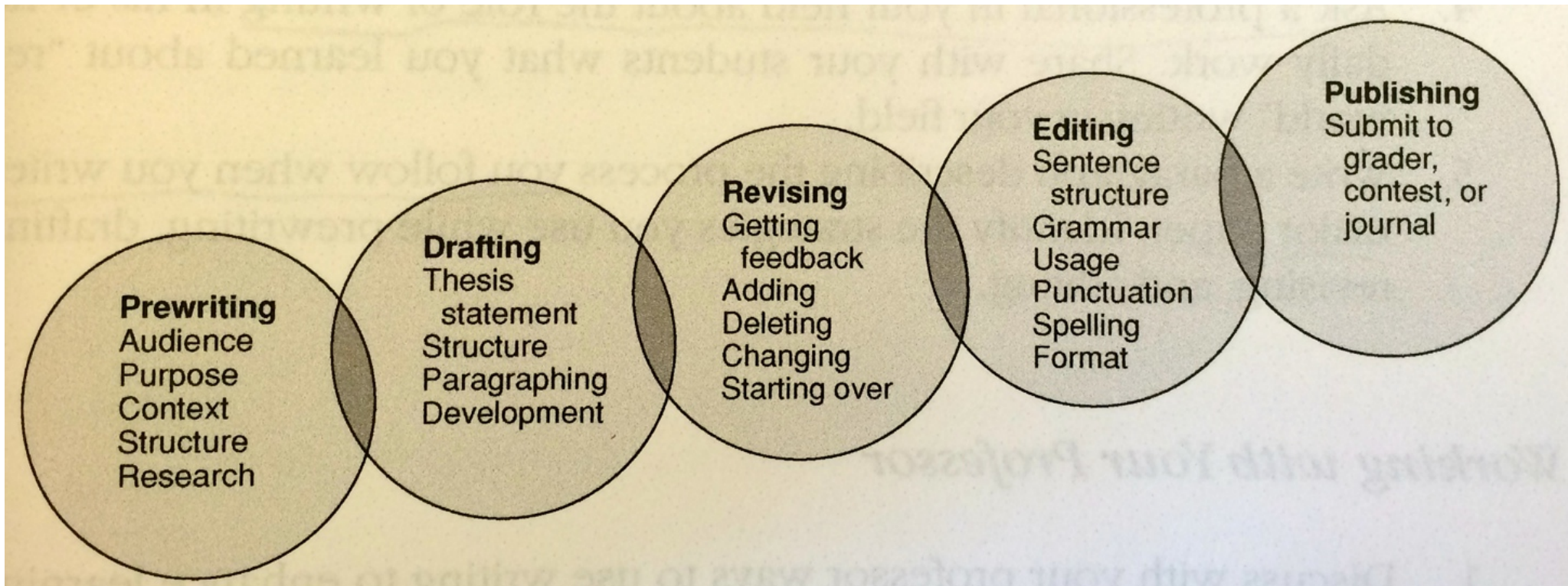
- 5-paragraph essay structure with thesis and topic sentence
- Rewarded for following the rules, for demonstrating knowledge & for visual effects

University Expectations

- Diversity of essay formats with discipline-specific norms
- Freedom to move beyond rules
- Rewarded for critical thinking & analysis

Academic Writing 101

- ✓ Done by scholars for other scholars
 - This includes you!
- ✓ Devoted to topics and questions of interest to the academic community
 - Sociologists: interested in the social world
- ✓ Presents the reader with an informed argument



The writing process.

Pre-Writing

“First you think about the subject and contemplate the assignment's purpose, audience, context, scope, style, and format. You mull over ideas for potential topics as you walk, wait at stop lights, shower, or doodle in your notebook. You think about a basic structure for the piece. All of this happens over time, either consciously or subconsciously, either in your head or in writing. Depending on the assignment, you may do research, either in the library or the lab. This is a time when you look for issues, problems, or uncertainties that you think would be interesting to explore (or easy to write about).” [Hedengren 2004]

Pre-writing

- What is the purpose?
- Who is the audience?
- How does the context influence the assignment?
- What is the scope of the assignment?
- What style is appropriate?
- What format is expected for the assignment.

Drafting

“When you feel ready (or when the deadline starts to loom) you start writing your ideas in sentences and paragraphs. As you work on the draft you will come to understand your subject more clearly, and your focus and structure may shift in subtle or even grand ways. You will begin to formalize your central purpose and structure, formulating a controlling thesis statement. As you try to express your ideas logically and compellingly, you may see that you need more data and will have to return to your research. As you follow a certain line of reasoning, you may discover it doesn't really work and that you need to find another plan of development. Drafting is the messiest part of the process and perhaps the hardest work of all.” [Hedengren 2004]

Creating a CS Report

- Abstract (Executive Summary)
- Introduction
- Background
- Specification and Design
- Implementation
- Results / Experimental (Critical) Evaluation
- Discussion
- Conclusions
- Future Work
- References
- Appendix

CS 300 - Essay I

- ~~Abstract (Executive Summary)~~
- Introduction
- Background
- ~~Specification and Design~~
- Implementation
- ~~Results / Experimental~~ (Critical) Evaluation
- ~~Discussion~~
- Conclusions
- ~~Future Work~~
- References
- Appendix

CS 300 - Essay I - Actual

- Context
- Thesis Statement
- Arguments
 - Claim
 - Reason for Claim
 - Evidence

Key strategy for arguments: writing effective claims

- Writing effective claims is one area where you can improve your arguments (and your marks!)
- By the end of today, you should be able to:
 - Identify common problems in making claims
 - Evaluate and re-write claims so that they are more effective

What is a claim?

- Definition: a claim is a statement of what you are going to argue or defend in a given paragraph
- Effective claims are clear, significant and limited
- Before you make a claim: read, reflect, write

Example: Little Red Riding Hood



Descriptive Claims

- Definition: a descriptive claim does nothing more than describe a situation or text, it does not make a significant claim *about* it
- How can you tell if a claim is descriptive?
 - Ask: is the claim debatable?
 - Ask: is it interesting? i.e. the “So What?” question

Example: Descriptive Claim

Little Red Riding Hood is a fairytale that describes the adventures of a young girl who almost gets eaten by a crafty wolf. The girl first encounters the wolf as she is walking through the woods to deliver food to her sick grandmother. The wolf is afraid to eat her in public, so he instead convinces her to pick some flowers while he secretly finds the grandmother and locks her in the closet. The wolf then disguises himself as the grandmother and waits for the girl. Just as the wolf is about to eat her, a local hunter comes to the rescue and both the girl and her grandmother are saved.

Extreme or Unlimited Claims

- Definition: extreme claims are too grandiose or too massive in scope for you to support in your paper
- How can you tell if a claim is extreme?
 - Do you find yourself saying “Get Real!” when you read it?

Example: Extreme Claim

Little Red Riding Hood is a fairytale that describes the adventures of a young girl who almost gets eaten by a crafty wolf while she is delivering food to her sick grandmother. When the girl first encounters the wolf in the woods, he convinces her to stop and pick some flowers. The fact that Little Red Riding Hood is so easily “fooled” by the wolf proves that she is actually an evil mastermind who was planning on poisoning her grandmother in any case, but instead saw an opportunity to let the wolf take the blame for her grandmother’s death. What she could not have foreseen was the fact that the wolf wanted to eat her instead.

Personal Reactions

- Definition: personal reactions focus on *you* rather than *on the matter at hand*. They are not appropriate for an argumentative paper.
- How you can use them: your personal reaction can make a good *starting point* for developing a fully-stated and effective claim

Example: Personal Reaction

Little Red Riding Hood is a fairytale that describes the adventures of a young girl who almost gets eaten by a crafty wolf while she is delivering food to her sick grandmother. When the girl first encounters the wolf in the woods, he convinces her to stop and pick some flowers. This part of the story made it impossible for me to sympathize with Little Red Riding Hood, because I felt like she was so easily tricked by the wolf. I couldn't really enjoy the story from that point onwards, although I was curious to see if the silly girl would survive.

Summary

- Descriptive Claims: Is it debatable? Is it interesting i.e. So What?
- Extreme or Unlimited Claims: 'Get real!'
- Personal Reactions: Is this talking about *you* or the *matter at hand*?

Example

Although the fact that Little Red Riding Hood is so easily tricked by the wolf makes it easy to think of her as a naïve victim of her circumstances, she is in fact an active creator of her story, because she is able to at times see through the wolf's disguise. For instance, by making a series of simplistic observations, such as “My, what big hands you have”, the girl effectively stalls the wolf long enough for help to arrive. This suggests, I argue, that the wolf is not the only one in disguise, but rather that the girl herself exaggerates her innocence in order to survive a tricky situation.

* Practice: evaluating claims

1. Each room has a different system of fans preserving the artifacts.
2. A museum's sole purpose is to keep its artifacts safe.
3. The main function of the Oriental Institute seems to be not to present artifacts to the public, but to preserve them.
4. The fans were distracting.

Choices: descriptive, extreme/unlimited, personal reaction, or fully-stated/effective

* More Practice

1. I couldn't wait to get out of the Egyptian room, but the Mesopotamian room was interesting.
2. The Egyptian room is a complete failure.
3. The space in the Egyptian room was open, but the space in the Mesopotamian room was divided by walls.
4. If one purpose of the museum is to educate the general public, then I would argue that the open design of Egyptian room fails to further this purpose, while the more structured Mesopotamian room succeeds.

Choices: descriptive, extreme/unlimited, personal reaction, or fully-stated/effective

Tips for writing an effective claim

At the outline stage:

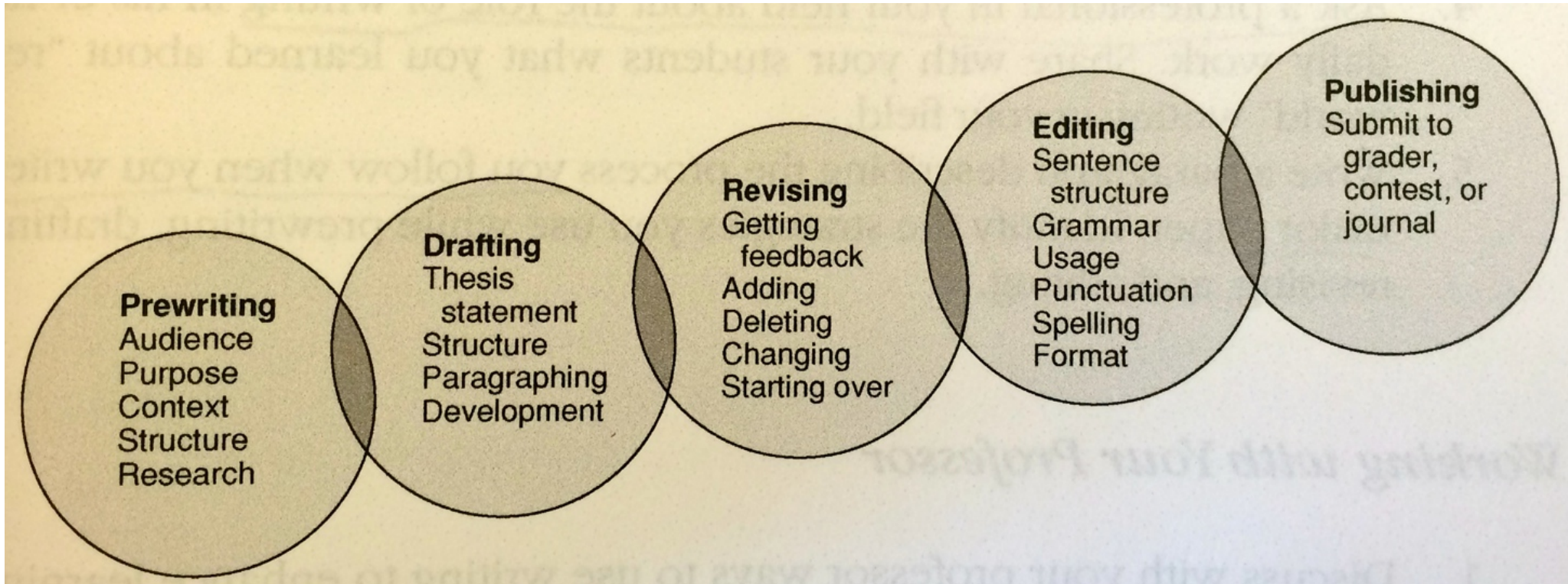
- Imagine counterarguments
- List the actors and themes that will be most important to include
- Use crucial connectors

Then try using this sample formula:

Although X, Y, because Z.

Example: Fully-Stated Claim

Although the fact that Little Red Riding Hood is so easily tricked by the wolf makes it easy to think of her as a naïve victim of her circumstances, she is in fact an active creator of her story, because she is able to at times see through the wolf's disguise. For instance, by making a series of simplistic observations, such as “My, what big hands you have”, the girl effectively stalls the wolf long enough for help to arrive. This suggests, I argue, that the wolf is not the only one in disguise, but rather that the girl herself exaggerates her innocence in order to survive a tricky situation.



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Revising

“After you have a pretty good draft, you start to revise. Usually you are so close to the work by this point that it is hard for you to look at it realistically. You may enlist some outside eyes—a friend, a roommate, family member, classmate, writing tutor, TA, or professor—to read over the paper and tell you what is confusing and what needs more evidence. With this feedback, you may make major changes to your draft, changing focus, structure, order, and paragraphs to make your meaning clearer. You may even start the paper over from scratch.” [Hedengren 2004]

Editing

“Once the draft says pretty much what you want it to, and says it clearly, you probably go through it again to make sure that everything is correct. You may run the computer's spell checker and grammar checker. You may read the paper aloud, looking for errors that the computer tools missed. You may smooth out awkward phrasing and make sure that the punctuation is correct. You may fiddle with the format, putting in headings and page numbers.” [Hedengren 2004]

Publishing

"Publishing means "making public." As a student, you probably publish most of your work by submitting it to be evaluated by the teacher or TA. However, you may also sometimes have the satisfaction of submitting your work to be published to a wider audience, perhaps at a symposium, conference, or even a professional journal. In those cases, you may go over your writing again with a "fine-toothed comb" just to make sure you've caught all your errors and that everything you've written makes sense." [Hedengren 2004]