

“The Green Sheet”

ARGUMENTATION AND APEC PARAGRAPH CONSTRUCTION

Good writing is an indispensable skill in the discipline of history. There is no substitute for the clear and lucid expression of ideas in a lively and engaging manner. At the heart of such effective prose is *argumentation*—persuasive analysis supported by appropriate evidence. History is never an objective view of reality; it always reflects the historian’s background, biases, and perspective. In a world of competing versions of history, therefore, one must be particularly attentive to the importance of “selling” one’s own historical vision. Such salesmanship is cannot be sensationalistic if it is to be good scholarship, however; rather, research and logical analysis presented in an accessible manner is the foundation of good history.

One’s prose style can be developed only through experience; there is no substitute. The more you read and write, the better your own written expression will become. The following *APEC* pattern is useful for paragraph construction in most forms of academic writing:

Assertion-Proof-Explanation-Connection

“**A**” - a statement of what you intend to prove

“**P**” - some evidence or examples that illustrate the assertion

“**E**” - an explanation of how the evidence proves the assertion

“**C**” - a statement connecting the assertion to the thesis of your paper

Note how this model is employed in the following example:

The Confederate Army succeeded [**A**] because it was fast and mobile. At Chancellorsville in 1863, for example [**P**], Jackson surprised the Yankees after a day-long march through the woods around their right flank. When he attacked, the Union Army broke and fled. Such speed and mobility [**E**] were typical of the Confederates under Lee, and account for [**C**] the endurance of the Confederacy even when the United States had so much power on its side.

This formula provides you with the basic building blocks for sound paragraph construction. You are then left to refine your prose, using language thoughtfully to enhance the persuasiveness of your points. Be sure to develop the effectiveness of your argument through *editing* and *revising* your work, the chief tasks of any good writer. As Justice Brandeis once observed, there is no good writing, only good rewriting.

THE EMPIRICAL ESSAY FORMAT

Prep school students frequently have difficulty structuring their history essays effectively. If this is your problem, you're in luck, because what follows is a simple system that solves it. It's called the *empirical essay* because—like a science experiment—it proceeds from hypothesis through empirical evidence to conclusion. It is a persuasive argumentative essay.

Method. The very first thing to do is to think about the evidence you have in hand, and then decide which position you will take on the question. Cast the essay topic into a form that you can support or refute. Then proceed through the four parts of the essay, as follows:

- Clearly identify a thesis, a general statement of your view.
- Develop supporting arguments.
- Consider the best contrary arguments and show that they are flawed.
- Make a concluding general statement showing that you have proven your thesis.

In detail, the empirical essay consists of the following:

(1) A ***thesis*** that is an assertive, declarative, and direct sentence. It should be the very first thing your reader sees, so that he or she is guided from the very beginning of the essay to see things the way you want them seen. If there are any terms in your opening statement that need to be defined, define them in this opening paragraph or paragraphs.

(2) ***Supporting arguments*** presented in at least two or three separate paragraphs, each organized in "APEC" form. A good empirical essay will posit several important points in support of the thesis. There should be a new paragraph for each new "APEC" argument, and there should be a new "APEC" argument for each new idea.

(3) The ***consideration of the opposing argument***, which entails clearly stating the very best challenge to your position, and then refuting it by "APEC" argument. If you are unable to demolish your opponents, then you are on the wrong side. And if you can demolish them, you therefore make your own view all the more persuasive.

(4) The ***concluding statement***, which shows that the preponderance of evidence is on your side.

The method given here is one you can use in all persuasive essays you write. You can write imaginatively, of course, by employing metaphors, crisp diction, clever sentence structure, and so on. But you must not sacrifice your argument in order to use language that obfuscates your central point. Don't forget the empirical essay format when you are in a hurry (during a test, for instance); it is especially helpful then.