Rhetorical Strategies

As you plan your essay, you will want to think about the *rhetorical strategies*by which you will present your ideas and evidence to readers. These strategies, sometimes called *rhetorical modes*or *techniques*, help a writer organize evi­dence, connect facts into a sequence, and provide clusters of information nec­essary for conveying a purpose or an argument. You might choose to *analyze*the cause of an outcome, *compare*one thing to another, *classify*your facts into categories, *deﬁne*a key term, *describe*a person, place, or phenomenon, *explain*how a process works, or *narrate*a pertinent event or experience.

**Analyzing cause and effect**

Focusing on causes helps a writer think about why something happened; fo­cusing on effects helps a writer think about what might or could happen. Cause is oriented toward the future; effect looks back to the past. But you can use this strategy by working in either direction: from present to future, or from present to the past.  
If you were writing about global warming and intending to show its harm­ful effects, you might lay out your evidence in this sequence:

Cause leads to these effects.

If you were writing about binge drinking and trying to identify the reasons for its rise among college students, you might reverse the direction:

Effect is the result of these causes.

Analyzing a cause (or causes) is a crucial strategy for genres such as cultural critique, Op-Ed, and historical narrative. But you can also use it in an autobi­ographical essay, where you might analyze the effects of a childhood trauma on your later life, or in a proﬁle of a person, where you might seek the sources (the causes) of the person’s adult personality or achievements.

**Comparing and contrasting**

Comparisons look for similarities between things; contrasts look for differ­ences. In most uses of this rhetorical strategy, you will want to consider both similarities and differences—that is, you will want to compare *and*contrast. That’s because most things worth comparing have something in common, even if they also have signiﬁcant differences. You may end up ﬁnding more similar­ities than differences, or vice versa, but when using this strategy, think about both.

Comparison-contrast may be used for a single paragraph or for an entire essay. It tends to be set up in one of two ways: block or point-by-point. In the block technique, the writer gives all the information about one item and then follows with all the information about the other. Think of it as giving all the A’s, then all the B’s. Usually, the order of the information is the same for both. In the point-by-point technique, the writer focuses on speciﬁc points of com­parison, alternating A, B, A, B, A, B, and so on until the main points have been covered.

Comparing and contrasting is an excellent strategy to use in writing a re­port, making an argument in an Op-Ed, or giving a speech to persuade your audience to take a speciﬁc course of action. You can set forth the pros and cons of different programs, political policies, or courses of action, leading up to the recommendation you endorse and believe is the more effective.

**Classifying and dividing**

Classifying and dividing involves either putting things into groups or dividing up a large block into smaller units. While this strategy might seem better suited to a biology lab than to a writing class, in fact it works well for organiz­ing facts that seem chaotic or for handling big topics that at ﬁrst glance seem overwhelming. Classifying and dividing allow the writer—and the reader—to get control of a big topic and break it into smaller units of analysis.

You will ﬁnd that classifying and dividing is helpful in writing all genres of analysis: textual, visual, and cultural. You will also ﬁnd that it can help in argu­mentative genres because it enables you, as a writer or speaker, to break down a complex argument into parts or to group pieces of evidence into similar cate­gories.

**Deﬁning**

Deﬁning involves telling your reader what something means—and what it does not. It involves saying what something is—and what it is not. As a strategy, deﬁning means making sure you—and your readers—understand what you mean by a key term. It may mean re-deﬁning a common term to have a more precise meaning or giving nuance to a term that is commonly used too broadly. Deﬁning and re-deﬁning are great strategies to use in argumentative writing: they help the writer reshape the thinking of the audience and see a concept in a new light.

This rhetorical strategy is not as simple as looking up a word in a diction­ary, though often that is a good place to begin. If you look up your key word in a good collegiate dictionary, you may discover that it meant something one hundred years ago that it no longer means, or that it is used in technical writ­ing in a speciﬁc sense, or that it has a range of meanings from which you must choose to convey *your*intention. Citing one of these deﬁnitions can help in composing your essay. But deﬁning as a rhetorical strategy may also include giving examples or providing descriptions.

**Describing**

When writers describe a person, place, or thing, they indicate what it looks like and often how it feels, smells, sounds, or tastes. As a strategy, describing involves showing rather than telling, helping readers see rather than giving them a formal deﬁnition, making the subject come alive rather than remaining abstract. When you describe, you want to choose precise verbs, speciﬁc nouns, vivid adjectives—unless your subject is dullness itself.

As a writer, you will use description in many kinds of assignments: in pro­ﬁles of people and places to provide a key to their essence, in visual analysis to reveal the crucial features of a painting or photograph, in cultural critique to highlight the features of the object or phenomenon you will analyze, and in scientiﬁc lab reports to give details of an experiment. Almost no essay can be written without at least some description, and many essays rely on this strat­egy as a fundamental technique.

**Explaining a process**

With this rhetorical strategy, the writer explains how something is done: from everyday processes like how to write a letter, how to play basketball, or how to make French fries, to unusual or extreme processes like how to embalm a corpse or how to face death. Sometimes, writers use this strategy in historical essays to show how something was done in the past. As these examples sug­gest, explaining a process can be useful in a range of genres: from a literacy narrative that explains learning to read, to a cultural analysis that treats the fu­neral industry, to a sermon or philosophical essay that explores the meaning and purpose of death and dying.

To make a process accessible to the reader, you will need to identify the main steps or stages and then explain them in order, one after the other. Se­quence matters. In preparing to write a paragraph explaining a process, it might help to list the steps as a ﬂow chart or as a cookbook recipe—and then turn your list into a paragraph (or more) of fully elaborated prose.

**Narrating**

This ﬁnal rhetorical strategy—narrating—may be the most fundamental. We tell stories about ourselves, about our families, and about friends and neigh­bors. We tell stories to make a point, to illustrate an argument, to offer evi­dence or counter-evidence, and sometimes even to substitute for an argument. As these uses suggest, narrating appears in many genres: from memoirs and biographies, to Op-Eds, formal speeches, and parables. Narrating is basic to essay writing.

As you plan a paragraph or segment of narration, think about sequence: the order in which the events occurred (chronological order) or an order in which the events might be most dramatically presented (reverse chronological order or the present moment with ﬂashback). Often, sequential order is easier for the reader to comprehend, but sometimes beginning *in medias res*(at the present moment *in the middle of things*) and then ﬂashing back to the past cre­ates a more compelling story.

Consider incorporating time markers—not only dates, but also sequential phrases: early one evening, later that night, the next morning. And use transitions and transitional words: ﬁrst, then, meanwhile, later, ﬁnally. When you’ve ﬁnished narrating your event or episode, re-read it and ask, What have I left out that the reader needs to know? What might I omit because the reader doesn’t need to know it?

© 2020 [W. W. Norton &](http://www.wwnorton.com/) Company