Sample essay of comparison using point-by-point method

The following essay is connected to pp. 179-80 of *Acting on Words*.

"The Lure of the Body Image" and "Canadians: What Do They Want?"
A Rhetorical Comparison

From Errol Flynn to Arnold Schwarzenegger, over the years Hollywood has changed its image of the ideal male body; according to Susan McClelland in her 1999 *Maclean's* essay "The Lure of the Body Image," the North American media have changed their depictions of male body images as well, resulting in today's widespread "beefcake" look. McClelland signals this trendy look for men as a serious problem. In another short magazine article, written for *Mother Jones* magazine in 1982, Margaret Atwood also invites readers to ponder a serious problem as she argues that Canadians chaff under American imperialism. Both articles seem intent on stirring readers to change their thinking and behaviour in response to the respective concerns represented. Before looking more at the writers' purposes, however, it is interesting to compare their tones and methods. This rhetorical approach should help to sharpen an understanding of purpose.

Reading the two essays with attention to tone, one's immediate impression is of the contrast between them: formal language on one hand, informal on the other. McClelland's article reflects *Maclean's* mandate to present thoughtful, relatively objective reportage responding to current events for a well educated general readership, as illustrated by the following excerpt:

> Both Signorile [author of the book *Life Outside*] and Brian Pronger, a philosopher in the Faculty of Physical Education at the University of Toronto, say that many men, straight and gay, adopted a more masculine appearance after the Oscar Wilde trials in the 1890s associated effeminate behaviour with homosexuality in the popular mind (para. 3.)

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This forty-seven-word sentence comes from a one-hundred-word passage with a Fog Index reading of 17.5, indicating that a reader needs to have a university degree to gather the information with ease.[1] A one-hundred-word passage from paragraph one of Atwood's essay yields a different result from the passage in McClelland. Here is an excerpt from the Atwood passage:

> Last month during a poetry reading, I tried out a short prose poem called "How to Like Men." It began by suggesting that one start with the feet.

In contrast to the university degree demanded for readability ease by McClelland's article, Atwood's requires a formal education of around grade eight. As a radical political magazine, *Mother Jones* was not as concerned with appearances of argumentation as with persuasive appeals. Its readers were not classified by an educational level so much as by a political viewpoint (something that could be more emotional than logical). This meant somewhat more room than in a *Maclean's* news story to favour "warm" approaches over research-based methods. Readability formulae cannot reveal emotional nuances of tone (and therefore intentions), but they do help to provide a preliminary sense of the basic level, whether informal, general, or formal. From this preliminary analysis, McClelland's tone is relatively formal (she does include creative non-fiction style examples) and Atwood's is between informal and general.

Looking more closely at rhetorical methods in the two essays further characterizes the distinction between their tones. McClelland uses third person, which increases a tone of relative objectivity, and detachment. Adding to this almost scholarly tone, she also refers frequently to studies, statistics, and experts. In the passage quoted above, she reports that one expert corroborates another, demonstrating a concern to seek confirmation through investigative research. Atwood, on the other hand, uses first person, increasing the personal, informal tone of her essay. Whereas McClelland's personal voice

[1] Robert Gunning's Fog Index is a readability formula based on sentence length and complexity of vocabulary (qtd. in Brundage and Lahey, pp. 235-37).

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is muted, reserved, and distant, Atwood's drives her article: it is ironical, playful, and generally witty, as in her following observations of what Americans say:

> "What's mine is yours," they have said for years, meaning exports. "What's yours is mine," meaning ownership and profits." (para. 9).

In simple language, she plays with reversals to serve her theme of a one-way relationship pretending to be something else. Adding to the distinctions between tones in the two essays is Atwood's use of first-hand experiences in contrast to McClelland's use of outside sources, and Atwood's reliance on analogy to make her case. Whereas McClelland presents conclusions mainly through the cited reasoning of her expert sources, Atwood designs her own analogy and applies it in the style of an oral teacher using parable. By asking her primary readers (Americans) to "[p]icture a Mexico with a population ten times larger than that of the United States" (para. 7), Atwood appeals through the logic of analogy for new understanding.

Despite these distinctions in tone, however, both essays have a common persuasive purpose primarily concerned with driving home a serious problem of victimization. McClelland foreshadows her purpose with an opening anecdote focused on Ralph Heighton of Pictou, N.S. Here and in other places McClelland does use personal examples or "warm proofs" (Brundage and Lahey, pp. 53-54). The meaning expressed by these examples in "Body Image" is that young men are pressured to "beef up"—as Heighton states at the end of the first paragraph—and that the effects can be dire: steroid use (para. 6), eating disorder (para. 8), and surgical disfiguration (para. 9). In preparing her readers for these conclusions, McClelland injects some emotional words of opinion into her relatively detached style: "statistics show an "alarming number…" (para. 2) and "one of the sad consequences…" (para.6). Readers familiar with Jean Kilbourne's critiques of media pressures on women will recognize McClelland's intention to expand that type of critique to recognize similar manipulations of men. Readers familiar with Noam Chomsky's Hegemony *or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance* (2003) or Morris Berman's *Dark Ages America: The Final Phase of Empire* (2006) will

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see a fundamental relationship between Atwood's 1982 critique of American imperialism and some of today's critiques, which have become in some cases increasingly desperate and strident. Both essays seek to portray serious power imbalances and manipulations.

One might ask whether there isn't a fundamental difference of purpose in that McClelland's essay, focusing on advertising images and the harm they create, never explicitly blames the victims. Atwood differs a little in this respect in that she does refer to Canadians' complicity in their own victimization (para. 10), and she stresses that *individual* Americans are not to blame (para. 16). These concessions and reassurances, absent in McClelland's essay, make sense, however, when one remembers Atwood's primary intended readers. It may seem as if she is writing to Canadians with advice on "how to like Americans," but her message is really directed primarily to her American readers, suggesting the right attitude they should take to build true friendship with Canadians. Even though she can probably count on *Mother Jones* readers to distrust if not deplore America's empire aspirations, she is still one of the victimized parties she writes about, and her readers represent the nation of the victimizer. Some diplomacy is needed, and this may be partly why her blame is more explicitly distributed than is McClelland's. So this distinction has more to do with adapting an argument to one's readers than to any major difference in argumentative purpose. As this brief analysis suggests, both essays aim to expose specific problems concerning what some readers today will recognize as long-standing, complex issues. McClelland concludes with a call for increased critical education (para. 10). Atwood's corrective offering is her analogy, a tool of reasoning to make the case for greater and wider understanding. In their different ways, both essays recognize the styles and approaches suited to the circumstances of their original publication while also applying basic principles for shaping persuasion.

Works Cited

Atwood, Margaret. "Canadians: What Do They Want?" *Acting on Words: An Integrated Rhetoric, Reader, and Handbook*. 2nd. ed. Ed. David Brundage and Michael Lahey. Toronto: Pearson, 2009. 467-69.

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Berman, Morris. *Dark Ages America: The Final Phase of Empire.* New York: Norton, 2006.

Chomsky, Noam. *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance (The American Empire Project).* New York: Metropolitan, 2003.

Kilbourne, Jean. *Deadly Persuasion: Why Girls and Women Must Fight the Addictive Power of Advertising.* New York: Free Press, 1999.

Jean Kilbourne is best known for her *Killing Us Softly* film series, which examines the effects of the media on women's self image. In this book, she analyzes the way advertising creates and then feeds an addictive mentality.

McClelland, Susan. "The Lure of the Body Image." *Acting on Words: An Integrated Rhetoric, Reader, and Handbook.* 2nd. ed. Ed. David Brundage and Michael Lahey. Toronto: Pearson, 2009. 447-50.

Commentary

When working with an outline, think of it as your friend rather than a dictator to be blindly obeyed. Outlines develop as part of the prewriting process. Even writers with years of experience will say that they cannot precisely outline the final state of the writing. An outline establishes basic structure and purpose and gets you started. Outline specifics then need to be tested in the actual writing; of course, you will also make discoveries, ideas you had not considered in the outline. A friend will understand, encourage, and accommodate your changes but also provide reminders and suggestions not to stray too far off track. A friend will help to remind you of the underlying goal(s) of the assignment and will offer tips and notes in case you lose sight of rhetorical principles in the midst of the fine details of a new thought or direction.

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If you review the outline on pages 179-80 of *Acting on Words*, you will see that the writer has treated that outline as a friend rather than a dictator. She trusted her friend to accommodate sound alterations. In the course of drafting the essay, the writer questioned certain things in the outline. For instance, she thought it was of rhetorical importance to say more about how articles are shaped by their intended audiences than is made explicit in the outline. In addition, she realized that using the Fog Index (not mentioned in the outline) offered a brisk practical way to explore the contrast in basic tones before moving on to other elements of rhetorical method. Incorporating these additions in service of thorough rhetorical description, however, added to a problem the writer found with the outline: she found that some of its suggestions were potentially off topic, simply too much for the purpose and length of essay proposed. Outlines are notorious for proposing more than is realistic, rather like cafeteria customers loading their trays. The writer discovered, for instance, that it would not be possible to provide as much critical reflection as the outline presumed and still remain within the 1000 word guideline typical for a five-paragraph essay. Her initial essay topic question had called for a rhetorical comparison of the two essays, not for a comprehensive critique of their argumentative strengths and shortcomings, of the soundness of their ideas. So while she and some of her classmates saw certain logical shortcomings in the arguments of both essays, she realized that exposing those would require a separate essay. For a similar reason, she did not pursue a note in the introduction concerning Atwood's celebrity status. Because this process of negotiation with her outline resulted in modifications, she naturally altered the wording of some of the working topic sentences in the outline.

Indeed, her relationship with the outline resembled that of a good friendship: each partner offering the best it has to offer and accepting the best that the other has to offer. While altering the outline on one hand, the writer was also entirely faithful to it on the other. She wanted to deliver precisely what the assignment required, so she referred to her outline in order to remain focused throughout on examining rhetorical process as her purpose. Bearing in mind the information on pages 177 – 178 of Acting *on Words* presenting two main purposes of comparison, she realized that her outline recognized

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contrast or difference yet ultimately subordinated it to commonality. The common element expressed in the outline is that by adapting to their intended readers, both writers present persuasive appeals on topics of comparable complexity and debate. Helping writers to stay on the track of their central purpose is the essential service of an outline.

The outline proved of further valuable service by helping the writer stick to the five-paragraph form that her instructor wanted to see and to deliver a clear consistent comparative method in service to her controlling idea that both essays carefully adapt to readers in order to persuade. Her outline helped her remember to say equal amounts about each essay on each important point and to provide effective examples and other specific supports. Through the sound structure of the outline, the writer confirmed that she was delivering a complete thesis suited to academic work: a controlling idea (both essays carefully adapt to their readers) and a solid reason (because in so doing they exercise their desired persuasive appeals).

Practice

1. As noted in the above commentary, the writer has departed in some ways from the outline on pages 179-80. For instance, the outline calls for the third body paragraph to discuss how vitimization is presented as more entire in "Body Image" than in "Canadians." In writing the essay, the writer found she had already provided a full paragraph's worth of material on purpose by the time she reached this specific point about victimization. She also realized that it could be used as a good lead-in to her final paragraph. But given that the writer has diverged from her outline in places, the following questons arise: A) Has the writer lost sight of the proposed point-by-point method? B) If not, what is her final point-by-point pattern? C) Why do you think the writer made the changes she did? D) Is her essay effective in following through on the outline? Explain.

2. Look at the sample essay of comparison using subject-by-subject method and the sample essay of comparison using hybrid method. Does the point-by-point pattern offer

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certain advantages and possible disadvantages? Answer this question with specific examples drawn from these three essays.

3. The writer of this essay realized that writing an effective study of rhetorical process requires more attention and examples than she had initially realized when she drafted her outline. Consequently, she resisted temptations to include a critique of argumentative methods and ideas in the two essays. She decided that a rigorous evaluation of argumentative achievements and shortcomings would require a separate essay. Was her resistance wise? Explain.

4. If the essay purpose shifted from analysis of rhetorical process to critique of argumentative ideas, do you think that a comparative critical assessment of these two essays could be handled in five paragraphs/1000 words? Why or why not?

5. Outline a 1000 word essay critiquing the argumentation of “Body Image.”

6. Outline a 1000 word essay critiquing the argumentation of “Canadians.”

7. Outline a 2000- 2500 word essay of comparison that critiques argumentation in both “Body Image” and “Canadians.”

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