

Burke's Dramatistic Pentad

Kenneth Burke's "Dramatistic Pentad" offers what David Blakesley, in *The Element of Dramatism*, calls "a strategic method for analyzing discourse [texts, arguments] by focusing on how it attributes motivation to human action" (32).

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In other words, the Pentad allows us to consider particular or specific aspects of an argument in our attempts to understand, among other things, **how** and **why** the argument is constructed.

The Pentad's five elements are as follows:

Act: What takes place? What is done, written, said?

Scene: Where and when is the act performed? What is the situation?

Agent: What person or what kind of person performs the act? Who does it?

Agency: How is the act performed? What means or instruments are used?

Purpose: What motivates the act? Why does the agent do it?

Burke later added a sixth element, making his Pentad a Hexad:

Attitude: What is the agent's state of mind toward the act?

More important than the terms themselves is Burke's discussion of **ratios**, or the dynamic relationships among the elements of the Pentad:

How does the _____ influence or affect the _____?

For instance:

How does the **scene** influence or affect [encourage, limit, etc] the **act**?

or

How does the **act** influence or affect the **scene**?

| | | | |
|---------------|-------------|---------------|----------------|
| scene-act | scene-agent | scene-agency | scene-purpose |
| act-scene | act-agent | act-agency | act-purpose |
| agent-scene | agent-act | agent-agency | agent-purpose |
| agency-scene | agency-act | agency-agent | agency-purpose |
| purpose-scene | purpose-act | purpose-agent | purpose-agency |

The ordering of the pairs matters: If one interprets a text (puts together elements) as a **scene-act** ratio, the assumption is that the nature of the scene affects the nature—the parameters and the possibilities—of the act.

If one interprets a text or puts together elements in an **act-scene** ratio, the assumption is that the nature of the act dominates—the description or interpretation of the act takes precedence over the nature of the scene.

Burke intended for critics to use the Pentad to make informed and judicious interpretive statements about our world; he warned against our **trained incapacity**, which Blakesley defines as “our inability to interpret . . . signs in any other way but the familiar or comfortable” (34).

Consider, for instance, how Pentadic ratios could help you analyze and discuss the following:



What acts, for instance, are allowed and encouraged in this scene? What acts are discouraged or not allowed? How does the scene affect agents?