

UNIT 5: INVENTION STRATEGIES

There are very few "right" and "wrong" ways to start a paper. There are just ways. However, it is often useful to have both a goal in mind and a model to use as the framework for starting a paper. Most writers will get attached to one or two models, and this is frequently a mistake. Additionally, writers will sometimes copy a model and leave out the entire thought process behind the model.

PARALLEL CASE

An argument that the circumstances in the case or situation being considered are similar to those in another case. The implication is that if A is like B, then we can learn how to handle A by looking at what worked and what did not work with B.

Overview:

Parallel case is an important concept in both its contributions and its limitations. By looking at a course of action that succeeded (or failed, really), we can sometimes learn how to handle a new situation. However, because things change over time, and from place to place, most of the time there needs to be some effort put into understanding how Case A and Case B differ. Often, acknowledging these differences are important *concessions* that need to be made.

Often, parallel case arguments are effective in persuading others because readers can use the 'example' situation as a way of understanding the more complicated (or more contentious) issue. Even when not used as a framework for a complete argument, drawing small-scale parallels can often help a writer to explain a complex subject.

Application:

In college-level composition classes, parallel case arguments are often useful in comparing two different sets of circumstances and seeing what they do have in common. For example, a student arguing about the restrictions placed on certain drugs might want to draw parallels to the prohibition of alcohol, or a student wishing to suggest why a parking deck needs to be built on campus might find another campus with similar problems and see whether or not a parking deck actually did or did not improve the problems.

As an invention strategy, the appeal of *parallel case* is that it gives student writers a place to start—making direct comparisons to another situation, perhaps one with a more readily understood or agreed upon set of facts. Students can usually develop an argument by pointing out ways in which the situations are similar or different, and thus they can create a fairly nuanced argument.

What to Avoid:

Parallel case is tricky, because using it almost always risks committing the fallacy of [hasty generalization](#) or [false correlation](#). Therefore, students attempting to build a parallel case argument need to be certain that the cases are, in fact, parallel. If something is different in one case, then the student needs to try to reason through what is the reason for the difference and how those differences might change the outcome in the new situation.

Perhaps more importantly, however, students need to be careful of *sources* in their research that make too many parallel case arguments, and students need to be sure to evaluate carefully whether or not what is being called a parallel is not, in fact, simply a hasty generalization.

REBUTTAL

Sometimes, the motivation to write comes not from an original idea so much as it comes from reading another work. On a regular basis we encounter those that we disagree with, and expressing that disagreement is an essential part of intellectual discourse.

Overview:

Unlike many other approaches to writing, rebuttals are directly shaped by another work—the work that they seek to counter. A rebuttal consists of reviewing the claims made by an argument and then responding to those claims in a reasoned, careful fashion. To prevent a rebuttal from turning into a playground contest of “yes it is/no it’s not,” those seeking to rebut an argument need to do more than list their own reasons for opposition. Instead, they need to understand the motivations and reasons of those who accept the “rival” argument, and then they need to respond to those motivations and reasons with logic, evidence, and empathy.

Application:

Many college instructors make use of a type of assignment where the student is given an article or essay to read. The student is then asked to respond to this reading with either agreement or disagreement. Often, students will be *lead* to disagreement, or the assignment itself will ask for such disagreement (e.g. “pick one of the readings and counter the claims made by the author” or “find a part of the reading you disagree with and explain why”). This type of assignment is, essentially, a rebuttal.

Students will also find themselves writing rebuttals even when that is not, explicitly, the assignment. Imagine a student in an ethics class confronted with the task of writing a paper about the death penalty. With thousands of years of recorded history, hundreds of cultural traditions, and modern politics clouding the issue, many students could get lost. However, by finding someone else who takes a stance on the death penalty, and then by explaining reasons to disagree with *that* person, the student has a place to start.

As an invention strategy, rebuttal works because it involves students opening themselves up to the views of others, and those others inform what comes next.

What to Avoid:

A lot of student writers make the mistake of overreacting in the course of a rebuttal. Borrowing from the example above, when writing a paper on the death penalty, students might be tempted to fill the screen with a rant about all of the moral and logical failings of their “opponents.” This isn’t a rebuttal anymore. It’s a metaphorical shouting match. After all, who is the audience for such a screed? It’s not those who agree with the students; they don’t need to read it, as they already agree! It’s not those who disagree with the original author being countered; they are offended by the tone of the attack.

Rebuttal writers need to give their readers the benefit of the doubt and assume that those who agreed with the original author did so for reasons that made sense to them. As a consequence, the claims that are made should be analyzed, evaluated, and countered. The people should be respected. Ideally, this could lead to common ground being found.

SYNTHESIS

Bringing together multiple components into a single whole is *synthesis*. In practice, synthesis arguments involve finding common ground between A and B (and maybe C or D) or showing the implications of A and B both representing valid arguments.

Overview:

Synthesis is important to understand both as a method of understanding the world and as a tool in constructing arguments. One traditional model (variously attributed to different philosophers) is that of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. Simply put, *thesis* involves putting forward a claim, *antithesis* involves disagreeing with the claim, and *synthesis* involves using reason and evidence to come to a conclusion regarding the most appropriate 'balanced' position between these extremes. Other models of synthesis involve piling data points on top of one another to construct a larger claim out of a number of smaller ones.

Application:

Most college-level writing assignments will involve some form of synthesis. The tricky part for student writers is often in deciding what should and should not be added to the mix. Additionally, while many assignments do call for synthesis in the sense of comparing viewpoints or compiling data, it is rarely a good idea simply to repeat facts gathered from elsewhere. Using logic and analysis to navigate the different pieces of data and then to come to a conclusion is the valuable part of the assignment. Two common forms of synthesis merit special attention.

Sometimes, student writers will be in a position where they need to put together facts because they cannot find all of the information that they need in one place. For example, one source might claim that drug rehabilitation programs cost taxpayers X number of dollars per patient. Another source might claim that drug incarceration costs taxpayers Y number of dollars per inmate. The student-writer can now make a comparison regarding the relative costs (X vs. Y) of treatment and incarceration, even if this information was not found in a reliable source on its own.

Additionally, sometimes sources will disagree. Source A might claim that a certain number of violent crimes are committed every year. Source B might claim another number. Source C might claim a third number entirely. By comparing these numbers and the definitions each source used for 'violent crime', as well as how each source gathered its data, the student writer can present a vastly more complex and nuanced argument.

As an invention strategy, synthesis works because it allows a student to begin by making simple comparisons and build 'up' from these smaller arguments.

What to Avoid:

Student writers need to be careful not to equate 'more' with 'better.' A lot of information from a lot of bad sources, or a lot of opinions from a lot of misinformed people, does nothing to prove a point's validity. Quality always has to come first, so student writers need to make sure that each time they write they are synthesizing only information or opinions that have merit and relevance to the discussion at hand.

TREATMENT

One form of presenting information is to present an argument as if it were some sort of clinical appointment. A problem is outlined, a cause is diagnosed, and a solution is prescribed. This structure—common in persuasive speeches—has the advantage of providing a clear arrangement of points. It can be very limiting, but it can also work well for simple arguments.

Overview:

A significant limitation in any argument is that people will often want to avoid taking additional action. Whether it is called inertia or laziness, most people have a routine and stick to it. Therefore, asking someone to change that routine, even a little, requires a lot of justification. Therefore, the ‘treatment’ model of argumentation begins by explaining to readers *why* they care about something. It presents a problem. Then, it explains what causes that problem, focusing its readers’ attention on a specific target. Finally, the argument offers a solution to the problem. As a result, before the readers are ever asked to *do* anything, they already know why they are doing it.

Typically, the problem step requires the most effort to understand the readers’ point of view, because some ‘problems’ aren’t seen as problems by everyone. The cause step typically requires a decent amount of evidence to prove the cause is being correctly diagnosed. The solution step typically requires the greatest number of concessions, just because people will want to limit the change to their lives.

Application:

‘Treatment’-style college essays are typically works that fit the mold of a “policy” argument (after all, the solution is an action that is being advocated). Specifically, college writers will find that when they are asked to offer advice, to fix a problem, or to explain why some action is necessary that the ‘treatment’ approach works fairly well.

As an invention strategy, the real limits of this approach deal with focus. It is easy for new writers to suggest multiple problems, multiple causes, or multiple solutions. By bringing in more moving pieces, novice writers sometimes create a jumble, making it difficult for readers to sort out where they should focus their attention. Still, the general approach works very well because it gives new writers a specific set of steps and a general outline to follow.

What to Avoid:

Student writers need to be careful not to use the ‘Treatment’ model for all efforts at persuasion. Unless there is clear action to be taken to alleviate a specific problem because of a known cause, the model falls apart pretty quickly.

Even when the model does fit, students should avoid oversimplifying everything. Often, a problem will have multiple causes, and the student will need to justify why the selected cause is worthy of focus. Likewise, sometimes people cannot agree on the cause of a problem, and so this requires development. Most importantly, students should not mistake ‘action’ for ‘solveny.’ In other words, not all solutions are created equally.