**“Shaping an Argument”- Renee Shea (Bowie State University)**

Most teachers have encountered the paradox that students are ferocious when it comes to having opinions but less confident when trying to express them as written arguments. Many of them turn to the five-paragraph formula, stringing together a series of examples. What other options do they know that they have?

We see that most rely on examples to structure their essays in a linear mode that makes the same point with several different examples: the examples become the argument. Other organizational structures suggest more complex thinking, as the writers break their main assertion or thesis into several subclaims that usually involve specific examples as part of a discussion. These other structures also are more likely to acknowledge, possibly even refute, a counterargument. (The counterargument is likely to have a stronger presence in student writing after the 2004 question that directed students to address it.)

**The Prompt: Free-Response Question 1, 2003**

In his 1998 book Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality, Neal Gabler wrote the following:

One does not necessarily have to cluck in disapproval to admit that entertainment is all the things its detractors say it is: fun, effortless, sensational, mindless, formulaic, predictable, and subversive. In fact, one might argue that those are the very reasons so many people love it.

At the same time, it is not hard to see why cultural aristocrats in the nineteenth century and intellectuals in the twentieth hated entertainment and why they predicted, as one typical nineteenth century critic railed, that its eventual effect would be “to overturn all morality, to poison the springs of domestic happiness, to dissolve the ties of our social order, and to involve our country in ruin.”

**1) The One-Point Essay**

Accumulation of evidence is by far the most common approach, a kind of reverse induction: the writer agrees or disagrees and cites examples to support that categorical position. It’s typical for a student to write “Gabler’s theory... has been proven true by historical falls of empires, literature, and modern-day society.” What follows are three rather lengthy paragraphs, each developed with an example on one of the specified topics: the fall of Rome, Shakespeare’s Henry IV, and computer video games: a four-page essay with five paragraphs.

Another student challenges Gabler with this thesis: “...in most instances of ‘risky’ books, movies, and plays, entertainment... has something to offer beyond the cover that most people are not willing to look for.” The writer then develops an essay with a paragraph about Broadway plays, specifically *The Full Monty;* another on books, specifically *Huck Finn;* and another on movies, with reference to John Wayne westerns, *Psycho,* and *A Beautiful Mind*. Perhaps somewhat more subtle than the previous response, this one is also a five-paragraph essay driven by examples.

Of course we tell students to support their arguments with examples, emphasizing that the most effective essays are concrete and specific, developed with relevant details. But the responses that follow this pattern are essentially one-point essays – the same point, “I agree or I don’t,” supported by three different examples or types of examples. I often tell my students that I think this kind of essay is the verbal equivalent of raising one’s voice: with each example, the volume goes up, yet the same point is repeated. Given the scores, however, it’s clear that this approach can work well. It’s a safe one, though the essays lack nuance.

**2) (Re)Definition**

Most of the students assume that entertainment is a synonym for television and movies, but some recognize the importance of defining the term precisely, using that process to structure the essay. One such student asserts: “Though often controversial and viewed as ‘mindless,’ entertainment positively contributes to society and enriches rather than ruins our society.” Neither assuming that we equate entertainment with violent films and mindless television nor accepting the binary opposition of entertainment and reality, he structures his essay by examining alternative definitions of entertainment. He first discusses entertainment as “an especially potent educational tool due to its ability to combine fun and learning” and includes (without relying on) examples such as *Sesame Street,* and educational programs that dramatize historical events or classic literature such as *Hamlet* or *Great Expectations*. Secondly, the student expands the definition of entertainment as a means to “express and communicate ideas and information... [in order to] vastly increase and encourage cultural sensitivity and diversity.” In a lengthy paragraph, he discusses music and even plotlines that cross cultural and geographical boundaries. The essay has only two developmental paragraphs, yet each includes several ideas discussed with considerable complexity.

**3) Consequence**

Some students choose to agree or disagree in terms of consequences, again subordinating examples to larger subissues. The prompt itself, with its reference to “eventual effect,” suggests this approach; often these essays look beyond mere assertion that Gabler’s statement is or is not true, focusing instead on defining the consequences of entertainment on society. One student considers entertainment as a cause that has certain negative effects: children watching television until they “forget what it requires to imagine,” young women modeling themselves after film and television stars, young men seeing violence as the only answer to conflict, and an obesity epidemic plaguing all of society. There are some concrete examples in this response, but the writer argues persuasively by formulating and explaining four issues. In the paragraph on young women, for example, the student examines the consequences of body images that require plastic surgery and harmful diets and the glorification of beauty over brains: “Since entertainment shapes society, females idolize those portrayed in entertainment and find themselves lacking in beauty. High school girls starve themselves, quest for plastic surgery... [and prefer] a superficial image of a model [to that of] a woman scientist.” The paragraph is concrete because of the specific details explaining the consequences the writer is exploring, yet it is not structured around a series of examples.

**4) Yes... But...**

Perhaps the most nuanced of the approaches, the “yes... but... ” technique addresses the counterargument as a way to craft an argument. In this way, the writer redefines the terms and explains points, using examples more to illustrate than to carry the argument. One student asserts, “It is important that people are able to separate entertainment from real life, spending... time watching TV, but being able to recognize its limitations.” Then she discusses ways in which people, especially adolescents, model themselves after pop stars, “fail[ing] to differentiate between what is real and what is not,” before she makes the point that if people can learn to see the difference, then they can take advantage of television and movies that are uplifting or simply relaxing. The writer concludes by emphasizing the importance of educating today’s youth on the “limitations and flaws” of entertainment so the next generation can understand it as a way “to help our society rather than hurt it.” Thus, she has used the “yes... but... ” approach first to support and then to challenge the Gabler claim, by exploring both sides to arrive at a conclusion or propose a solution.