

# Writing Deductive Essays

by Alfred J. Drake

"When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." (Doyle's Sherlock Holmes in *The Sign of Four*)

There are many purposes for writing. Journal-keepers write to express themselves; humorists to entertain; poets and novelists to explore the subtleties of human language, and so forth (see note 1). However, the main thing you will be doing as a college writer is to inform and explain, and the common form such writing takes is known as the "deductive essay," which I define briefly as follows: "A deductive essay presents an introduction and a thesis in the first paragraph, explores the thesis in several paragraphs that cite and analyze the assigned text, and concludes with a paragraph reflecting on the thesis."

Let's go over the term "deductive." Deduction is the process of stating a known fact, principle, or assumption and then reasoning from it to particular observations to arrive at a conclusion. The logic is subtractive, as we know from Arthur Conan Doyle's great detective, Sherlock Holmes: "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth" (*The Sign of Four*). Here's an example of how a doctor might diagnose a disease:

General Principle: Certain symptoms occur only in smallpox sufferers.

Particular Instance: These sick people show exactly those symptoms.

Conclusion: These sick people must have smallpox.

The doctor has arrived at his diagnosis by way of a syllogism, which is the form that deductive logic takes: if the first premise (the general principle) is true and the second premise (the particular instance) is also true, we must accept the conclusion. He begins with a generally acknowledged fact: smallpox entails a number of unique symptoms. Then he notes that a particular group of individuals show only those symptoms. On that basis, he is able to classify the group as smallpox sufferers. Having eliminated all other possible causes for their suffering, he deduces the cause of their illness—it must be true that they have smallpox (see note 2).

Most college humanities essays are deductive in that they state a generally valid claim or argument (a thesis) and then move from that claim to discuss particular parts of the work that fit the thesis, thereby lessening the plausibility of other, presumably weaker, arguments. Their structure is based on deductive reasoning. Here's an example of a typical first paragraph:

Martin Luther King is perhaps best remembered for the "March on Washington" he led in 1963 and capped with his "I Have a Dream" speech. That march exemplified King's belief in the individual's power to change things and his skills as an organizer of what he and Gandhi called "nonviolent direct action." The speech itself is a dramatic instance of King's philosophy and program—part of the "action" of the March, it came after years of fact-gathering, negotiation, and self-examination. It would be easy to focus on the positive,

visionary rhetoric of "I Have a Dream," but I plan to concentrate instead on how the speech confronts America with its repeated failures to live up to its own ideals. King's vision of unity results only from his fulfillment of a difficult task—that of drawing together and transforming the fragments of bitter experience—the dissonant sounds and ugly scenes of racial strife—that have made dreaming necessary. Much of "I Have a Dream's" variety stems from its need to be true to the element of confrontation central to King's program.

You notice that I begin my paragraph with an historical/biographical synopsis, offer a few more sentences focused more narrowly on the "Dream" speech, and then move quickly to the claim I propose as generally valid. I say that King's program of action involves a structured kind of confrontation, argue that "I Have a Dream" exemplifies that element of confrontation, and finally, promise to show that that is so about the speech by examining selected examples of its style, structure, and content. In sum, I'm claiming that the speech is a nearly perfect example of King's core belief in nonviolent confrontation as the primary means of transforming the worst in people and countries into something better. My thesis is arguable because it would be possible to disagree intelligently with it—someone else might say, "wait a minute—certain parts of the speech don't fit your thesis; you have really overestimated all this stuff about confrontation, when in fact the speech is remarkably upbeat," etc. I would like to offer a different reading that emphasizes the more positive elements in King's oration." If it isn't possible to disagree with a writer's claims, the resulting paper will not engage its readers—what else could the writer be doing except merely repeating the text or celebrating its author without much originality?

You don't leap up to make thesis statements, of course, without first having done some observing, and that's where the term "inductive" comes into play. Induction refers to the process of adding observations until you reach a generally true statement. Here's how that reasoning process might go while I read King's "I Have a Dream" speech in hopes of either generating a thesis or—as is sometimes the case—firming up a hunch I had even before reading the text carefully (see note 3):

Observation: Passage "a" confronts its audience with some of its members' hypocrisy.

Observation: Passage "b" explores the author's bitter feelings.

Observation: Passage "c" exposes something unsavory about parts of the present-day South.

Observation: Passage "d" focuses on the increasing anger and frustration felt by many African Americans.

Conclusion: King's speech as a whole underscores his core belief in nonviolent confrontation.

Once I've made my observations and convinced myself, I'll need to arrange them into an orderly succession of several paragraphs—however many it takes—that are likely to convince my reader, too, and conclude with a brief paragraph summing up and reflecting on what I've tried to show the reader. The middle paragraphs of an essay should consist of several tightly linked paragraphs that support the thesis. This should be done through analysis, the breaking down of a text into component stylistic, structural, and substantive features with the aim of studying how

they fit together (or, sometimes, how they do not fit together) to support your thesis. The point is to show in each paragraph how the work's style, claims, and organization advance your own argument. Structurally, each paragraph should have a topic sentence, which is usually placed at the beginning and which links the new paragraph's subject with that of the preceding one by means of proper connective phrases and clearly related ideas (see note 4). There are many ways of analyzing a text, and I can't set them all down here—but don't be discouraged; interpretation is not a priestly art that only English majors and professors can know. There are some formal things to learn, but analysis has as much to do with simply finding ways to spin a compelling story about a poem or other work as it does with applying formal methods that your instructor may help you learn in class.

Now let's move on to discuss the conclusion. While a conclusion must not raise wholly new or irrelevant issues, it should not merely restate the thesis. It should reflect on what you want your reader to have understood by the end of your essay. A good conclusion, while crafted so as to require no further writing on your part, should not discourage further thinking. It should reflect upon the thesis you have been supporting, bringing out its implications and perhaps focusing on some important undercurrent that has emerged from the middle paragraphs. While the conclusion brings the reader back to the essay's first claims, it does so to focus upon them more sharply with the help of the analysis in the essay's middle section. Perhaps my conclusion for the paper on King's speech could go something like the following:

I've tried to demonstrate that King's "I Have a Dream" speech challenges his audience to do something more than make speeches. In refusing to elide the bitter experiences and frustrated desires of the Marchers, King tactfully but firmly emphasizes the vital need for each person to take responsibility for making good on America's centuries-old offer of freedom. What was abstract, he insists, must now, in 1963, be made real, and that can only happen if Americans are able to look honestly at the situation confronting them. As King's legacy ages and falls prey to commodifiers and political buccaneers, it is easy—too easy—to forget the vital part played by confrontation and directness in his plans for a better now.

My thesis and conclusion may seem a bit contrary; but then, good college-level essays often take on the task of challenging a commonly accepted opinion about some author, issue, or text. Sometimes, too, when dissent from the majority opinion would merely brand one a fool, the writer may choose to follow "the road less taken" with regard to the text's style or content even while accepting the usual interpretation of its overall meaning or value. My goal in the above paragraphs is to explore what I'm claiming is the less "warm and fuzzy" side of King's philosophy, not to oversimplify what I take to be his motives or to reduce what he has written just so it suits my claims. People love to reduce King to a milksop, and I think they're dead wrong -- you might say that's my bottom line, the thing that makes me want to write the paper well. I used the word "explore" at the beginning of this handout—the best papers always offer an argument sophisticated enough to be worthy of exploration and variation. A good college essay isn't crafted by applying a rigid structure like the five-paragraph essay or an equally rigid method that only allows for one-dimensional statements and rock-hard proof that they are scientifically correct. Humanities subjects, much like cases at law, seldom admit of such absolute certainty, so there's little point in writing as if they did. Remember, though, that there's no glory in making a

thing appear complicated when it isn't—the idea is to find elements of a text that are genuinely worth paying attention to.

Finally, here are some thoughts on the comparison and contrast essay form, which is a common variant on the deductive essay. A comparison and contrast essay does not merely list similarities and differences; it explains what is significant about those similarities and differences. Comparison and contrast essays deal with three things: Text A, Text B, and the connections between them. Each work will need analysis in terms of its own language, context, and themes, and you must place these elements in relation to comparable elements of the other work. Your argument emerges from the relationships between the two texts. Here are two ways to organize comparison and contrast papers:

### **Block Style**

AB (first paragraph introduces texts and claims that emerge from comparison)

A

A } block-style discussion of the first text

A . .

B (with proper transition from text A)

B

B . . } block-style discussion of the second text

AB (conclusion brings the two texts back together and reflects on your thesis)

### **Back-and-Forth Style**

AB (first paragraph introduces texts and claims that emerge from comparison)

A

B

A

B

A

B . . } several linked paragraphs each including one text mainly

AB (conclusion reflects on thesis)

While the first style has always been my preference because I find that the second style tends to make me leave a point just when I was getting started on it, some writers do well with the second style. See which works for you, given the assignment you've been handed. The middle paragraphs in the point-by-point style especially allow several kinds of organization. You might begin by dealing with similarities in the first several paragraphs, and then take care of differences in the remaining paragraphs—or vice versa, if you want to place similarities in the all-important final position. Another possibility would be to organize your analysis not rigidly on the principle of similarity and difference but rather on the principle that certain claims or parts of the texts should be discussed in a particular order irrespective of whether they show similarities or differences. I mean that you might say to yourself, "I think I should write about three basic elements of King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in such-and-such an order because that's the best way to explain King's argument as a whole; therefore, I'll follow up by dealing with the same basic elements in the other text to which I'm comparing King's letter.

## Notes

(1) Aristotle and other classical rhetoricians divided the kinds of rhetoric—whether in writing or in speech—into three simple branches: a) Deliberative, which deals with questions of the worthy (dignitas) or the good (bonum); and with questions of action, the expedient, and the useful (utilitas).

b) Judicial (or "forensic," i.e. legal), which deals with questions of right and wrong; legal evidence; and guilt and innocence. c) Ceremonial (or "epideictic"), which is concerned to praise what is already deemed praiseworthy rather than to persuade the audience to the right course of action. The ancients also specified three fundamental kinds of audience appeal to be used singly or in combination as the speaker's or writer's goal required: a) Logical (logos), which appeals to people's sense of what is true and what would be the most reasonable thing to do given the circumstances. b) Ethical (ethos), which is an appeal to people's sense of what makes a man or woman worthy of being labeled "of good character." c) Emotional (pathos), which plays, for better or for worse as the case may be, to the audience's hopes, sentiments, fears, needs, and desires. Consider the possible combinations of even a few of these divisions, and you can see how supple classical rhetoric could be in its power to persuade, advocate, inform, explain, celebrate, and judge, among other things. It's easy to see how a skillful speaker might combine these divisions: a clever appeal to logic might simultaneously set forth the facts and persuade an audience to a course of action as much by playing to their need or desire to be considered wise as by laying out the facts themselves. As a final note on classical rhetoric, the ancients generally divided the standard speech into five sections:

Exordium: a leading into, "beginning a web"—examine, for instance, the opening of Philip Sidney's *Defense of Poesy*.

Narratio: a statement of fact, especially in forensic oratory; this is where the speaker sets forth the facts of the case to be decided.

Confirmatio or Probatio: the body of the argument, where the author really gets down to business.

Refutatio: deals with possible objections.

Peroratio: closes the argument—leaves the audience with a good opinion of the speaker; amplifies the force of points made previously; rouses the appropriate emotions in the audience; restates/summarizes the main points of the speech. (2) Not everyone agrees that the traditional syllogism is adequate to the writer's needs. In his book *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1958), British philosopher Stephen Toulmin offers a model based upon the triad of claim, support, and warrant, with the last-mentioned term corresponding roughly to the general principle or first premise of the traditional syllogism. Toulmin apparently believes that standard syllogistic procedure encourages people to avoid investigating hidden assumptions or values behind one's general principles. For him, the warrant is much in need of attention.

(3) Readers might find it useful to examine the induction debate between nineteenth-century scientist William Whewell and fellow Victorian John Stuart Mill. Whewell insists that the hallowed Baconian scientific method of patiently adding up one's particular observations to arrive at statements of greater general import doesn't quite capture what scientific observers really do. In his anthology *Nineteenth-century Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), Patrick Gardner summarizes Whewell's argument from the 1840/47 *Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences* as follows:

For Whewell, induction took the form of "a leap which is out of the reach of method," and he insisted upon invention and imagination, involving fresh modes of looking at and connecting empirical facts, as being integral to all genuine scientific discovery. Thus new conceptions are introduced which are never mere summaries of, or abstractions from, painstakingly accumulated observations; instead they should be seen for what they are—products of insight and genius.

Gardner further explains that Whewell's "hypothetico-deductive" scientific method aims to get around what some philosophers argue is "'the problem of induction'—the alleged difficulty of justifying extrapolation from observed to unobserved cases" (Gardner 158-59).

(4) Although the organic model I set forth in this essay isn't the only or perhaps even ultimately the best way to write (fiction certainly doesn't always follow such a model!), it is an excellent place to begin if you're new to writing. One problem in writing with such concern for the logical or supposedly natural connection between one idea, sentence, or paragraph and another (i.e. an organic method of composition) is that doing so implies belief in a similar unity in the text you are exploring. But of course that unity may be just the thing you want to argue doesn't really exist! Still, the model is a fine starting point, and once you're comfortable with it, you're set to move on to other kinds of writing.

### **Works Consulted**

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