Maximizing the Heuristic Potential of the Enthymeme

When I read these instructions now, I see a varying degree of clarity in my content expectations and an assumption concerning students' knowledge of what demonstrates “thoughtful” analysis. My approach to teaching composition, particularly literary analysis, needs revision.

Students have an unclear understanding of thesis statements, the role of evidence, and what constitutes analysis, resulting from experiences with the expectations of other English teachers. Consequently, teachers’ seemingly arbitrary requirements replace a student’s determining of sufficient evidence and interpretation. These factors, combined with teachers’ other subtle preferences (e.g., the thesis statement should end the introduction), send an ambiguous message to students about the process of literary analysis. I may be disappointed but unfortunately cannot be surprised, then, when I hear seniors admit, “I thought a thesis was a summary of my paper. I didn’t know it should be arguable!” So much of their writing experience has been pre-structured by teachers, muddled by inconsistent terminology and emphases, that they become detached from the authentic motivating factors of analysis, namely their own curiosity and opinions about a text.

Many of these issues could be pinned on a teacher’s unclear instructions, an English department’s disjointed curriculum, students’ laziness, or even the pressure of state standards and their contrived writing contexts. Regardless of the source, high school students struggle to self-determine the appropriate steps for crafting strong literary analysis essays. We English teachers, typically the best writers in the classroom, tend to forget the subtle evaluations we make when we plan and draft an essay: Is my claim logical? Is my focus narrow enough? Will I find sufficient evidence? The enthymeme, Aristotle’s preferred approach to deductive logic, can foreground this array of subtle choices at the start of the writing process and, as a consequence, improve the teaching of literary analysis. By crafting enthymemes during prewriting, students can see how an argument’s logic determines their content and structure choices.

In Book II, Chapter 22 of Rhetoric, Aristotle explains the enthymeme. He identifies it as a syllogism, a certain method of deductive reasoning, one
that I suggest to students is like rhetoric’s version of the transitive property: If \( a = b \) and \( b = c \), then \( a = c \). In the field of logic, a syllogism might look like this: Zach (a) is in English 10 (b); English 10 students (b) are sophomores (c); therefore, Zach (a) is a sophomore (c). Deductive reasoning is evidenced in the movement from general statements \( a = b, b = c \) to a particular conclusion \( a = c \). After classifying an enthymeme as a syllogism, however, Aristotle clarifies that the two are not quite the same: the enthymeme is subtler. It implies the b→c relationship necessary to prove the argument’s a→c reasoning, rather than stating it explicitly. As an enthymeme, the above syllogism looks like this: Zach (a) is in English 10 (b) because he (a) is a sophomore (c). Note that the b→c relationship—English 10 students (b) are sophomores (c)—is absent from my sentence. I do not need to state it if I know my particular audience already accepts that relationship. This is known as a commonplace. Jay Heinrichs, in his book *Thank You for Arguing*, defines a commonplace as “any cliché, belief, or value [that] can serve as your audience’s boiled-down public opinion. [It] is the starting point of your argument” (114). For Aristotle, the commonplace’s basis in what the audience already accepts allows it to go unstated so that a speaker need not “waste words in saying what is manifest” (1395b). Heinrichs neatly summarizes this process: “Take something the audience believes—a fact or commonplace—and apply that premise to a choice or conclusion that you want the audience to accept. Skip the part that goes without saying . . . and voilà! An enthymeme” (134).

Let’s look at an example from Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. Book II. At the beginning of Chapter 21, he writes, “There is no man in all things prosperous, / and / There is no man among us all is free, / are maxims; but the latter, taken with what follows it, is an Enthymeme— / For all are slaves of money or of chance” (1395b). On its own, the claim “There is no man among us all is free” is not an enthymeme; it depends on a subsequent reason clause: “For all are slaves of money or of chance” (see Figure 1).

By adding the reason clause to the maxim, Aristotle assumes that his audience will accept his unstated commonplace; however, he cautions, “We must not . . . start from any and every accepted opinion, but only from those we have defined—those accepted by our judges or by those whose authority they recognize” (1395b). With this clarification, he identifies the enthymeme as an audience-dependent approach to argument.

The audience influences an enthymeme’s commonplace. In Book II, Chapter 23, Aristotle presents 28 potential commonplaces, including the reasoning that an opposite thing will have an opposite effect (e.g., If war is causing our current problem, then peace will remedy it), and the *a fortiori* proof, where if something is not evident where it is more likely, then there is a greater likelihood that it will not be evident where it is less likely (e.g., If the gods do not know everything, then human beings definitely do not). For Aristotle, the rhetor’s responsibility is to find the most appropriate commonplace for persuading his or her audience:

[W]e must first of all have by us a selection of arguments about questions that may arise and are suitable for us to handle; and then we must try to think out arguments of the same type for special needs as they emerge; not vaguely and indefinitely, but by keeping our eyes on the actual facts of the subject we have to speak on, and gathering in as many of them as we can that bear closely upon it; for the more actual facts we have at our command, the more easily we prove our case. (1396b)

In this excerpt, Aristotle reveals the heuristic potential of the enthymeme. Using an enthymeme requires one to anticipate an audience’s position and then to specifically design one’s argument in a way that gradually leads the audience to accept the claim as a sensible conclusion. The DirecTV commercials from 2012 exemplify the enthymeme at work. The commercial I share with students ends with the line, “Don’t wake up in a roadside ditch. Get rid of cable

---

**FIGURE 1. Identifying the Implied Commonplace**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Claim: ( a \rightarrow b )</th>
<th>Aristotle’s Example</th>
<th>My Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No man among us is free.</td>
<td>Zach is in English 10.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason: ( a \rightarrow c )</th>
<th>Everyone is a slave to money or chance.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zach is a sophomore.</td>
<td>(English 10 students are sophomores.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commonplace: ( b \rightarrow c )</th>
<th>(If you are a slave to something, you are not free.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Reprinted with permission from *Thank You for Arguing: What Aristotle, Lincoln, and Homer Simpson Can Teach Us about the Art of Persuasion*, © Jay Heinrichs.
Using an enthymeme requires one to anticipate an audience’s position and then to specifically design one’s argument in a way that gradually leads the audience to accept the claim as a sensible conclusion.

and upgrade to DirecTV” (DirecTV). The company trusts that viewers unconsciously accept their argument because of its commonplace: If one choice leads to a bad conclusion, then the opposite choice will lead to a good conclusion. Most commercials follow this same approach to persuasion based on Aristotle’s general, dynamic guideline above: Recognize the “special needs” of an audience, identify an appropriate commonplace, and then select the “actual facts” that best address those needs while also serving one’s own rhetorical goals.

In the classroom, the “rhetors” are students, and students must take initiative in developing their own arguments. By constructing an enthymeme in the prewriting stage, students have a concise tool for clarifying purpose, considering audience, identifying the commonplace, and, in turn, pinpointing the necessary supporting details. In other words, the enthymeme provides the concrete structure for an argument that the literary analysis essay will eventually reflect. Whether this enthymeme explicitly appears in the essay does not matter. Lawrence D. Green, in “Enthymemic Invention and Structural Prediction,” acknowledges that enthymemes “generate particular structures of ideas, and students can use this understanding to control their own process of composition” (624). The “structure of ideas” becomes apparent when the enthymeme is broken down into its parts—claim, reason, and commonplace—a process that forces students to clarify and evaluate their reasoning before searching for evidence. Once students see that these components exist on their own and in relationship to each other, they can take responsibility for manipulating their arrangement and clarification within an essay.

Aristotle’s example—“No man among us is free, for all are slaves of money or of chance”—reveals how the enthymeme’s structure offers writers options for organizing their composition. One could first provide examples of money or chance enslaving people; one could first define freedom or slavery; or one could first elaborate on the commonplace. These arrangement choices are up to the writers who should realize that these components determine their essays’ content. Instead of relying on teachers to answer the questions “What should I say next?” or “When am I finished?”, students can use the claim, reason, and commonplace as a checklist guiding their composition. In the process, they discover that an argument’s structure and underlying logic, rather than teacher-enforced, subjective preferences, organically determine content and length.

The enthymeme’s structure demands audience awareness from the start of the writing process because the argument hinges on an agreeable commonplace. Students cannot simply argue using reasons convincing only to themselves. This kind of writing, where they explore only their own reasons, unaware of their assumptions, may inform or entertain others but ultimately lacks the urgency of purpose engendered by an accessible audience with different opinions. Students must consider what will appeal to their audience and use that common belief or value as the basis for their argument. For this reason, contextualized disagreement is necessary.

The enthymeme must emerge from real debate in classroom discussions, which, for my interest, concerns literary interpretation. This requirement broadens the audience from the teacher to include one’s classmates, from whom one does not receive any type of grade but rather praise or criticism. Students with a real audience of differing opinions have a specific challenge to find an agreeable commonplace that might persuade disagreeing classmates and then to build their enthymeme on that knowledge. John T. Gage, in “Teaching the Enthymeme: Invention and Arrangement,” emphasizes how crafting enthymemes with proximal, opposing views in mind helps to ensure that student opinions “are no longer the pre-conditioned, unexamined responses with which they may have begun the discussions” (41). Students must make this practice a habit in order to argue well, and the enthymeme demands critical self-analysis of assumptions.

I now want to elucidate how enthymeme-focused prewriting functions in my US Literature classroom. Having just finished The Crucible, students are ready for discussion and a literary analysis essay. The play’s resolution frustrates most students, and Proctor’s willingness to die shocks some of the more naive ones. Beginning with my question “Do you agree with Proctor’s decision to die?,” students
spend a class period discussing the resolution and how Proctor’s choice will affect Elizabeth, Hale, Danforth, and others. Discussion days in my classroom typically follow Alexis Wiggins’s Spider Web format: The teacher sits outside the circle, mapping the progression of the conversation and annotating the kind of comment, question, or text reference students share. Students, then, talk with each other instead of to the teacher. As students discuss The Crucible, they naturally question when self-sacrifice is necessary and if Proctor’s situation demanded martyrdom. Some students agree with Reverend Hale that Proctor makes a selfish decision; others agree with Elizabeth that, by choosing to die, Proctor maintains his integrity. Several points of disagreement arise from this discussion, and in the next class, students begin asserting their claims. One student might write, “It’s wrong to lie to save your life.” Another might argue, “You shouldn’t die for a crime you didn’t commit.” Alone, these claims are not enthymemes, but they capture students’ opinions from discussion at their most basic, inchoate level.

Once students have written their claims, we then consider reasons and commonplaces. This step requires more time than the claim step. Students must evaluate agreeable commonplaces to find the one most useful for persuading classmates who disagree with them. Modeling this step for students is essential. On the whiteboard, I write the enthymeme, “Lying to save your life is cowardly because abandoning your convictions favors convenience over truth.” I then clarify for students its three parts.

CLAIM: Lying to save your life is cowardly.

REASON: Abandoning your convictions favors convenience over truth.

COMMONPLACE: Abandoning one’s convictions is cowardly.

I draft another enthymeme on the board: “Lying to save your life is cowardly because dishonesty allows power to prevail over truth.”

REASON: Dishonesty allows power to prevail over truth.

COMMONPLACE: Truth should prevail at all costs.

With both commonplaces, I think aloud in front of the class, wondering which one my audience of students will more likely accept. I recognize the stereotype that students frequently lie to authorities to save themselves or friends from punishment, which nullifies the efficacy of the commonplace in my second enthymeme. I also realize that students often struggle with integrity amid the strong desire to fit in. This awareness renders the commonplace of my first enthymeme ineffective. Here, I pause to highlight that, though it seems like I have two worthless enthymemes, realizing their shortcomings now is better than writing an entire essay only to realize its shortcomings after the rough draft.

After evaluating my first two enthymemes, I inform students of Aristotle’s 28 commonplaces, introducing them as a resource for identifying a possible commonplace. I give them a handout with the commonplaces defined and exemplified. Scanning the list with them on the document camera, I pause at 13: “[A]nother line of argument consists in using those consequences as a reason for urging that a thing should or should not be done” (1399a). I note how this focus matches Proctor’s concern for the consequences of his actions. He could lie, and, though he would live, he would betray his friends and validate the corrupt court; he could tell the truth, which would ease his conscience, but he would then die and leave his family behind.

Next, we look at Aristotle’s commonplace 14: “Another line of argument is used when we have to urge or discourage a course of action that may be done in either of two opposite ways, and have to apply the method just mentioned [in 13] to both. The difference between this one and the last is that, whereas in the last any two things are contrasted, here the things contrasted are opposites” (1399a). I explain how Proctor’s predicament involves opposites: he makes one choice and lives, or he makes another choice and dies; he needs to choose the lesser of two unpleasant consequences. With these commonplaces in mind, I draft a third enthymeme on the board: “Lying to save one’s life is cowardly because it forsakes loyalty to others and their suffering.” This time, I ask students to identify the reason and commonplace.

REASON: Lying to save one’s life forsakes loyalty to others and their suffering.

COMMONPLACE: Loyalty is more admirable than cowardice.
In this third example, students have an epiphany related to the necessity of an agreeable commonplace. Most will admit that this reasoning satisfies them more than the commonplaces of my first two drafts. Through this first significant step in crafting enthymemes—especially in showing instead of hiding the flaws in my first two statements—students can understand how audience and purpose dictate the writing process before an outline is even constructed. Deciding on convincing reasons is impossible without a clear audience. Students craft arguments for others, not for themselves. One doesn’t write something and then find an audience, yet this approach typifies how we often treat high school students’ writing.

Once students have drafted enthymemes, the next step is to examine their three parts in more detail. In her article “Toward a Pedagogy of the Enthymeme: The Roles of Dialogue, Intention, and Function in Shaping Argument,” Barbara A. Emmel praises the “choice of directions” an enthymeme gives students to follow in identifying the content and structure of their essays (145). She clarifies that its usefulness in prewriting comes from the terms that make up an enthymeme: “Assigning terms to a position permits simultaneous exploration of new ideas, without losing sight of already-articulated and established ideas” (145). For example, we could classify the various positions as in Figure 2.

Regardless of the actual words composing the enthymeme, students will, for any argument, always need to consider and clarify the relationships A→B, A→C, and B→C. Elaborating on these relationships constitutes the bulk of a paper’s length, and in this way, students can more organically understand when they have sufficient content for a final draft instead of depending on a teacher’s predetermined page requirement. With each term and relationship, they follow Aristotle’s advice to “gath[er] in as many [facts] as [they] can,” since “the more actual facts [they] have at [their] command, the more easily [they] prove [their] case” (1396b). My third enthymeme from The Crucible will demonstrate this step.

To distinguish the claim, reason, and commonplace, I write my enthymeme on the board in similar fashion to Figure 2, an approach owing to Green’s “Enthymemic Invention and Structural Prediction” (see Figure 3). I also use a different color marker for each term as a way to visually reinforce the distinct parts and relationships.

To identify my commonplace, I substitute “anything that” into the A position in the REASON row and read across and up to the claim’s verb + B: Anything that forsakes loyalty to others and their suffering is cowardly. If I agree with this commonplace and know that my audience will accept it, I am ready to outline my essay. If I disagree with its logic, I try a new commonplace.

When arranged in this manner, the terms reveal the relationships on which my literary analysis essay will need to elaborate. I control how I order that content, but I echo to students Green’s advice to save the A→B relationship until the end: This claim “is the writer’s eventual goal, and if it is introduced before there is adequate preparation, the thesis and paper will be rejected by an audience” (632). I think aloud as I design my outline, considering that first clarifying A→C with examples from my own life might draw readers into my argument. I could then, in a new paragraph, bridge the gap between my experience and the play by showing how John’s dishonesty erodes Elizabeth’s trust and later undermines Rebecca Nurse’s and Martha Corey’s willful suffering. Once I have established A→C with multiple examples, I might clarify B so my audience knows how my definition of “coward” could label those A→C examples. After defining B, I could move on to my commonplace, B→C. This step will require me to link my definition of cowardice to the act of saving one’s own skin at the expense of friends and will require me to include text evidence showing how Proctor’s situation could involve loyalty or cowardice. Once I have shown examples that establish B→C, I am ready to assert my claim, A→B.
Maximizing the Heuristic Potential of the Enthymeme

Using this approach, students will experience a feeling of accomplishment when they make their ultimate assertion, the bulk of their essay being a unified build-up to that central claim. This achievement is diminished when their thesis statements appear in the introduction, a subjective preference many teachers demand students follow (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 4. Enthymeme-Based Outline

A: Lying to save oneself
  Clarify different motivations for lying
  Could save own reputation
  Could save own life
  Could protect others’ feelings, reputation, or life

A→C: Lying to save oneself forsakes loyalty to others and their suffering.
  Personal anecdotes
  Examples from The Crucible

B: Cowardly
  Accepted definition of “cowardly”
  Explanation of how this label fits anecdotes and examples from A→C

B→C: Anything that forsakes loyalty to others and their suffering is cowardly.
  References to historical occasions that identify cowardice with betrayal
  Explanation of how Proctor ultimately has two choices:
    Option #1: Give a false confession.
    Option #2: Cling to the truth.
    Consequences: Die. Validate friends’ honesty and integrity. Weaken the court.

A→B: Lying to save oneself is cowardly.
  Review the evidence and affirm Proctor’s choice.

Reflecting on the above classroom scenario, we see how, with a genuine disagreement and the immediate presence of classmates who differ in opinion, purpose and audience foreground decisions in the crafting of enthymemes during pre-writing for the formal literary analysis essay. The typically subtle, instinctual choices skilled writers make when refining their topics and thesis statements are no longer hidden; they take the front seat of consciousness. As an invention heuristic, the enthymeme combats students’ perception of arbitrary writing preferences and instead provides them with initiative and confidence to successfully defend their interpretations in the English classroom and beyond.

Works Cited
DirecTV. “Don’t Wake Up in a Roadside Ditch.” YouTube. 2 Jan. 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=klv3m2gMgUU.

A member of NCTE since 2014, Ben Roth Shank taught English at Eastern Mennonite School from 2012 to 2017 and now lives and works in Wellington, New Zealand.

READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Traditionally, teachers have encouraged students to engage with and interpret literature—novels, poems, short stories, and plays. Too often, however, the spoken word is left unanalyzed, even though the spoken word has the potential to alter our space just as much than the written. After gaining skill through analyzing a historic and contemporary speech as a class, students will select a famous speech from a list compiled from several resources and write an essay that identifies and explains the rhetorical strategies that the author deliberately chose while crafting the text to make an effective argument. Their analysis will consider questions such as, What makes the speech an argument? How did the author’s rhetoric evoke a response from the audience? Why are the words still venerated today? http://bit.ly/29NGaGz

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT