

Hierarchy of Rhetorical Concerns

The hierarchy of rhetorical concerns is a tool by which one can prioritize different aspects of writing in terms of examining the quality of a piece of writing, prioritizing feedback in a review, and/or making necessary revisions to a piece of writing.

1. Purpose/Audience

- Does the essay meet the assigned or intended purpose in a manner?
- Is that purpose appropriately handled for the paper's intended audience?

2. Focus/Organization

- Does the essay establish a focus that is maintained throughout?
- Are the ideas presented in a logical order with logical transitions?

3. Development/Logic

- Is each key point fully addressed using both sound reasoning and quality evidence?

4. Mechanics

- Has the paper been proofed for spelling and grammatical errors?
- Does the essay follow appropriate formatting guidelines?

Ways of Utilizing the Hierarchy in the Writing Center

Prioritizing Feedback:

When reviewing a paper, the hierarchy offers a way of prioritizing the feedback we provide. For example, when reading a student's paper, it may be tempting to point out mechanical errors as we view them, but this can distract a student (and the session) away from any larger concerns that need to be addressed within the piece of writing, such as having included arguments within an essay assignment that calls for an explanatory synthesis.

Helping Students to Prioritize Revisions:

Revising a paper can seem overwhelming to a student who acknowledges their papers have weaknesses in several areas (i.e. lack of focus and mechanical errors). Briefly explaining the idea of the hierarchy to students can help them to focus their energies and view drafting as a process that can happen in stages. For instance, when working with a student who needs to make revisions in terms of both focus and mechanics, the student might benefit from being encouraged to think of them as separate revisions. Encouraging the student to first revise the paper in order to improve its sense of focus before worrying about mechanics can make the revision process seem much less overwhelming.

Helping Students to Articulate Their Writing Needs:

Often, students do not possess the language necessary to talk about their writing strengths and weaknesses. Asking questions about their writing in terms of the hierarchy can help them to recognize different aspects of the writing experience in a way that allows them to identify their strengths and weaknesses. For instance, a student might be able to easily explain how they chose the order in which their ideas appear, but then draw a blank when asked to identify her thesis statement. This can signal to the student that she should feel confident about her ability to organize while she puts effort into understanding and meeting the expectation of a focus within an essay.

Tips for Helping Students Articulate Rhetorical Strengths and Weaknesses:

Purpose

Some students tend to articulate purpose in terms of the essay's topic, or "what the essay is talking about," rather than what the essay is trying to achieve. One way to help students articulate their purpose is to ask them to choose an action verb that best describes that they hope to achieve. You could ask the student to complete the sentence "I want my audience to _____ ..." or "I want to _____ my audience..." (Examples: "I want my audience to believe that global warming is a real concern" or "I want to inform my audience of the dangers of global warming.")

Audience

If the student cannot articulate how or if they have met the needs of his audience, suggest an audience member that is very different from the intended audience, such as a 5-year-old girl. Ask the student to articulate how he would need to change the paper to meet the needs of that audience member as opposed to his intended audience. Continue with comparative examples.

Focus

If students cannot identify or articulate a thesis statement, ask them to summarize their entire paper in one sentence. Check to see if that statement matches the purpose of the essay. Then ask them if they feel they have any statements close to that sentence in the paper. If not, ask them to identify a place where that statement (or a variation) could fit in.

If students are not sure what the paper is mostly about, it might be due to a lack of focus. You could ask them to summarize the topic of each paragraph into a list. Examine the list for themes, repeated ideas, unrelated ideas, etc.

Organization

Backward outlining an essay can help students to visualize the manner in which they have organized an essay. Condense the outline onto one sheet of paper and ask the student to explain why he chose to put ideas in the order that he did. Ask him if the order of ideas seems to make sense or if it is haphazard.

When looking at transitions, it can help to have students explain the relationship between the ideas in two paragraphs. Then ask how they can signal that relationship to their readers.

Development

Begin by asking students to identify a few claims within an essay. For each of those claims, ask the student to identify what evidence is used to back it up. Ask the student to explain why it is the best piece of evidence to use to support that claim. If there is no evidence, discuss possible evidence to provide. The same can be done in reverse for evidence. Have the student identify outside information and then ask her to identify the claim it is intended to support. If the student isn't sure why she chose that quote, ask her to state a claim it could support and then discuss whether or not that claim (and the evidence) fits within the essay.

Sample Questions for Purpose:

- What is your goal in this paper? What are you trying to say or accomplish?
- Where do you think your essay most clearly makes its point or meets your goal?
- Do you need a thesis statement? If so, where do you think your thesis is best stated?

Sample Questions for Focus/Organization:

- How do you want to organize this document? What seems logical?
- Can you tell me why you've arranged things this way?
- Where do you think your paper flows well? Where do you think it gets off track?
- How does this section relate to your purpose or main point?
- What's the main point in this paragraph and how does each sentence connect to it?

Sample Questions for Development:

- What else could you say about X?
- This idea or claim could use more support. What evidence could you use to back it up?
- Where might you look to find more research for this idea?
- What else will readers want to know about?
- This idea feels unclear to me; can you explain it more?

Sample Questions for Logic and Critical Thinking:

- If someone were to play devil's advocate, how would they object to this idea?
- Can you explain your thinking more fully on X?
- What assumptions do you make here? How might you support these assumptions for readers who don't share your same beliefs?
- I'm having trouble following the logic here. Could you tell me more about it?

Sample Questions/Procedures for Grammar and Mechanics:

- First, read through the section that has errors.
- Choose just one or two types of errors to focus on (i.e. run on sentences and inconsistent verb tense). Let the other errors go. Your aim is to teach students how to correct their most common or distracting errors, rather than fix all of their errors.
- Point to the error and say something like, "This sentence is confusing to me because it runs together with this other one. Why don't we look this up and see how to correct it."