

The Classical Pattern of Persuasion

By John R. Edlund

Once a writer has a topic and some idea of what he or she wants to say, an important question is “How do I organize it?” Some writers just start writing and let the organization grow out of the material. This is the “organic” style of organization. At the other extreme, a lot of students rely on a formula such as the five-paragraph essay. However, that formula, with a thesis and three reasons, a body paragraph about each “reason,” and a summary conclusion, has many critics. The “reasons” often turn out to be examples rather than arguments, the essay may seem repetitive and formulaic, and the pattern doesn’t allow for counter-arguments or much critical thinking. It is also pretty much a school format that doesn’t often appear in real-world writing.

What we want is an organization that is effective in explaining our ideas, supporting our arguments, and persuading our audience. To be persuasive, we also have to deal with the counter-arguments of people who disagree with us. We also want to give the audience a clear idea of what action we want them to take based on our arguments. Ideally, we want a flexible structure that can expand and contract to fit the material, the occasion, and the needs of the audience. And it should be simple enough that we can remember how to use it, even under time pressure.

Fortunately, such a pattern exists. It happens to have been developed by the ancient Romans, more than 2,000 years ago, but it is still used by speech writers today and can easily be adapted to essay writing. In fact, many of today’s editorials and op-ed pieces follow a similar pattern. The format can be expanded or contracted to fit different kinds of content. If the five-paragraph essay seems too constraining, this pattern, because it is more flexible and is organized by rhetorical purpose, is a good alternative. It is often called “the Roman six-part speech,” but in this article I will call it “the Classical pattern.” Here it is in chart form.

The Classical Pattern			
	Latin	English Equivalent	Rhetorical Function
1	<i>exordium</i>	Introduction	Introduces the topic and purpose of the speech or document and tries to establish the writer's <i>ethos</i> . This may also include some kind of “hook” to engage the audience's attention. What are you writing about? Why are you writing about it?
2	<i>narratio</i>	Background	States the known facts of the case, describing what has happened so far and the nature of the problem. This provides a narrative context for the arguments that will come. What happened? Why did it happen? What might happen next? How did things get this way?
3	<i>divisio</i>	Possible Positions	Identifies the point at issue, what position the writer will take, and how the issue will be developed. This is equivalent to the “thesis” of the writing. It is often called “division” because this section often divides the issue into possible positions and perspectives.
4	<i>confirmatio</i>	Support	Presents the arguments in favor of the writer's position, including both statements of the arguments and support in the form of facts and examples. This section will probably be the longest in the paper and may include several paragraphs. This section is strong in <i>logos</i> .
5	<i>refutatio</i>	Counter-Arguments	Analyzes the likely arguments of the opposition and refutes them with facts, examples, and counter-arguments. This section is also strong in <i>logos</i> . Don't be tempted to offer simplistic “straw man” versions of your opponent's arguments that are easy to knock down.

6	<i>peroratio</i>	Conclusion	Traditionally, this section engages the emotions of the audience, so this might be strong in <i>pathos</i> . The writer also might offer a summary of the arguments so far and encourage the audience to be persuaded or take action.
Source: (Cic. De Inv. 1.7; Cic. De Or. 1.31.143)			

Don't worry about the Latin names for these sections. I included them only for historical context. The English names are much easier to remember. In fact, you might remember them by their first letters: IBPSCC. That doesn't mean anything, but it sort of rhymes.

Questions for a Writer

You can also think of this pattern as a series of questions:

1. **Introduction:** What is my paper about? How can I make my reader interested in it?
2. **Background:** What background information does the reader need to know to understand the issue I am writing about? What is the story behind the issue? How did things get this way?
3. **Possible Positions:** What are the possible positions someone could take on this issue? What position will I take and why?
4. **Support:** What are the arguments in favor of my position? How can I support them?
5. **Counter-arguments:** What will people who disagree with me say? What are the arguments against my position? How can I refute them?
6. **Conclusion:** What do I want my reader to believe or do after they finish reading my essay? How do I want them to feel?

In a short paper, the first three categories might be combined into a one-paragraph introduction, but if the issue is complicated, the "Background" section might take two or more paragraphs. Note that in this pattern, the thesis may not be in the first paragraph. In fact, it may come in the third or fourth paragraph, depending on how long the "background" section is. The "Support" and "Counter-arguments" form the "body" of the paper. Each of these sections might be one or more paragraphs. Even if you end up writing a five-paragraph essay because that is what you are more comfortable doing, the questions above are good for generating ideas.

Questions for a Critical Reader

You can also use the Classical pattern to analyze published editorials and op-ed pieces. You can ask:

1. **Introduction:** What is this piece about? Why is the issue or topic important, according to the writer? What kind of impression does the writer create?
2. **Background:** What background information does the author give us? What is the story behind the issue? Does the writer do a good job of putting the issue in context?
3. **Possible Positions:** What are the possible positions on this issue? Does the writer do a good job of laying them out? What position does the writer take? Is it clear and well-defined, or a little vague?
4. **Support:** What arguments does the writer make in favor of his or her position? How are they supported? Do they make sense?
5. **Counter-arguments:** What arguments against the position does the writer describe? Does he or she do a good job of refuting them? Can you think of other arguments against the position that the writer does not deal with?
6. **Conclusion:** How do you feel at the end of the piece? Are you persuaded? Why or why not?

These questions, and the Roman pattern from which they derive, are useful for analyzing a wide range of persuasive texts. They can help you think about the pros and cons of multiple positions rather than simply taking one position and supporting it with one-sided arguments and cherry-picked examples. They might also help you see gaps or problems with a published writer's position or arguments. It is a versatile pattern for organizing effective essays and speeches. It is amazing how useful something 2,000 years old can be.