Introduction to Rhetorical Structures

This electronic file has been created in an attempt to provide a concise, explicit, and interactive guide for academic writing at Luther Seminary. Although the content of the examples has been selected with the seminary writer in mind, all of the principles outlined here are applicable to any academic writing.

What follows is a description of four distinct strategies for structuring academic writing which have been organized according to increasing complexity: the neutral summary, the critical review, the Aristotelian argument, and the Rogerian argument. As these models build on one another, it is important to become familiar with the concepts of each form before proceeding on to the next. The following content is provided for each of the four structures:

- A diagram outlining the basic components of the structure
- A worksheet
- A synopsis with key features
- An annotated example with commentary

Upon mastering these concepts, academic writers should be able to make better strategic decisions about their writing based on greater awareness of the relationship between rhetorical structure, audience, and subject matter.

For additional explanation of these concepts, please feel free to contact the Center for Writing directly via the following:

- Call 651.641.3464
- Email writingcenter@lutherse.edu
- Stop by Gullixson Hall Library Office
- Go to www.lutherse.edu/writing
Rhetorical Structure: *Neutral Summaries*

Summaries are commonly used when you need to inform the reader of a text they have not read or provide a neutral discussion of a topic. At the seminary, you will often be asked to do this to show that you understand course readings. For neutral summaries, it is typical to follow chronology—the progression of the original text—as the basis for your own organization.*

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1. Start broad and describe the title, author and a brief summary of the text’s content.

2. Reviews do not usually have a thesis, so this diagram does not end in a “point.” However, it may **preview the organization** of the following text (e.g., “Therefore, this review will describe the three primary themes of the author’s text: X, Y, and Z.”).

3. Start each body paragraph with a distinct topic sentence, which tells the reader what the focus of the paragraph is (in this case, theme X, Y, and Z). Next, develop each paragraph using both quotes and paraphrase as evidence.

4. Conclude and broaden the scope of your summary, describing its application in terms of relevance to your class, audience, or society.

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*The example above is for illustration only. The size and number of points (and paragraphs) can change.*
**Neutral Summaries**

The following example illustrates a typical neutral summary. Neutral summaries...

- ...are neutral in tone. They do not develop their own argument or assess the source material (although the source material itself may make an argument, as in this example).
- ...start broad, establishing the title, author, and a brief summary of the source material.
- ...preview the organization of your text for the reader in the introduction.
- ...reinforce the organization with explicit claims at the top of each theme.

It can be useful to first consult the handout “Rhetorical Structure: Neutral Summaries” and then read the text and fill out the worksheet while consulting the commentary. The following example has been annotated using Track Changes in Microsoft Word. Click on the comments to the right to highlight the relevant section. To view the text without comments:

1. Select the “Review” tab.
2. Click “Final: Show Markup” from the Track Changes pane.
3. Select “Original” from the drop-down menu.

To re-establish the comments:

1. Select the “Review” tab.
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3. Select “Final: Show Markup” from the drop-down menu.
In his article, "Enhancing the Development Capabilities of Civil Society Organizations," Deryke Belshaw evaluates two classes of civil society organizations (churches and faith-based non-governmental organizations (FBNGOs)) and calls for greater scrutiny and funding of such organizations to affect social change. Belshaw, Professor Emeritus and Director of the Institute for Development Research at Oxford University, England, develops his article in three sections: an assessment of FBNGOs' effectiveness, a reevaluation of organizational oversight, and suggestions for improvement.

According to Belshaw, Christian faith-based organizations are effective in many ways. They are very committed, are morally guided, and have an inherent connection to the populations they seek to serve—the poor. However, they also have many shortcomings. They can be clannish and hierarchical, stuck in their ways, and often focus on morality to the exclusion of accomplishing objectives. The latter is especially true in the context of international disasters, where law and morality often break down. The author then supports these claims with evidence from ten global initiatives.

The challenges faced by FBBOs are compounded by the fact that there is often little oversight of such organizations’ methodology or their financial sustainability. Belshaw argues that funders and governments generally fail to collaborate with FBBOs in three domains: employing conceptual and theoretical frameworks, following participatory development processes, and investigating impact-enhancing interventions.

To improve this situation and bring these organizations more in line with their non-faith-based counterparts, Belshaw lobbies for greater specialized training for FBBO leadership as well as ongoing assessment of these organizations’ achievements and competency, as "competence to produce reliable measures of competence is generally lacking in the CFBO community." In this way, Belshaw's article is useful for those interested in the general efficacy of FBNGOs.

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2 Ibid., 160.
3 Ibid., 161.
Rhetorical Structure: *Critical Reviews*

Critical reviews are commonly used when you need to evaluate a text. At the seminary, you may also be asked to do this to show that you have evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of readings or when creating an annotated bibliography. For critical reviews, it is typical to organize your progression based on three categories: summary, praise, and criticism.*

1. Start broad and describe the **title, author** and a brief **summary** of the text’s content.

2. Critical reviews will often have a "soft" **thesis** (e.g. "While Smith's work provides theologians with many valuable insights into the origins of the synoptic gospels, his failure to discuss the gnostic gospels is a potential shortcoming."). You may also choose to include a preview of the progression of the review (e.g. "Therefore, this review will briefly describe the primary themes of the author’s text, its strengths, and notable weaknesses.").

3. Start the body of the analysis with a sentence announcing your **neutral summary** of the major claims of the text and develop this section while maintaining proportion with the rest of the analysis.

4. Next, signal your transition to the second section **and praise** the author for what they did well in their text, being sure to support your claims with specific quoted text.

5. Finally, **criticize** the author based on shortcomings of their text (e.g., logic, timeliness, applicability, evidence, etc.) and support your claims with specific quoted text.

6. **Conclude** and broaden the scope of your analysis, describing its relevance to your class, vocation, audience, or society.

*The example above is for illustration only. The size and number of points (and paragraphs) can change.*
Critical Reviews

The following example illustrates a typical critical review. Critical reviews...

- ...are critical in tone. They not only summarize the source material, but assess its strengths and weaknesses.
- ...start broad, establishing the author, title, and a brief summary of the source material.
- ...preview the organization of the review (neutral summary, praise, criticism) for the reader in the introductory section.
- ...reinforce the organization with explicit claims at the top of each theme.
- ...employ accurate citation of references made to the source material.

To better understand the following example, it can be useful to first consult the handout “Rhetorical Structure: Critical Reviews” and then read the text and fill out the worksheet while consulting the commentary. The following example has been annotated using Track Changes in Microsoft Word. Click on the comments to the right to highlight the relevant section. To view the text without comments:

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3. Select “Original” from the drop-down menu.

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In his 2010 article, “Faith-Based Pushback,” Joseph L. Conn discusses the debate surrounding the Obama administration’s failure to address controversial legislation regarding funding of faith-based nonprofit organizations. Conn, who is the Director of Communications for the organization Americans United for Separation of Church and State, outlines the controversy from a primarily legal perspective, although his analysis has distinct strengths and weaknesses.

The article begins by recounting claims made by president Obama that he had “turned the faith-based initiative around to find common ground among people of all beliefs” in regards to Bush-era policy which had been criticized for being sectarian. However, Conn also cites opponents to the legislation such as Barry W. Lynn, Director of Americans United, who laments that “no American should be required to support religious discrimination through his or her taxes.” At the fore of the debate are provisions in the law which allow for faith-based organizations to discriminate during hiring based on religious affiliation, the perceived favoritism towards funding certain denominations and groups, as well as overt displays or religious symbols in philanthropic contexts.

There are many things Conn does well in this article. He has done an excellent job of giving a voice to a side of the debate that is often suppressed—those that argue that freedom of religion requires freedom from religion—while avoiding the temptation to include secular voices only: Lynn and other opponents interviewed are, in fact, ordained clergy.

However, one cannot help but notice that the article is essentially a mouthpiece for the opinion of Americans United, the institution with which both Conn and Lynn are affiliated—a clear shortcoming. It could have solicited opinions from a wider range of sources. Similarly, subsequent legislation has muted many of Conn’s criticisms, so his arguments are less relevant for the contemporary debate.

In this way, Conn’s article is a good introduction to the legal controversy surrounding faith-based organizations, but far from comprehensive or neutral.  

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2 Ibid.
Rhetorical Structure: The Aristotelian Argument

The Aristotelian argument is the framework upon which most academic, thesis-driven writing is based. You should use this structure any time you need to take a position on a topic. Before getting started, make sure that your thesis is argumentative and non-obvious. Next, to support your thesis, group all of your evidence into distinct sub-themes. Finally, develop each claim in its own section of text, making sure that each point is proportionate to the others. The back of this handout contains a template you can use to get started.

1. Start broad and describe the context of the topic you aim to address (the current state of the phenomenon or debate) followed by the problem this raises.

2. End with a specific claim, your thesis. For example: “In Augustine's Confessions, we find many personal dilemmas still relevant to modern life.” You may also opt to preview the organization of your argument: “In Augustine’s Confessions, we find many personal dilemmas still relevant to modern life, evidenced by his greed, his theological experimentation, and his sense of despair when faced with personal loss.”

3. Start each body paragraph with a distinct topic sentence; this tells the reader how the paragraph functions in the context of the argument. For example, the first paragraph would begin with “One way in which Augustine’s confessions are still relevant to modern life is his greed, shown in his willingness to steal the pears despite being well-fed and otherwise content.” Each body paragraph should then be developed with its own distinct content.

4. If your thesis is controversial, you may also opt to include a concession. This acknowledges a typical argument your opposition would present to you (e.g., “However, some theologians have claimed that the realities of the modern world have made Augustine less relevant to modern theological dilemmas.”)

5. Immediately following, and in about as much space, create a refutation using evidence which undermines opponents’ criticisms.

6. Conclude and broaden the scope of your argument, describing its relevance/application to your class, audience, or society.

*The example above is for illustration only. The size and number of points (and paragraphs) can change.*
The Aristotelian Argument

The following example illustrates a typical Aristotelian argument. This rhetorical form differs from the neutral summary and critical review in the fact that it addresses an issue, not a source text. Aristotelian arguments...

- ...start by establishing the context for the issue, telling the reader why the issue is timely and relevant to its audience.
- ...establish the problem that results from the current situation.
- ...make a claim (thesis) that solves the problem.
- ...close the introduction by previewing the organization of the argument that follows.
- ...reinforce the organization with explicit claims at the top of each theme.
- ...include a concession and refutation just prior to the concluding section.
- ...conclude by briefly restating the main claims made in the body, followed by imploring the audience to take a specific action.

To better understand the following example, it can be useful to first consult the handout “Rhetorical Structure: The Aristotelian Argument” and then read the text and fill out the worksheet while consulting the commentary. The following example has been annotated using Track Changes in Microsoft Word. Click on the comments to the right to highlight the relevant section. To view the text without comments:

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To re-establish the comments:

1. Select the “Review” tab.
2. Click “Original” from the Track Changes pane.
3. Select “Final: Show Markup” from the drop-down menu.
Last month, in a high-profile meeting at the White House, representatives from the United Nations, the federal government, and faith-based non-governmental organizations (FBNGOs) listened while Anne-Birgitte Albrectsen, Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund, threatened a withdrawal of funding for faith-based AIDS initiatives. The reason? Faith-based organizations had failed to provide adequate services due to their ideology.\(^1\) This is not a new phenomenon. Since 1996, religious organizations have been eligible for federal funding to support their social service programs—despite mixed results and vocal opposition from the left decrying such funding as a breach of the separation of church and state.\(^2\) Therefore, to address this problem, it is time that we consider passing tougher legislation overseeing federal funding of FBNGOs based on their potential illegality, ineffectiveness, and fiscal irresponsibility.

Federal funding of faith-based social programs has long been considered illegal by some critics. Opponents to the legislation, such as Barry W. Lynn, Director of the watchdog group Americans United for Separation of Church and State, lamented that “no American should be required to support religious discrimination through his or her taxes.”\(^3\) Such critics view funding of FBNGOs as a de facto endorsement of these organizations, and argue that there are numerous secular alternatives in place.

Similarly, opponents claim that FBNGOs are less effective at delivering services than their secular counterparts. In fact, faith-based groups typically fail because they lack the infrastructure, experience and long-term approach of other organizations. In his article from *Christian Century*, “Thanks, but No Thanks,” Mark Chaves recounts that “[i]t is no accident that congregations’ most significant social service collaborations are with organizations, like homeless shelters and Habitat for Humanity...”\(^4\) To the extent that FBNGOs succeed at all, it is often due to the strengths of larger, secular organizations.

Finally, FBNGOs’ initiatives may be fiscally irresponsible. Because they lack many of the resources and distribution networks of larger, secular organizations, FBNGOs are often much less efficient, spending money on infrastructure instead of those in need. They also spend too much on too few, as supported by a 2006 study by Deryke Belshaw, Director of the Institute for Development Research at Oxford University, who argues that “accepting the continuing dependence of a minority of communities on external aid, with no resources left to be rolled into untouched communities, is depressingly common behavior” among FBNGOs.\(^5\)

This is not to say that such groups have done no good. Even critics acknowledge that faith-based organizations are able to make a great impact on individuals in their community that are in need.

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However, such initiatives are often hyper-local and short term, unlike the situations which the federal funding seeks to address: long-term projects aimed at diverse communities.

Therefore, given that FBNGOs are of questionable legal standing, ineffective and wasteful, now is the time we need to implement greater restrictions on federal funding of such organizations. Due to the current state of the federal budget, we can no longer afford to waste time or money on such organizations.

Comment [P532]: My transition to the refutation. This, too, should be backed with evidence.

Comment [P533]: The refutation.

Comment [P534]: In this conclusion, re-summarize my main points, issue a call to action, and re-emphasize the urgent need for action.
Rhetorical Structure: The Rogerian Argument

The Rogerian argument is a rhetorical form that includes both sides of a debate, representing the opposition's opinion while systematically refuting their claims. Therefore, this rhetorical structure is best used for topics that are controversial, entrenched, or emotional, since it is difficult to persuade an opinionated audience if they don't feel their voice has been heard. The back of this handout contains a template you can use to get started.

1. Start broad and describe the context of the topic you aim to address (the current state of the phenomenon or debate) followed by the problem this raises.

2. In contrast to the Aristotelian form, the Rogerian argument typically has no thesis, but instead acknowledges that there are two sides to the debate. You may also opt to preview the progression of your argument, for example: “Therefore, we must analyze this debate based on its 1) historical, 2) exegetical and 3) linguistic evidence.”

3. Organize your discussion based on subtopic (historical, exegetical, linguistic arguments) or side of the debate (side A vs. B). Note: It is typical that the side you endorse will be “side B,” since the Rogerian argument essentially consists of a series of concessions and refutations.

4. Clearly signal the role of every paragraph/section with a topic sentence at the top, being sure to describe this section’s relationship with the preceding section. In this example, the topic sentence for either section B2 would describe that side B disagrees with side A based on exegetical evidence. Develop the section using evidence from sources.

5. Conclude by arguing that Side B is the best option and then broaden the scope of your analysis to describe its application and relevance to your class, audience, or society.

*The example above is for illustration only. The size and number of points (and paragraphs) can change.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Problem:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sides of the Debate:</td>
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<td>Preview of Progression:</td>
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<tr>
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<th>Subtopic 2, Side A:</th>
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<tr>
<th>Relevance/Application:</th>
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**The Rogerian Argument**

The following example illustrates a typical Rogerian argument. This rhetorical form differs from the Aristotelian argument in that it presents both sides of a debate and withholds taking a stance on the issue until the conclusion. Rogerian arguments...

- start by establishing the context for the issue, telling the reader why the issue is timely and relevant to its audience.
- establish the problem that results from the current situation.
- avoid making a claim (thesis) that solves the problem in the introduction, and instead, acknowledge that there is a debate.
- close the introduction by previewing the organization of the argument that follows.
- present both sides of the debate equally in the body of the text.
- reinforce the organization with explicit claims at the top of each theme.
- conclude by synthesizing the information presented to best solve the problem.

To better understand the following example, it can be useful to first consult the handout “Rhetorical Structure: The Rogerian Argument” and then read the text and fill out the worksheet while consulting the commentary. The following example has been annotated using Track Changes in Microsoft Word. Click on the comments to the right to highlight the relevant section. To view the text without comments:

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3. Select “Final: Show Markup” from the drop-down menu.
Last month, in a high-profile meeting at the white house, representatives from the United Nations, the federal government, and faith-based non-governmental organizations (FBNGOs) listened while Anne-Birgitte Albrectsen, Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund, discussed the potential of withdrawing funding for faith-based AIDS initiatives. As this example shows, government funding of FBNGOs is an ongoing controversy. Therefore, to address this issue, it is important that we weigh the evidence for U.S. federal funding of FBNGOs based on their legality, effectiveness, and fiscal responsibility.

Federal funding of faith-based social programs has long been considered illegal by some critics. Opponents to the legislation, such as Barry W. Lynn, Director of the watchdog group Americans United for Separation of Church and State, lament that “no American should be required to support religious discrimination through his or her taxes.” Such critics view funding of FBNGOs as a de facto endorsement of these organizations, and argue that there are numerous secular alternatives in place.

However, proponents of faith-based initiatives have long upheld such programs’ legality. They argue that opponents are actually misinformed: such programs do not establish a government bias against secular NGOs, but do away with a previous bias against faith-based organizations. Therefore, according to the Obama administration’s own legal opinion, when it comes to “the free exercise of religion and forbidding the establishment of religion[,] ...the Federal Government can preserve these fundamental commitments while empowering faith-based and neighborhood organizations to deliver vital services in our communities.”

Opponents also claim that FBNGOs are less effective at delivering services than their secular counterparts. In fact, faith-based groups typically fail because they lack the infrastructure, experience and long-term approach of other organizations. In his article from *Christian Century*, “Thanks, but No Thanks,” Mark Chaves recounts that “[i]t is no accident that congregations’ most significant social service collaborations are with organizations, like homeless shelters and Habitat for Humanity....” To the extent that FBNGOs succeed at all, it is often due to the strengths of larger, secular organizations.

Conversely, proponents of FBNGOs argue that such criticisms fail to realize that many of the most effective NGOs are in fact faith based—including Habitat for Humanity. According to the organization’s website, “The concept that grew into Habitat for Humanity International was born at Koinonia Farm, a small, interracial, Christian community outside of Americus, Georgia. Koinonia Farm was founded in 1942 by farmer and biblical scholar Clarence Jordan.” In this way, it is often hard to tease apart the contributions of small and large organizations—much less those that are or are not faith-based.

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Finally, opponents argue that the money invested in FBNGOs’ initiatives may not be well spent. Because they lack many of the resources and distribution networks of larger, secular organizations, FBNGOs are often much less efficient, spending money on infrastructure instead of those in need. They also spend too much on too few, as supported by a 2006 study by Deryke Belshaw, Director of the Institute for Development Research at Oxford University, who argues that “accepting the continuing dependence of a minority of communities on external aid, with no resources left to be rolled into untouched communities, is depressingly common behavior” among FBNGOs. 11

However, proponents argue that because it is a government-funded initiative, it requires extreme oversight and auditing, making it impossible for organizations to squander funds inefficiently. As a result, as early as 2001 the Center for Public Justice (a nonpartisan think tank dedicated to researching public policy) found that “[t]here is some direct and much indirect evidence that faith-based agencies are, in fact, more effective in enabling people to overcome persistent social ills.” 12 Such evidence would imply that it is the non-faith based organizations that should be scrutinized for efficiency.

Therefore, given that we have established that FBNGOs are legal, effective and fiscally responsible, now is the time we need greater investment of federal funding of such organizations. Due to the current state of the federal budget, we can no longer afford not to invest in such organizations.

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