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Fractured Fairy Tales: Slightly Twisted Invention And Arrangement.

Abstract:
In many lower-level courses, including writing and speaking courses, one goal is to improve students' skills of invention and arrangement. Invention is the classical rhetoric term for the process of selecting what concepts, ideas, or information to include in a message. Arrangement refers to the process of organizing that information into a coherent, persuasive message. The ability to artistically select and organize ideas separates skilled writers and speakers from novices. [From the intro paragraph]

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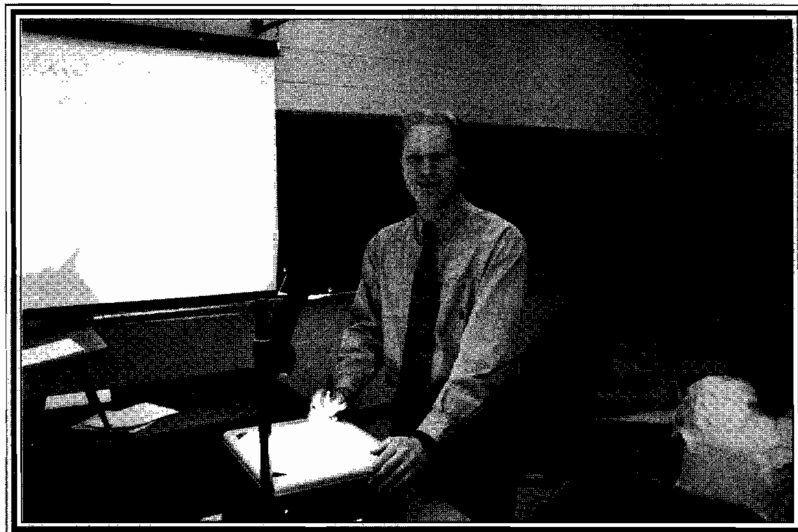
Fractured Fairy Tales: Slightly Twisted Invention and Arrangement

Norman Clark, Communication

Introduction

In many lower-level courses, including writing and speaking courses, one goal is to improve students' skills of invention and arrangement. Invention is the classical rhetoric term for the process of selecting what concepts, ideas, or information to include in a message. Arrangement refers to the process of organizing that information into a coherent, persuasive message. The ability to artistically select and organize ideas separates skilled writers and speakers from novices. One tool that can help students improve both aspects of their communication is a strong outline.



Dr. Clark introduces the elements of a fairy tale.

Most students will understand at least the concept of outlining. But many students, if pressed, will claim to have a deep and abiding hatred for I.'s and a)'s. Unfortunately, this hatred often results in a deep and abiding inability to organize their thoughts into a persuasive message. I came up with this rather twisted activity to draw their attention to the significance of the selection and arrangement of ideas in all forms of communication. Essentially, the activity involves **creating opening arguments in a twisted fairy-tale trial:** for example, charging the Three Little Pigs with insurance fraud (sure the wolf blew your house down!). Students in my classes have consistently found it to be their favorite class activity. I usually position this exercise early in the semester, after students have read a chapter on organization and outlining. This activity takes about **thirty-five minutes** (longer if you do more debriefing) of the fifty-minute period, and I will provide rough time guides in the steps below. I start the session by talking for fifteen minutes about basic outlining principles such as subordination and coordination. Then the fun begins.

The Exercise

1. Announce the activity. I begin setting up the exercise by saying something like the following: "To better understand organization, we are going to do an activity called 'Fractured Fairy Tales.' What we will do is pick a fairy tale that nearly everyone in the class knows, and then twist it. We are going to charge one of the characters in the fairy tale with a crime, a crime that you would not expect from a normal version of the fairy tale."

2. Get suggestions from students for possible twisted criminal cases. I usually list them on the board, then let the class vote for which one they will "take to court." You will probably need to "prime the creative pump" by offering some potential cases, such as charging the Seven Dwarfs with the attempted murder of Snow White; charging Humpty Dumpty with public intoxication (a favorite of college students); charging the Three Bears with contributing to the delinquency of a minor; or charging the Woodsman with poaching (or out-of-season wolf hunting). This usually takes about **five minutes.**

3. Break the students into groups. I select half of the groups to be prosecuting attorneys and the other half to be defending attorneys. It usually works best to have at least four groups (two prosecutor/defender sets) so you can compare them later. Students tend to work together better and come up with more creative ideas if the size of each group stays below five.

4. Put some basic "facts" of the case on the board. This is the baseline information that all groups will use. Here I try to stick to the original fairy tale as much as possible. It is often interesting to see the cultural variations that crop up at this stage. I tell the groups that this is only the very raw data for the case, and that they will have to go out and gather (creatively invent) the other information they need to prosecute or defend. This usually takes very little time, around **three minutes.**

5. Tell the groups to prepare their opening arguments. I give each group a transparency sheet and an overhead marker to write up their outline. They are told to put together a rough outline of how they would either defend or prosecute the case. With a little encouragement, students will often come up with the wildest arguments for defending or accusing the alleged criminal. I encourage them to invent their own informants, circumstantial evidence, witnesses, or anything else to back up their case. I ask them to follow principles of outlining when they write up their case on the transparency, being sure to subordinate and coordinate, and to use proper form (I., A., etc.). The groups can sometimes get bogged down (or overly creative) at this point, so it is often neces-

sary to push them to work as quickly as possible. This stage can take up a lot of time if you aren't careful. I usually try to get them to finish in **seven minutes.**

6. Go over the outlines one at a time. Since they are written on overhead transparencies, it is easy to show the rest of the class what each group did. I usually end up with at least one good example of correct outlining form, and several bad ones. This will probably take **five minutes.** If I have extra time and have some particularly active students, I sometimes have them deliver the argument as a short speech. Often students will get quite competitive at this point, claiming that their case was better than the opposition's, without really being able to explain why. This sets up the next crucial stage of this exercise: debriefing.

Debriefing

I always hope to have **fifteen minutes** left at this point, but it is often only ten. One of the best ways to start is by asking students to pick which argument is the most persuasive, based just on its organization. Then ask them why, which leads nicely into the following topics.

1. Organization. I single out positive examples where information was placed into categories, subordinated and coordinated, arranged in a logical order. I also point out where misplaced information should have been placed. This is also a good time to talk about the number of points as well, pointing out the benefits of picking a small number (but more than one!) of main points.

> "You cannot teach a man anything; you can only help him to find it within himself."
> —Galileo

2. Outlining Form. Even though students often claim to know how to outline, it is almost always necessary to clarify how to correctly format an outline. Concepts such as only one idea per point, coordination and subordination styles, and the need for more than one sub-point can easily be demonstrated by examples here. I try not to get too detailed at this point because students can feel threatened by it, although it is a good opportunity to point out the usefulness (and limitations) of formal outlines.

3. Generic Constraints. One team inevitably lays out its case in something resembling "proper" legal form, with main points such as "I. Circumstantial Evidence," "II. Witnesses," "III. Alibi," etc.; or "I. Motive," "II. Opportunity," "III. Circumstantial Evidence," etc. These are typically the most clearly organized as well. This sets up a discussion about generic constraints, how they help speakers and writers organize, how they help audiences and readers comprehend the message, and how they limit and constrain information as well.

4. Selection (or Invention). I try to always have two prosecution and two defense cases to compare. This allows me to point out how even though all groups started with the same data, they went in very different directions with what they had. Students are very quick to figure out which selections made the most sense and were the most persuasive. I also ask them why some information was left out—or point out why some should have been left out because it was irrelevant or damaging. It is usually quite an eye-opener for students to see that the same data, sometimes even expressed in the same way, can be used to argue completely different points.

Depending on the level of the students, I will try to explore some other points. This exercise works well as an example for several other key concepts in a wide range of courses, although given the time constraints I invariably have to bring them up at a later date.

5. Cultural Knowledge. Did all students know the fairy tale that was tried? What variations were present? Did people of different races/classes/regions have significant differences?

6. Cultural Stereotypes. What stereotypes about crime came out in the outlines? What can students learn about their own views of crime, criminals, and punishment in our society?

7. "Original" Fairy Tales. What were the cultural/political/societal underpinnings of the original version of the story? What alterations have been made to the fairy tale over time?

8) "Why is twisting a fairy tale so much fun?" With higher level students, I usually lead them into a discussion about the importance of audience resistance to hegemonic discourses. Many students do not recognize how powerfully fairy tales shape their own worldview. Nor do they realize the importance of "playing" with cultural ideas. This exercise can be a nice springboard for a discussion on how worldviews can be shaped, altered, and sometimes transformed through something as "simple" as a story.

Implications/Value

I have already touched on several reasons why I find this activity valuable: low technological requirements, low time investment, and adaptability to a range of students and subjects. I want to briefly touch on a few other reasons.

First, I have found that students really enjoy this activity. Postmodern theorists might offer a whole range of reasons. My experience has been that students really get into twisting fairy tales around, in putting the Three Little Pigs on trial for insurance fraud, in letting their creativity run free and dreaming up such evidence as notarized affidavits of inspection and canceled checks. It is often outrageously funny.

Charging Humpty Dumpty with public intoxication was so uproarious that the instructor next door came to find out what all the racket was about.

Second, this activity can be extremely enriching. It allows students to put a wide range of skills into practice. It engages students on a variety of levels, and the number of levels can be increased if you let the activity take up more of the class period (for instance, having students deliver their arguments as a speech). Finally, it gives the instructor a set of student-generated examples to draw upon for a wide range of topics. I use the examples from this activity throughout the semester, even when discussing some very serious topics such as crime and prejudice.

Conclusion

I have had great success with this activity. Many students said that it was their favorite activity, and I have seen genuine improvement in outlining and organization after this activity. I hope you find it useful, and I am sure you will find it enjoyable. And by the way, Humpty's yolk-alcohol level was .3, so do not try to tell me he was pushed off that wall by a jealous guard in the king's army. On the other hand, if it was not a set-up, how come no medical personnel were summoned, only *horses?*

Students create an opening argument for a twisted fairy-tale trial.

> "Good teaching is an act of generosity, a whim of the wanton muse, a craft that may grow with practice, and always a risky business. It is, to speak plainly, a maddening mystery."
>
> —Parker Palmer