

Postgraduate Writing: Maintaining Clarity and Focus

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Topic:	The argument of fact: creating and maintaining a clear, concise and logical structure for academic text.
Focus:	An auto-ethnographic analysis of argument structure using the argument of fact. Discussion of transferability: how well does this work for your own writing?

1. The argument of fact

The first modern linguistic analysis of the *argument of fact* that I can identify is by Corbett and Connors (1965, reference here pointing to 4th Edition, 1999: 28; reproduced in Bishop, 2004: 243-4). They have identified the Latin origins of three questions that were asked when identifying a subject under discussion. The later reference to Huckin and Olsen (1991: 79) is where the actual term “argument of fact” appears.

Corbett and Connors cite the example:

An sit (whether a thing is)—a question of fact
Quid sit (what is it?)—a question of definition
Quale sit (what kind is it?)—a question of quality

In a murder trial, for instance, the case for the prosecution and the defense could turn on one of these issues:

1. Did Brutus, as has been alleged, kill Caesar? (whether a thing is)
2. If it is granted that Brutus *did* kill Caesar, was the act murder or self-defense? (What is it?)
3. If it was in fact murder, was Brutus justified in murdering Caesar? (what kind is it?)”

Huckin and Olsen (1991: 79) offer more pragmatic insights for the end of the twentieth century:

“Arguments of fact can be derived from three sources:

1. Questions or subarguments of existence
2. Questions or subarguments of definition
3. Questions or subarguments of quality

[...]

Subargument of existence:

The company is discharging material into public waters.

↓

Subargument of definition

The materials being discharged are regulated by law and are dangerous.

↓

Subargument of quality

The materials being discharged are present in public waters in illegal and unsafe amounts.”

2. Using the argument of fact

The argument of fact is an abstract concept that is not identified or labelled in a piece of writing, but at the same time it can be used for clear and focused structuring of an argument that makes text easily readable. Creating such a focus in your writing is something we often do subconsciously in topics we know well and it is possible to assume that such clarity will be transferable to other written contexts. This is not always true however, and we may run up against obstacles in articulating ideas clearly, causing some texts to appear much more complex and convoluted than others.

This approach to writing can be used to either plan argument structures as we draft them, or it can be used as an editing technique with completed text. It can be very revealing in terms of how we put ideas down on paper assuming that others will be able to read them clearly and this method can be used to monitor the flow of writing in relation to structure and readability. In my own writing for instance, it was only after teaching this issue for more than three years that I suddenly realised one day that I was consciously checking my paragraphs as I was writing them—and finding considerable faults with my own structures.

Let's stand aside from the main issue for a moment and see what happened in the previous paragraphs. When I wrote these paragraphs (9th November, 2005) I was consciously structuring them to follow the initial pattern of the argument of fact, but did not label them to avoid interference with the reading process. I then pasted the paragraphs to page 2 to show them as an example, and added The (E, which is *existence*), (D, which is *definition*) and (Q, which is *quality*) to them.

(E) The argument of fact is an abstract concept that is not identified or labelled in a piece of writing, but at the same time it can be used for clear and focused structuring of an argument that makes text easily readable. **(D)** Creating such a focus in your writing is something we often do subconsciously in topics we know well and it is possible to assume that such clarity will be transferable to other written contexts. **(Q)** This is not always true however, and we may run up against obstacles in articulating ideas clearly, causing some texts to appear much more complex and convoluted than others.

(E) This approach to writing can be used to either plan argument structures as we draft them, or it can be used as an editing technique with completed text. **(D)** It can be very revealing in terms of how we put ideas down on paper assuming that others will be able to read them clearly and this method can be used to monitor the flow of writing in relation to structure and readability. **(Q)** In my own writing for instance, it was only after teaching this issue for more than three years that I suddenly realised one day that I was consciously checking my paragraphs as I was writing them—and finding considerable faults with my own structures.

- Look at these two paragraphs again, this time noting the sentence breaks within some of the sub-arguments:

(E x 2) The argument of fact is an abstract concept that is not identified or labelled in a piece of writing. At the same time it can be used for clear and focused structuring of an argument that makes text easily readable. **(D x 2)** Creating such a focus in your writing is something we often do subconsciously in topics we know well. It is possible to assume that such clarity will be transferable to other written contexts. **(Q x 2)** This is not always true however, and we may run up against obstacles in articulating ideas clearly. This causes some texts to appear much more complex and convoluted than others.

(E x 2) This approach to writing can be used to plan argument structures as we draft them. It can also be used as an editing technique with completed text. (D x 2) It can be very revealing in terms of how we put ideas down on paper with the assumption that others will be able to read them clearly. This method can be used to monitor the flow of writing in relation to structure and readability. (Q x 2) In my own writing for instance, it was only after teaching this issue for more than three years that I suddenly realised one day that I was consciously checking my paragraphs as I was writing them. I now found considerable faults with my own structures.

- Do these shorter sentences enhance clarity, or do they disrupt flow by creating a stop – start effect in the writing?

What we are looking at with the argument of fact is the creation and recycling of a structure that helps to focus what we say or write. It is not a new structure as it appears to have its roots in Latin rhetoric (from an earlier reading I had identified it as coming from Greek rhetoric, but this stems from a misleading sequence of references to Aristotle that previews a discussion of the argument of fact, but fails to identify it as being of Latin origin—it later states a different model on building a case as being of Greek *and* Roman origin, so I suppose we had better settle for the idea that the argument of fact may in fact predate both traditions). Linguistic archaeology aside, it is this act of focusing that really does help to create a clear, effective argument, whether you have a concise and factual or dense and descriptive style of writing.

Stop here. Have a look at the last paragraph. Can you see the same pattern running through it? It may be more difficult to analyse because of the increasing complexity of the continuing argument, but if you include the information in parentheses as part of the definition, it still has only three main sentences. However, if you delete the information in parentheses (which should always be possible as it is only there to add weight), there is a direct movement from the single mention of “Latin rhetoric” to the issue of “linguistic archaeology”. A problem of adequate reference emerges here as the mere mention of Latin rhetoric does not justify any claim to linguistic archaeology.

(E) Stop again. Try it again with the paragraph you've just read. This one is much more fragmented by the instructions at the beginning and the need to justify what is going on. **(D)** What is beginning to emerge is the idea that any of the individual ideational units (as opposed to sentences) can be formulated through more than one sentence, or that more than one of them could actually appear within a single sentence.

Now, I had planned to end that paragraph as it is and move on, but closer reading tells me it has no "quality", so I will add...

(Q) As such, the way that we represent ideas through paragraphs is not an issue of writing paragraphs, but how we create clarity of representation (how the writer writes) and interpretation (how the reader reads).

N.B. I could have avoided that last "unit" (conveniently wrapped as a single sentence) and nobody would have noticed, but the essential quality that creates the discussion and analysis of academic writing would have been missing.

3. How others are using it

One of the problems with the argument of fact is that few people analyse text in this way. The published sources (Corbett & Connors, 1999, 4th Ed.—1st published 1965; Huckin & Olsen, 1991; Bishop, 2004) that refer to it only refer to it as a method of establishing a thesis statement or opening an argument. To my knowledge nobody has yet identified the fact that it is recycled throughout a text and this is one of my own research interests.

Evidence (through student feedback) suggests that continued use does create a clear focused style of writing. We tend to use this subconsciously and we tend to "read" it subconsciously and I would hazard a claim here that many editors do not know this pattern exists. What readers do know however, is when they are being presented with a good, clear argument; how to construct it is another matter entirely.

My main piece of advice is that you don't have to write with this pattern in mind as it could be very distracting, but when you read through your work to prepare a second draft, you may be able to use it as an editing tool. In this way you will be able to identify where and when to break paragraphs to create that clarity of focus and to create a good layout on the page. Eventually it can become a built in editorial checker through which you are able to monitor your writing as you actually type it: that's how this document was written today, so as such this is a deliberate rhetorical experiment.

A word of warning though. When you do go back and start editing your work, make sure that after deleting or editing sentences, you read through the text again to see if this pattern is still evident. Reference to previous or subsequent ideas is often damaged by rapid editing without final proofreading. Good, clear writing sometimes just happens, but on most occasions is the result of significant editing and redrafting.

References

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