Eng301, The Classical Argument

What is the "classical argument"?

▶ The "classical argument" is the common name for the style and mode of argument introduced and used by ancient western cultures and societies. It was introduced and developed by the Greeks sometime in the eighth century B.C.E. or earlier, and was further developed by the Romans and cultures and societies in the western hemisphere, including the European Renaissance.

▶ One of the characteristics that makes it a "western" style and mode is the introduction of the main claim or idea early in the argument, often in the opening paragraph or opening minutes of a speech.

▶ Another common characteristic is the inclusion of a "rebuttal" of opposing views, typically before the conclusion.

  ▶ Cultures and societies east of Greece and Rome developed their own types and modes of argument, such as the eight-legged argument used for centuries in China.

Definition of the "classical argument" continued

▶ The label "classical argument" suggests an entire field of argument. At the beginning of chapter 11 of *Essentials of* Argument, in a section titled "Classical Organization of Arguments," Nancy Wood qualifies this as a mode of arrangement:

  ▶ "In classical times, organization, or *arrangement*, was one of the five canons of *rhetoric*. These canons identified the important aspects of building an argument to which every orator of the time needed to pay attention" (237).

Aristotle (384-322 b.c.e.) and Cicero (106-43 b.c.e.)

- According to Aristotle in Book 1 of *Rhetoric*, "Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion . . . rhetoric we look upon as the power of observing the means of persuasion on almost any subject presented to us; and that is why we say that, in its technical character, it is not concerned with any special or definite class of subjects" (I.2).

- Three hundred years after Aristotle, Cicero observed of rhetoric in book 1 of *De Inventione*, "the duty of this faculty appears to be to speak in a manner suitable to persuading men; the end of it is to persuade by language" (1.V).

  - *Aristotle and Cicero were but two of many in Greek and Roman cultures and societies who discussed and theorized about rhetoric. Rhetoric in the "ancient" world was a complex process and field of study for all advanced and advancing cultures and societies.*

Quintilian (35-100 c.e.)-

▶ Published in 95 c.e., Quintilian's *Institutio Oratio* examines rhetoric from a modern Roman perspective, when the Roman Empire was at its height. In addition to defining rhetoric as the "science of rhetoric," Quintilian laid out the "modern" modes of arrangement based on several hundred years of existing scholarship.

▶ The "classical argument" therefore was an evolving model for organization that transitioned from oratory to writing and later became a set of building blocks which could be moved around, depending on one's audience and purpose.

Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and the classical model of arrangement

- The principles used by Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian indicate a need by rhetoricians and their audiences for a logical means of structuring and presenting arguments. All three discuss in their respective texts the many parts an argument can have or should have, and the most logical order to arrange these parts.

- These include the concepts of claim, proof, and refutation on which modern argument is built. Concession was considered a part of rhetoric but its usage has shifted in the past century as rhetoricians and theorists seek ways to mitigate the conflict inherent in arguments about topics people feel passionately about.

Refutation, rebuttal, and the Classical Argument

▶ The classical argument depends on a key feature that other forms of writing may not have: a refutation of those who disagree with us, or who may disagree with us.

▶ Aristotle emphasizes how important it is to logically consider both sides of the argument to show which is the most valid.

▶ Mauk and Metz note that a "rebuttal" is a statement of "circumstances which could invalidate the claim" (83).

▶ Wood provides a more qualified definition when she states that, "A rebuttal establishes what is wrong, invalid, or unacceptable about an argument and may also present counterarguments or new arguments that represent entirely different perspectives or points of view on the issue" (106).

▶ The common theme or connecting idea in all of these may be found in the idea of considering and presenting a response to others' views. Modern argument modifies classical responses by accepting, if not inviting, the possibility that we do not disagree about everything, and that we may, as part of refutation or rebuttal, concede the validity of others' views.

Arrangement/Organization

The Classical Argument was traditionally arranged in six parts:

- Introduction: presents the topic and an attention getter, and sets up the statement of background. Note: one does NOT present a thesis statement in the introduction in the Classical Argument model.

- Statement of Background: provides background information and sets up the context for the presentation of position. This part may include definitions of key terms, acronyms, and important concepts. Readers should understand the context and situation for the author's position on the issue by the end of this part. It may be part of the Introduction or in a separate paragraph.

- Statement of Position: a detailed presentation of the author's position on the issue (i.e. a detailed thesis), including an outline of the author's main points and an explanation of the author's position. This part should be separate from the introduction, but may be combined with the statement of background. An effective Statement of Position spends several sentences outlining the author's position.

- Support (appeals and evidence): after the statement of position the author works to support their position with appeals and evidence. Each paragraph in this part should have one main point and development of appeals and/or evidence to support that point.

- Refutation/rebuttal: in this section the author identifies others who may disagree with the author's position and attempts to counter their views. Here you anticipate possible disagreement by addressing opposing views.

- Conclusion: lastly, the author restates their position, makes final appeals, and offers solutions if a problem has been identified.

Other ways to arrange/organize

- In modern argument we may follow different patterns of organization, such as a chronological order if time is a key part of our argument, a focus on a problem and its solution, a focus on arguing as rebuttal (our main claim is a rebuttal and our support is the support for that rebuttal).

- We might choose to organize point by point, such as:

  - Point 1

    - Claim, support, rebuttal for this point

  - Point 2

    - Claim, support, rebuttal for this point

- Or we might include concession and compromise.

  - Claim, support, concession, rebuttal, conclusion.

- How do we decide how to arrange/organize? By determining what will be the most effective for our audience and purpose. In all approaches we still need to present a clear main argument, effective support, address others' views, and conclude with a strong final point, call to action, or means to resolve the problem.

Works Cited

- Aristotle. *Rhetoric*. 350 c.e.

- Cicero. *De Inventione*.

- Mauk, John and John Metz. *Inventing Arguments Fourth Edition*. Boston: Cengage Learning, 2016.

- Quintilian. *Institutio Oratio*.

- Wood, Nancy V. *Essentials of Argument*. Boston, Columbus, Indianapolis, et al: Prentice Hall, 2011.