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Why is Writing a Paper Like Climbing a Mountain?

Using Outrageous Analogies to Teach Writing

by

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As a sociology professor at a small liberal arts college, I spend many hours in my office each semester helping students plan or revise their papers. In these individual conferences I try to impress on my students the social nature of writing. Just chanting the exhortation, "Remember your reader" doesn't seem to be sufficient, however. I find it works better to shape my advice into vivid analogies. For example, to help students understand the logic of organizing a paper, I sometimes find it useful to compare the relationship of reader and writer to that of a mountain climber and a guide.

An academic paper is something like a hike up a mountain, I begin, with the writer as guide and readers as members of the climbing party. And the various sections of a paper--introduction, body, and conclusion--are like the different stages of an expedition. The introduction corresponds to the moment the hikers stand at the bottom of the trail contemplating the mountains before them. The guide's job is to point out a particular summit to attempt and then to motivate the hikers to accept the challenge. From the start, then, the writer must let readers know where the paper is headed--what will be the point (or should we say peak?). If the guide hasn't figured out a destination, the trip can't even begin.

Furthermore, in introducing our main point we as writers should be setting a problem before the reader, a metaphorical mountain to climb. Writers can use the introduction to engage their readers' interest by raising a question, or by uncovering a contradiction in what people ordinarily think about a subject. By the end of the paper we will resolve this central problem, so that the reader can really get the point, understanding the ramifications of the paper's argument and sharing our sense of completion of an intellectual journey. But to attain that satisfying resolution, we must first pique (!) the reader's interest in following us up the trail.

Stretching the analogy a little further, I counsel students not to waste time in introductions commenting on irrelevant bits of scenery but to get right to the point themselves. Thus, I discourage "funnel" introductions, which comment on the general scene by reviewing the

last thousand years of mountaineering history or something equally lofty and abstract. Rather than standing around admiring the cloud formations, we need to propose a path and get the expedition moving. The guide should know that wider views await us higher up.

The body of the paper is like the climb itself. Every step we take should move us closer to our conclusion. We may need to work our way over foothills and up winding trails, but the guide's goal should be to get the climbing party to the top as expeditiously as possible, avoiding the side paths of irrelevant arguments and the underbrush of wordy academic prose.

In the body of a paper, a good writer, like a good guide, needs to direct attention different ways at different times. Sometimes, guides find spots to pause and look out at the panoramic vista from valley to summit. Other times, guides must warn hikers to focus their view downward on significant details, such as sharp rocks in the path or delicate wild flowers. Similarly, good writers must alternate between the far-reaching generalizations of their argument and the vivid particulars that bring these ideas down to earth. Thus, good writers will frequently switch levels of abstraction, sometimes from sentence to sentence. Too many abstract statements, and readers lose their footing. Too many details, and they lose track of the goal. An experienced guide points out the important sights both high and low to keep the expedition moving upward

At the conclusion of the paper, we can feel the exhilaration of reaching the mountain top. The paper's thesis, which intrigued readers from the start, should finally make perfect sense. When readers have followed the argument all the way to its culmination, we can look back down from the summit to the start and celebrate our shared accomplishment as we retrace our steps.

Our conclusion however, should do more than merely sum up the argument. As writers, we can take advantage of this new elevation, our new perspective on the world, to expand our focus and reexamine in wider context the surrounding terrain. We may want to direct our readers' gaze to the other side of the mountain and what lies beyond. Sights hidden at the beginning of our journey may now be clearly visible. Our conclusion may even bring forward some entirely new idea, some new insight, perhaps one which now appears as a logical extension of the path already taken.

By this point in an individual conference, some students are helping me push the metaphors to ever more absurd extremes, while others are smiling secretly at their professor's evident dottiness. Still, I feel free in these conferences to indulge in fanciful analogies I would never dare to put on paper (well, hardly ever), much less present to a class. Like how making an

argument resembles flying a kite: your generalizations need to take flight but without a string of specific details to hold them down they'll just float away. Or how a two-page paper is like a 30-second commercial: it's over in a flash so that every word and image has got to help **sell** the product. And the outrageous analogies seem to work. My students' second drafts are almost always much better than the first. Perhaps, in the end, the key is the individual attention, not the verbal playfulness, but a light touch can't hurt when your job is to guide students up the trail to better writing.