Using Movies to Create Key Skills in Structuring an Essay

David Coad & Michal Reznizki

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Overview

In this activity students will explore how to organize and structure their essays by looking at specific movies and their structure. The purpose of this activity is to help students consider the rhetorical thinking process that will help them organize any essay. The activity includes group work, a mini-lecture, and whole-class discussion.

Time Commitment

30-45 minutes

Materials

Materials include a list of popular movies (optional), and students’ recently-written draft of a paper (on any topic).

Activity Process

- Students will have their drafts ready either as hard copies or online.
  - Option 1: Students work in groups of 3-4 in a group. The group chooses a specific movie and discusses its structure using specific questions handed by the instructor.
  - Option 2: Students choose a movie off a short list that they want to talk about. The instructor would then divide students into groups based on which movie they chose.
- Once the group has chosen a movie to focus on, students discuss the following questions (10-15min):
  - What would you say is the general movie
structure? (beginning, middle, and end)?
- What makes each part effective?
- How does the movie pull people in at the beginning?
- How are characters introduced? Who is introduced first, and why?
- What is the order of major events? Why do you think these events are introduced in this specific order?
- What can you say about the order of the different scenes/parts of the movie?

- Next, the instructor leads a whole class discussion, asking students what they observed in their movie structures. The instructor may take notes on the board to synthesize ideas. They may also discuss connections between students’ observations and essay structure, including ideas such as:
  - Essays, like movies, have a beginning, middle and end.
  - Essays hook the audience’s attention at the beginning.
  - Authors who are cited or ideas that are brought up, like characters, need to be introduced in a thoughtful order.
  - Use of rhetorical appeals, identification, logic, emotion, making characters credible or unreliable.

- Going back to the same groups, instructors encourage students to see themselves as movie producers of their essays in trying to structure and organize their drafts.
- Finally, students either participate in peer review, or work on their own papers, using this analogy as a guiding lens for the feedback. Students use this guiding question: What can you do/change in the structure of your essay that would make it more effective/appealing to your audience?
Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity will:

- Gain an understanding of essay structure and organization
- Think critically about how to organize and structure their essays
- Become more aware of rhetorical elements that make essay structure more effective
- Develop a clear understanding of how audience awareness impacts their writing

Learning Accommodations

- This activity can be done in a synchronous or asynchronous online course. In the latter case, instructors would rely on small-group discussion boards for the first part, synchronous video calls or whole class discussion board for the second part, and LMS peer review functionality for the final step.
- Students may choose two different forms of note taking for the group activity: on paper or on their laptop. The same applies for their drafts.