A User's Guide to the Composition Pyramid
Susannah Brietz Monta, Department of English, University of Wisconsin

The composition pyramid is a way to organize the core elements of writing in graphic form. Its fundamental concept is simple. The USDA food pyramid sets forth the ideal diet in a series of levels that indicate how many servings of different sorts of foods we should have each day. For instance, the bottom level of the USDA pyramid suggests that a healthy diet should include six to eight servings of bread and/or grains per day, while the top level represents the USDA's recommendation for limited servings of fats, oils, and sweets. The composition pyramid operates in the same way, roughly; it sets forth the elements of writing in a prioritized structure. In selecting the terms for the pyramid, Anthony Monta and I tried to choose terms which were both flexible enough to be applicable to different genres of writing, but were also specific enough to give students a useful vocabulary for thinking about writing and responding to writing.

Those terms came in handy as I was composing this essay and was trying to identify what exactly I wanted it to do. Thus, it seems easiest to me to explain the direction of this essay as well as the pyramid's basic terms—*audience, purpose, focus,* and *voice—*simultaneousl*y,* by defining the way this essay uses these terms. First, I've written this piece largely for an audience of new English 100 instructors, though repeat offenders are certainly welcome readers as well. My purpose is basically to explain to new instructors some ways to use the pyramid in their courses. I'll focus on six principal ways that I use it, so that the voice shaping this essay draws largely from my own experience (here I use the term "voice" to mean "perspective," more or less, though of course the term can and probably should be taught to include ideas of *ethos,* of tone, etc.).

As is perhaps obvious from the way I've outlined the terms here, the composition pyramid's language is flexible enough to suit a variety of writing situations; thus, although that language is not geared toward any one genre of writing, it can be adapted fairly easily as needed. For example, in English 100, where the focus is on argumentative discourse, the term "purpose" can be used to demystify the concept of "thesis" by relating that often ethereal idea to the author's concrete motivation: getting her reader to agree with a certain proposition to which the author, for reasons based on logic and solid analysis of sound evidence, is committed. "Thesis" then becomes a purposeful term, not just an arbitrary requirement for academic argumentation. Similarly, audience, voice, and focus can be adapted to argumentative issues to suit the course's goals.

I use the composition pyramid as one of the first handouts I discuss with my students and I also refer to the handout throughout the semester for a variety of uses, to which I'll now turn.

1. Teaching critical reading skills

As teachers of English 100, we are all committed to teaching students how to write arguments. It's been my experience that in order to get students to write well-structured and convincing arguments, we must simultaneously teach them how to be analytical readers of arguments—to read arguments for structure, soundness, persuasiveness, etc. The composition pyramid can help students learn to identify

the major elements of an argumentative essay. *In my course, I ask students to take notes on the basic elements of the argumentative pieces that they read. Those notes are organized by the terms of the*

composition pyramid and are a good way of getting students to realize how different levels of the pyramid interact and contribute to the building of an overall argument. The notes also help prepare them for the kinds of analyses they'll need to provide for each other in the course of their group work.

2. Teaching drafting processes

I've found that many of my students enter my course with fairly traditional ideas about sequencing in writing courses. They expect, that is, to build up gradually from smaller writing units to, at long last, a full essay. [English 100, however, . . .] relies upon a more radical sense of sequencing in that students learn about the elements of writing in the context of producing full, meaningful essays. Rather than asking students to produce good sentences, then good paragraphs, and then a good essay, we ask students to write a fairly lengthy initial draft in order to discover, deepen, and develop the major rhetorical elements of their own pieces—focus, purpose, audience, and voice. As the composition pyramid itself inverts traditional wisdom about sequencing, it can be helpful in teaching students this different (for many of them) way of writing. The upper elements of the pyramid then become not so much a set of rules which a student must master before producing bits of writing, leading to larger bits of writing, but rather a series of rhetorical choices to be made at the later or polishing stages of writing, choices dependent upon a paper's core elements.

3. Coaching draft responses and priorities in groups

My experience has been that many students enter composition courses with a sense that all instructor comments on their papers are to be equally weighed, and thus that comments regarding, say, a few comma splices are to be considered as important to respond to as, for example, comments about the appropriate scope or focus of the paper. The pyramid helps students rethink and reorder these priorities in service not only of a productive drafting process but also of successful group discussions, without suggesting that upper-level issues are irrelevant or wholly unimportant. Just as the USDA pyramid recommends a certain number of servings of different food groups per day, depending on their nutritional value, instructors can recommend that students spend more time in drafting and in groups on the elements of writing most crucial to a paper's success. *The pyramid can also be used to coach responses across different workshop periods; as the essays progress, for example, instructors can suggest that students are ready to work on second-level issues as a way to refine further the paper's core elements.* Finally, I think that the pyramid structure suggests that stylistic, grammatical, and mechanical issues are important—after all, they are parallel to the USDA's positioning of sweets, and who would deny the importance of sweets?—but simultaneously the pyramid places these issues in proper perspective.

4. Teaching common vocabulary as a set of interactive terms

The composition pyramid is also useful for teaching students common vocabulary in a way which shows the interdependencies between different levels of writing choices. The metaphor of building a pyramid itself suggests that the various elements are interrelated, that they depend structurally upon each other. I like to think of the interactions between terms as a pair of movements. First, lower-level choices *inform* upper-level ones, so that a mid-level issue, such as the choice of an organizational strategy, proceeds from and depends upon larger rhetorical decisions. In turn, upper-level choices constantly *refine* lower-level concerns; stylistic choices, for example, may help to sharpen and define more precisely the way a paper's core concerns are conveyed to its reader. It's my belief that a student who can recognize the links between different writing choices will be able to build early drafts into purposeful and polished essays.
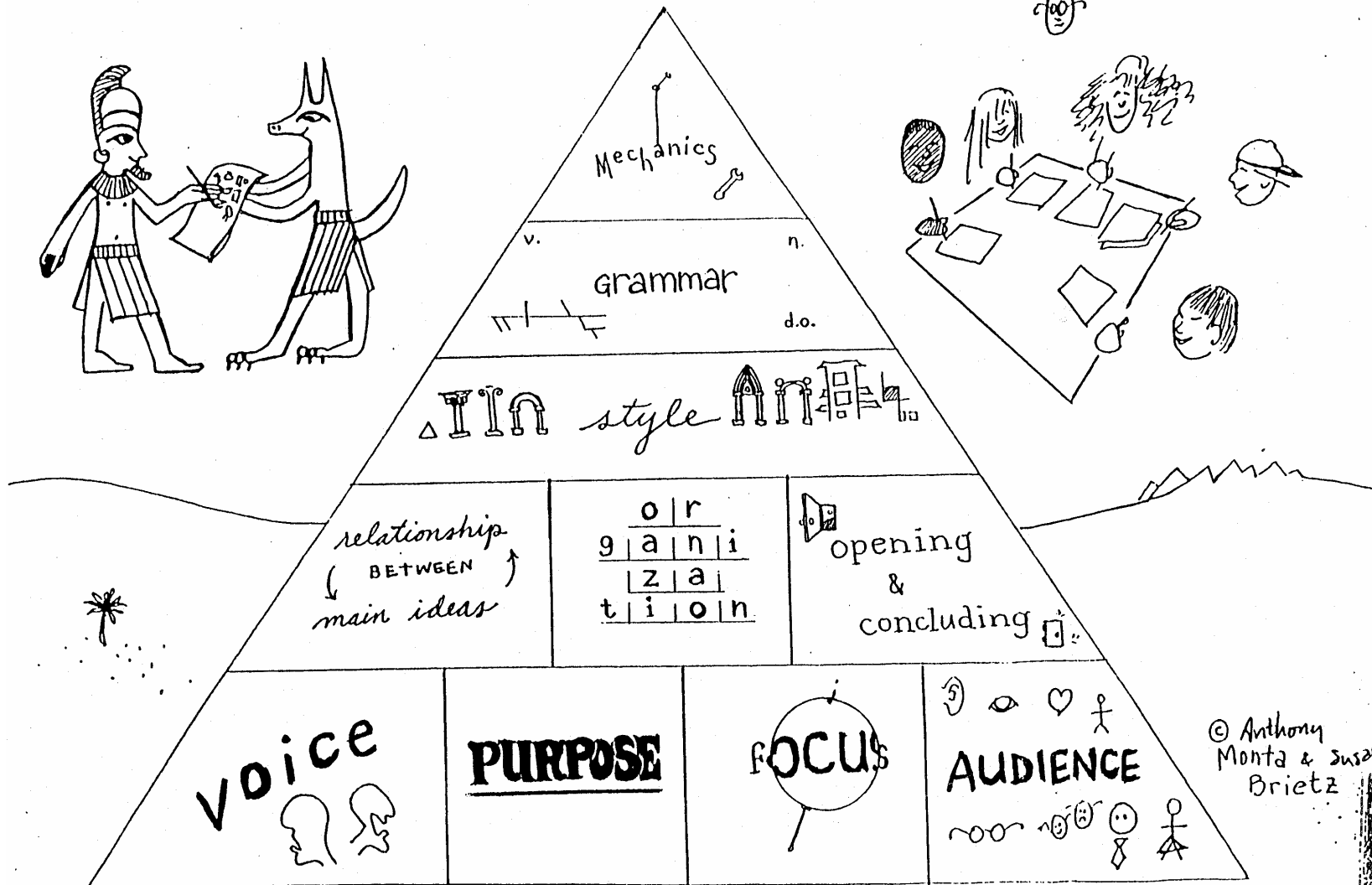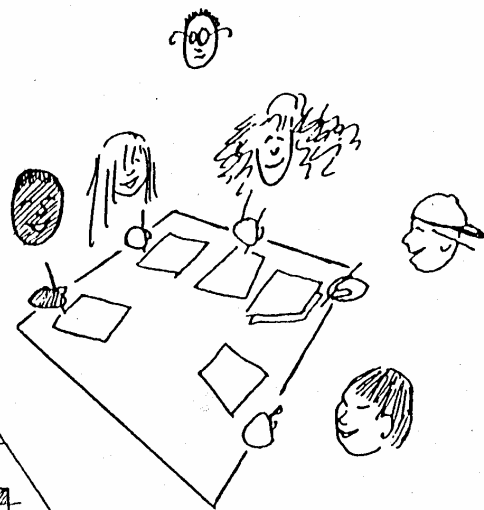
5. Organizing course discussions

The composition pyramid can be used to lend an overall structure to full-class discussions across the course of the semester. Initially, for example, discussions can focus on principal issues; towards the middle of the course, attention can shift to refining focus, audience, voice, and purpose through working on organization, connections between ideas, and opening and concluding strategies; by the end of the course, discussions can center on ways to polish papers and in doing so to carry the paper's basic elements through to its most specific details. I've found that this method of structuring discussions tends to emphasize that polishing issues such as stylistic choices depend upon larger rhetorical concerns; at the same time, because the course never really loses its focus on principal rhetorical issues, later discussions can review those issues as they both shape and are shaped by polishing choices.

6. Explaining grading criteria

Official grades in English 100 are typically deferred until the end of the course, so that students may get the benefits of the extensive revisions which we ask them to do. While my students appreciate the advantages that this grading system gives them, I've found that they are often anxious about the final imposition of grading criteria which, they fear, may be unfamiliar to them. The composition pyramid can be used both to explain grading criteria to students throughout the semester and to link those criteria to classroom activities, thereby insuring consistency in the course's expectations and standards. For many teachers of English 100 a paper's control of lower-level issues is most important in establishing a grade. Thus, papers which struggle with the location and implementation of core rhetorical issues tend to earn lower grades, while papers which more fully develop those core issues tend to earn higher ones; the most successful papers integrate lower-level rhetorical issues throughout the paper's organization, introduction and conclusion, transitional moments, and polishing choices. If students are already treating those core, lower-level issues first and most fully in group discussions, and thus are able to discuss mid- and upper-level issues with regard to how those choices proceed from and refine lower-level concerns, they will already be practicing the criteria by which they will be graded. I feel that by telling my students that I use the composition pyramid to establish my grading priorities and by giving them the opportunity to practice using my grading criteria throughout the semester in their own group discussions and drafting processes, those criteria become clearer to the students and proceed more organically out of the course as a whole.

I'd like to close with a note of caution and with one final plug for the pyramid. The pyramid by itself is not a cure-all; it and its terms must be complicated, extended, and embedded across a wide range of classroom activities in order for students to be able to use it most fully in their development as writers. At the same time, this flexibility is one of its greatest virtues, as it is adaptable to different teaching purposes and styles. Ideally, students too will be able to claim its adaptability as their own, drawing upon the learning environments which we provide in order to learn to write and revise most successfully.

Mechanics

v.   Grammar   n.
                 d.o.

style

relationship BETWEEN main ideas

o r
g a n i
z a
t i o n

opening & concluding

voice   PURPOSE   fOCUS   AUDIENCE

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THE COMPOSITION PYRAMID