Introduction

A rhetorical mode is a strategy—a way or method of presenting a subject—through writing or speech. Some of the better known rhetorical modes are, for example, "argument" and "cause and effect." There are literally dozens, perhaps hundreds, of strategies or methods for presenting subjects; however, the modes are among the most basic. Instructors have used rhetorical modes to teach writing or public speaking since ancient Greek times over two thousand years ago, perhaps longer. Knowing the modes can help us understand the organization—the methodology—of most kinds of writings or other presentations.

The basic modes are presented below in alphabetical order. Though you can study and practice the modes in any order, often it is helpful to start with "Extended Definition" because it's pattern of thought useful when writing the introduction to any paper using the other rhetorical modes. Similarly, you may find "Description" helpful to learn early; not only do many people find this mode easier to use, but also its pattern of thought, too, is used in many other types of papers.

Argument

An "argument" is, simply, an educated guess or opinion, not a simple fact. It is something debatable: "Men have walked on the moon" is a fact, but "People will walk on Venus in the next ten years" is an opinion. Anything that reasonably can be debated is an argument. A simple argument paper usually presents a debatable opinion and then offers supports in favor of it, or sometimes an argument paper will discuss both sides of an issue and then give good reasons for choosing one side over the other. For example, a paper about space flight might argue that humans should not spend large sums of money in sending people into space. The paper might then argue that three good reasons this is true is that there are many poor on our planet, on whom our resources should be spent, that space flight is not as enlightening for humankind as increasing literacy or cultural awareness, and that most of the money being spent on space is for military purposes, which is useless. Another type of argument paper might ask the main idea as a question: "Should the human race spend large sums of money to send people into space?" Then it might argue both sides thoroughly and, finally, choose one side and give strong reasons why this side is best.

A typical argument paper often has what is called a "thesis" structure. It starts with an introduction that offers an interesting opening—a quotation, perhaps, or an interesting story, a statement of the main argument, and sometimes a list of the several reasons (often three, but not necessarily so) to be given in support of this argument. Then, step by step, the reasons are given with supporting details such as quotations, facts, figures, statistics, and/or people's experiences. If the paper is short, there may be just one paragraph per reason. In a longer argument paper, there may be several paragraphs or even several pages per reason. At the end, a conclusion provides a restatement of the main argument and a final interesting quotation or other detail.

In the alternative form, the introduction is much the same, and often starts with an interesting quotation or story, but it offers the main idea as a question and provides the two (or more) possible answers. It may or may not state which answer it will choose in the end. The body is formed by having a section discussing the first possible answer with reasons and details supporting it, the second possible answer and its reasons and supporting details, and a final section in which you choose one of the two answers and give strong reasons why you are doing so. The conclusion once again restates your final choice and offers a final interesting quotation or story.

As with all the other modes, argument is a thinking pattern or skill that is used in a number of types of college papers in shorter form. You will find it in any sentence, paragraph, or section of a paper in which an opinion is expressed, especially when one or more supporting reasons are given for the opinion. Argument is one of the most basic forms of human thinking. When you use argument, you rise above the mere offering of a personal opinion precisely because an argument requires supporting reasons, preferably with specific supporting details, to justify the position you are taking.
Cause and Effect

"Cause and effect" simply means that you start with a subject (an event, person, or object) and then show the causes (reasons) for it, and/or the effects (results) of it. "Cause" means the reasons why or for something, or the source of something. "Effects" simply are results or outcomes. Cause-and-effect writing shows a chain of connected events, each the logical result of the one before it. A simple cause-and-effect paper discusses the chain of events related to a person, event, or object, showing what are the causes and what are the results. For example, a paper about a solar car might describe how it came to be built by an inventor and how he first became interested in solar cars (the causes), and what the results of this solar car might be—how its existence might lead people to take energy efficiency and environmental concerns more seriously and even lead to mass-produced solar cars (effects or results).

Typically a cause-and-effect paper has an introductory paragraph defining or clarifying the subject itself, and stating the nature of the paper (i.e., that your paper is a cause-and-effect paper); a body of several to many paragraphs; and a brief concluding paragraph. Assume, when you write a cause-and-effect paper, that you are explaining events to someone who may know a little about them but never has heard the entire story of how the events are linked by logical cause and effect.

At the end of your cause-and-effect paper, add a final, concluding paragraph. It should summarize, very briefly, the most important cause and effect concerning your subject. And it might offer a final interesting thought or two about the subject.

It also is possible to use cause and effect in less than a full paper. In fact, many explanations and discussions involve cause-and-effect logic in just a paragraph or two, just a sentence, or even within a phrase within a sentence. Anytime you want to answer the question of why something has happened, you are using cause-and-effect logic.

Classification

"Classification" means that a subject—a person, place, event, or object—is identified and broken into parts and sub-parts. This type of paper is slightly more complex than others. For this reason, you might first want to learn to write "Extended Definition," "Comparison/Contrast," and "Description" papers.

For an example of a classification paper, imagine you want to classify a specific student. You might first start by identifying this student by name and briefly defining him or her. Second, you would choose a system by which to classify him: e.g., you could choose a system that would describe his looks, school classes, and after-school activities; or you might choose a biological system and describe him by his physical type, health, blood type, and other biological markings; or, perhaps, you might choose to describe the student by his psychological makeup, his family history, and/or even his medical history. Third, once you have chosen a system, you would then describe the person. As you do so, you would want to show how, in each part of our classification, he is similar to others like him and also how he differs from them—this is the heart of developing lengthy description in a good classification paper, to use comparisons and contrasts with each small element of our classification system.

A standard classification paper starts with a short introduction. In it, you state and briefly define (see "Extended Definition") your subject. You also should state clearly that you intend to classify your subject. In the body of your paper, you describe your subject according to the classification system you have chosen. You choose a system based partly on what your audience expects (e.g., a psychology instructor probably would expect you to classify and describe using a system of psychology; a biology instructor, a system of biology; etc.) and partly on how many classification categories you need to make your paper be well developed (often, the more categories you have, the more length you can develop). Be sure to break down the body into a number of separate paragraphs. Finally, your conclusion briefly reminds your audience of the subject and purpose and, perhaps, ends with a final, interesting sentence or two.

Classification is used as a pattern of thinking, speaking, and writing in shorter forms, too. Whenever you must break down a subject into its separate parts, you are classifying. Classification is almost as basic a way of thinking as are "Cause and Effect" (above) and "Description" (below).
Comparison-Contrast

"Comparison/contrast" means to show how subjects are alike and/or different. A simple comparison/contrast paper often has two subjects and describes how they are alike and then how they differ. For example, a comparison/contrast paper on two forms of weekend entertainment, camping and dancing, might first give details on how both can involve physical skills, friends, and enjoying sounds and sights; then the paper might give details of how camping and popular dancing differ in that one happens in nature and the other in the midst of civilization, one usually is slow and quiet and the other often fast and loud, and one peaceful while the other is rousing. If you are asked to write a comparison/contrast paper on just one subject, you can first compare it to the subjects it is like and then contrast it to the subjects that seem opposite it; several different similarities and several different opposites are acceptable, even helpful, in such a paper. For example, if you were going to write a comparison/contrast paper about airports, you might decide compare them to city bus stations, train stations, and street bus stops. Then you might contrast them with each of these.

In academic writing, comparison/contrast writing sometimes is used to show how two related viewpoints—two ideas or opinions—can be similar but different: for example, in the abortion controversy, some people believe that abortions are wrong; others believe that artificial birth control is wrong. These two positions are similar, but they also are different—leading to different arguments and different results at times. Comparison/contrast also can be useful in analyzing an author's argument by comparing it to someone else's argument (yours or another author's), showing points of similarity and points of difference. For example, if an author argues for a constitutional amendment preventing gender discrimination, you could analyze the argument by comparing and contrasting it to the reasons for other constitutional amendments which already exist.

Start a comparison/contrast paper simply and clearly: tell your readers in a brief introduction what you are going to do (compare, contrast, or both) and what your subject or subjects are. It also may be helpful to offer a very brief definition (see "Extended Definition") of your subject(s). Then write the body. It is a good idea to provide at least one paragraph for each intellectual function you are going to do. For example, you might first have just one paragraph (or one set of paragraphs) that use comparison, then another set that uses just contrast. Instead, you might organize our paragraphs by subject: using the example above of airports, you might have one paragraph or set of paragraphs comparing and contrasting them to city bus stations, a second set comparing and contrasting them to train stations, and a final one to street bus stops. The organization you choose for your body paragraphs should be the one that helps your readers most easily understand your comparisons/contrasts. Your conclusion should be one paragraph containing a summary of your subject and purpose (to compare and/or contrast), and a final interesting sentence or two. The audience you should consider as you plan and then write your paper is anyone who knows all of the subjects you are talking about but who would find it interesting to read about how they are compared/contrasted.

Comparison and contrast both are commonly used in short form in many other types of papers, too. For example, you must use comparison and contrast to define something (see "Extended Definition": you show what the subject is like; then you show how it differs or contrasts from others like it). You also use comparison anytime you explain that something is "like" something else; likewise, you use contrast whenever you want to show how something is different. Comparison/contrast is quite deeply and naturally imbedded in our everyday thinking and logic.

Description

"Description" means "illustrative detail." A description paper often takes a person or object and then describes that person or thing in great illustrative detail. For example, a description paper about a close friend might describe his or her appearance, her actions, and her personality, both through direct descriptive words—like paintings of her in different situations—and through stories or vignettes showing him in action. It is important to be thorough—to provide plenty of details. Often it is helpful to use one or more plans or systems of description. One typical plan is to move in a specific direction: e.g., from head to foot when describing a person, or perhaps clockwise when describing a room or place. The exact direction or order does not matter as long as you are consistent. Another system is to use the five senses to describe; still another, is to use the five W's of journalism
by answering the questions "Who, What, Where, When, and Why or How?" When you describe a subject that moves—a person or moving object—it is wise to describe not only its appearance when standing still, but also its movement. In fact, whenever you write a description paper, it is wise to include as much action as possible: to make your readers see a movie whenever possible, and not just a painting or drawing.

A description paper is organized very simply. You can start with a very short paragraph introducing or defining the subject, or a longer one that offers a particularly striking first description or overall summary. Next, you can write the body in as many or as few paragraphs as you need to fully describe the subject. Organizing these paragraphs according to one or more plans or systems often is helpful. Finally, you can write a concluding paragraph either briefly or at length, depending on whether you want to achieve an abrupt end or to provide some kind of especially strong final description that you have saved for the last.

This rhetorical mode is very common in shorter form, as well. When someone writes a story, for example, whether he or she is a famous story writer or a simple school child, he will use two main rhetorical modes: narration (the giving of a series of events, as above) and description. Even business reports must sometimes use description to provide an accurate and full account of the appearance of something. Description plays an especially important part in the teaching of writing, as writing instructors usually want their students to learn to write in great detail—the more specifics, the better.

Example

"Exemplification" means "the giving of an example." An exemplification paper usually starts with a main idea, belief, or opinion—something abstract—and then gives one extended example or a series of shorter examples to illustrate that main idea. In fact, an exemplification paper is a paper that illustrates an abstract idea. For example, if I wished to write an exemplification paper about "The Opposite Sex—Problems and Pleasures" (as a man or as a woman), there might be two ways I could go about this. One would be, after introducing my general idea, to tell several little stories about—give examples of—how the opposite sex can be both a problem to deal with and a pleasure to be with. The other way I might write the paper (and a stronger, more unified way of doing it) might be to pick out one person of the opposite gender I have dated or lived with and describe how this one person gave me both problems and pleasures in my overall relationship with him or her.

A typical short exemplification paper is written like most of the other rhetorical-modes paper. It usually starts with a single introductory paragraph that briefly defines your subject and states what you will do in the paper—exemplify. Then there are one or two to many paragraphs offering one or more extended examples of your subject. Finally, there is a brief closing paragraph restating what your subject is and offering some kind of final brief, strong example or some other kind of interesting ending. Your audience is anyone who might only have a partial understanding of the subject and to whom an example would be helpful: in fact, you choose your examples partly by deciding what the audience will easily understand.

Shorter versions of this rhetorical mode exist, as do the others, within the space of a few paragraphs, one paragraph, or even as part of a larger paragraph. Exemplification simply means to give an example of a subject, and it is possible to do this in as little as a sentence.

Definition

This section describes how to start an "extended definition." An extended definition simply defines a subject in a fuller or more extended—more thorough—way than does a dictionary. Typically an extended definition has a brief introductory paragraph of a few sentences, a body of one or several paragraphs, and a brief concluding paragraph. Assume, when you write an extended definition, that you are defining something for a student or perhaps a foreigner who never has heard the term before.

To write an extended definition, start with an introductory paragraph first. Write it in just two or three sentences as if it were a dictionary definition. A good dictionary definition has the following parts:
1. the exact term (the who or what) being defined,
2. its classification—the class or group of people, events, or things to which it belongs, and a brief
summarizing description of the term. (This description often helps define your subject by showing
how it differs from similar subjects that fit in the same classification as you have described in "2": in
other words, provide enough details that your subject cannot be mistaken for a similar but different
one.)

These three items are the three parts of a good dictionary definition. Use these in the introduction; then the
rest of your news release is the "extended" part of the definition, adding further description of or about the term.
Here are three examples of good dictionary definitions using the three defining items above:

(1—term:) "Chris Smith
(2—class:) is a student at George Washington College.
(3—sum/des:) He is 19, is working on an engineering degree, and is from Chicago, Illinois."

(1—term:) "The Sun Car Race
(2—class:) is a national competition.
(3—sum/des:) It is based in Utah for solar-run cars developed by independent inventors and schools."

(1—term:) "La-Zee
(2—class:) is a new silicon-based car polish.
(3—sum/des:) It is made by Dup Chemicals and can be used so easily that it practically applies itself."

A simple extended-definition paper usually starts with such simple dictionary-like definitions; then the
definition is extended by writing a long body further describing the term. The body paragraph(s) may consist of
any or all of the following:

• further description and/or details about the subject
• one or several excellent examples
• a description of the subject in action or use
• a background or history of the subject

The conclusion should simply summarize your subject or say something particularly interesting about it
in a final paragraph. Try to make your conclusion relatively short—just several sentences, if possible.

Definition is a rhetorical mode that can be used in something smaller or shorter than a full paper. You can
use extended definition for several paragraphs only in a paper of much greater length. You also can add to a
paper a one-paragraph definition—like a brief encyclopedia definition. And you can use a short definition,
dictionary style, in many types of writing situations that call for just a sentence or two of definition.

Narration

"Narration" or a "narrative" provides details of what happened. It is almost like a list of events in the order
that they happened, except that it is written in paragraph form. A narration or narrative doesn't have to show any
cause and effect; it only needs to show what happened in the order that it happened. History books are filled with
narrations. For example, if I were to describe the visit of the Pope to Denver in 1993, I would use his itinerary and
give details of each major event in that visit. If I were writing a book about it, I would give details of many of the
more interesting minor events as well. I would do this in the order in which they occurred: first the Pope did this,
then he did that, and then he did a third thing.
A typical short narration paper starts with a brief introductory paragraph consisting of two parts. The first is a sentence or two stating the event you are going to narrate; you might even want to include the who, what, where, and when of the event in this part. The second part is a simple statement that the paper you are writing is a narrative of this event. In the body of the narrative, you break the event into several parts—one part per paragraph. Each paragraph would then further break down the event into sub-events and enough description of them that your reader will know what you mean. The body may have just a few paragraphs or many, depending on the length of paper and complexity you want. The conclusion can be very brief: just a final rewording of the overall event you have narrated, and a final interesting comment or two about it, or perhaps a statement about how, where, or when this event fits into the larger flow of history around it. Your audience is anyone who knows little or nothing about the event but can understand it easily once you explain it.

As with other rhetorical modes, narration often is used in a context shorter than an entire paper. More commonly, you may need to explain a sequence of events, event by event, in just a paragraph or two when you are writing a longer paper for some other purpose: if you need to give a long example of one or two paragraphs, this example might, perhaps, be in story form—in the order in which events happened. This would be a short narration. Any other time as well that you write about events in the order in which they happened, you are using narration.

Using the Modes

If you are working with the rhetorical modes, you sometimes can examine and even summarize the structures of a reading by describing the rhetorical modes used in it. Often, for example, in the introductory paragraph of a paper—or in the beginning of the body—you might find the rhetorical mode of definition, helping to define the subject. Often you will find description or exemplification in a longer paragraph, helping to further describe or give an example of the subject of that paragraph. Occasionally an entire paper might be developed with just one primary mode, as discussed in this chapter. However, it is much more likely—and extremely common—to find several of the modes used to develop a paper, especially if it is a college essay or professional paper. This is because each of the modes represents a form of thinking that is very basic to writing, speaking, and indeed thinking itself; each can be used in long or short form.

The most common major rhetorical-mode pattern you may find in college readings is argumentation. It is common because many textbooks and other assignments you will read in college—especially in the humanities, liberal arts, and social sciences—are arguing a point. Sometimes this point—this argument—is obvious. Often it is less so, primarily because in these fields, most knowledge is based on speculation—on scholars' intelligent guesses—rather than on hard scientific fact. For this reason, a typical textbook chapter (or part of one) or assigned short essay in these fields is set up as having a main argument and then a series of details helping to prove it. With this in mind, we might look at the following pattern—or some parts of it—as being somewhat typical for this kind of essay.

**COLLEGE READING #1:** Argumentation as Overall Structural/Controlling Mode

**Introduction:** Issue or Main Argument. Possible use of definition (which includes comparison/contrast and example), statement of overall cause and effect, and/or other modes

**Body:** A Series of Points Helping to Prove the Main Argument

Each Longer Paragraph:

(1) statement of a point providing a part of the proof
(2) develop using exemplification, narration, cause and effect, and/or other modes

**Conclusion:** Concluding Argument. Use description,, cause and effect, narration, and/or other modes.
On the other hand, there is another common type of college reading, one that occurs more often in the sciences and mathematics. This second kind includes textbook chapters and shorter readings that are purely or largely factual: they simply offer information. These, too, use the rhetorical modes. Most commonly their overall form of structural development is description. However, other modes also may be used as the overall structural pattern, especially classification or cause and effect, as these lend themselves easily to scientific and factual thinking.

**COLLEGE READING #2: Description as Overall Structural/Controlling Mode**

**Introduction:** Main Subject. Possible use of definition or classification (both of which include comparison/contrast) and/or other modes

**Body:** Descriptions of Factual Parts of the Subject. Organization might be by mode of classification, cause and effect, description, and/or other modes.

- Each Longer Paragraph:
  1. statement of subpart to be described
  2. factual development of the description using one or more modes

**Conclusion:** Brief Restatement of Subject and Final Summary. Possible use of description, narration, cause and effect, and/or other modes.

Once you know your rhetorical modes, it is a simple matter to look for them in your readings. Often is to easier understand and summarize such readings by understanding just what kind of thinking pattern the author is using. If you understand these modes—these thinking patterns—you will find it easier to follow the logic an author is attempting to use—and, as is sometimes quite important in college reading—to disagree with the author, too.

**Conclusion**

Each rhetorical mode is an excellent device to use for writing a paper. Such writing helps you practice the pure form of the mode in an extended way. The other types of college papers and as you analyze and argue about college reading assignments. It is possible to make the modes fun: practice, for example, narration by telling the blow-by-blow account of an interesting or even silly event in your life; cause and effect by showing how one part of your life inevitably leads to your doing or participating in another; comparison/contrast by comparing and contrasting two activities, people, or activities you really like or dislike; etc. However you practice the modes, your practice will have the serious purpose of helping you understand, use, and find in others these basic methods of thinking.