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## THREE WAYS OF LOOKING AT A BLACKBOARD:

### A "TRIVIAL" APPROACH TO WRITING AND SPEAKING

[Hal McDonald](#)

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Like most everyone else who routinely engages in that singular pedagogical experience called Freshman Composition, I have spent my career searching, quite in vain, for the perfect approach to teaching that class. Perfection being, as it is, a hard thing to come by in the dull sublunary realm of academe, I have adopted and abandoned far more freshman rhetorics than I can count. My experience having convinced me, *argumentum ad ignorantium* notwithstanding, that the perfect text simply doesn't exist, I nonetheless concluded years ago that the closest approximation to such perfection lies in the direction of classical rhetoric, the classical world being, as it is, the origin of the study of rhetoric. I fail to see how one can teach rhetoric, freshman or otherwise, without passing through pedagogical territory first cleared by Aristotle, Quintilian, Erasmus, and the like, any more than one can teach physics without covering the ideas of Galileo, Newton, and Kepler, even if these luminaries are never mentioned by name.

So, I wish to teach classical rhetoric to my freshmen. But what exactly does that mean? It is, after all, a term that covers quite a lot of ground, and is thus subject to a number of interpretations. As treated by some texts, for instance, it becomes a history or philosophy class, recounting the development of public discourse from antiquity through modern times, and highlighting the theory and practice of such great men as Cicero, Socrates, and the Apostle Paul. Other texts adopt a handbook approach, treating classical rhetoric as a collection of Greek and Latin terms that, when correctly applied to words, create interesting verbal special effects (e.g., synecdoche, metonymy, anadiplosis, and other such words that fall trippingly from the tongue). For all their virtues as histories or handbooks, however, neither approach is remotely practical as a freshman rhetoric, for neither provides students with tools that are transferable even to other college classes, much less to their communication experience outside of academia, and it is, after all, practical tools which the average incoming freshman most needs. The impracticality of most classical rhetoric texts is not merely frustrating to the classically minded freshman comp teacher; it is highly ironic, as well, given the concretely pragmatic nature of classical rhetoric as it was taught in classical times. What I seek for my freshmen is an approach that is genuinely classical in both substance *and* in spirit. I want a freshman rhetoric that will ground students in the rich 2500-year history of rhetorical theory, yet be as practical and useful to them in their various language projects, from history essays, to formal job interviews, to casual conversations, as a 100-piece Black and

Decker toolbox is to a carpenter in a woodworking shop.

To reach beyond the glittering façade of tropes, figures, and fascinating classical people and grasp the truly pragmatic heart of classical rhetoric, one must look at it within the context of classical education as a whole. Early in the evolution of Western education emerged the paradigm of seven liberal arts, which held fairly uncontested sway throughout antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the early part of the Renaissance. Rhetoric was one of those liberal arts, but not just any one. Rather, it was the capstone of a three-subject sequence that prepared students for all higher learning, which in those days consisted of arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy—four courses collectively known as the quadrivium. The three-subject sequence, starting with grammar and logic, and culminating in rhetoric, that functioned as an indispensable prerequisite to the quadrivium, was the trivium. In its original context, rhetoric was not merely a study of verbal ornamentation, nor a survey of the history of verbal ornamentation, but a key component in a powerfully pragmatic three-subject college preparatory program. Were Western education still informed by the classical tradition, our typical freshman would embark upon his or her college career with a complete prior mastery of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and there would be no need for freshman composition. Anyone who has taught the typical college freshman lately, alas, knows that nothing could be farther from the truth. There is still, obviously, a serious need for freshman composition. And that leads us right back to the question of what a freshman comp course should cover, in order to be as useful as possible to the students it serves.

I have said that the classical approach to composition holds great promise as a pedagogical paradigm, and that the trivium is the heart and soul of the classical pedagogical tradition. The trivium, then—grammar, logic, and rhetoric—is the ideal curriculum for a classically-based freshman composition course, offering students both a systematic method for processing new information, academic or otherwise, and a collection of practical tools with which to both establish and communicate connections between this information and the world in which they live.

Of course, having decided upon the trivium as the ideal curriculum for a freshman composition course, we're left with daunting task of covering grammar, logic, and rhetoric, in a scant fifteen weeks. Difficult? Absolutely. Impossible? No, but to create a fifteen-week course that does justice to the three subjects of the trivium will require two essential things: first, a method for streamlining course content in such a way as to maximize practical benefit to students while minimizing the sheer volume of information they must process in order to reap these benefits, and, second, a hyper-efficient learning model that will expedite student acquisition of the large volume of information contained in even the most streamlined version of the trivium.

Since pragmatic utility is the desired common denominator of course content, the best method for streamlining the curriculum is to filter the whole thing through a pragmatic philosophy of language, language being, as it is, the medium through which grammar, logic, and rhetoric are carried out. An approach to language that serves this end quite nicely is speech act theory. At the heart of the speech act conception of language is the premise that all language use is performative; that is, it *does* something, rather than merely *saying* something (Curzan and Adams 244-6). Traditionally, all of the myriad utterances, or speech acts, that swirl about us every day of our lives fit neatly into some pre-determined functional category—declarative, interrogative, imperative, exclamatory, for example; or informative, deliberative, reflective. Speech act theory views such categorical distinctions as superficial, masking far more significant and comprehensive commonalities deeper down. According to speech act theory, every single thing we say or write, and every single thing that is said or written to us, is fundamentally persuasive, in that such utterances are sent out into the world with the intent of producing some tangible effect upon the audience toward whom they are directed. Whether consciously or not, whenever we send words out into the world, we do so with the intent of *doing* something to someone out there. The effect we wish to produce with a given utterance is, in speech act terminology, the perlocutionary force of the speech act. The more superficial, apparent purpose of the speech act (e.g., to declare, to ask, to command, to exclaim) is its illocutionary force. The utterance itself is a locution. To create successful speech acts, we should approach them with a clear, self-honest sense of what we wish to do to our audience (our perlocutionary goal), and then use the tools at our disposal to craft locutions that will have the highest probability of achieving our goal. The tools, of course, are grammar, logic,

and rhetoric. The trivium, as filtered through the pragmatic, purpose-driven language philosophy of speech act theory, will consist of a core set of indispensable tools from each of the three subjects, with which students may craft, out of the medium of language, successful speech acts for any verbal occasion.

The first compartment in our trivium toolbox is grammar. Our speech act grammar will consist of tools necessary for building sentences (locutions), with which to do things to people (assuming, of course, that we have decided *what* we wish to do, and approximately *how* we wish to do it, which are matters that will be addressed under logic and rhetoric). Grammar tools include, at the word level, parts of speech and clause functions; at the clause level, clause components (i.e., subjects and predicates), clause patterns (S + V, S + V + DO, S + LV + PN, etc.), and clause types (independent and dependent); and at the sentence level, basic sentence types (simple, compound, complex, compound-complex). Speech act theory being, as it is, fundamentally pragmatic, and devoting as much attention to successfully *implicit* speech acts as it does to explicit ones (Curzan and Adams 146), our speech act grammar will not ignore the remarkable capacity of language to allow for perfectly successful speech act exchanges that deviate, sometimes quite dramatically, from the basic rules of **correct** English syntax. Sometimes a fragment simply works better than a complete sentence **practically speaking** **especially** in oral communication, where time constraints often supercede grammatical correctness in consideration of situational propriety, and students will practice sizing up various rhetorical situations for the appropriate degree of grammatical **correctness** required by them.

Of course, in order to build sentences, **correct** or otherwise, with which to do things to people, we must first have something to say. That is the object of our next toolbox compartment, logic. To come up with a manageable curriculum for a speech act logic, I have side-stepped the traditional Aristotelian slant on logic, in which deductive reasoning holds almost complete dominion, and opted instead for a logic that derives etymologically and semantically from the Greek term *logos*, which in Greek philosophy is viewed as the organizing formal principle behind the physical universe (i.e., all those laws, such as gravity and angular momentum, that make the world we experience with our five senses behave the way it does). In human terms, this is the definition of logic we are tapping into when we use the phrase **fuzzy logic**, or say of a person's inexplicable behavior that we **cannot understand the logic** behind his/her actions. What we mean of the term "logic" in such situations is the internal sequence of thought processes that caused a person to act the way he/she did in a given situation.

Regarding language, this conception of logic works two ways. On the receiving/listening end, it means taking a given locution, critically examining it to determine its overt illocutionary force, and then exploring the illocution within the context of everything we know about the speaker and any part of his/her world that might impinge upon the specific circumstances that first gave rise to the locution. In thus peeling away the layers of the speech act to the logic that lies behind it, one can get at the speaker's true motives for uttering a particular locution, and then make a conscious decision whether or not to **play along** with the speaker in the perlocutionary game he/she wishes to play.

On the delivering/speaking end, my speech act model of logic entails deciding **before** we ever so much as open our mouth or set a single finger on the computer keyboard **the specific effect** we wish to produce upon the audience toward whom the speech act will be directed, and then generating a mental database of content out of which we might craft locutions that will achieve this desired effect. To find the best available set of tools for generating raw content, I reach for my Aristotle, and turn, not to his *Logic*, but to the *Rhetoric*, where I find the **common topics**. The common topics have long been the **go-to** source for **arguments**, and I see no reason to abandon them simply because I am working with a definition of persuasive language that encompasses all speech, rather than only that which is overtly deliberative (i.e., at the illocutionary level). My speech act logic involves exhaustive practice with and application of the topics of *definition* (including an introduction to categorical/deductive reasoning, which is essentially a subset of definition), *comparison*, *relationship*, *circumstance*, and *testimony*. When faced with a given speech situation (be it a job interview, a sociology essay, a merit scholarship application, or an invitation to go on a date) students practice scouring the common topics for all the things they might possibly say to achieve a desired perlocutionary effect (*which* of these things they will actually choose to say, and *how* they will say those things, fall under the domain of

rhetoric, the third subject of our trivium). Having generated a long list of possible semantic content, the students categorize each possible chunk of content according to the three modes of appeal (logical, ethical, or pathetic) for help in deciding which chunk will best fit the bill when they arrive at the rhetorical phase of speech act creation. Speech act logic shares with all other definitions of logic an emphasis on critical thinking. In speech act logic, however, this critical thinking is more purpose-driven tailored for a specific end in a specific situation hence streamlining the total volume of logical theory a student must know to acquire those logical tools that work best for him or her individually in producing the most usable content in the greatest variety of speech situations.

The rhetoric of my speech act trivium is similarly situation-driven. Once students have decided what they wish to achieve with a given speech act, and then generate a body of possible content out of which to weave a locution that stands a good chance of achieving the desired effect, they must then decide *which* content has the best chances of success, and then craft this content into a form that maximizes those chances. These last two steps require intense scrutiny of the specific speech act situation the *kairos* of traditional Greek rhetoric but once again, we want a means of streamlining the total amount of information a student must possess in order to conduct such a scrutiny. I have borrowed here another tool from pragmatic linguistics the Cooperative Principle. Paul Grice coined this term to convey the game-like character of all speech situations. The CP is a general rule that participants in a speech exchange tend to follow, whether they consciously mean to or not: Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged (Newmeyer 175). This very general rule entails four maxims that are typically observed by cooperating participants in a successful speech exchange. The maxims, and their sub-maxims, are as follows:

**Quantity** : (i) Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange). (ii) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

**Quality** : (i) Do not say what you believe to be false. (ii) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

**Relation** : Be relevant.

**Manner** : (i) Avoid obscurity of expression. (ii) Avoid ambiguity. (iii) Be brief. (iv) Be orderly. (Newmeyer 175)

As Grice is quick to point out, people bend or even break these rules all the time, and yet, because of another general rule, the Principle of Charity, which supercedes strict adherence to the rules by extending the benefit of a doubt to speakers who appear to violate one or more of the maxims, such rule-breaking expedites rather than impedes communication by providing semantic shortcuts for speakers to take on the way to their perlocutionary goals.

Rather than view the CP maxims as a list of prescriptions and proscriptions that are either observed or not observed in given speech situations an approach that is better at explaining how language works than it is at helping speakers make language work for them I prefer to think of the maxims as four *dimensions* that every speech act occupies to some degree or another. Just as all objects in a three-dimensional physical world occupy width, height, and depth, so all locutions in the speech act universe occupy measurable coordinates of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. Once speakers have at their disposal a database of things they *might* say to achieve a particular perlocutionary goal, they must explore all four dimensions of the CP to determine how many of those things they should ideally say (dimension of Quantity), which of those things best establish the appropriate level of credibility (Quality), which of those things are most relevant to the situation at hand (Relation), and finally what degree of clarity or obscurity, equivocation or univocation, and of literal or figurative language will best fit the perlocutionary goal to the rhetorical situation (Manner). Each of these dimensions can

be enriched by reference to [classical](#) rhetoric (particularly Manner, which most specifically concerns those elements of arrangement and style that are such a central focus of traditional rhetoric from antiquity through the Renaissance and beyond), but even without a broad knowledge of tropes and figures, any student who consciously considers these four dimensions when crafting a locution will go a long way toward achieving a high probability of perlocutionary success.

As the last paragraphs indicate, even when [streamlined](#) with a pragmatic speech act filter, the trivium, as a freshman composition curriculum, still entails a pretty large volume of largely unfamiliar material that must be processed by a first-semester freshman in a mere fifteen weeks' time. In order to make the trivium [doable](#) in a single semester, we will need a hyper-efficient information-processing system—or, in other words, a very good learning model.

I found such a learning model in an unlikely place—a fifty-year-old speech delivered by a British mystery novelist—but for its sheer efficiency, as well as its neat symmetrical propriety to this particular body of information, I seized upon this model as not only the best possible approach to the trivium, but indeed the only approach. In 1947, Dorothy Sayers delivered a [speech](#) titled [The Lost Tools of Learning](#), in which she explored the [decline](#) of Western education over the last couple of hundred years. Her diagnosis of the problem focused on the West's abandonment of the learning model that dominated Western education from antiquity through the Middle Ages. This learning model, the abandonment of which Sayers sees as the root of our then (and current) educational woes is none other than the trivium. We have already established that the trivium was originally a language-based preparatory program (that language being Latin) preceding the [higher](#) level courses of the quadrivium. Rather than simply a communications course that prepared students to think critically about and effectively communicate ideas within those higher-level courses, the trivium, as Sayers presents it, was also a learning *sequence* that taught students *how* to learn those higher level subjects. When we in the humanities reflexively, and somewhat tritely, defend our profession by citing the true purpose of a liberal arts education as [learning how to learn](#), it is the tradition of the trivium to which we are paying lip service (whether it is anything more substantial than lip service can be gathered from the degree to which today's liberal arts programs achieve this pedagogical and epistemological end). In addition to *being* three subjects—grammar, logic, and rhetoric—the trivium also refers to three distinct but interlocking components shared by every subject under, and beyond, the sun. Any subject that one might care to learn—from biology to basketball—has a grammar (a static set of fundamental concepts and [rules](#) that define the parameters, purposes, and practices of the subject), a logic (a dynamic web of relations between these abstract concepts and the raw materials with which the concepts are implemented in actuality), and a rhetoric (the relationship between the subject and the [real](#) world, in which the grammar and logic of the subject are applied to meeting particular demands in particular situations). In Sayers' trivium learning model, these three components translate into three sequential, incremental stages, each of which should be mastered before moving on to the next.

One of the great virtues of the trivium model is its intuitive, common-sensical character. So very efficient is this model that, even if we have never so much as even heard of the trivium, we instinctively tend to approach new subjects that we wish to learn with a system very similar to that described above. Let's say our parents/spouse/rich uncle/etc. gives us a very nice set of golf clubs for our birthday, and we decide to take the game up. Assuming we know absolutely nothing whatsoever about golf, we'll most likely start out by taking a trip to Barnes and Noble and picking out a book from the sports section (if we're on a tight budget, we might just visit a website, or check a book out from the library), and simply reading *about* the game—its general object, where it's carried out, what is allowed, what is not allowed, and what each of those shiny sticks in our red leather golf bag is supposed to do. All of the knowledge we acquire from this initial phase, without so much as hitting a single ball, is the *grammar* of golf, without which those clubs sitting in our front hallway could just as well be garden tools, for all the golf we'll be able to play with them.

After getting a pretty good handle on the grammar of golf, the next thing we will do is head for the driving range (or the back yard, if you don't have a driving range handy, but you'd better use whiffle balls unless you want trouble with the neighbors). At the driving range, you will hit one ball after another with each of your clubs with

no other object than to allow your slowly blistering hands to process what your head already knows. In other words, you're trying to establish a relationship between what the clubs are theoretically *supposed* to do, and what they *actually* do to a golf ball governed by the laws of Newtonian physics. This phase of implementing the theory of golf into the actuality of clubs, balls, grass, and dirt—otherwise known as practice—is the *logic* of golf.

Having sufficiently mastered the grammar and logic of golf, we are now ready to apply our knowledge of the theory of golf, and our practical experience, gleaned from hours of practice under controlled situations, with the mechanics of golf, to a three-hour series of uncontrolled and novel situations involving sun, wind, grass, sand, water, and a four-and-a-quarter-inch hole in the ground. We throw our clubs into the trunk, and head for the municipal links to embark upon the *rhetoric* of golf.

The great strength of the trivium as an information-processing system for learning *any* subject is its progressive, incremental, and cyclical structure, in which each of the three stages continually reinforces, and is reinforced by, the other two. Once we have provided ourselves a foundation in the grammar of a subject, our practice of these principles in the logic stage—say, at the driving range—strengthens and clarifies our knowledge of them. And when we bring our knowledge and practice to bear upon a new rhetorical situation—a round of golf, for instance, no two shots of which are ever completely identical—we are reinforcing our grammatical and logical foundation by applying theory and practical experience to every single stroke.

As effectively as each successive stage strengthens the one before it, this progressive reinforcement is not a one-way street. Even after we have passed through all three stages of a subject and achieved a fairly sound rhetorical competence, further work in grammar and logic will continue to strengthen our rhetoric, and our new experience in rhetoric will guide our work in grammar and logic with ever-increasing efficiency by presenting us with increasingly specific issues that need to be addressed. If we find our golf ball in a fluffy fairway bunker, for instance, we don't need to relearn the entire grammar of golf, but rather just the few principles that will help us out in that particular situation. In the trivium model, the more we know, the faster we learn, so that the whole process becomes more and more efficient the longer we pursue it.

Like golf, all other subjects one might wish to learn have a grammar, a logic, and a rhetoric, and the most efficient way to learn these subjects is to tackle these three components sequentially. The three subjects of the trivium are no exception to this rule. Grammar has a grammar, a logic, and a rhetoric. Logic has a grammar, a logic, and a rhetoric. And, of course, rhetoric has a grammar, a logic, and a rhetoric. In my —trivial— approach to the trivium, I lead my students, first, through the grammar of grammar, the grammar of logic, and the grammar of rhetoric, in which they learn the theory and fundamental principles behind each of these subjects (as I have defined them above). Next, we proceed to the logic of grammar, the logic of logic, and the logic of rhetoric, where we practice these principles in controlled situations (e.g., sentence —drills,— common topics application to hypothetical questions or issues, rhetorical analyses of selected texts, etc.). Finally, we take on the rhetoric of grammar, the rhetoric of logic, and the rhetoric of rhetoric, where the students apply their theoretical knowledge of, and practical experience with, the trivium, to —real— situations in the —real— world. These situations include letters to the editor of the local newspaper, summer job applications, cafeteria conversations, and just about any other occasion in which language can be used to —do— something. By the end of the course, students have (if they've stuck with the program) developed the habit of approaching every speech situation with a clear sense of perlocutionary goals (both their own and those of the people with whom they are communicating), and a ready capacity for reaching into their trivium toolbox for just the right piece of equipment with which to craft a locution that will stand the best possible chance of doing what they want it to do.

In her speech, Dorothy Sayers lays out a twelve-year multi-course trivium, with each stage occupying approximately four years of a student's life. Unfortunately, a freshman composition class lasts a scant fifteen weeks, and anyone who's ever taught freshman composition knows the sinking feeling that fifteen weeks is hardly enough time to break students of the bad habits they've developed over the past twelve years, let alone teach them new skills as fundamental and comprehensive as grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Gargantuan though the task may seem, however, because of the crucial preparatory role the trivium can play in a student's future development—both academic and otherwise—I believe it is certainly worth giving it a try. And with a

pragmatically streamlined curriculum, presented incrementally through the super-efficient ♦trivial♦ learning model, I believe that students can, at the very least, emerge from the class with a more intentional attitude toward their use of language. Ideally, however, they stand a good chance of experiencing in the class a genuine awakening to the power of language to transform their entire world, from the graffiti-covered desk right under their noses to the farthest reaches of that work-in-progress we call human civilization.

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**Hal McDonald** ([hmcDonald@mhc.edu](mailto:hmcDonald@mhc.edu)) is Professor of English at Mars Hill College. His publications include articles on American literature, linguistics, popular culture, and running. He is just coming off of a sabbatical break, during which he worked on a freshman composition textbook (*Three Ways of Looking at a Blackboard* ♦, the subject of the above article), and roamed the highways and byways of Italy for two months.

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