

Rhetorical Microcosm

What is a microcosm? Let's ask the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

MICROCOSM: a place, situation, etc., regarded as encapsulating in miniature the characteristic qualities or features of something much larger. (Sense 2c).

A rhetorical microcosm, then, is a complete expression of rhetoric, rendered as small as possible, which represents it as a whole. Here's my version of that, based on *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*:

A rhetorically educated writing process

First, to get started, I'd ask myself a series of questions about the issue at hand. I'll record my answers in writing. (This doesn't have to be pretty.)

What am I writing about? Who—what specific audience or audiences—am I writing for? Am I writing about a single idea or subject, with one angle or approach, or am I dealing with a complex topic that will require me to establish a focus?

How will I establish *kairos*—how will I convince my readers that what I'm writing about is important, relevant to them, and has urgency or exigency? Will I need to specifically devote writing to this activity?

What are the possible forms I can use—written, spoken, or multimedia? Do I have time and money to produce these forms? What styles of writing will be appropriate—formal, informal, serious, humorous, or a mix of these? What principles of graphic design (contrast, repetition, alignment, proximity) are applicable to my piece, and in what degree?

Will I need help to get this done—a peer to review, someone to ask for advice, or a professional designer, photographer, or editor?

What is my deadline?

With these answers, in whole or in part, I'd start the inventive process—finding the arguments relevant to my situation, using one or more rhetorical techniques. I might use common rhetorical exercises to elaborate on any part of these—imitation, paraphrase, forming a narrative, listing commonplaces, invective. Again, this would occur in writing, and wouldn't be very formal:

Stasis theory: how is the stasis for my issue defined by interested parties? Are common stases workable, or will I have to redefine them for my own purposes? Work through each of the four questions—conjecture, definition, quality, and policy—to consider my issue.

Common topics: are one or more of the common topics—past and future fact, degree, and possibility—relevant? Do elaborations with these topics assist the inventive process?

Ethos, logos, pathos, and extrinsic arguments: broadly speaking, what sort of arguments might be effective here? Which seem inappropriate or likely to fail? If an extrinsic argument is a good idea, does that mean I need to do research?

Arrangement: can common strategies of arrangement—definition, division, comparison, classification—be useful for my argument? If so, do they suggest a certain form?

At this point, I should have a written guide to moving forward, and I'd be ready to summarize the inventive process. I'd return to the questions about my issue, selecting answers from all parts of my notes and rhetorical exercises. The next step is narrowing down what, for whom, how, and why I write, so a first draft would be effective. I might select one or two ways to get this done—for example, if I had a good idea about the arguments I want to use, but not about the format for presenting them, I'd try to use the same material in a couple different ways, and see if it was effective.

Moving ahead: beginning the writing process

With these rhetorical exercises, worksheets, and other materials at hand, I would be equipped to make decisions about my writing process, and then prepare the appropriate documents:

Do I need to do research, contact others, or think more about my topic before I begin drafting?

Do I need a formal outline or plan or some kind, or can the document I'm working on be produced without it? (E. g. is it important, complex, or long enough to mandate formal planning?)

If I chose a formal outline, I'd make it on the computer—it's a lot easier to revise that way. And I never worry about pedantic formal rules for making an outline.

Drafting

Getting a draft going can leverage a variety of techniques:

Freewriting: writing as long as I can stand, on the computer or longhand, using my accumulated research and notes as a guide, or just going by memory. Completed freewrites could be cut-and-pasted in to a draft, or mined for good phrases or sentences.

Partial development: working out the ideas that I felt most comfortable with first, making notes on what needed to be done next, and spreading out the parts of the writing that are the most difficult (transitions, opening and closings, etc). I tackle those first thing in the morning, when I'm the most fired up.

One element: starting from one main element of my rhetorical exercises—form or content—and using that to guide the process of development. (Great for small stuff.)

Formal composition: moving through the outline, point by point, writing each section from beginning to end. (Does anybody write this way, excepting documents organized chronologically or sequentially?)

At any time during the draft, I'd revise my outlines or planning documents accordingly as I moved away from the original plan. If I produced a draft that has potential, but needed help with organization, I'd engage the technique of decomposition (see the course web site for a handout with a full description).

As time allows, I'd ask others to look at the piece (especially if formal review was a part of the process), to ask specific questions about it, or just to talk generally. I'd revise my draft, sometimes radically, sometimes only a little.

Three things I never do while drafting: (1) throw out any drafts—not until I'm completely finished and the work is published or delivered; (2) cross out anything in a manner that doesn't allow me to read it; (3) compose something entirely on the computer without printing it out.

If possible, I also avoid writing anything at one sitting—even something as short as an email.

Finishing up

With a final draft complete and printed, it's time to working through it word by word...is my word choice effective? Does my sentence structure show cause and effect and use parallelism effectively? Am I consistent about punctuation conventions? Is my spelling accurate? And so on.

This is the time to ask someone else to read and mark up the document. Alternatively (or in addition to this), I'd set aside the last draft a few days before returning to it for the final edit, paging through a style manual or keeping a handbook nearby in order to ask questions about my writing. (No doubt; this is the most difficult thing to learn, and requires the most practice.)