

Four Modes of Discourse

Park, Room 503

taken from *5 Steps to a 5*, McGraw-Hill

A. The Basics:

The first set of basics we need to become familiar with are the **four modes of discourse**. Remember that a *mode* refers to a *method or form used*, and *discourse* is the technical term for *conversation*. Therefore, a **mode of discourse** is simply a **method a writer uses** to have a **conversation** with a particular **reader/audience**.

4 Modes of Discourse:

- **Exposition**--writing that explains or informs
- **Narration**--writing that tells a story
- **Description**--writing that appeals to the five senses
- **Argument/persuasion**--writing that presents a position in hopes that the reader will accept an assertion

B. Warm-up Exercise:

The following four sentences revolve around the same event. Identify the mode of discourse for each statement.

- _____ 1. Last night I took the train into the city with a couple of old friends to see Herman Overact as the lead in *The Crucible* at the Humongous Theater, and we had a terrific time.
- _____ 2. Herman Overact's performance in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* is an acting event not to be missed.
- _____ 3. Herman Overact is playing the lead role in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* at the Humongous Theater for the next 6 weeks.
- _____ 4. Last evening, the sold-out audience buzzed with excitement as it stared wide-eyed at the stage in rapt anticipation of the appearance of Herman Overact in Miller's *The Crucible*.

C. Consider:

- Did each of them contain information?
- Did each of them assume that the reader would accept what was stated?

Be aware that most writing experts agree that **a writer rarely uses only a single mode of discourse**. However, even though more than one mode may be employed, there is a **dominant mode** that fits the author's specific purpose. **The key word here is PURPOSE--why the author composed each of these sentences.**

The primary purpose is what determines the primary mode of discourse.

D. Warm-up Exercise 2

Now, using this basic information, complete the following set: identify the dominant mode of discourse of each of the following excerpts. Read each carefully, keeping in mind that every author writes with a purpose. Whether you're dealing with an entire book or with a single sentence, **once you determine what the author's purpose is in a given context, you know what the dominant mode of discourse is**. Remember to ask yourself: What is the author's purpose?

_____ Gertrude Stein liked to say that America entered the twentieth century ahead of the rest of the world. In 1933, in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, she put it more strongly--that America actually created the new century.

--R.W.B. Lewis, "Writers at the Century's Turn," appearing in *The Writing Life*

R.W.B. Lewis tells his reader about the thoughts of Gertrude Stein. Therefore, the dominant mode of discourse is **exposition** (although you might like to argue about what Ms. Stein had to say about America).

_____ My other hangout, strategically located near the front door, was under the porch, behind the blue hydrangeas. I could see the postman's hairy legs and black socks, the skirts of my mother's bridge friends, and sometimes hear bits of forbidden conversation....

--Frances Mayes, *Bella Tuscany*

In this short excerpt, Ms. Mayes attempts to have her readers sense her immediate surroundings and begin to feel her life as a child. This is an example of ...

_____...we should not be surprised to find that [certain contemporary historians] have overlooked a tremendous contribution in the distant past that was both Celtic and Catholic, a contribution without which European civilization would have been impossible.

--Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*

Here Thomas Cahill presents a very **arguable** assertion. You can be sure that there are people who will want to agree, disagree, or qualify his thesis.

_____ I, myself, was having a terrible time reading the paper, so yesterday morning, I went to Birmingham to get my eyes checked, and lo and behold, I had on Wilbur's glasses and he had on mine. We are getting different colored ones next time.

--Fanny Flagg, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*

Fanny Flagg relates a brief a episode that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Although quite short; that's ...

_____ So why do I write, torturing myself to put it down? Because in spite of myself I've learned some things. Without the possibility of action, all knowledge comes to one labeled "file and forget," and I can neither file nor forget.

--Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

Writing in the first person, Mr. Ellison is telling his reader about why he has to write. Although this excerpt appears in a full-length narrative, the dominant purpose of this selection is...

Note-making: Use this space to journal about what you've just learned. Turn the facts into meaning. What did you learn? What do you want to remember?

Name:

Park

AP English Lang & Comp, Period ____

Date:

4 Modes of Discourse Exercises

Exercise 1: Identify the mode of discourse of each of the following. Write in your answer on the space provided.

- _____ 1. The cold air stung us and we played till our bodies glowed. Our shouts echoed in the silent street.
--James Joyce, "Araby"
- _____ 2. A buoy is nothing but a board four or five feet long, with one end turned up; it is a reversed school-house bench, with one of the supports left and the other removed.
--Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*
- _____ 3. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us--that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion--that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain--that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom--and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.
--Abraham Lincoln, "Address at the Dedication of Gettysburg Cemetery as a War Memorial"
- _____ 4. The journey took about a week each way, and each day had my parents both in its grip. Riding behind my father I could see that the road had him by the shoulders, by the hair under his driving cap. It took my mother to make him stop. I inherited this nervous energy in the way I can't stop writing on a story.
--Eudora Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings*
- _____ 5. The law can only do so much in removing the burden of living vigilantly and responsibly, for our own sake and for our children's. So click off the Internet and go for a brisk walk. You look as though you could use some exercise.
--George F. Will, "Sex, Fat and Responsibility," *Newsweek*, July 7, 1997
- _____ 6. Beside us, on an overstuffed chair, absolutely motionless, was a platinum-blond woman in her forties, wearing a black silk dress and a strand of pearls. Her long legs were crossed; she supported her head on her fist.
--Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*
- _____ 7. So I was a lucky child too. I played with a set of paper dolls called "The Family of Dolls," four in number, who came with the factory-assigned names of Dad, Mom, Sis, and Junior....Now I've replaced the dolls with a life.
--Barbara Kingsolver, "Stone Soup," *High Tide in Tucson*
- _____ 8. I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.
--Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*
- _____ 9. Antigua used to have a splendid library, but in The Earthquake (everyone talks about it that way--The Earthquake; we Antiguan, for I am one, have a great sense of things, and the more meaningful the thing, the more meaningless we make it) the library building was damaged.
--Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place*
- _____ 10. Partially covering his shaggy blond hair was one of those blue baseball caps with gold braid on the bill and a sailfish patch sewn onto the peak. Covering his eyes and part of his face was a pair of those stupid-looking '50s-style wrap-around sunglasses.
--Cherokee Paul McDonald, "A View from the Bridge," *Sunshine Magazine*

Exposition:

I own several pairs of Kangaroo sneakers. They take up most of the shoe space in my closet. But, I can never have enough of them.

Description:

My closet is boxed in by shoes. Shoes lined up on the top shelf, shoes straddling a rack on the floor, and shoes nestling in hanging pockets on the door. I like to think of it as my Kangaroo cage.

Subject: My Love of Shoes



Argument:

I've owned many different brands of sneakers, but none is as comfortable, colorful, long-wearing, and reasonably priced as Kangaroos. No other sneaker even comes close.

Narration:

Yesterday, I saw an ad in the newspaper for a 60 percent sale on Kangaroo sneakers at the Bullseye department store. I can't resist either Kangaroo sneakers or a bargain, so I called two of my friends, and off we went. You would not believe the fun we had. Crowds, choices, credit cards, and lunch. My closet has never been so colorfully stuffed.

Exposition:

My Subject:

Description:

Argument:

Narration:

Your turn...