9 | Organizing Arguments

You've been introduced to a number of Greeks throughout this book but now, in addressing the topic of how arguments should be organized, it's time to draw from that other great classical Mediterranean civilization: Ancient Rome.

Like the democrats of ancient Athens, citizens of the Roman republic placed enormous value on oratory as the primary tool for democratic decision-making. Perhaps the greatest defender of that republic was Cicero, one of history's most famous political orators, whose championing of republican values eventually cost him his life.

In addition to practicing skilled rhetoric, Cicero also wrote about the subject, including writing which popularized the notion that rhetoric could be broken into five specific components or "canons": *invention*, *arrangement*, *style*, *memory*, and *delivery*.

While we will be focusing on arrangement in this chapter, you have already been exposed to other canons in Cicero's list. Invention, for example, is about having something to say. This logos-based element of communication is tied to what you have already learned about logic and argumentation. Similarly, style and delivery have been covered in previous discussions of rhetorical devices, although delivery also encompasses the physical nature of communication, frequently referred to as "body language."

Memory plays less of a role in persuasive speech than it did before the advent of the teleprompter. But for those who cannot afford such gadgetry, the ability to commit what you will say to memory frees the body to perform other tasks during a speech, such as making eye contact with the audience (another lost art in the era of PowerPoint).

Circling back to arrangement, you are probably already familiar with how certain types of written communication are organized. For example, a school paper such as an expository essay should begin with an introductory paragraph that states the question you will be answering, followed by additional paragraphs that provide facts that help answer that question, ending with a concluding paragraph. Each paragraph in your essay should look like a miniature version of the entire essay with an introductory sentence, followed by fact-fact-fact, and then a conclusion.

A newspaper story contains similar elements but might begin with a compelling lead (also called lede) sentence designed to grab the reader's attention, with more emphasis on making sure the piece answers the "Five W" questions (who?, what?, where?, when?, and why?).

In both cases, the goal of such communication can be summed up as "tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, then tell them what you've told them."

Persuasive speeches or writing (such as campaign presentations and editorials), while similar to these other forms of communication, have their own unique requirements for informing or moving a wide or concentrated audience like attendees at a political convention or people watching that same speech on TV.

For example, a political speech should also begin with an introduction. But unlike the intro to a research paper, this rhetorical introduction (called an *exordium* in Latin) is usually very brief.

Sometimes it consists of an explanation as to why the subject being discussed or debated is important (i.e., why it is worth the audience's time and attention).

In political situations like the acceptance speeches of presidential candidates, the importance of the subject is obvious. After all, the people who pay thousands of dollars and fly hundreds or thousands of miles to attend either the Democratic or Republican conventions do not need an explanation of why they should be listening to speeches that are the point of and climax to those events.

In such cases, the introduction is instead used to create an ethos-based connection to the audience by telling a story, thanking specific named individuals in the audience, or congratulating a local sports team for a recent victory. This is why so many presentations begin with a joke that puts an audience at ease while generating gratitude (an ethos response) for having provided a moment of amusement.

Once the introduction is over, one then gets into the meat of a presentation with a *statement of facts*, followed by an outline of the argument that will follow (called the *division*), then a *logical proof* that links the just-stated facts with the just-introduced argument. As you might guess, this is the portion of the presentation where logos, an appeal to logic, is the primary mode of persuasion.

Since most arguments need to deal with objections (either direct objections from an opponent as in a debate or anticipated objections that the speaker wants to head off by answering them in advance), the speaker's own statements of facts and logical arguments are usually followed by what is called the *refutation* in which the speaker deals with direct or anticipated counter-arguments.

This is the reason why it sometimes seems like a candidate can take forever before giving a direct answer to a question brought up by an opponent during a political debate. For before getting to a refutation of that challenge, a skilled speaker (which usually means a speaker who has internalized the canons of rhetoric) must first make his own connection to the audience (the introduction), then state his own case (i.e., present his own statement of facts,

division, and proof) before getting to a refutation where he takes on his opponent's challenges.

A refutation can also be primarily logos-based, although it is also the place where appeals to emotion (pathos) can play an important role. For instance, you can refute an opponent by presenting a logical argument as to why his or her facts and logic are wrong. Or you can begin to play on the emotions of the audience, declaring, for example, that only someone who doesn't care about the needs of others would be making your opponent's argument in the first place.

But emotion tends to get concentrated in the conclusion of a talk, which has traditionally been called the *peroration*. Now "peroration" can be translated as simply the conclusion. But, in rhetoric circles, the term implies something grander, more eloquent, and often of great length. Cicero, for example, was known to go on for hours or even days with his closing political or legal statements.

While you might be tempted to think of the peroration as similar to the concluding paragraph of a term paper, a better analogy would be the climax of a story or movie where an audience is worked into a frenzy of excitement as the argument is wrapped up and the case closed. Since nothing works better at building this type of frenzy than an appeal to the audience's emotions, a peroration often ends up the most pathos-driven component of a presentation.

I want to focus on stories a bit more here since they are where classical rhetoric like Cicero's five canons meets modern cognitive science, specifically the brain science described in an earlier chapter on sources of bias.

If you recall, that discussion stressed the importance of story creation in how we human beings come to understand the world. Simply put, our brains tend to look for patterns and then work tirelessly to build those patterns into stories, after which new

information is either accepted or rejected based on how well it fits into a previously created storyline.

While it is possible that new information can cause us to reject a previously created story and replace it with a new one, more often than not, if new facts do not fit an existing storyline we tend to resist or reject them rather than go back to the hard work of story modification or replacement.

In fact, a fair amount of political campaigning is built around the confirmation of existing stories, also known as preconceptions. For example, we all know that Republicans only favor the rich and that Democrats are soft on defense. Actually, we know nothing of the kind (at least about the party we support), but these accusations (as well as positive associations like Democrats are the party of caring while Republicans are the party of responsibility) are stories that have been ground into our individual and collective consciousness, making them extremely difficult to shake off.

This is why the words "favor the rich" appear in so much Democratic campaign material directed at their Republican rivals or why Republicans use the phrase "soft on defense" to describe their opponents, even in situations where these characterizations have nothing to do with an issue being discussed. For just as constant repetition of advertising slogans helps cement a positive association with a product, the constant inclusion of phrases like "favor the rich" and "soft on defense" are designed to cement existing storylines into the heads of voters.

Just as an aside, the need to confound existing stories plays a particularly important role in party conventions and other large-scale campaign events. This is why you tend to see so many soldiers on stage at Democratic events to counter the notion that Democrats are hostile to the military, and why you've seen an increasing number of rockers singing at Republican ones to counter the notion that Republicans aren't cool.

Getting back to arrangement, or how a persuasive argument is organized, while this framework of introduction, facts, division,

proof, refutation, and peroration is important, when analyzing a political speech, I would urge you to think of them as components of a dramatic story rather than as a mathematical proof, term-paper outline, or other work of nonfiction.

And not just any story but a story we already know resonates with large audiences: the summer blockbuster movie.

It might seem strange to be talking about something as unserious as a romance or action film in a discussion of critical thinking. But keep in mind that these types of entertainments are often referred to as "formula pictures." And the formula that the storylines follow in such films is a time-tested one that you are increasingly being exposed to as modern political communication begins to look less like Cicero and more like Spielberg.

For instance, a formula story requires a hero (the protagonist) who faces off against a villain (his or her antagonist). And it is vital that this antagonist be a real person, not an abstraction. Even in stories where the hero or heroine is battling against a totalitarian society such as those in Orwell's *1984* or *The Hunger Games*, you needed an O'Brien or President Snow to personify those hideous societies, creating a flesh-and-blood villain for the hero to battle against directly.

Many formula pictures also include a *reflection* character such as a plucky sidekick (think Sam Gamgee from *Lord of the Rings*) or a wise teacher like Mr. Miyagi from *Karate Kid* who possesses many of the characteristics of the hero, although not enough of them to replace the hero in his or her central role.

Finally, you've got the romantic interest whose relationship with the hero should be obvious.

Getting back to our hero, this character should represent some kind of outsider. Perhaps he or she is poor in a rich society (again, think Katniss Everdeen from *Hunger Games* or Daniel from *Karate Kid*), perhaps they come from a marginalized group or are strangers in a new town or country.

While you can have a hero that starts the story rich and powerful, generally it doesn't take long for them to tumble from that position, at which point they need to discover internal strengths they never knew they possessed in order to overcome their current degraded state.

Also, unlike the gods of ancient mythology or 1940s superheroes, our formula movie heroes cannot be all-powerful and all-confident but must suffer from weaknesses, particularly self-doubt. This gives them the chance, over the course of the story, to find some special quality within that allows them to overcome their fears and shortcomings in order to win out against the overwhelming challenges they face.

And these challenges must indeed by overwhelming. For it is not good enough for the Karate Kid to learn a few good moves and at last come to peace with himself. No, instead he must defeat opponent after opponent, finishing with his deadliest rival. But only after the hero's leg has been broken, making it all but impossible for him to succeed (which of course he does anyway).

This final overcoming of monumental challenges comes near the end of the film in a climax that can be thought of as the peroration of the picture. For it is at this maximum point of tension and drama that the audience sees the hero put together everything he or she has learned throughout the picture into an effective burst of resourcefulness and courage that allows him to save the day and win the girl (or, if you're Sigourney Weaver in *Alien* and *Aliens*, kill off the "bugs" and escape safely into cryogen).

So what does all this movie talk have to do with politics (or, more importantly, critical thinking about politics)?

Well, consider for a moment how these elements play out in modern political convention addresses.

Regarding characters, your hero is clearly the candidate and the villain the opponent from the opposing party.

I should note here that there are some times, such as when a president is particularly popular, when another less-popular political player might serve the role of villain/antagonist.

For example, in the 1990s Democrats railed not against Congress but against "Newt Gingrich's Republican Congress," just as Republicans more recently made then-Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi the villainess in their dramas. You can sometimes also see echoes of other stories in the decision of who to cast as a political villain, my favorite being the evil advisers who were pulling the strings of an allegedly hapless Ronald Reagan or George W. Bush, an archetype that could have been pulled right from the pages of the tale of "Aladdin".

But assuming most candidates cast their opponent in the villain's role, the next step is to identify the candidate's spunky sidekick or reflection character. During a convention, this role is normally taken by the candidate's choice for vice president. This means a well-arranged speech will include the candidate singing the praises of his or her running mate and highlighting that this partner has many of the virtues possessed by the candidate him or herself. But within the storyline being told through speeches and those now-ubiquitous (and overproduced) video biographies, it will also be made clear that the person playing a reflection role lacks something that makes the hero/presidential candidate special enough to secure the actual nomination.

As for romance, in American politics that role must be taken by the candidate's beloved and selfless spouse. And woe to any candidate who tries to put someone else in that slot.

Previously, I mentioned that the hero must be some kind of an outsider, preferably one who has overcome a great disadvantage such as poverty, a crippling illness, a family tragedy, or a wayward youth.

For those who enter the fray from outside of politics (think Ross Perot or Donald Trump), this outsider status is usually automatically accepted as genuine. But since nearly all successful

candidates for high office (especially for president) are moving up from an existing political position, it takes effort to create a similar impression of outsiderness.

Sometimes this can be done by tapping other existing storylines that resonate within American culture. For instance, Ronald Reagan was the governor of California before he ran for president. But in both his gubernatorial and presidential campaigns and careers, he was characterized as the cowboy riding into town to clean things up who would afterwards retire to his ranch when the work was done.

Such a storyline will be familiar with those who grew up on movie Westerns (including those that starred Ronald Reagan, another demonstration of his origins outside of politics). But it also taps an important component of political mythology that Americans have internalized, even if most don't know its origins. This is the belief that our president should be the reincarnation of Cincinnatus, a legendary Roman leader who put down his plow to take control of the army and save the city, only to leave command behind and return to the farm when victory was won.

In Washington, DC, there is a statue of the man that city was named for dressed in a Roman toga, leaning on a plow. For it was George Washington—who genuinely embodied Cincinnatus' virtue as a citizen-turned-soldier-turned-leader-turned-back-to-citizen—who set the standard all American politicians have since had to live up to (or at least pretend to emulate).

In the 2008 election, candidate Obama was able to turn his limited political experience before becoming president into an asset by using it to demonstrate that he was really an outsider ready to transform the stale status quo, a sentiment embodied in his one-word campaign mantra: "Change."

In addition to narratives of outsiderness, a candidate's biography must also contain stories of how he or she overcame personal shortcomings in order to achieve current success. Think about George W. Bush's story of rising above his youthful

irresponsibility, which included heavy drinking, through personal strength driven by religious faith.

In 2012, it was particularly interesting to see how Republican candidate Mitt Romney—a wealthy man who was born into a powerful and successful political family—could package his personal story to fit "The Formula." For, unlike other wealthy men from connected political clans (such as the various Bushes and Kennedys that have been on the political stage for decades), Romney seems to have had a blessed if straight-laced upbringing, making it difficult for him to dramatize a tale of overcoming the odds set against him since birth.

But, as all presidential candidates remind us every election cycle: "this is America." And in America, one need not go back too many generations to find a poverty-stricken outsider who was fortunate enough to make it to these shores. In the case of Mitt Romney, it was his father who got to play lead role in the rags-to-riches portion of the candidate's story.

As for Romney himself, his piece of the story (exemplified in an official biopic that preceded his acceptance speech) was that of a man who used his blessings to bring even greater blessings to others: as savior of the 2002 Olympics, as governor of Massachusetts, and finally as the man who will save us from our predicaments and woes as president of the United States. (It should be noted that the film also mentioned Romney's wife's battle with a deadly illness, which added an appropriate amount of pathos to the storyline.)

Of course, Mitt Romney, like every presidential candidate from both parties before and since, wanted Americans to know that he was an outsider, specifically an outsider to the corrupt politics of Washington. In fact, he wasn't even a politician at all but rather a sound, sensible businessman who was ready to bring his practical bottom-line (but still compassionate) wisdom to bear on solving our nation's many problems.

One of the things I love most about political conventions—both party's—are those periods when the candidates ridicule "Washington insiders" while their own party's representatives, senators, and other insiders are in the audience wildly cheering their own condemnation.

Speaking of party conventions, if you're lucky enough to be reading this book during an election year, you will have many opportunities to view speeches organized around most if not all of the arrangement principles you've just been reading about.

While congressional floor discussions, campaign stump speeches, and even political debates will include some elements of classical arrangement, major public addresses like convention acceptance speeches are where candidates and their speechwriters try to channel their inner Cicero. Inaugural addresses and "State of the Union" speeches are also events where these professionals like to strut their stuff.

As you watch such speeches play out (which is better than just listening to them since body language is an important component of delivery), the speech's introduction is the easiest thing to spot since it is short and right up at the beginning.

As I mentioned earlier, at a national political convention the presidential nominee is generally not required to explain to a stadium full of wildly screaming supporters why it is important that they listen to what he or she has to say. Similarly, audiences for inaugural addresses and "State of the Union" speeches largely know why they are there.

This is why such speeches frequently begin with ethos-based boilerplate, such as thanks directed to local politicians and celebrities (especially beloved sports heroes), praise for recently defeated rivals, warm expressions of gratitude towards loving family members, and that all-purpose favorite: the self-deprecating joke designed to demonstrate humility as well as put the audience at ease before the main event begins.

While the ethos-based introduction is easy to spot, often the logos-based part of a speech will cut between the statements of facts, the division, and the logical proof, especially if a speech is serving multiple purposes.

For instance, a just-nominated candidate for president has a long list of facts he or she needs to present to the American people at this coming-out celebration: their biography (to help Americans understand who they "really" are), an assessment of the current state of the country, and a review of how things have gone over the last four or more years which will be presented in either a positive or negative light, depending on whether or not the speaker represents the party in power.

Frequently, a speaker will switch between the statement of facts and the division, hinting at the line of argument that will be presented when he or she gets to the logical proof portion of the talk. For it is through that logical proof that a candidate can make the connection between the facts you were just told and the issues those facts will be applied to. For example, a candidate who has just presented his biography and then listed a set of things wrong with the country will use the logical proof segment of their talk to argue that only someone with that just-presented biography can solve those just-listed problems.

The refutation, where candidates must anticipate lines of attack from an opponent in the upcoming presidential race, can take a number of forms. Among other things, it usually provides a way to begin ratcheting up the emotion (pathos) quotient of a presentation. For example, when Republican Mitt Romney accepted his party's nomination in 2012, his refutation came in the form of a series of accusations, each beginning with the words "this president can" followed by an excuse the president was allegedly making for the current and supposedly bad state of affairs, as in "this president can ask us to be patient" (supposedly about something we shouldn't have to wait for) or "this president can tell us it was someone else's fault."

Interestingly, these emotion-tinged accusations are like premises, state or implied, in an argument. For example, that statement you just read ("This president can tell us it was someone else's fault") is really paired with a hidden premise that says something like "only someone who doesn't take responsibility for his own failings would blame those failings on others." With these premises in place, the (also unstated) conclusion is that the president does not take responsibility for his own failings. Given what you have learned so far, you are now in a position to tell if that complete argument was valid and sound.

Getting back to pointing out different arrangement elements, the injection of emotional content usually means we are starting to reach the peroration, which, like the introduction, can generally be spotted easily since it will appear at the end of a speech. In previous eras, perorations often involved the speaker working himself or herself into an emotional frenzy, much like a tent revival preacher exploding into a passionate declaration of faith. But in our more-subdued contemporary age, the peroration usually involves the speaker staying in control while working the audience into a froth by, for example, asking a series of rhetorical questions like "does the America we want borrow a trillion dollars from China!?" and waiting for the audience to shout back a resounding and unsurprising "No!"

Maintaining this level of fervor is draining for both a speaker and an audience, which is why an emotional climax also tends to be a signal that the speech is coming to an end, with the final wrap-up usually marked by a crisp appeal to higher authority such as "So help me God," "God bless the United States of America," or some other sentiment used to establish that the candidate recognizes a power greater the one he or she is seeking. In 1988, for example, George H. W. Bush preceded his call to God with this well-crafted short phrase designed to establish that his run for the presidency was based not on ambition but on duty: "That is my mission. And I

will complete it." (Not bad for someone usually not associated with skilled oratory.)

As we leave the subject of arrangement behind, one of the reasons modern speeches don't go on for hours or days (as they did in the time of Cicero) is that the audience for such events is not just (or mainly) the people in the room where the speech is given. For the unseen audience a candidate must ultimately reach will be watching and listening to that speech through a filter that is generally referred to as "the media." And it is to the subject of the media (and media literacy) that we will turn to next.