

## Modes of Discourse

Since the following “Modes of Discourse” have been used in countless books, articles, classes, and workshop to teach students effective writing, in particular effective argumentation, I would like to describe each of them briefly. Please be aware, that the modes are NOT all on the same level: many are actually parts of other modes. To find a text that contains exclusively ONE mode is rare, if not impossible.

### 1. Description

You can describe an idea, an image, a sound, a smell, a taste, an object, a character, an event, a time, a culture, and millions of other things. No matter, what you describe, your description will, most likely, be more powerful if you keep the following things in mind:

- ⇒ Be specific and concrete instead of general and vague
- ⇒ Don't dwell on what is expected and obvious anyway
- ⇒ Avoid using clichés and trite expressions
- ⇒ Don't rely too much on adjectives to describe things, use characteristic verbs and nouns instead
- ⇒ Involve more than one sense (sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch) in your description
- ⇒ Describe whatever you are describing in a way that makes it unique and memorable
- ⇒ Focus on the details that are relevant for the impression you would like to communicate
- ⇒ Include details that point beyond themselves to a more symbolic meaning

Descriptions are part of basically ANY genre: from ads to poems, political speeches to scholarly essays, ancient mythology to science fiction. Practicing this particular mode is therefore extremely useful.

### 2. Narration

Whenever someone is telling someone else about something that happened to him or her – a first encounter with a new date, a trip to Hawaii, an strange incident at school or work – he or she is using narration (or narrative). Sometimes, one event follows the other pretty quickly (first – then – and then – and then – and then). At other times, the story unfolds slowly with lots of pauses and detours.

If you want your narrative to be effective, here are a few things that you might want to keep in mind:

- ⇒ Concentrate on the point(s) that you want to make with your story
- ⇒ Make sure that the setting, the plot, and the characters all contribute to the story
- ⇒ Try to find the parts of the story that are most interesting for others and focus on them
- ⇒ Include some kind of conflict or decision or turning-point
- ⇒ Select carefully what you want to include in your narrative and what you want to leave out, e.g.:
  - Don't tell the reader bluntly what happened, instead: show him/her what's going on
  - Leave out some crucial information so that the reader can play detective and figure out certain things on his/her own
  - But make sure you include enough hints for the reader to be able to make correct guesses
  - Don't include obvious and redundant information (unless you have a reason to do so)
  - Use speed systematically as well, i.e.: speed up (and sum up) the events when nothing interesting is going on and slow down (and elaborate) whenever something of importance is happening
- ⇒ Think about how to order the events to best achieve your desired effects; possibilities include:
  - Chronological order (i.e. you tell what happened first, first, what happened last, last)
  - Reverse chronological order (i.e. you start at the end of the story and go backward in time)
  - you start at a point close to the end of the story and tell that last bit in chronological order while integrating the earlier parts in the form of flashbacks
  - you tell bits and pieces of the story by jumping back and forth; since this makes it more difficult for the reader to understand what's going on, you have to put in enough clues for him/her to be able to reconstruct the actual sequence of the events
  - you circle around the main event(s); this can, for example, easily be done either in combination with stream-of-consciousness technique (where the main character's thoughts circle back to the same event over and over again) or by telling the story from different perspectives (e.g. 10 people have watched the same event but their interpretations of what happened differ considerably from each other)

### 3. Dialogue

Dialogue can be part of a narrative or, in the form of radio plays, stand on its own. In most movies and stage plays, dialogue and action together convey the story – without the mediation of a narrator.

Often, dialogue is meant to give the impression of “real” – recorded – conversation. It therefore often includes linguistic elements that are typical for spoken language, such as dialect, sociolect, idiolect, colloquialisms, repetitions of various kinds, and incomplete sentences,

A monologue can be seen as a special kind of dialogue – a dialogue in which one partner is either absent or silent. Interior monologue and stream-of-consciousness technique are both special forms of monologues.

### 4. Argumentation

In a way, an argument is an exercise in logic. The essential ingredients are: a thesis – or position (i.e. your opinion about something) – and enough evidence (supporting points, complete with examples) to prove that what you say is convincing and correct. In Greek Antiquity, the typical argument consisted of three steps: a) thesis (your opinion/interpretation), b) antithesis (the opposite opinion/interpretation of the same thing) and c) a synthesis or evaluation of the two sides that was supposed to lead to a higher perspective. Many texts (including many poems and stories) make an argument. Sometimes, however, the argument is neither overt nor foregrounded.

### 5. Analysis

Analysis is often used to figure out – and then explain – the nature of something: how something works (for example photosynthesis), or how something is structured or composed (for instance, a text). Analysis requires careful investigation, attention to detail, and a step-by-step description and/or explanation of the object, phenomenon, or process in question – with plenty of evidence as illustration.

### 6. Definition

When we define something, we explain its meaning – the way it makes sense in our context and for our purpose. Definition is therefore often used to RE-DEFINE a word, term, expression, idea, action, thing, or phenomenon, that is, to define it in a new – and sometimes unique – way. Of course, we also define words and terms that are specialized to make sure our readers know what we are talking about.

### 7. Classification

Classifying things is a way of ordering them, of putting them into a box with a label on it. This allows easy identification and evaluation but is often an oversimplification that does not do justice to the variety and complexity of the world. Simplistic classifications often give also rise to stereotypes and prejudices and can therefore be extremely dangerous. On the other hand, writers can use classification to undermine or even break up stereotypical thinking by restructuring the world in new – and sometimes very provocative – ways.

### 8. Cause & Effect

The relationship between cause and effect plays an important role in particular in narration as well as in argumentation. The focus can be on one cause (e.g. global warming) that has multiple effects or on one effect (e.g. rising sea level) that has multiple causes or on a chain of cause and effects.

### 9. Contrast & Comparison

Contrast can be used in any of the other modes (description, narrative, dialogue, argumentation, etc) either on a micro (e.g. contrasting examples) or on a macro level (e.g. thesis – antithesis, 2 contrasting characters). Most contrasts automatically lead to a comparison of the contrasted phenomena or things. This comparison can be explicit or just implied. If it is just implied, the reader has to do the comparing him- or herself. If it is explicit, the writer does the work.

If you want to compare two things, you have two basic options: you can either talk about one thing in all its aspects first and then about the other thing in all its aspects – or you can compare each aspect right away.

### 10. Example & Illustration

Examples and Illustrations can be found in ALL texts. All powerful texts contain examples or illustrations.

#### -> ASSIGNMENTS:

- a) Find examples for each mode of discourse in 1) some poems of your choice and 2) some non-fictional texts
- b) Try to write either a short story or a poem or a short general-interest article that contains all 10 modes of discourse