Classification and Definition Essays: Reading Samples

Inquire: Rhetorically Reading a Classification Essay

Overview

Reading an example of a definition or classification essay can be somewhat dry. If, however, the essay holds some sort of importance, it can be much easier to read, even if the topic of the essay is fairly academic. Fred Mednick’s “Multiple Intelligences” is an example of a classification essay that has had lasting impact, particularly in the field of education. As you read, be sure to analyze Mednick’s ethos, his appeals to pathos, his use of logos, and his overall purpose.

Big Question: What does an effective classification essay look like?

Watch: Street Smarts vs. Book Smarts

Reading a classification essay might seem boring, especially if the topic doesn’t seem relevant to you. However, a good classification essay can be one of the most helpful and informative tools when you’re first learning about a new topic. It can be easier to understand a new topic when the subject is broken down into its smallest parts.

You might find yourself wondering what a good classification essay looks like, especially if the goal is to inform rather than persuade. One of the best ways to learn how to write a good classification essay is to read a good classification essay.

As you read any example essay, you should be looking at its rhetorical situation. You need to look at the essay’s:

- ethos
- pathos
- logos
- overall purpose

You can learn about the essay’s ethos by looking at how the author presents him or herself. Do they present themselves as educated by using academic and formal language? Or, do they present themselves as more casual by using informal language?
You can learn about the essay’s pathos by asking a few questions:

- Who is the audience?
- What do they value?
- What do they already know about the subject?

The writer will change his or her language depending on the audience and their needs.

The essay’s appeals to logos will come in two ways: first, through the essay’s structure, and second, through the essay’s use of research, citations, and supporting evidence.

These elements combined help the reader to understand the essay’s “purpose.” What is the essay writer trying to accomplish?

In the essay “Multiple Intelligences,” Fred Mednick writes for an audience of students who are learning to be educators. He attempts to teach his readers about the concept of multiple intelligences by breaking it down in a classification-style essay.

We talk about multiple intelligences in abstract ways all the time. Do you have a friend that you would say is book smart but not street smart? What do we mean by this? Are there different kinds of smarts? This is the very question Mednick explores in his essay “Multiple Intelligences.”

What are some different kinds of “smart” you can think of?

**Read: Fred Mednick’s “Multiple Intelligences”**

“Is intelligence innate? Genetic? Fixed?

Generally, this is how intelligence has been viewed – as a quantity. Recently, new views have emerged with enormous implications for education. This new perspective asserts that intelligence can be measured in different ways, that it grows, and it is more quality than quantity. It used to be that the question was asked: “Is s/he smart?” Now, the question is: “How is s/he smart?” The emphasis is on the various ways in which we demonstrate multiple intelligences, rather than a single intelligence. The readings and assignments that follow discuss multiple intelligences, provide an opportunity for you to apply them, and furnish a way to assess students.

Howard Gardner created a list of seven intelligences. The first two are ones that have been typically valued in schools; the next three are usually associated with the arts; and the final two are what Howard Gardner called “personal intelligences.”

Linguistic intelligence involves sensitivity to spoken and written language, the ability to learn languages, and the capacity to use language to accomplish certain goals. This intelligence includes the ability to effectively use language to express oneself rhetorically or poetically and language as a means to remembering information. Writers, poets, lawyers, and speakers are among those that Howard Gardner sees as having high linguistic intelligence.

Logical-mathematical intelligence consists of the capacity to analyze problems logically, carry out mathematical operations, and investigate issues scientifically. In Howard Gardner’s words, it entails the ability to detect patterns, reason deductively, and think logically. This intelligence is most often associated with scientific and mathematical thinking.
Musical intelligence involves skill in the performance, composition, and appreciation of musical patterns. It encompasses the capacity to recognize and compose musical pitches, tones, and rhythms. According to Howard Gardner, musical intelligence runs in an almost structural parallel to linguistic intelligence.

Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence entails the potential of using one’s whole body or parts of the body to solve problems. It is the ability to use mental abilities to coordinate bodily movements. Howard Gardner sees mental and physical activity as related.

Spatial intelligence involves the potential to recognize and use the patterns of wide space and more confined areas.

Interpersonal intelligence is the capacity to understand the intentions, motivations, and desires of other people. It allows people to work effectively with others. Educators, salespeople, religious and political leaders, and counselors all need a well-developed interpersonal intelligence.

[...]

In essence, Howard Gardner argues that he was making two essential claims about multiple intelligences:

1. The theory is an account of human cognition in its fullness. The intelligences provided “a new definition of human nature, cognitively speaking” (Gardner 1999: 44). Human beings are organisms who possess a basic set of intelligences.

2. People have a unique blend of intelligences. Gardner argues that the big challenge facing the deployment of human resources “is how to best take advantage of the uniqueness conferred on us as a species exhibiting several intelligences.”

Also, these intelligences, according to Howard Gardner, are amoral. They can be put to constructive or destructive use.

The Appeal of Multiple Intelligences

[...]
Mindy L. Kornhaber, a researcher at Harvard University, has identified a number of reasons why teachers and policymakers have responded positively to Howard Gardner’s presentation of multiple intelligences. Among these are the fact that the theory validates educators’ everyday experience: students think and learn in many different ways. It also provides educators with a conceptual framework for organizing and reflecting on curriculum assessment and pedagogical practices. In turn, this reflection has led many educators to develop new approaches that might better meet the needs of the range of learners in their classrooms.

[...]

Additional Intelligences

Since Howard Gardner’s original listing of the intelligences in Frames of Mind (1983), there has been a great deal of discussion as to other possible candidates for inclusion: naturalistic intelligence, the ability of people to draw upon the resources and features of the environment to solve problems; spiritual intelligence, the ability of people to both access and use, practically, the resources available in somewhat less tangible, but nonetheless powerful lessons of the spirit; and moral intelligence, the ability to access and use certain truths.

Emotional Intelligence

In a 1994 report on the current state of emotional literacy in the U.S., author Daniel Goleman stated:

“...in navigating our lives, it is our fears and envies, our rages and depressions, our worries and anxieties that steer us day to day. Even the most academically brilliant among us are vulnerable to being undone by unruly emotions. The price we pay for emotional illiteracy is in failed marriages and troubled families, in stunted social and work lives, in deteriorating physical health and mental anguish and, as a society, in tragedies such as killings...”

Goleman attests that the best remedy for battling our emotional shortcomings is preventive medicine. In other words, we need to place as much importance on teaching our children the essential skills of emotional intelligence as we do on more traditional measures like IQ and GPA (grade point averages).

Exactly what is emotional intelligence? The term encompasses the following five characteristics and abilities:
1. Self-awareness – knowing your emotions, recognizing feelings as they occur, and discriminating between them.
2. Mood management – handling feelings so they’re relevant to the current situation, and you react appropriately.
3. Self-motivation – “gathering up” your feelings, and directing yourself towards a goal, despite self-doubt, inertia, and impulsiveness.
4. Empathy – recognizing feelings in others, and tuning into their verbal and nonverbal cues.
5. Managing relationships – handling interpersonal interaction, conflict resolution, and negotiations.

Why We Need Emotional Intelligence

Research in brain-based learning suggests that emotional health is fundamental to effective learning. According to a report from the National Center for Clinical Infant Programs, the most critical element for a student’s success in school is an understanding of how to learn. (Emotional Intelligence, p. 193.) The key ingredients for this understanding are:

- Confidence
- Curiosity
- Intentionality
- Self-control
- Relatedness
- Capacity to communicate
- Ability to cooperate

These traits are all aspects of emotional intelligence. Basically, a student who learns to learn is much more apt to succeed. Emotional intelligence has proven a better predictor of future success than traditional methods like the GPA, IQ, and standardized test scores.

Hence, the great interest in emotional intelligence on the part of corporations, universities, and schools nationwide. The idea of emotional intelligence has inspired research and curriculum development. Researchers have concluded that people who manage their own feelings well and deal effectively with others are more likely to live content lives. Plus, happy people are more apt to retain information and do so more effectively than dissatisfied people.

Building one’s emotional intelligence has a lifelong impact. Many parents and educators are alarmed by increasing levels of conflict in young schoolchildren: low self-esteem, early drug and alcohol use, and depression. Parents and teachers are rushing to teach students the skills necessary for emotional intelligence. In corporations, the inclusion of emotional intelligence in training programs has helped employees cooperate better and be more motivated, thereby increasing productivity and profits."

Reflect Poll: Your Intelligence

Which kind of intelligence do you consider yourself strongest in?

- Linguistic
- Logical-mathematical
- Musical
- Interpersonal
- Spatial
Expand: Rhetorically Analyzing a Classification Essay

Overview

A quick examination of an essay’s rhetorical situation can help us better understand how to write one ourselves. Read back through the essay. Looking at the ethos, pathos, logos, and purpose can help you figure out what kind of style will work best when you set out to write your own.

Purpose

So, what is Mednick’s purpose in this essay? What is the general purpose of a definition essay? Certainly, it is to define a specific term — in this case, Mednick sets out to define “multiple intelligences.” He goes beyond that, of course, to provide the separate classifications that exist within the term. This, then, is a classification essay. Mednick takes the genre of writing one step further by proposing the inclusion of an additional classification to the already established list. One of Mednick’s main purposes is to convince the reader that “emotional intelligence” should always be included as a form (or class) of intelligence.

Ethos

Notice the kind of language used by Mednick. While it is certainly academic, it is not overly formal in tone. He asks rhetorical questions and uses more casual transitions like “plus” or “basically.” He falls somewhere between formal and scholarly and informal and casual. This makes his text more accessible to a wider audience, while maintaining his credibility, which makes sense considering his purpose.

Pathos

Who do you suspect is Mednick’s audience? Some research can help us answer this question. This essay was initially published online in 2007 for a course entitled “Education for the New Millennium.” Looking at the title, we can presume that the essay was written for those who are studying to be educators. This can help us better understand the kind of language Mednick used. As future educators, we can assume that the students of this course are looking to contribute to the well-being of their future students. By explaining the importance of emotional intelligence, Mednick taps into the desire to better students’ emotions and, therefore, lives. The essay was produced for an academic setting, so the language leans toward being more formal, but the content is introductory, which means Mednick needs to make the writing clear and easy to understand for someone learning about the topic for the first time.

Logos

Finally, it’s worth examining Mednick’s use of logos. Look at the structure of the essay: it's broken down neatly into lists and small paragraphs that represent different subtopics. Mednick has also used subtitles to further divide the subject matter. This clear and distinctly broken down organization can make a difficult topic easier to digest for someone learning it for the first time. Additionally, Mednick makes a point to cite a number of courses and to reference scholars and experts in the subject matter. In doing this, Mednick appeals not only to the logos of his audience, but he also further establishes his own credibility through extensive research.
Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings
A chapter expanding on the concept of multiple intelligences
  ● Link to resource:

A document providing additional information and example classification essays
  ● Link to resource:

More information helping you organize your essays
  ● Link to resource:
    https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/establishing_arguments/organizing_your_argument.html

Lesson Glossary
None

Check Your Knowledge

1. Fred Mednick’s essay was originally published in a book.
   a. True
   b. False
2. Emotional intelligence is a part of the original seven classifications of intelligence.
   a. True
   b. False
3. Fred Mednick developed the concept of multiple intelligences.
   a. True
   b. False

Answer Key:

Citations

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