

Burkean Ratios

A Rhetorical Heuristic



The Pentad

- **Act**–What was done? (“What took place in thought or deed?”)
- **Scene**–Where and when was it done? (Context, Background, Situation)
- **Agent**–Who did it? (What person or kind of person, what co-agents or counter-agents?)
- **Agency**–By what means or with what instruments was it done?
- **Purpose**–Why was it done?

The Pentad Is Not a Checklist

- People often start by identifying what they see as the **act, agent, agency, scene** and **purpose** in the text.
- They often identify the writing of the text or speech as the act, but there are usually many other more interesting acts to focus on.
- It is better to identify the act that the text is talking about.
- There are no right or wrong ratios, but some fit better than others.
- The pentad is a heuristic that helps you find the arguments in the text and think of ways to counter them.

The Real Power Is in the Ratios

- The most commonly used ratios are agent→act and scene→act.
- For example, a person who wants to argue that there are racist people and non-racist people, but that the system isn't racist is making an argument based on an agent→act ratio.
- A racist agent makes a racist act.
- Someone who argues that racism is systemic is invoking a scene→act ratio.
- Racist acts are motivated by the racist system (scene) in which we all live.

The System is a Scene

- The same thing is happening when people argue that the solution to police brutality is to eliminate a few bad apples.
- That is an agent→act ratio. A few bad cops (agents) make the police force look bad.
- If you argue that the militarization of police and the warrior culture of a police force is the real problem, you are making a scene→act argument.

What Motivates the Act?

- Burke's question is, "From whence does motivation flow?"
- If you have a hammer and everything looks like a nail, that is an agency→act ratio.
- If you argue "Guns don't kill people, people kill people," you are countering an agency-act ratio with an agent→act ratio.
- From a Burkean point of view, the gun control debate is mostly a conflict between these two ratios.

Pentad as Heuristic

- The pentad is a perspective-shifting heuristic.
- It is not an engine of Truth.
- Every situation contains many ratios.
- Which ratio best serves your purpose?
- Which ratio seems to distort reality more than reveal it?

How will the pentad help students?

- Students tend to think that our job is to teach them what everybody knows, but that they don't know yet.
- The pentad is a thinking tool, but it is not a thinking tool that everybody knows.
- It is not common knowledge, but useful special knowledge.
- It generates insights that others might not see.

Ukraine War Ratios

- When Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, they thought that they would win in three days. Ukraine surprised them by resisting fiercely and continuing to resist.
- Russia says that the Ukrainian armed forces have been able to resist the invasion because NATO has supplied them with advanced weapons. What kind of ratio does this imply?
- Others say that Ukraine has resisted heroically because of the character of the Ukrainian people. What kind of ratio does this imply?
- Still others say that Ukraine resists because the population remembers what it was like to live under the Soviet Union and has experienced democracy and greater prosperity. What ratio does this imply?

The Scene

- The scene can be defined in terms of place, time, culture, a mode of political organization, or a belief system.
- The scene can be defined narrowly or broadly. Burke talks about this as changing the “circumference.”
- You may have noticed that Burke’s concept of scene is related to the sophistic concept of *kairos*.
- An act that is appropriate in one scene may be inappropriate in another.
- The appropriateness of an act may change depending on how narrowly or broadly the scene is defined.

The Origin Story of the ERWC in Burkean Terms

- In 2003, the EPT and the mindset of the C.O. at the time created a scene in which it looked like about half of CSU first year students were "remedial."
- ETS reported that the biggest problem was with scores on the reading portion of the test.
- The C.O. wanted to do something about this.
- We could characterize this situation as purpose→act, but I think scene→act is a better description. This purpose came out of the whole scene.

The CSU Literacy Scene

- The C.O. reached out to English Council and asked, "What do you recommend?"
- A big reason reason they responded in this way was because of the leadership of Dave Spence, Associate Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs at the time.
- In the current scene, I don't think that relations between the C.O. and English Council are good enough for the C.O to reach out, or pay attention to any recommendations.
- I said, "You need to develop a 12th grade course." They said, "OK, develop a course." I said, "We are CSU faculty. We have no credibility with high school teachers. We need to recruit teachers to work with." They said, "Make it so."

Task Force 12

- Once the idea of creating an ERWC course was approved, the formation of the task force became an agent→act ratio with me as the agent.
- Once the task force began meeting, it became an intersection of competing scenes—the CSU scene, the k-12 scene, the TESOL scene, the comp-rhet scene, the reading scene, the testing scene.
- ERWC grew into something at the center of a Venn diagram of these competing scenes. ERWC was becoming its own scene. The agent→act ratio became less relevant in understanding ERWC, unless one thought of the whole task force as an agent.

The Template

- We can think of the template as an agency.
- It was a tool for regulating the design of modules so that they had consistency of form and purpose.
- Thus the creation of each module had an agency→act component. The motivation for creating the module flowed from the template, the "one ring to rule them all."

The Tennessee Three

After a mass shooting at the Covenant Christian School in Nashville on March 27, 2023, protestors gathered in front of the Tennessee State House, asking the legislature to do something. Most legislators walked through the protestors without engaging with them. Three legislators, Reps. Justin Jones, Justin J. Pearson, and Gloria Johnson organized a protest inside the statehouse. Jones and Pearson, who are Black, were expelled from the legislature. Gloria Johnson, who is white, was not.

I will play a little bit of the video of the session to expel Justin J. Pearson.

<https://www.c-span.org/video/?c5065594/user-clip-rep-farmer-question-rep-pearson-response>

Activity

In the handouts I have done some analysis of the initial speech by Rep. Andrew Farmer, who wrote the resolution to expel Justin J. Pearson. In your groups, I would like you to apply the concepts of the Burkean ratios to Pearson's response.

1. How does he reframe the arguments made by Farmer?
2. What ratios does he use in making his own arguments?
3. What insights do you get from thinking about Burkean ratios in this context?

Thanks for Coming!

For more examples of the pentad in use go to my blog post “Using Kenneth Burke’s Pentad”

<https://textrhet.com/2018/09/29/using-kenneth-burkes-pentad/>