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A Structurally Sound Theme Is like a Hamburger with Everything on It

Doyle W. Walls

Lisa opened the door of Frank's Smokehouse and looked inside. I motioned to her and moved away from the table where I sat with my colleagues. Lisa's mornings were filled with classes; her afternoons, with work. Something had to be done about her structureless themes. I spread out Lisa's four themes on the table in front of us. On each paper I had praised her for content, yet the content was not organized. Lisa decided to skip lunch despite my concern for her health. I am glad I did not skip lunch that day. When Frank called my number, I picked up my charcoal-broiled, double-meat hamburger with everything on it. While I was explaining theme structure to Lisa in an abstract way and taking bites from my hamburger, I realized that I was overlooking, or better yet looking over, a concrete simile. A hamburger cooked the way I like it has many similarities to the basic theme structure that I ask of my students. With the pedagogical approach presented in this essay, I have helped freshmen and sophomores replace chaos with clarity in their writing. I teach my students how to structure themes, something they seem to know little about, by lecturing to them concerning something they know everything about, the basic hamburger: meat, buns, and trimmings.

The most important part of the theme is the meat. One must first check the freezer to see if he has meat, extra lean meat. Without meat, one has no theme. I tell my students that their content is what I am after. Their eternal question concerning content and style is irrelevant. Because I am concerned with their ideas, I must necessarily be concerned with the effective presentation of those ideas. I hate to assign a writing topic only to see someone take out a clean sheet of paper, write his complete heading, write his title, write his first few sentences, and then sit and stare into space for twenty minutes. This student started without thinking, without checking to see if he had anything to write about. He, like Lisa, might well have flashes of excellent content; but the content will be obscured by disorganization, and some of the best points the student has to offer may never reach the paper. Set the meat out to thaw. Thawing time is thinking time.

When the meat has thawed, one can arrange the meat into separate patties. These patties are the body paragraphs. The meat patties are manageable parts. A letter to the editor might need only one or two meat patties. A paper on Ancient History, e.g., a paper on the Beatles, might naturally divide into four meat patties. I recommend three meat patties as a rule in order to ensure development of an idea, but I am flexible on this point. The content should determine the number of body paragraphs needed. If a student finds that he consistently writes a body paragraph that is weak, he should return to the thawing stage and check his categories for division. A hamburger without symmetrical meat patties will not stack up. The meat patties in a hamburger-theme should be well done. A half-broiled idea is no better than a half-baked idea. A "rare" idea is something most of us admire. But in hamburger-theme terminology, "rare" means that the body paragraphs have not been thought through; "rare" meat patties have not been tested in the fire by the writer. A paragraph that has not been criticized by its own writer will not be tough enough to keep from crumbling during the teacher's inspection.

Preparing the buns, i.e., the introduction and conclusion, is step number two when the student is writing a hamburger-theme. Although the top bun comes before the meat in the hamburger-theme, it is important to remind the student that the top bun and the bottom bun are one set. A student can not write an introduction before he knows what the meat of his essay will be. The buns, albeit a part of the hamburger, are made of entirely different ingredients than the meat; therefore, the buns have an entirely different function. By this point in the lecture, I have already drawn three symmetrical, horizontal meat patties on the board. I then draw the buns on the board, but I draw the top bun on the bottom and vice versa. The students quickly correct my mistake, and I make them tell me that there is a difference that anyone can see between a top and bottom bun.

Similarly, the two parts of bread in the hamburger-theme have separate, recognizable functions. The top bun, when placed on top of the meat patties while they are kept warm, emits an aroma that can make one leave his study and walk into the kitchen. I tell my students that my research in the library (so

I lie a little) has led me to believe that the very top of the top bun is that portion which sends out the aroma which in turn makes me more amenable to consuming the entire hamburger even if I had not wanted a hamburger in the first place. As an example of aroma, I refer to the beginning of class when I pulled out my handkerchief and stuffed the top of it inside the front of my collar and told the students to shut their books and forget about English because I wanted to speak about a favorite topic of mine, food. (This method of capturing the student's attention works well, especially around the noon hour.) The bottom bun is similar to the top bun, so the similarity should be made apparent in a hamburger-theme. If one opens his paper with a fish image, I ask to see that fish reappear in the conclusion. I like continuity. I also like mustard, an ingredient of paramount importance to the buns on a hamburger-theme. The mustard should appear twice: at the bottom of the top bun (thesis statement) and at the top of the bottom bun (restatement of thesis statement). The tangy taste of mustard, unlike many sauces often used on hamburgers, is immediately recognizable. The thesis statement and the restatement of the thesis statement should be just as apparent.

The last step in preparing the hamburger-theme is the trimmings. Although the appearance of a multitude of "minor" errors can fail a paper, the trimmings do not bear so much on whether or not the grade for the paper is pass or fail; but the trimmings do separate the average paper from the "B" and "A" papers. The onions, pickles, tomatoes, and lettuce are the fine details which enhance the basic structure of the hamburger. Washing the fine details is a method of omitting that which does not belong. The trimmings should be used in moderation. One should not spend too much time on a small detail just as one should not place an entire head of lettuce between two meat patties. Teaching the student to add the trimmings last and use them sparingly will help the student, especially when he is writing under pressure, e.g., in-class themes or essay tests. I have mentioned the four trimmings that are most commonly found on a hamburger. Each semester I have to set my students straight concerning what I do not want on hamburger-themes. First, I do not want cheese. When my students mention cheese as a trimming, I remind them that the assignment was to make a hamburger, not a cheeseburger. One should always follow the assignment. Second, I do not want to see anyone's "special" sauce. On one occasion I made the mistake of ordering a hamburger with "special" sauce. I had no idea what I was eating. "Special" sauce is unintelligible, incoherent. I will have nothing in my hamburger that is incomprehensible, and I will not have any such goop in an essay. The warnings I give concerning cheese and "special" sauce help remind the student that he should be writing with an audience in mind and that while he knows what it is that he is writing about, he should make what he knows clear for the reader.

The three parts of a common hamburger--meat, buns, and trimmings--have provided me with the simplest and most effective simile I have found for teaching my students how to structure a theme. After I had finished my hamburger and my impromptu lecture to Lisa during that noon hour in the Smokehouse, I asked Lisa two questions. If I had taken my hamburger to Frank with instructions to run the entire hamburger through the meat grinder, would the nutrition of that which came through the meat grinder be the same as the structured hamburger? Lisa said it would. Would I have eaten all that came out of the meat grinder? Lisa said I probably would not have eaten over a bite or two. Lisa saw the connection I was making between the nutritionally sound, yet unstructured and consequently unappetizing hamburger-in-a-cup and her own thoughtful, yet weakly structured essays. Lisa explained that it was the organization of the ingredients that made me consume the entire hamburger. In short order, Lisa's themes were structured and clear. Incidentally, Frank's Smokehouse burned down a few months after Lisa and I discussed her themes there; but Frank's Food Factory, at a new location, is thriving to this day because Frank remembered the same basic structure of a hamburger and never deviated from it.

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