

The Keith Scott Rules
by Hanne Blank

I had an excellent English teacher in grade 8. His name was Mr. Scott and he had eyebrows like a Great Horned Owl and he was about 19 feet tall. He had gone AWOL in Japan during WWII after helping tend to the dying after Hiroshima, and spent more than a decade as an apprentice to a bonsai master before returning to the US for his mother's funeral and giving himself up to military authorities the day after he buried her. He was a former alcoholic and drug addict who refused to parrot the anti-drug slogans he was told to repeat to us kids, instead, he spent 20 minutes one day telling us what it feels like to go through withdrawal. I will never forget the look on his face when he gazed out the window and said "Probably one or two of you will eventually get hooked on something and if it doesn't kill you first, maybe you'll decide to kick. And when you are lying there shivering and sweating and wishing you could die, because you will, I hope you remember your old eighth grade English teacher sitting here saying 'I told you so.' "

But I digress. Mr. Scott's classroom manner was not nurturing, gentle, or particularly kind, and he only gave praise when someone had done something he found genuinely praiseworthy. For the first 3 weeks I was terrified of him. Then I wrote something--it was only a paragraph, actually, in the context of a short essay, which he circled in red ink and wrote, in the margin, that it was "not just right, but actually good"--and I became his happy disciple, even though I only got a C on that essay. I loved him without reservation and worked harder to gain his approval than I have ever worked for anyone else, ever.

I find as I think about what needs to happen to my writing work in order for it to be more useful and accessible to more people is that I need to pay a lot more attention to the basics of organization for expository prose, as expounded by Keith Scott.

1. The piece as a whole needs to have a premise, or be based upon a situation, that you can express in a single short declarative sentence.
2. Each thematic subsection needs to have a premise that can likewise be expressed in a single short declarative sentence.
3. Each thematic subsection should have an odd number of supporting arguments. 3, 5, or 7 are the most effective numbers of arguments. More is generally superfluous. Three and five are most effective, as most readers cannot hold more than that in their heads at once.
4. Each supporting argument must have at minimum two pieces of positive evidence and one piece of negative evidence. This ratio should be maintained regardless of how many total pieces of evidence you introduce. The reason for this is that you must impress upon your reader that you know both (or all) sides of the argument, and yet your answer is the correct one.
5. Each piece as a whole, and each subsection as a whole, must have an introduction and a conclusion. Tell them what you're going to tell them. Then tell them. Then tell them what you told them. Repetition is a necessity for the feeble and an aid to the clever.
6. Do not insult your audience by presuming they wish to know everything there is to know about something, or even everything you know about something. They do not. Your readers are giving you the gift of their time, which they could be spending doing many things more pleasant and rewarding than reading your paltry contribution to the world of the written word. You must entice and reward them, and never, ever crush them. Besides, you should keep some evidence in reserve in case someone tries to tell you you are wrong.