Chapter overview:

Teaching rhetoric at any grade can be difficult to do. It wasn’t until my senior year in college that I even knew what rhetoric was. My high school education clearly lacked in this department. This is not the case for every student and in fact one teacher at the rural high school where I have done observations and teaching has tackled this vast subject and scaffolded it in such a way as to attempt to break down the main elements of it to make them more understandable for her students. The following pages are devoted to dissecting her process. Her process of scaffolding rhetoric was successful enough to get students to understand the elements of the rhetorical triangle seen in Figure 1.1 but was not structured enough to get them to produce quality work which showed their understanding.

Classroom Profile:

Ms. Zander, an experienced teacher, teaches English 11 at Charles High School, a rural high school. There is little racial diversity at CHS, as most students are Caucasian. Ms. Zander has twenty-eight students sitting in rows facing the front of the room. Because of the number of special education students in the class, she has a team teacher, with whom she has worked for several years and who is certified in special education, Mrs. Trevon.

Note that the following pages are based on observations of the classroom and students and discussions with the teachers. Student work examples are copied as students wrote them.

What is the rhetorical triangle?

There are many versions of the rhetorical triangle, but Ms. Zander and Mrs. Trevon adopted this one as it is the one agreed upon by the English department at CHS. It has the four main elements of a text that students should consider when exploring rhetoric: audience, topic,

![Rhetorical Triangle Diagram](attachment:rhetorical_triangle.png)
and purpose, persona, and format. Ms. Zander began the semester by having students explore rhetoric because it was the frame around which the rest of her units revolved. Thus, it is vital that her students understood the different elements of the rhetorical triangle so that they could apply them to future texts.

The National Council of Teachers of English puts a lot of emphasis on rhetoric and would thus approve of Mrs. Trevon and Ms. Zander’s emphasis on the rhetorical triangle. For instance, in “NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing” by the Writing Study Guide Group of the NCTE Executive committee, NCTE states that “Writing is not just one thing. It varies in form, structure, and production according to its audience and purpose.” (NCTE 2004) This single statement includes and emphasizes three elements of the rhetorical triangle: form (format), audience, and purpose. Thus, it is necessary for students to understand the elements of rhetoric in order to become good writers; understanding rhetoric and applying the elements of it are important steps in the process of writing.

Stage 1: Introduction & Audience

After taking care of the daily tasks like attendance and the daily agenda, Ms. Zander started the unit with a PowerPoint. The slides of the presentation defined what rhetoric was and then subsequent slides explained the triangle and the different elements of it. The definitions were given in terms of questions the students should answer as they considered the rhetorical element so that when they are asked to find each part, such as audience, they can pose these questions to themselves to discover who the audience is. Students took notes in their journals as she presented the slides from her computer at her desk. The PowerPoint is displayed on the TV which is to the left of the center of the room.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Slide 1: “Rhetorical Triangle”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Slide 2: Rhetoric is: the art of speaking or writing effectively as the study of writing or speaking as a means of communication or persuasion. We use rhetoric to dissect the texts we read to find out what the author(s) are trying to communicate to us.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slide 3: Figure 1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slide 4: Audience: Who is the audience of this text? What are their likes/dislikes? What is their age and gender?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slide 5: Topic &amp; Purpose: What is the idea of the text? What is the topic? Why did the author write this? What was his/her purpose? What does the author want you to take away from this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slide 6: Persona: What mask does this author have to wear to make this text? Examples: murderer, crazy person, soldier, teenage girl, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slide 7: Format: Title, style of writing, genre, length, formatting (bullet points, captions, headings, subheadings, etc) picture, color, rhyming, similes, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Each of the following days was devoted to looking more closely at the individual elements of the rhetorical triangle. For the rest of that day, students looked closely at audience.

To get students started thinking more closely about audience, Ms. Zander had students respond to the following journal prompt: What is your favorite movie? Why is it your favorite movie? What makes you interested in seeing a new movie?

From there, Ms. Zander had students move their desks into a large circle. She then launched into a discussion about how movies cater to their audience. She gave examples of different types of movies and students listed the people who would want to see that movie. For instance, one student brought up Disney movies. Initial discussion revealed that little kids would enjoy Disney movies because Disney movies are targeted towards them: they are animated, use simpler language, are very colorful and usually like fairy tales. But one student, Marie, raised her hand to add that she is not a little kid and she loves Disney movies, especially recent ones.

Ms. Zander asked her to elaborate on why she likes them. Her response amounted to the fact that the movies have humor in them which could appeal to adults and older kids. It’s not all just little kid humor. She also made a really good point when she brought up Toy Story 3:

Marie: I took my little brother to see Toy Story 3 and he couldn’t even understand a whole part of it because Buzz was speaking Spanish. Little kids can’t read subtitles. My little brother can read but not very quickly and the subtitles disappeared too quickly. Disney must have known that it wasn’t just little kids who were going to see this movie, or else they wouldn’t have put subtitles in it.

Ms. Zander explained that this is a very good point and the rest of class time was spent with students discussing various movies and who would go and see them. When the bell rang, Ms. Zander told me that she thought that discussion went really well and that she felt that students had a good grasp of what was involved in thinking about audience.

**Analysis of Stage 1**

I would agree with Ms. Zander that that day’s lesson went very well. Students participated in class and spoke with enthusiasm about the topic. This occurred for several reasons. For one, students were discussing a topic that interested them and which they got to choose. They chose which movies to talk about and they talked mostly about movies that they enjoyed. They had a stake in the conversation: many students raised their hands and added in their input about their favorite movie to make sure that it was included in the conversation.

Another factor that made this discussion so successful was that students sat in a circle. This made it possible for all students to see each other and respond to each other. When these students sit in their rows they tend to not turn around in their seats to see who is talking or to respond directly to the person who just spoke. Generally, they respond to Mrs. Trevon or Ms. Zander even if they were not the ones speaking. This day’s discussion was a conversation
among students because they could see each other and because Mrs. Trevon and Ms. Zander were not in the front of the room “leading” the classroom discussion.

Stage 2: Topic & Purpose

Day 2 was spent going over topic and purpose. Ms. Zander focused on propaganda. This lesson had a more tangible formative assessment than just discussion like the day before. Mrs. Trevon went over several types of propaganda techniques using a PowerPoint and students wrote notes on a note sheet that was handed out. Such techniques included: glittering generalities, fear, testimonials, etc. Each technique had its own slide in the PowerPoint and several examples. For instance, for testimonials was a picture of Jennifer Love Hewitt’s ProActive commercial. For fear, was a poster from WWII seen in Figure 1.2. Mrs. Trevon explained that the purpose of this poster was to make workers work harder. The message was that if you were a lazy worker and took the day off, you would be doing a favor for the enemy.

After discussing several propaganda images, students got into groups of 3 to develop a product that they were to sell to their fellow peers using at least 3 propaganda techniques. They had to use props and everyone in the group had to play a role.

The groups came up with good products to sell. Some were original, some were versions of products already on the market. The biggest problem which arouse with the projects was that students didn’t take the presentations seriously. Instead of presenting them like an infomercial or in a persuasive way, students got in front of the class and simply said what their product was and the phrases or sentences which showed their propaganda techniques.

Analysis of Stage 2

It is difficult to classify this lesson as a successful one even though students came up with good products to sell and had their propaganda techniques written out well on paper. Despite these factors, students did not present their products in ways which reinforced their propaganda techniques. This issue can be partially attributed to the fact that Mrs. Trevon and Ms. Zander did not emphasize the fact that students needed to present their products as if they were actually trying to sell them. They did not tell students that they needed to take it seriously and act their parts. The assignment sheet about this project did not have any direction about their presentation other than that they would have to present it. The blasé way in which students presented their products actually defeated the purpose of the propaganda techniques they were using. For instance, with a nonchalant and even bored voice, fear was not felt. With this voice, testimonials, instead of being exciting and intriguing, were ineffective. Were I to teach this lesson, I would
emphasize this point several times throughout the process of making the project so that students understood the requirement.

In addition to this emphasis, I would also hand out the rubric that would be used to grade the presentations because on the rubric was a category of how well they presented. Had students seen this they may have taken their presentations more seriously and successfully used propaganda techniques.

Finally, to reinforce the point of propaganda, I would show an infomercial or two and then as a class, have students analyze the ways in which the infomercial employed propaganda techniques. The teachers used many images and propaganda posters but did not use any texts which modeled what they were asking of their students. That is, they wanted their students to act out a skit but did not show any example skits. Furthermore, while we dissected the model infomercials, I’d pose questions such as: what audience are they trying to cater to? How can you tell? What language do they use to try to get you to purchase the product? This not only reinforces the propaganda techniques, and thus the purpose element of the rhetorical triangle, but also the element from the day before: audience. I would tell students to keep in mind their audience, voice, and language as they made their projects. This would produce projects that included strong and effective propaganda techniques.

**Stage 3: Format**

Once all the propaganda products had been presented, students moved into working with format. For this element of the rhetorical triangle, students read a graphic short story called “The Elephant Man.” As a class, they discussed the format of this piece: it is a graphic short story with black and white pictures and text in order to communicate its message. In order to reinforce what they’d learned about audience and purpose, Ms. Zander also asks students to discuss these elements of the rhetorical triangle in reference to this short story. Discussion is not very lively. Students do not volunteer answers. Mrs. Trevon calls on students to respond but is often met with silence. She moves on to another student when this happens.

**Analysis of Stage 3**

Instead of having an enthusiastic and lively discussion as was had during the discussion on audience, students struggled to talk about the graphic short story that they’d read. One of the main differences between that discussion and today’s discussion was that they were not speaking about a topic that they’d chosen or which seemed to interest them. Having students talk about topics which interest them is a great way to get students to actually participate. Another difference was that they were not sitting in a circle. Instead, Mrs. Trevon was in the front of the classroom having to call on students to respond. Instead of moving on to a different student when he/she didn’t respond, I would have held the student accountable to participate. This not only would have helped motivate discussion today, but would show students that in the future they also must participate because they will be held accountable to do so.
Instead of having students just read the graphic short story, I would have them watch a clip from the Disney film *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* since students are clearly interested in movies and seem to enjoy Disney movies. This could be a segue into reading “The Elephant Man.” The two texts have a lot in common and could be used to compare and contrast the two formats to see what each format adds or takes away from the text. In addition, students could discuss how the purpose and audience affect the format. In order to get students thinking about the similarities and differences students could do a Venn diagram journal. This way, when it’s time to discuss the texts, everyone will have something written and prepared which they can contribute. Finally, discussion of these texts should take place in a circle of desks as that was a successful classroom arrangement in the discussion about audience.

Having students compare and contrast the purposes alongside the audience and format would help them to accomplish another part of the writing process: understanding the affect of purpose and audience on form. NCTE points to the necessity of understanding “the wide range of purposes for which people write, and the forms or writing that arise from those purposes.” (NCTE 2004). Using *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and “The Elephant Man” would allow students to compare formats, audience, and purposes and how all three elements of the rhetorical triangle play off of each other and affect each other.

**Stage 4: Persona**

Ms. Zander began by defining what a persona was: a role, mask, or character adopted by an author or an actor. She then reviewed the questions and examples in the PowerPoint which students should consider when investigating personas: What mask(s) does this author have to wear to make this text? Examples: murderer, crazy person, soldier, teenage girl, etc. She asked students to shout out a few very popular books that most students will likely have read. *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* came up, probably because they are both movies and books so it was likely that students would have been exposed to them in one fashion or another. Using these two examples, students discussed what masks, what personas, the authors had to put on when writing these books. They enthusiastically develop a table like that in Figure 1.3.

Ms. Zander noted that the more specific the personas the better. For instance, saying worried mother and worried father was better than just mother or father, because there are so many different masks a mother and father can wear. The more specific you can get the better she concluded.

To assess how well students understood personas, she assigned a formative assessment: students had to choose any image and then write about the image from three different perspectives (personas).
Analysis of Stage 4

For the most part, students seemed to enjoy this activity. They got to choose their image. Most students choose something they were interested in. McKenzie loves wolves so she chose an image of a wolf pup. Heath loves hard-core music and chose an image of a mosh pit in a club. Carl loves hunting and nature so he chose a forest scene. Benny, an aspiring actor, chose a dramatic scene of a couple kissing under an umbrella, their faces shielded from the camera by it.

In the end, the biggest area that students get marked down on is that they don’t write a half page for each persona as was the requirement. They struggled with coming up with enough detail to reach that half-page minimum. They also had difficulty putting the masks, the personas, on. This was evident by the fact that I read several student papers that were not written in the first person but rather in the third person. Putting the mask on meant actually becoming that persona and explaining what was happening in the image through that persona, as if they were the persona inside the image. Thus, it was a personal narrative of sorts, written from the persona they’d chosen and thus should have been written in the first person.

Because Benny had not followed the directions, Ms. Zander allowed him to redo the assignment since it was important for him to understand the skill of putting on a persona as an author does. Benny’s revised paper, and while it still didn’t meet the half-page minimum, it was an example of strong writing with concrete detail. His detail and successful use of the first person showed him actually putting on the persona of the mountain and thus understanding the rhetorical element of persona.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benny’s Original example:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Mountain in the background</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will take on the persona of the mountain in the background. The mountain would have been there for a very long time, even since there were dinosaurs. It would have seen a lot of people come and ago and maybe even seen this couple when they were children. If the mountain could feel it would be happy to see the couple together now and in love. The couple might keep coming here for the rest of their life until their old and the mountain can watch.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benny’s Revised Example:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Mountain in the background</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have been here for about 2 million years. I have seen almost everything that you can imagine. I have witnessed the dawn and the end of the dinosaurs; I’ve experienced the ice age, and much more. However, this man and woman are the most unique moment of my decades. They look healthy and happy together I wonder if they will stay as one. Hopefully they will grow old together as I grew old with this land. I remember when they were little and just holding hands at the time, and I believe this couple is destined to be in love.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
developed inner-monologue distinctly showed the persona she was taking on and the attitudes, morals, and ideologies of her chosen persona.

An example from McKenzie's Paper:

**Human Hunter**

*Oh yes, today is the day. I see the beast now, stalking across the earth like she owns the place—typical wolf. Foul creatures, killing my daughter’s cat! I’ve killed each one that passes here, and these two aren’t about to be excused from that equation. Well, there were two...the second was noticeably smaller than this one, a pup probably, so at least it’ll be easy to take down. This she-wolf however is large in size and stature. She's not quite as big as that one male I brought down last week, but sizeable nonetheless! At least I’m getting a good trophy out of this grueling task; sitting out here, night and ay, whenever Rick, our neighbor, mentions that a canine is wandering around through is starting to get old! Hopefully, this one’s the last. I hate these stupid monsters...I want to set them all on fire. I guess the only alternative is to shoot ever last one of them; thank god that he government is considering making that legal again...For now, they don’t have to know. Speaking of which...Hal! I dropped that sucker. Stupid she-wolf. She’s dead, that’s for sure, and no doubt her pup will find her soon. I’ll wait till noon before going back inside. If I don’t kill the pup, something else surely will.*

Ms. Zander did not correct punctuation, spelling, or grammar except where the errors made it difficult to understand what the writer was trying to say. Her focus was on students understanding personas and the process writers must go through to effectively capture a certain persona. Thus, small spelling, grammar, and mechanics errors were not an area of concern for this assignment.

Overall, their essays showed that they understood persona and those students who struggled with it were allowed to re-do their essays correctly. Allowing them to re-do the essay was important because students needed to understand personas. Had they not been allowed a re-do, a rough draft on which they could receive feedback, they would not have redone the assignment and thus would not have learned what a persona was or how to take one on. They would have failed to learn what they needed to learn to succeed on future assignments.

The most prevalent issue, that students did not write a half-page for each persona, could easily be combated. I would put more emphasis on the fact that each response had to be a half-page long and that in order to achieve that minimum, students should use a lot of detail. To get them working with including concrete and sensory details in their writing, I would probably use a thought-shot activity, like that proposed by Barry Lane in Newkirk’s *The Neglected R*. The thought-shot is simply a snapshot, or a “picture in your brain.” (Newkirk 44) Having students describe those thoughtshots, those pictures in their brains, gets them writing before writing, as Donald Murray points out is very important in his chapter aptly titled, “Write Before Writing.” This writing is a time of invention: a time for developing ideas and using their writing skills to begin drafting. Instead of having student get right to writing their formative assessments in paragraph form, I would do lead up writing activities to help them brainstorm. I would have students study their picture and then close their eyes, keeping that picture in their mind but imagining it as if they were there. This turns the snapshot into a thoughtshot. I would have them
sit quietly like this for a minute or two, with the lights off, completely focused on their thoughtshot. Then, I would turn the lights on and have them list out every sound, smell, sight, taste, and feel that was involved in their thoughtshot. This would serve as a list they could go back to as they developed their persona paragraphs. As Murray points out,

“Writing before writing is rarely outlining, stating the thesis, drawing a plan, organizing research, drafting titles or leads. It is not formal thinking, using the tools of logic, picking out style, listening for the appropriate voice or style, but a more random form of thinking.” (Newkirk 19)

While students brainstorm they do not have to have any logic to their thoughts. There is not set style they must follow. They do not even need complete sentences, verbs, or subjects. They need only write down the thoughts that came to their mind during their thoughtshot experience. Style, voice, and these other formalities come after.

As a final measure to enforce the half-page requirement, I would also give out a rubric which has this requirement written on it so students could visually see the requirement. This would be a constant reminder to complete the assignment as required. I would also include a category for attention to detail so students are sure to add in these sensory and concrete details that they brainstormed during the thoughtshot.

Stage 5: The Marxist and Feminist Lenses

After covering the elements of the rhetorical triangle, Ms. Zander and Mrs. Trevon teach the Marxist and feminist lens. They spend about 2 class periods on each lens, using a PowerPoint to define and give examples of the lens. They also use several texts which students must read through these lenses; that is, the readers must take on the personas of a feminist and/or Marxist. For instance, during the feminist lens, they use the satire “I want a wife” by Judy Syfers and an episode of the Smurfs called “The Smurfette.”

Stage 6: Combining all the elements of the Rhetorical Triangle

The summative assessment to assess if students understood the rhetorical triangle, the lenses, and propaganda, was a response essay to the movie The Wizard of Oz. Students watched this movie, taking notes on a note sheet that Ms. Zander handed out. The assignment sheet for this assignment can be seen in figure 1.4 below.
The class watched the movie over two class periods and then had one day in the computer lab to write their paper. Mrs. Trevon and Ms. Zander framed the assignment as a homework assignment. When they got the papers turned in and read them over, they were disappointed in the essays. The essays did not show their comprehension of the rhetorical triangle or their ability to construct and write thoughtful, grammatically correct essays.

Analysis of Stage 6

Students had shown at least some evidence through the formative assessments after each lesson on the elements of the rhetorical triangle that they understood the elements and could apply them to texts. However, their responses to the movie showed that they struggled. Not only did they struggle with applying the elements and lenses, but they did not edit or revise their essays so their papers were littered with spelling, grammar, and mechanics errors. These were mistakes which would have been easily corrected had students taken the assignment more seriously.

The students seemed to struggle very much with this kind of writing. One student in particular struggled, getting a 61% on the essay. His writing showed a lack of formality, a number of spelling and grammar errors, and a lack of development of ideas. Ray, this student has Autism and has difficulty hand writing things. However, this essay was typed and I have seen him do fantastic writing on the computer. His persona essays were beautifully detailed and well written. This type of writing, which is more formal and analytical, is more difficult for him. There were specific elements he had to include and thus was not as creative or open as the personas assignment was.
Ray has some good ideas beginning to develop, such as that Dorothy learns to stand up for herself and assert her voice, and that the purpose of the movie is to teach people not to take things for granted, but he never develops his idea. His first paragraph about the rhetorical triangle is particularly underdeveloped and incorrect. He is not specific enough in who the audience is, but instead cites “everyone” as the audience. The information he gives about format does not actually describe the format of the movie but instead describes some plot points of it. There is no mention of it being a film which starts off in black and white and transforms into color when Dorothy reaches Oz. He also misses the mark on personas; he does not describe what personas the writer must take on, but rather describes the people, the characters, in the movie. Some of his confusion may stem from the teachers’ use of “mask” to describe personas. In the film, Dorothy’s uncles transform into the characters she meets in Oz and thus are in the masks (costumes) of a scarecrow, a lion, and a tin man. While Ray struggles with these elements, he does, however, successfully cite a purpose of the movie. He does not however, give any specific examples (textual evidence) which develop this purpose, as the instructions on the assignment sheet say to do.

He also does not relate his Marxist and feminist ideas back to the claims that they learned for the Marxist and feminist lenses. His arguments are good but underdeveloped. He needs to
add that extra layer which synthesizes what a Marxist or feminist would say about the events he uses as his examples. Additionally, his first propaganda technique, bandwagon, is decently explained but his second example, cinematic techniques, lacks specific examples from the movie. He needs to explain what the effects of the specific camera angles and colors are for the film.

Finally, while it wasn’t explicitly stated in the directions, Ms. Zander and Mrs. Trevon did tell students that their essays needed to be well-written and edited for errors such as spelling mistakes, grammar errors, and run-ons. Ray’s paper is rife with such errors. Many other students also made these easily correctable mistakes.

Further Analysis of Stage 6:

Why weren’t these essays more successful? The text they used was a movie and Mrs. Trevon and Ms. Zander knew that their students enjoyed movies. It was also a rather common film that students would have likely had previous experience with. What was it about this assignment that made it so unsuccessful?

Students were not given any scaffolds or structures to help them with the invention part of this assignment; that is, they were not given any help in developing the content of the paper. In order to help them do this, I would develop a note-taking worksheet, like that in figure 1.5, for them to use while they watch the movie. This worksheet would be like a mini-draft of their final essay because it would have much of the content for the paper; their notes would just need to be turned into formal, ordered paragraphs in a final draft. (Note that to give them more room in each column, I would put Marxism, Feminism, and Propaganda on the back of the notes page.) I would also remind them that we’ve done a lot of practice with applying the rhetorical triangle and the lenses to texts. Now we are going to combine all our practice and content into one assignment. This makes the objective of the assignment more transparent and tells students what they are expected to do.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1.5
Besides helping students develop content for their paper, I would also address this paper differently to the class. Mrs. Trevon and Ms. Zander told students this was a homework assignment. Their students don’t generally put much effort into homework assignments. In fact, students often don’t do the homework at all. Were I to teach this lesson, instead of calling the essay a homework assignment, I would approach it as a major, complex summative assessment and I would remind students that it constitutes a large portion of their grade, 50 points. This would probably be enough motivation to get them to complete the assignment with more care.

Modeling what a good essay, a mediocre essay, and a poorly written essay look like would help students to understand what is being required of them. Reading through each of these three essays and then dissecting what makes them good, mediocre, and poor, would be an even better way of helping students write these essays.

To also make students take the essay more seriously and because it was worth so many points, I would give students another day or two to work on the essay in the computer lab. Day one could be spent developing a draft. Day two could be spent peer reviewing and then revising. Day three could be spent finalizing the draft and then turning it in.

For this assignment, peer reviewing would be vital because students are so careless when it comes to spelling, grammar, and mechanics. I have noticed that these students are more likely to correct these mistakes on their peers’ writing than their own because Mrs. Trevon and Ms. Zander have put so much emphasis on the peer review process. I believe that the reason they chose not to do a peer review with this assignment is because they only spent one day on it and thus would not have had time. Thus, adding in that extra day or two would help.

The NCTE would agree because it says that students should have “multiple strategies for approaching a wide range of typical problems writers face during composing, including…revision, and editing.” (NCTE 2004) Peer reviewing is one such strategy that students can use to approach the issue of editing. Mrs. Trevon and Ms. Zander scaffold the process of peer review for students by giving them a worksheet to complete while they read their peers’ papers. This worksheet poses questions to students to get them considering what amounts to Sommers’ four operations of revision: “deletion, substitution, addition, and re-ordering.” (Sommers 380) Such questions include: Are there any areas where you are confused? Why? What should the author add or take away to fix your confusion? Do the writer’s ideas flow with transitions between paragraphs? Students write comments on the worksheets and the writer’s paper in order to respond to these questions. The final question asks students to go through and edit the paper in order to find basic spelling, mechanics, and grammar errors. Students understand that they do not know all the rules that govern these conventions, so some of them even mark areas that they are unsure about. For instance, I once saw a paper where a student had circled a colon and written “not sure if that is right.”
Students must sign the peer review worksheet to show the teachers that they did it. They also get points for doing it. Students are held accountable for doing peer reviewing so they take it more seriously. They are also helped along with the process of peer reviewing with the peer review worksheet. If this worksheet were handed out as a self-review or a self-evaluation worth points as well, students would be more likely to re-read their essays to find and correct errors. This would produce essays that are written more grammatically correct.

Ms. Zander and Mrs. Trevon were faced with a tension for which NCTE says there is no formula: “Writing as generating and shaping ideas and writing as demonstrating expected surface conventions.” (NCTE 2004) NCTE points out that:

“On the one hand, it is important for writing to be as correct as possible and for students to be able to produce correct texts. On the other hand, achieving correctness is only one set of things writers must be able to do; a correct text empty of ideas or unsuited to its audience or purpose is not a good piece of writing….Writing is both/and: both fluency and fitting conventions.” (NCTE 2004)

In Ms. Zander and Mrs. Trevon’s class students struggled with both fluency (development of ideas) as well as fitting conventions. Students in this class need to focus on developing their ideas and focus on writing with proper conventions. In order to help them develop ideas, I would give students more chances for small group or class discussions after watching the film. They could use their notes sheets to further brainstorm. I can tell that they have the ability to develop their ideas if they take the assignment seriously enough because I know they have the content knowledge and skills to do so. When the teachers have done brainstorming worksheets on past assignments, students have written more developed papers.

If students are not told to focus on correct conventions from the beginning they will become lax about writing correctly and this attitude will carry with them throughout the rest of the assignments to come. In fact, I have seen this attitude carry with them since the Wizard of Oz assignment. When they had to complete a PowerPoint about the independent novel they chose to read, students did not use proper conventions. Their slides were filled with grammar, spelling, and mechanics errors because they figured they were not going to be held accountable for these conventions and because they had become accustomed to not worrying about proper conventions. This attitude can be very detrimental to them and their development as writers. There are some conventions that they probably don’t know how to do correctly. In this case, I would look for patterns of errors in their writing and then develop mini-lessons in the context of our current unit to help them learn the conventions. Both Thomas Newkirk and Peter Smagorinsky, two respected and published, English educators suggest this practice for teaching grammar.

A Review of the Process

Ms. Zander and Mrs. Trevon’s process of teaching the elements of rhetoric was not as successful as they had hoped. It looks good on paper: they scaffolded the process by breaking it
up into elements and giving formative assessments after teaching each element. But there are several small changes that I would make to make the activities more successful and more structured so that students to transfer the content and skills which are necessary for them to know in order to complete future assignments. These changes include:

- having group discussions in a circle so that students can see and respond to each other instead of the teacher,
- having students do journal writing before class discussions so that everyone has something prepared that they can contribute to the discussion,
- giving students a rubric telling them exactly how they will be graded so that they know the requirements and take them more seriously,
- introducing assignments with language that make students take the assignment seriously. Example: If an assignment is worth many points, don’t just call it a homework assignment,
- using texts or discussion topics that relate more directly to students interests,
- emphasizing the need for proper writing conventions in students’ writings and using mini-lessons on grammar to boost students’ knowledge of conventions,
- and using both a peer review and self-evaluation worksheet to ensure that writing is free of easily correctable errors and that it is well-structured.

For Mrs. Trevon and Ms. Zander’s class these small changes would work to make their activities more effective and structured in order to make sure that students understand the content they are being taught and the skills they are developing. These changes may not work or may not be necessary for all of their classes. It is a matter of knowing the strengths and weaknesses of the class itself and working with those in order to make the scaffolding process more structured. Scaffolding is not enough if it does not produce quality work from students which shows all that they have learned.
Works Cited


Image Citation

http://www.greatdreams.com/war/war-time.htm