The Five Canons of Rhetoric

In *De Inventione*, he Roman philosopher Cicero explains that there are five **canons**, or tenets, of rhetoric: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. Although these canons were originally created with a focus on oratory, or public speaking, most are also applicable to the writing process stages of prewriting, drafting, and rewriting.

Invention

Invention is the process of coming up with material for a text. In writing, this is the brainstorming or prewriting stage.

Examples of invention:

A political candidate comes up with several major points she wants to bring up in a debate.

Before writing a paper, a student does a freewriting exercise to come up with a good topic.

Before a major trial, a defense attorney thinks of ways to combat the charges against her client.

Arrangement

Arrangement is the process of deciding how to order the material in a text. In writing, this is still part of the prewriting stage.

Examples of arrangement:

A political candidate decides that she will first talk about civil rights; next, she will talk about the economy; finally, she will talk about international relations.

Before writing a paper, a student creates an outline to determine the order in which he will discuss his major points.

Before the trial, a defense attorney decides the order in which she will address the charges against her client.

Style

Style is the process of coming up with the actual words that will be used in a text. In writing, this canon is first approached in the drafting stage and continues in the rewriting stage.

Examples of style:

A political candidate uses a humorous metaphor in which she compares being in Congress to being in a zoo.

A student revises sentences he wrote in the passive voice into sentences in the active voice.

A defense attorney comes up with a witty line: "If the shoe doesn't match, you must detach."

Memory

Memory is the process of committing a text to memory. Although this canon is not as applicable to writing as it is to oratory, there are still occasions when writers must memorize their texts in order to make the delivery (the fifth canon) more effective.

Examples of memory:

A political candidate rehearses her speech so that she doesn't need to use a teleprompter or script. She is able to make eye contact with the audience and more effectively use body language.

A student memorizes his paper (or at least the major points of it) so that he can deliver it at an academic conference without reading off the paper itself.

A defense attorney memorizes the key points of her closing argument so that she can more effectively interact with the jurors.

Delivery

Delivery is the process of presenting a text to an audience. Like memory, delivery is less prominent in writing than in oratory; however, there are many occasions when writers must think of how to best deliver their texts.

Examples of delivery:

As she delivers her speech, a political candidate shows energy by speaking in a loud voice and pounding the podium with her fist.

At an academic conference, a student walks around the room as he delivers his paper instead of standing behind the podium the whole time.

During her closing argument, a defense attorney makes direct eye contact with each juror.