**Structuring the argument of a bachelor’s thesis in the social sciences: The example**

Richard Parncutt, June 2011, revised November 2014

A typical academic presentation goes back and forth between the specific and the general. Specific cases are described, general principles are inductively (bottom up) derived from them, and these principles are tested and revised by applying them deductively (top down) to specific examples. More: <http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/dedind.php>

Academics tend to believe that the general principles for which they are arguing are the most important part of their presentation. But since these principles cannot be understood without reference to the specific examples, the specific and the general should be regarded as equally important.

Some academic presenters fall into the trap of focusing on generalities at the expense of specifics. They forget that they themselves have been testing their ideas for a long time against specific examples. The audience also has the need to test the ideas presented in the talk or paper against specific examples, in order to understand and evaluate them.

Why do academic talks often lack examples? Sometimes the author deletes the examples at the last minute. S/he has many things to say and the draft has become too long for the available time. To shorten it, s/he takes out the examples. Either they seem obvious or they somehow don’t sound as impressive as the generalities. The result is an impressive sounding presentation, but one in which the audience is constantly wondering what is going on. Audience members ask themselves: Am I too stupid to understand this, or is the presenter too stupid to explain it? If you have ever been to a dry and dusty academic presentation in which much was said but the audience was trying not to yawn, you will know what I mean.

I recommend beginning your presentation with one or more examples of the general issue that you are addressing. Later, after you have explained your main idea or theory, return to your examples and test your theory against them. That can be an effective strategy for the conclusion section.

Many university students are surprised by this recommendation and initially think the task is simple. It is not. The examples that you present should illustrate your general questions and principles and make them easier to understand. Your examples should not merely introduce the general subject area – the audience does not need examples for that, they just have to read the title of your talk if it is clearly formulated. Instead, your audience needs direct insight into the problem through a realistic situation that they could encounter in their everyday life. If the issue you addressing is not trivial, the audience will need examples to understand it.

If you are having trouble finding an example, you may have to invent one. For example, you could tell the story of “Sarah” (just make up a name). This story should be *directly* relevant to your main question and thesis. In the next paragraph, write that the name and the story are invented, but according to the literature (here you might cite one or two examples) her case is typical. That is just one of many possible approaches to generating an example. Of course it is better to describe something that really happened; if the case has already been described in the literature or the media, you can also give the real name of the person. Make sure first that there can be no negative consequences for that person if they are named in your text and your text appears in the internet.

**Writing like a journalist**

Concrete examples, involving people or everyday life, tend to be associated with journalism rather than academia. Journalists know that they have to attract the attention of the reader in their title, and then maintain it in their first paragraph. A good way to do that is to talk about a specific example in the first paragraph - something that the reader can personally connect with.

The following examples are taken from the New York Times. This newspaper has its own characteristic writing style which you can like or dislike. The constant use of examples at the start of articles, which often takes the form of naming unknown individuals, can get a bit monotonous. But this style is a good illustration of what I am trying to explain. I guess you could say it is a good “example of examples”.

I have copied the headings and openings of all New York Times articles selected for Der Standard on 14 April 2011. Each article begins with some kind of example, which I have sorted into three categories.

**Examples that focus on an individual person:** *Here, an event is presented from the perspective of a named individual or an anecdote is told about a famous person. This creates interest simply because everyone is interested in personal relationships. Moreover, we are generally more interested in stories about individuals than stories or generalizations about groups of people.*

Amid Ruins, A Family’s Resolve. AYUKAWAHAMA, Japan - Seiko Taira and her family have settled into a grim routine since the tsunami struck: her sons forage for firewood; she and a daughter lug water from the marsh; and her grandson waits for their one meal a day, a package from the town office that usually contains a piece of bread each, a few cans of tuna and one cup of instant noodles. (…)

Policy Makers Parse a Rogue’s Gallery of Delusional Leaders. He is a delusional narcissist who will fight until his last breath. Or an impulsive showman who will hop the next flight out of town when cornered. (…) (referring to Muammar el-Qaddafi)

Protesters in Belarus Pay With Their Jobs. MINSK, Belarus - Andrei Vilkin has long been celebrated in Belarus for his skills as a Karate master. (…)

Arab Unrest has Diplomats Rethinking Their Careers. WASHINGON – The maids who once swept the white marble floors at the Libyan ambassador’s residence here have gone home to the Philippines, their visas expired now that their boss, Ali Suleiman Aujali, has quit his job. The driver is gone, too.

Whisper Words of Wisdom To Keep a Business Going. The Beatles were stymied. During a 1968 recording session, they couldn’t find an introduction to “Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da”, a song written by Paul McCartney. John Lennon didn’t much like the song, and he stormed out of the studio.

No Bluffing: Robots Play Their Cards. Bryan Taylor, 36, could not shake the feeling that something funny was going on. Three of his most frequent opponents on an online poker site were acting oddly, playing in ways so similar that is was suspicious. Mr. Taylor suspected that he was competing against computers.

Free Will, the Only Choice. Suppose that Mark and Bill live in a deterministic universe. Everything that happens this morning – like Mark’s decision to wear a blue shirt, or Bill’s latest attempt to comb over his bald spot – is completely caused by whatever happened before it.

**Examples that focus on an important issue in the everyday life of most readers:** *That is a reliable way to attract attention and a useful tool for explaining more general ideas.*

An Infatuation With American Flair. All things all-American are back in style, from rustic and vintage to preppy and casual. (…)

In the Web Era, a Newspaper Devoted to Print. PARIS - Claude Angeli had his little black book on the table – a real little black book, leather bound and yellowing pages. No Blackberry. No iPhone. No computer in sight.

In East-West Movie Dialogue, a Silent Voice. A profusion of foreign films addresses the complex ties between the West and Islam.

**Shock and surprise tactics:** *The reader’s attention can be attracted by anything shocking or surprising, especially if there is a chance that the news might make someone angry. Strong emotions are always interesting.*

America, the Idea. “Shoot them.” The order came from a Libyan soldier loyal to Colonel Muammar el-Qaddafi.

Top to Bottom, a Better Boss. MOUNTAIN VIEW; California – In early 2009, Google embarked on a plan to build better bosses. “Project Oxygen” began analyzing performance reviews, feedback surveys and nominations for top-manager awards.

A Reactor Russians Insist Is Safe. MOSCOW – Even as radioactive steam was rising from the Fukushima Daiichi plant in Japan in mid-March, Russia’s state-owned nuclear power company, Rosatom, was signing a contract to build a nuclear reactor in Belarus.

Blindsided by a Fault’s Ferocity. On a map of Japan that shows seismic hazards, the area around the prefecture of Fukushima is colored in green, signifying a fairly low risk, and yellow, denoting a fairly high one. But since Japan sits on the collision of several tectonic plates, almost all of the country lies in an earthquake zone.

**Discussion**

The style of these entries may not be particularly appropriate for an academic presentation or paper. The style must be adjusted to suit what an academic audience would normally expect. But the basic principle is right. One of the first things that the listener or reader encounters in your academic presentation should be a concrete example of the phenomenon under consideration. The example could involve a real person in a real situation (perhaps with a fictive name, or something out of your own experience). But many other kinds of example are possible, e.g. if your paper is about music theory and cognition, you could begin with an example in music notation that illustrates your main question. Your talk could begin with a recording of it (a few seconds will do).

I have quoted only the start of articles above, because that is where examples are most useful. A common error in academic presentations and papers is to delay examples to the end. Consider for example a talk about the harmonic syntax of a given musical style. Sound examples at the start of the talk will help the audience to think creatively about the problem. The audience will understand your talk better, ask more interesting questions after the talk, and remember your main points better days, weeks and even years later. If you play an example at the end, they might already be asleep.

How do you find a good example? Think creatively and laterally. Brainstorm, make a list of examples of the phenomenon you are trying to explain and select one that is both easy for an audience to understand and illustrative of important details of your main question. Depart temporarily from the usual deductive mode of academic thought and instead think inductively. With practice you will become good at it.