

Here is an example—the subject of “guilt” as developed in the eight most widely used rhetorical patterns. Notice how the writer’s focus shifts with the use of each new pattern.

Patterns of Development for the Subject “Guilt”

1. Narration

I was seven years old when I first became aware of the terrible power of guilt. For piling our toys into the toy box, Mother had rewarded my brother and me with five shiny pennies each. If I had had ten pennies instead of just five, I could have bought a gingerbread man with raisin eyes and sugar-frosted hair. The image danced in my head all day, until, finally, I crept into my brother’s room and stole his five pennies. The next morning, as my brother and I were dressing to go to school, I hid all ten pennies in the pocket of my coat, cramming one of my father’s handkerchiefs on top of them. As my brother and I lined up in front of Mother to be kissed goodbye, she looked at my bulging pocket with amazement. “What on earth do you have in your pocket?” she asked. “It’s nothing,” I said as offhandedly as I could. “It’s nothing at all.” Bewildered, but too busy to investigate any further, Mother kissed me good-bye. I ran out the door and down our gravel path as fast as my feet could carry me. But the farther from home I got, the more miserable I became. The shiny pennies in my pocket felt oppressively like one-ton boulders. And I was haunted by the idea that I had become a thief. Forgotten was the gingerbread man, for whose sake I had stolen my brother’s pennies. Finally, unable to bear my horrible feeling of guilt, I ran back home to blurt out my crime to my mother.

2. Description

Never before had Pedro experienced such a depth of despair and such a sense of isolation. He began to avoid those nearest to him, returning their friendly greetings with rough and indifferent replies. Often he sat in his room staring vacantly into space with hollow eyes. His hands were cold and clammy most of the time, yet his forehead burned hot with a mysterious fever. Terrible nightmares haunted his sleep, causing him to rise out of bed in the middle of the night, overcome with terror. When strangers at the store asked him a simple question such as “Where is the thread?” or “Have you any molasses?” he would read silent accusations in their eyes and his hands would tremble. He had become a man tormented by guilt.

3. Process Analysis

Do you know the most effective way to handle a friend turned a debtor? Make the person feel guilty. Let us say that you lent your friend Tom \$500 to buy a motorcycle, but he refuses to repay the loan. Your first step is to place him in a category of bogus moral superiority. Say, “Tom, you have always been a person of honor. Why do you refuse to pay what you owe me?” If that doesn’t work, your second step is to take the behavior personally, indicating that it is causing you emotional pain. Say, “I can’t tell you how disappointed I am that you are treating me worse than a total stranger. You would pay back your bank, your credit cards, but you ignore me, your best friend, who needs the money.” Unless your present debtor and former friend is a sociopath, he will feel bad about hurting you. Finally, you can threaten to cut off the relationship, making the threat look as if it were the debtor’s doing. Say, “Look,

Tom, unless I get the money you owe me within a week, I will take your refusal to repay me as a sign that you don’t care any more about our friendship.” With that, you have really turned up the guilt barometer. Indeed, inducing guilt can be a powerful tool in the process of debt collection.

4. Illustration/Exemplification

Seneca once said, “Every guilty person is his own hangman.” The truth of this observation can be illustrated by the lives of countless villains. One such is Macbeth, from Shakespeare’s tragedy of the same name. At the instigation of his wife, Macbeth kills the king of Scotland and usurps his throne—an act of treachery for which Macbeth and his wife suffer torments of guilt. Lady Macbeth develops an obsession that her hands are stained with blood, and she wanders somnambulistically through the castle trying vainly to cleanse them. Before he murders the king, Macbeth hallucinates a dagger floating in the air. Later, after his assassin murder Banquo, Macbeth is tormented by hallucinations of Banquo’s ghost. Eventually, Lady Macbeth commits suicide. Macbeth is killed during a rebellion of his noblemen, which is brought about—in the main—by the excesses to which his guilt has driven him.

5. Definition

Guilt is the remorse that comes from an awareness of having done something wrong. The origin of guilt is psychological. From childhood, we have all been conditioned by family and society to act within defined standards of reasonableness and decency. Gradually, over a period of years, these standards are internalized and modified to become the core of what is called “conscience.” When we do something that violates these internalized standards, we feel guilty. If we have been brought up in a religious environment, we feel an added measure of guilt when we break what we think is a divine commandment. Whenever we don’t play according to our internalized rules, we feel miserable, and this misery is what guilt is all about.

6. Comparison and Contrast

Although the two words may seem to share some connotations, *guilt* is not a synonym for *blame*. *Guilt* must be felt; *blame* must be assessed. *Guilt* implies self-reproach that comes from an internal consciousness of wrong. *Blame* hints at fault that has been externally assessed. A man may suffer guilt yet be entirely exonerated of blame; conversely, he may be blamed and yet feel no guilt. In short, while guilt is a feeling, blame is a judgment—and that is the chief distinction between the two.

7. Division and Classification

The Bible identifies three kinds of guilt: guilt of the unpardonable sin, redeemable guilt, and guilt of innocence. First, the guilt of the unpardonable sin belongs to any being who has become so steeped in evil that a change for good is no longer possible. Lucifer is said to have committed this sin by which he cut himself off eternally from Yahweh, the source of all good. Second, redeemable guilt is guilt that can be erased because it belongs to one whose heart is not incorrigibly corrupt, but which has weakened temporarily under the pressure of temptation. King David, for instance, murdered Uriah in order to marry Bathsheba, Uriah’s wife. But despite this sin, David was a noble king with a thirst for righteousness; he was redeemable. Finally, the guilt of innocence is the guilt that Jesus bore when he decided to be