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English 131 C2

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Short Assignment 1

A Review of *Agonism in the Academy*

 Even though the intention of education is to provide students with tools to guide their lives outside of the classroom, occasionally accepted teaching methods will leave students unable to cooperate with the world around them. Deborah Tannen’s article *Agonism in the Academy: Surviving Higher Learning’s Argument Culture* shares with her academic peers a subject of her research: the concept of agonism. Tannen describes agonism as a “metaphorical battle” in which disapproval in each other’s ideas supersedes constructive discussion. This opposition does not arise from disagreement, it occurs as a result of one party seeking benefit from condemning the other’s argument. Through her own research and book *The Argument Culture*, Tannen has plenty of experience with agonism and shares her beliefs on its cause.

Tannen argues that even though she has observed agonism in many places, the phenomenon is most prevalent in the academic community. Because her article is being published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Tannen chooses to tailor her argument in a way that the academe will understand and appreciate. *Agonism in the Academy* has the formal and educated tone that reaches out to readers ranging from the linguistics professor to the elementary school teacher. Tannen’s main claim in the article is designed specifically with the teacher in mind and focuses on agonism in an academic setting.

After introducing pieces of evidence supporting the existence and nature of agonism, Tannen is prepared to share her claim with her readers. Tannen states that agonism is perpetuated by the attitudes of teachers themselves and is passed onto their students. Tannen then cites examples of the continuation of agonism through teaching methods. By encouraging the critical analysis of classical works, teachers persuade their students to find faults in texts rather than appreciate literature. With debate being praised in the classroom, are taught that argument is more rewarding than collaborative discussion. Rather than adopting the beliefs of agonism, Tannen suggests that students can participate in cooperative tasks that develop understanding and appreciation for the material. Teachers can therefore create opportunities for students to openly discuss the material, free of criticism, and share their opinions without fear. Tannen provides a few pieces of evidence that support her case, including a study that states teachers prefer a difficult question rather than a “nice little supportive” one. Tannen even utilizes an anecdote that takes place in her reading group to express the presence of agonism in society. By referencing these situations, Tannen further strengthens her claim that agonism is taught to the student.

Through repetition of scholarly examples, Tannen presents relatable situations to her academic audience that serve to support her case. Citations of personal experience and opinions from other scholars, which teachers can easily relate to, form the backbone of Tannen’s argument. By beginning with her experiences in a reading group, Tannen relates to the many teachers who have a passion for reading and discuss their reading material openly. Presenting this understandable situation allows Tannen to connect with her readers while providing compelling evidence for her claim. The relatable and powerful evidence that Tannen puts forth supports her argument immensely. It would be difficult to argue against the claim that agonism is passed from teacher to student when presented with Tannen’s logical and factual evidence.

Tannen has created a powerful argument that revolves around her concept of agonism. Her claim that agonism stems from teaching methods is backed with evidence and is crafted specifically for her academic audience. The presentation of an alternative to agonism – open discussion and collective understanding – likely foreshadows a call to action appearing later in her article. Tannen’s interesting perspective on teaching would be immensely beneficial for those in the academic community. In reading Tannen’s work, teachers can improve their own teaching methods and hopefully ponder the effects of their lessons on students. Tannen clearly states that “agonism is endemic in academe – and bad for it,” and her article would help clarify and overlooked side effect of education. *Agonism in the Academy* is effective at describing the concept of agonism to the academic community and is an invaluable source of insight into the unintentional effects of teaching methods on students. Any teacher should take the time to read Tannen’s article in order to improve their method of instruction and their own interactions with the world around them. Good conclusion in which you really get at the stakes of Tannen’s argument as well as the use-value for potential readers.

Writer’s Memo

I started this assignment by reading over Tannen’s article several times and checking if I was absolutely positive about her main claim. Although I’m sure my perspective may differ from others, I feel as reading and note-taking gave me a good grasp of how Tannen made her claim and how effective it was. I was sure to read from the perspective of a scholar in order to see how Tannen wrote to her audience specifically. I also made sure to make sure I was writing to the same audience in my book review, as I wouldn’t want to review this article for an audience it wasn’t intended for. I then decided to format my essay similarly to the outline of Fredrick’s book review in class; I wrote a very small bulleted outline but combined two of the paragraphs together (because I felt that they would lack content). I also obviously had to modify my outline from Fredrick’s because her topic was quite different. For example, rather than introducing Buffy and similar works and arguments based off of Buffy, I was only able to introduce agonism (because I have no other knowledge of articles based on agonism besides Tannen’s own). This assignment was definitely something new for me, and if I’ve even written a book review at all it was many years ago. The complexity of my writing at that time would have been much different. I was able to integrate what I had learned about argument from my past two years of high school into this essay, which definitely helped me understand the assignment and gave me confidence in my work. Another strength I feel I possess as a writer is the ability to create complex statements that (hopefully) clarify my point. Part of this assignment was being concise and clear, and I certainly hope I was able to do that. I was also able to organize my essay in the way I had hoped, beginning with an introduction to agonism, audience, and Tannen’s claim before evaluating the article. In addition, one weakness in my writing is consistently stating new ideas in each paragraph. I hope that I wasn’t too repetitive in this assignment!

Jack,

I think you demonstrate a good sense of this in your memo, but your strength as a writer is definitely your style. You have a clear and engaging voice that is at once easily understandable and expertly confident. You do, indeed, possess the ability to construct complex sentences without getting bogged down by the overt display of effort such sentences often get caught up in. Rather, your complexity is also clear. This is all great. What you still need to work on is content. I think you have a firm grasp on Tannen’s argument and especially why it is an important one that readers should pay attention to, but that clarity might be lost on an unfamiliar audience. Though your memo articulates the audience you have in mind (academics), the review itself seems to sometimes lose track of the fact that your readers haven’t already read Tannen’s article. There is much you take for granted, especially pre-existing knowledge of the evidence Tannen uses. One way to easily address this issue is to 1. Define agonism more clearly and in-depth right away (see margin note above) and 2. Choose one piece of evidence, explain it, and then demonstrate how it proves Tannen’s point effective. In effect, you are choosing one moment of the article as an exemplary moment that gives readers a sense for how the rest of the article functions as well. In other words, pause and ask yourself if the points you make contain enough information to be clear to readers that have not already read Tannen. Once you do this, the added clarity and specificity will help your review as a whole a great deal. It will also help make your powerful end point that much stronger: that Tannen offers a way out of agonism, which hurts our students, as a way to better our educational system. Keep up the good work, Jack!