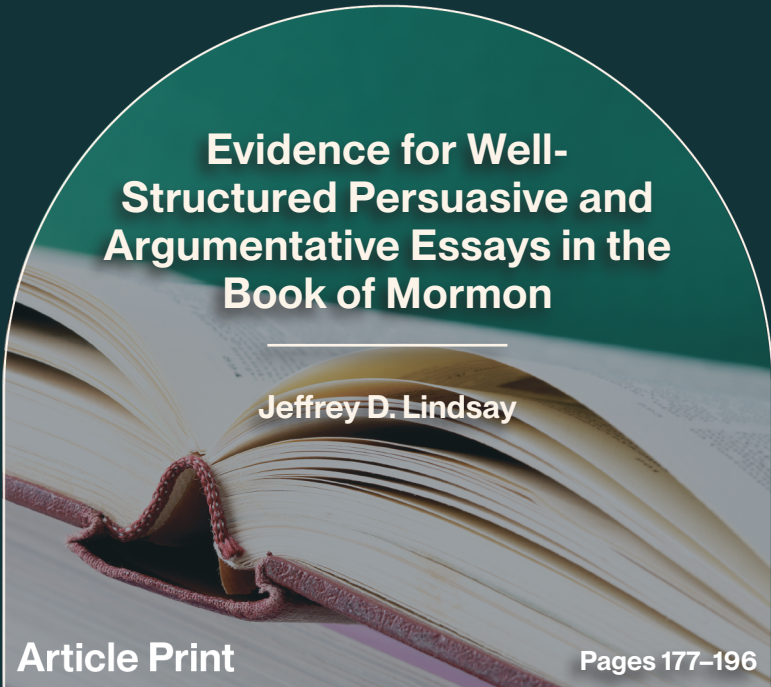


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Evidence for Well- Structured Persuasive and Argumentative Essays in the Book of Mormon

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Evidence for Well-Structured Persuasive and Argumentative Essays in the Book of Mormon

Jeffrey D. Lindsay

Review of Edward K. Watson, Verifiable Evidence for the Book of Mormon: Proof of a Deliberate Design Within a Dictated-from-Imagination Book (Springville, UT: Brainy Press, 2022). 252 pp.; \$32.95 (hardcover).

Abstract: *Edward K. Watson provides a new twist in the textual evidence for the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. Drawing upon his expertise in working with argumentative and persuasive essays (collectively known as “structured essays”) and applying modern scholarship to the requirements for sound argumentation in such essays, Watson seeks to apply objective criteria and scoring methods to evaluate several of the many structured essays in the Book of Mormon. Watson argues that because such essays generally require considerable planning and revision, it would be very unlikely for them to have been created, rather than translated, by Joseph Smith dictating at high speed and without major revisions. While his analysis adds new dimensions to the complexity and depth of the Book of Mormon, I believe that his claims are overstated and not adequately supported, especially when he says that dictating structured essays would be “impossible” for any mortal. Nevertheless, Watson does provide interesting evidence on a long-overlooked aspect of the Book of Mormon that merits consideration.*

Not being familiar with Edward K. Watson and his background, I was skeptical when I picked up his *Verifiable Evidence for the*

Book of Mormon: Proof of a Deliberate Design Within a Dictated-from-Imagination Book.¹ Watson's thesis is that the Book of Mormon contains a significant number of formal "structured essays," such as argumentative or persuasive essays, and that such essays are extremely difficult to compose without significant planning and rewriting. Examples include 2 Nephi 2, where Lehi takes a deep dive into logical corollaries involving the Atonement, agency, and the Creation, and Alma 32, where Alma₂ explores faith in terms of logical experiments that can lead one to greater knowledge and growing faith.

Dictating such structured essays on the fly, over and over, without notes and without revision in content or structure, certainly seems like it would be outside the skills of Joseph Smith or anyone else. Watson explains that objective criteria or rubrics exist to identify a structured essay and to evaluate its quality. Based on applying such criteria in a detailed examination of five of the Book of Mormon's many such essays (pp. 10–11), Watson concludes that the writing of these structured essays shows that they were deliberately and artfully crafted, and that they could not have been created using the oral dictation process that Joseph used in the translation of the Book of Mormon. These essays, according to Watson, thus constitute evidence for the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

Overview of Watson's Approach and Conclusions

Watson's background includes three decades of experience in analyzing, creating, and organizing complex documents, such as proposals for projects, project execution plans, and user manuals and procedures, thus making him sensitive to the challenges of making arguments and explanations in texts. He has skills to recognize that structured essays naturally are written with multiple revisions, otherwise a poorly organized essay would result with significant gaps in the structure and logic. Given this useful background, the question is whether his methodology supports the conclusions.

The book's title signals strong conclusions will be drawn. I generally dislike the noun *proof* or the verb *prove* when it comes to broad claims regarding Book of Mormon evidence, even though Nephi₁ did not share my caution (see 2 Nephi 11:3), nor does the Lord (see 2 Nephi

1. Edward K. Watson, *Verifiable Evidence for the Book of Mormon: Proof of a Deliberate Design Within a Dictated-from-Imagination Book* (Springville, UT: Brainy Press, 2022).

29:9). The Lord can certainly refer to His works as divine proof to any degree he sees fit. But for the works, logic, and publications of men, I prefer softer language, such as speaking of evidence for authenticity or plausibility.

Watson's title does not directly claim that he has "proven" the Book of Mormon to be true. Rather, it speaks of "verifiable evidence" that offers "proof of deliberate design." This is not a modest claim. By "deliberate design," Watson is arguing that the structured essays in the Book of Mormon are crafted following rigorous logical requirements that simply would not be possible for a human being to create while dictating a text on-the-fly, as Joseph Smith did.

Watson's argument is ultimately extended to argue that the Book of Mormon necessarily is a miraculous work and that its structures offer proof for the divinity of the text. This may be too strong a conclusion, based on Watson's assumption that structured essays cannot be dictated extemporaneously. He does not support this assumption or consider potential counterexamples. By way of illustration, long ago when I was on a high school debate team competing against other schools, there were rounds in which my partner and I would listen to a speech from an opposing team offering a proposal related to a specific topic. We would take notes, have a few minutes to think of a rebuttal, and look for evidence in our boxes of note cards. Then, one of us would stand and give an extemporaneous speech with a thesis statement, a series of arguments supported by evidence, a consideration of counterarguments, and a summary and call to action. The opposing team would then do the same in response. This was not as brilliant as 2 Nephi 2, but I believe that we and dozens of other debaters were almost always within the bounds of Watson's requirements for a sound argumentative essay. Based on my experience in high school debate, which pales in comparison with collegiate debate, I cannot accept Watson's undemonstrated claim of "impossibility" for human orators to provide a meaningful structured essay. I consider this to be a serious flaw in the book, but I believe that the book still has valuable content and insights.

Despite my objections to some of the claims Watson makes, his analysis helps us further appreciate the value of the structured essays in the Book of Mormon. Some of these are truly remarkable, such as 2 Nephi 2 and Alma 36. Once attentively analyzed, most people should recognize that these essays appear to be carefully composed.

While translation with divine power could be and was done

spontaneously, the composition of the text in the first place, with detailed logic and rhetorical tools, defies explanation as Joseph Smith's production. By showing how much detail and structure there is in some of the many structured essays of the Book of Mormon, Watson adds a new understanding of the complexity and sophistication of the Book of Mormon. His claims ring true — but do not rise to the level of “proof,” although it is meaningful evidence for readers to consider.

Watson's argument could have been strengthened by considering what skillful orators or debaters can achieve. Perhaps Watson in future work might consider great speeches from Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., Frederick Douglass, Winston Churchill, or Cicero, analyzing them as he does Book of Mormon essays. How do such famous speeches compare to the inspired essays in the Book of Mormon? Even if they all fell far short of the Book of Mormon, I would still hesitate to claim that he had proven it was impossible for a human to extemporaneously craft a properly structured essay. In that hypothetical case, I would prefer to say that what Joseph Smith achieved might have been difficult for a well-educated scholar, and even more unlikely for Joseph.

Watson's Methodology and Contributions

In *Verifiable Evidence for the Book of Mormon*, Watson only examines the Book of Mormon in light of his core competency in analyzing documents, including the Formalism-Structuralism approach for looking at internal structure (how units of a text are connected to support a thesis) and concept development (the phrasing, expansion, and support for concepts) (p. 2). He goes beyond merely pointing out how complex and coherent the Book of Mormon text is. Rather, he performs detailed analyses of passages that meet criteria for structured essays and then illustrates that the Book of Mormon shows internal evidence of “deliberate design,” with well-coordinated thought modules that must have been carefully constructed, showing examples of them having been rewritten multiple times (as does Alma₂'s accounts of his conversion), in contrast to the disorganized arguments that one might expect from dictated text.

In addition to his introduction and conclusion, Watson's book has two parts, originally written as separate papers (pp. 10–11). Part One explores the use of argumentative and persuasive essays in the Book of Mormon by examining in detail four of the forty-six examples of such

essays among the seventy-five structured essays Watson identifies in the Book of Mormon. These four essays are contained in 2 Nephi 2 and in three contiguous chapters, Alma 32–34. Part Two of the book looks specifically at Alma 36, considering three facets of this famous discourse of Alma₂ to his son, Helaman₁. These aspects are 1) Alma 36 as a persuasive essay, 2) Alma 36 as a modified public speech, and 3) Alma 36 as a thematic chiasm.

Watson notes that argumentative and persuasive essays are subsets of the more general category of structured essays. Argumentative essays are defined as “a composition containing a thesis statement with at least one argument-evidence pair or counterargument and conclusion that support the thesis,” while a persuasive essay is “a composition containing a thesis statement with at least one argument-evidence pair in a non-counterargument form and conclusion that support the thesis” (p. 23).

Argumentative and persuasive essays collectively form one type or category of structured essays. There are three other types of structured essays, as follows:

- Exposition—a composition structured as an instruction or lesson.
- Narration—a composition that conveys a story without attempting to justify the essay’s credibility.
- Description—a composition that primarily uses language that allows the audience to envision or relate to the subject while not attempting to justify the essay’s credibility. (p. 23)

Watson’s analysis of the Book of Mormon finds twenty-nine argumentative essays, seventeen persuasive essays, and sixteen expository essays. All told, he finds seventy-five structured essays, but only a handful are explored. For example, Lehi’s Tree of Life dream (1 Nephi 8:4–35) and Nephi₁’s prayer (2 Nephi 4:16–35) are classified as narrative essays, and while they are impressive texts, they are not relevant to Watson’s thesis. He recognizes that “it is possible for a highly imaginative, experienced, and disciplined person to dictate Nephi’s Prayer and even Lehi’s Dream, given their small word count and not needing a logical structure” (pp. 24–25). It is the logical structure required in a structured essay that makes it so difficult to create without rewriting and careful planning.

The challenging aspect for readers might be grasping Watson’s extensive analysis in Part One, with carefully constructed scoring

mechanisms to provide numerical scores for the quality of the essay, based on modern scholarship regarding the argumentation and structure of such essays. Watson utilizes questionnaires that draw upon relevant publications on structured essays from several universities. These provide criteria to identify a structured essay and then to evaluate it. Watson applies these to create what seem to be thorough and objective “rubrics” (forms akin to a formatted spreadsheet) that can be used to consider the arguments, the argumentative strategy, the use of evidence, and so forth, then giving scores to each essay considered. These appear to be thoughtful, careful tools, and if objectively applied, could yield useful data. There is definitely valuable content in this aspect of the work, but some readers may simply choose to flip through or overlook it. Watson deserves credit for going beyond hand-waving arguments and instead seeking objective data that credibly demonstrate the strength of the essays he explores in depth.

His rubrics are used to determine if a passage is a legitimate argumentative essay. After clearing that hurdle, an essay can be evaluated for quality with the “Argumentative Essay Assessment Rubric” (pp. 119–29).

After examining the rubrics and the criteria considered, it became clear to me that a plausible, good-faith mechanism had been created for adjudicating essays and that the approach made sense. There is still the possibility that the scoring was not as objective as intended, but the results do seem to capture a genuine feature in the essays considered, including a well-developed logic, thorough development of arguments, and carefully crafted rhetoric and reasoning. All this makes it extremely difficult to see how these essays could have been created on the fly by dictation. Yet I am still uncomfortable with the strong wording of the claims, even though what is demonstrated seems impressive.

In a sense, Watson’s work is closely related to Brian Hales’s explorations of organization and design in the Book of Mormon. In one study, Hales explores and dismantles the hypothesis that Joseph Smith was just a great storyteller drawing on highly developed skills of professional storytellers to create Book of Mormon scenes.² Even if Joseph had been trained in storytelling techniques, this would hardly account for the logical development of numerous arguments Watson

2. Brian C. Hales, “Joseph Smith as a Book of Mormon Storyteller,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 46 (2021): 253–90, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/joseph-smith-as-a-book-of-mormon-storyteller/.

identifies and explores. In a recent study published after Watson's work, Hales employs Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools to evaluate the skills Joseph would need to dictate a text with the complexity of the Book of Mormon.³ He then evaluates the fifteen key skills that AI tools identified, and demonstrated that eyewitness reports and other sources confirmed that Joseph did not have the skills or experience required. One factor Hales considered is the sixty sermons contained in the Book of Mormon, comprising 87,000 words (about one-third of the text),⁴ but he did not consider the development of persuasive arguments as Watson does.

Watson stresses that writing style or aesthetic values are largely irrelevant when it comes to the function of a structured essay, an important issue that distinguishes Watson's work from others that focus on poetic value or elements such as chiasmus. He asserts that for argumentative or persuasive essays (the two dominant types of essays considered), what matters is the argumentation, including its structure and logic:

An argumentative or persuasive essay's stylistic quality is generally irrelevant. These essays effectively convince their audience when their argument-evidence pairs and conclusion support the thesis statement using a sound warrant. Conversely, they fail when the thesis collapses from a lack of viable support. Legal briefs, patent applications, scientific papers, critical reviews, hermeneutics, apologetics, and structured debates are examples of argumentative or persuasive essays. (pp. 17–18)

Here and elsewhere, Watson discusses concepts from a widely influential and scholarly work on the nature of arguments, S. E. Toulmin's *The Uses of Argument*.⁵ Toulmin used the term *warrant* to describe the reasoning that connects the evidence or data used to support a claim to the claim itself. In other words, the warrant is an explanation of why or how the evidence supports the conclusion.

3. Brian C. Hales, "What Can Artificial Intelligence Tell Us About the Literary Skills Needed to Dictate a Text Like the Book of Mormon?," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 63 (2025): 257–96, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/what-can-artificial-intelligence-tell-us-about-the-literary-skills-needed-to-dictate-a-text-like-the-book-of-mormon/.

4. Hales, "What Can Artificial Intelligence Tell Us?," 264.

5. S. E. Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Watson's book would be somewhat easier for many readers if this and other specialized terms were explained as they are introduced.

When details of persuasion strategy come into play, it seems clear to me that Watson is not following Toulmin so much as he is following Aristotle's categories of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*, combined with the potential methodology of timing (*kairos*). This comes after Watson emphasizes his application of Toulmin, who does not rely on Aristotle and (as far as I can tell) does not mention these persuasion categories in his book. It would have been helpful to prepare the reader for this blending of Toulmin and Aristotle.

Further, it is unclear how knowledge of Toulmin's complex work would have helped Joseph or any other author in producing sound argumentative essays. Toulmin digs into the hidden assumptions and sometimes tangential implications of human reasoning in seemingly simple arguments, identifying the "warrants," "bridges," and other logical elements that may be at play. But knowing that terminology and mapping out the implicit reasoning process seems completely unnecessary to make well-structured persuasive or argumentative essays. Though likely due to my inadequate reading, it was unclear to me why Toulmin is important for Watson's work, especially since Toulmin is mentioned very little after the introduction.

Watson recognizes his bias, and to counter that has created and applied objective criteria for high-quality persuasive essays, and a scoring and analysis method for evaluating them. I was skeptical about the approach until I examined the details and concluded that a genuine effort was underway to accurately and objectively depict the quality of the essays considered.

Watson recognizes that the logical framework used in a structured essay will vary between cultures having different worldviews, which may affect what would be considered as evidence. But the logical structure of arguments need not vary dramatically, particularly in the West, where arguments tend to follow a three-part structure:

1. A thesis statement (the main idea, argument, or position that the author wants the audience to accept or believe),
2. the frame of argument (the body of the essay which comprises at least one argument and one piece of evidence that supports the thesis), and
3. a conclusion (the close of the essay which contains a restatement of the thesis, a call to action, or makes the

audience think or look at the world or themselves differently). (p. 20)

The concept is that the Book of Mormon has numerous passages where a genuine argumentative or persuasive essay is offered. Argumentative essays are similar to the more general "persuasive essays," but are distinguished in that an argumentative essay also recognizes and rebuts one or more counterarguments. The persuasive essay need not do so, thus giving formal argumentative essays greater convincing power (p. 21). Watson writes, "The specific logical structure of these essays can only be made from deliberate design. What are they doing in a known dictated book?" (p. 28). Watson later suggests that:

If just one argumentative or persuasive essay is valid within the Book of Mormon, then verifiable evidence exists that an apparent impossibility occurs within a dictated book. But, as this [book] will show with four examples, there is more than one instance of apparent impossibilities within the book—and they are not confirmation bias fallacies.

And the reason why this can be asserted with confidence is that we know how to create argumentative and persuasive essays—millions of people produce them every year. And each one knows from firsthand experience that it is highly implausible that they can make them by merely dictating them. (p. 30)

Again, such language diminishes the impact of Watson's discoveries, but Watson's findings are still important. What makes the presence of structured essays surprising is that they are essentially in the same wording as what Joseph Smith dictated to his scribes in a rapid process, without notes and without major revisions of content. While there were some clarifying edits and many corrections of awkward grammar, the flow of concepts and the arrangement of the text is essentially what was dictated from the mouth of Joseph without referring to a previously edited draft. It is a unique book:

No paragraphs were inserted or moved elsewhere. No sentences were reworded or had their primary thought changed. . . .

This feat may not seem like much to the non-writer, but to those with a lot of experience in structured non-prose and non-poetry writing, this "*dictated first draft is the final draft*"

is an accomplishment none of us can equal. We all need to revise our first draft to correct errors and omissions and improve it. And for an uneducated 23-year-old man in 1829 to produce a 269,318-[word] work that did not need structural and layout enhancement on his *first* attempt at writing is something none of us can comprehend. (pp. 5–6)

Watson takes what he calls a “Formalism-Structuralism approach” to analyzing the Book of Mormon. He finds its internal structure and concept development as evidence of intentional design and great skill (p. 2). Such coordination is not unusual in textbooks and other carefully written and edited books produced through many iterative stages with heavy rewriting. However, intricate coordination is surprising from a secular perspective that rejects the ancient origins and crafting of the Book of Mormon text, when one considers its dictated nature. Given the unusual means by which Joseph Smith produced the text, one might expect it to be inconsistent, crudely shaped, and in need of massive revision in order for it to be cohesive and intelligible. Instead, we have many elements suggesting a carefully devised structure. Watson reasonably maintains that those who have written carefully structured essays know that oral dictation off the top of one’s head simply cannot achieve the structure evidenced in the Book of Mormon. Novelists and non-fiction writers generally don’t just start dictating and then send off their dictation to the printer.

Watson considers many aspects of formal texts and the layers of organization and structure they demand, showing that the Book of Mormon is incompatible with such patterns. Even if one assumes that Joseph Smith dictated from memorized or hidden manuscripts that he had spent years preparing, the intricacy of the structure in the Book of Mormon still doesn’t make sense as a product of his day. This is most easily demonstrated with archaic rhetorical tools known in the Hebrew Bible and other documents from the Ancient Near East. For example, I was profoundly touched when I read modern scholars describing discoveries made after Joseph Smith’s day about ancient covenant patterns that we see in the Book of Mormon. I was further touched upon learning of the political and covenant-oriented meanings of motifs associated with the theme of “arising from the dust” and associated passages in Isaiah (especially Isaiah 52:1–2), based on twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholarship that adds numerous

insights and much unity to the Book of Mormon.⁶ Aside from divine creation and intervention, such features cannot be explained in an early nineteenth-century document, even if Joseph Smith had access to the finest scholars of his day.

Watson's Approach to Alma 36

Part Two of Watson's book is a lengthy essay that explores some of the marvels of Alma 36. Watson identifies the chapter as a persuasive essay (pp. 153–66), but also as a modified public speech (pp. 167–79), and later as a thematic chiasm (pp. 180–215). The persuasive essay aspect is most relevant to his overall thesis, and he makes a strong case that the chapter is a solid example of a structured essay. The issue of Alma 36 as a chiasm may be best known to Latter-day Saints and will be my focus.

Watson observes that a variety of chiastic structures have been proposed for Alma 36, with not all in agreement. The number of elements in the proposed structures range from eight to seventeen. Watson critiques them, pointing out that they sometimes break up clauses and have out-of-sequence elements that must be ignored (p. 181). He resolves this problem by condensing the many elements of the chiasm into seven broad thematic groups, asserting that:

Alma 36 is definitely a chiasm but not one driven by key-words or phrases. It is actually a thematic chiasm that encompasses every single word of the chapter, making it immune to the cherry-picking charge. And the matching words and phrases, while important, are secondary to the partnered themes. (p. 183)

The thematic elements begin with "keep the commandments of

6. Jeff Lindsay, "'Arise from the Dust': Insights from Dust-Related Themes in the Book of Mormon (Part 1: Tracks from the Book of Moses)," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 22 (2016): 179–232, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/arise-from-the-dust-insights-from-dust-related-themes-in-the-book-of-mormon-part-1-tracks-from-the-book-of-moses/; and Jeff Lindsay, "'Arise from the Dust: Insights from Dust-Related Themes in the Book of Mormon (Part 2: Enthronement, Resurrection, and Other Ancient Motifs from the 'Voice from the Dust')," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 22 (2016): 233–77, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/arise-from-the-dust-insights-from-dust-related-themes-in-the-book-of-mormon-part-2-enthronement-resurrection-and-other-ancient-motifs-from-the-voice-from-the-dust/.

God and you will prosper in the land” and reach a climax with element seven, “Jesus Christ, the Son of God, saves from sins.” Some of these elements cover a single verse or two, while others cover as many as six verses. These broad groupings are reasonable, but obscure significant parallels that suggest there is more than just a broad thematic outline in the composition. Taking those details into consideration inevitably results in struggling with apparent out-of-place elements. One wonders if the broader brush used by Watson is necessarily an improvement.

Here it would have been helpful to consider more of the many scholarly works that have addressed such issues in Alma 36. Stephen Ehat, for example, considers the challenge of asymmetrical chiasmus with occasional “skews” (out of place items) as a known feature in studies of chiasmus, and he proposes that the skew is not necessarily a flaw, but rather a feature that should be considered.⁷ While Ehat’s work was published after Watson’s, it conveniently brings together a large body of earlier relevant works. His examination of Alma 36 considers nearly a dozen other works that discuss various aspects of the structure, including the skews. Ehat also notes that Noel Reynolds has discussed the different “levels” of the chiasm,⁸ including very broad thematic levels with a small number of elements, in contrast to more detailed structures wherein the broad levels may be broken up into more detailed internal structures that contribute to the complexity and subtlety of the structure.

Ehat attributes “levels analysis” in chiasmus originally to the work of David L. Clark, who wrote, “multiple levels of patterning may coexist, superimposed and interpenetrating. The recognition of one of them does not necessarily involve the repudiation of others.”⁹

Watson’s broad seven-step chiasm seems closely related to

7. Stephen Kent Ehat, “Asymmetry in Chiasms, With a Note About Deuteronomy 8 and Alma 36,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 59 (2023): 191–280, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/asymmetry-in-chiasms-with-a-note-about-deuteronomy-8-and-alma-36/.

8. Noel B. Reynolds, “Rethinking Alma 36,” in *Give Ear to My Words: Text and Context of Alma 36–42*, ed. Kerry M. Hull, Nicholas J. Frederick, and Hank R. Smith (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2019), 451–72, rsc.byu.edu/give-ear-my-words/rethinking-alma-36/; and Noel B. Reynolds, “Rethinking Alma 36,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 34 (2020): 279–312, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/rethinking-alma-36/. See discussion in Ehat, “Asymmetry in Chiasms.”

9. David J. Clark, “Criteria for Identifying Chiasm,” *Linguistica Biblica* 5 (1975): 63–71, as cited by Ehat, “Asymmetry in Chiasms,” 208.

previous structures at a broad level and is reasonable, but it seems premature to stop there and declare that Alma 36 is only a thematic chiasm with those broad levels, discounting the internal intricacies that also call for attention. Overall, while Watson's approach provides a useful perspective which is somewhat related to the earlier work of Noel Reynolds, it is not a complete or broadly satisfying approach, in light of the evidence that a more intricate structure has been provided. But Watson's broad level analysis is certainly a useful perspective and may suffice for the purpose of illustrating aspects of a deliberately structured text. In any case, Watson's treatment of Alma 36 gives the reader much to consider and makes it unmistakably clear that Alma 36 is a complex, well-structured text that does seem extremely unlikely to have been authored by Joseph Smith, and certainly not authored on the fly while dictating text at high speed without notes and revisions. Alma 36 is a majestic chapter.

Impossible vs. Improbable? A Brief Query with AI

I mentioned that I would prefer more modest claims for Watson's important work, and more thorough consideration of the possibility that talented orators can at least occasionally produce equally sound structured essays. Watson repeatedly suggests that dictating an argumentative essay is beyond human ability because it requires rewriting and revision to draft. That is certainly the way that skilled writers tend to approach such essays. But what are the bounds to human capability? Has nobody ever written a convincing blog post in one rapid session without revising the structure? Has no spontaneous sermon ever included all the elements of a persuasive or argumentative essay? And don't the extemporaneous rebuttals of debaters in formal competition sometimes qualify as argumentative essays?

Perhaps the issue to consider is not how difficult it is for millions of college students to craft a structured essay, but whether such a thing is possible for an unusual talent or for a well-trained, disciplined speaker.

As I considered Watson's arguments, it occurred to me that someone only needs to turn to some leading AI tool and ask for a counterexample to undermine Watson's most strongly worded claims, and then claim victory.

Not wishing to play the devil's advocate, I still felt it would be helpful to be able to fairly understand the strengths and weaknesses of Watson's work, by at least posing the key concern that might be on the

minds of readers — is extemporaneous dictation of a well-structured essay really impossible? Here's the query I provided to ChatGPT 4o (a leading Large Language Model [LLM] or "chatbot" of OpenAI.com) and also to Grok 3, the highly-praised LLM of X.ai that has the tremendous advantage of access to the billions of pages of textual input in X (formerly known as Twitter). This query could have been much more complex, but since I assumed that the LLMs would be familiar with the details of structured essays, I proceeded with a simple form. Here is my query:

In light of the criteria for a structured essay such as an argumentative essay, is it possible for oral diction by an orator to generate a structured essay on the fly without rewriting? Can you give an example of an extemporaneous oration from Cicero or some other major figure, and show that it has the elements of an argumentative essay?

Here was the response of ChatGPT (5 April 2025):

The idea of generating a structured argumentative essay through extemporaneous speech is indeed intriguing and quite possible, especially for skilled orators. Great speakers like Cicero were renowned for their ability to structure their thoughts on the fly in a manner that closely mirrors the structure of a written argumentative essay, which typically includes an introduction, a thesis statement, supporting arguments, counterarguments, and a conclusion.

Cicero as an Example: Cicero, a master of rhetoric in ancient Rome, often spoke in a manner that included all these elements, reflecting the techniques and structures taught in his time for persuasive speech. His orations, such as those in the "Catilinarian Orations" against the conspiracy of Catiline, demonstrate this well.

Example Analysis of Cicero's First Catilinarian Oration:

1. **Introduction:** Cicero begins with a powerful hook that immediately addresses the urgency of the situation, asking Catiline, "How long, O Catiline, will you abuse our patience?"
2. **Thesis Statement:** He states his main argument

clearly—that Catiline’s conspiracy is a danger to the Roman state and must be confronted.

3. **Supporting Arguments:** Cicero details the evidence of Catiline’s treachery, recounting past conspiracies, the gathering of forces, and the seditious plans Catiline has made.
4. **Counterarguments:** Implicitly, Cicero addresses potential objections—why Catiline has been allowed to act this way for so long without being stopped, suggesting the patience of the Senate and his own clemency.
5. **Conclusion:** Cicero concludes with a call to action, urging the Senate to act against Catiline and calling for the defense of the republic.

Extemporaneous Nature of Cicero’s Orations: While Cicero likely prepared extensively for his speeches, the orations he delivered were adapted to the mood and reactions of his audience, demonstrating his skill in extemporaneous speech. The way Cicero structured his arguments would have required a deep understanding of both the topic at hand and rhetorical techniques, allowing him to construct what can essentially be seen as a structured argumentative essay orally.

Modern Implications: Today, similar skills are used by debaters and public speakers who must organize their thoughts quickly and present them persuasively in real-time discussions and debates. While it’s challenging, training in debate and public speaking often focuses on this ability to think and organize one’s thoughts swiftly and coherently.

Thus, Cicero’s example shows that it’s indeed possible for an orator to deliver a speech that has all the hallmarks of a structured argumentative essay. This ability reflects both a mastery of subject matter and rhetorical skill.

Grok 3 seemed more thorough but gave a similar answer (5 April 2025):

Yes, it’s entirely possible for a skilled orator to deliver an extemporaneous speech that aligns with the structure of an argumentative essay—complete with an introduction, thesis, supporting arguments, counterarguments, and

a conclusion—without needing to rewrite or script it in advance. This ability hinges on the orator’s mastery of rhetoric, logical organization, and spontaneous eloquence, qualities often honed through practice and training, as seen in classical traditions like those of ancient Greece and Rome. The extemporaneous nature doesn’t preclude structure; rather, it showcases how a well-trained mind can impose order on ideas in real time.

A prime example of this is Cicero’s *First Catilinarian Oration* (*In Catilinam I*), delivered on November 7, 63 BCE, in the Roman Senate. While Cicero likely prepared his main points beforehand, the speech was an immediate response to the unfolding Catiline Conspiracy, a plot to overthrow the Roman Republic. Its delivery was urgent and situational, yet it exhibits the hallmarks of a structured argumentative essay. Let’s break it down to demonstrate this:

1. Introduction (Exordium)

Cicero opens with a striking rhetorical question: “*Quo usque tandem abutere, Catilina, patientia nostra?*” (“How long, Catiline, will you abuse our patience?”). This serves as the hook, grabbing the audience’s attention while establishing the exigency of the situation. He sets the stage by painting Catiline as a brazen threat, present in the Senate despite his alleged crimes, thus justifying the need for immediate discourse.

2. Thesis (Narratio and Propositio)

Cicero quickly states his central claim: Catiline is a danger to the Republic, and his conspiracy must be exposed and stopped. He transitions from the dramatic opening to a clear assertion: “*Nihilne te nocturnum praesidium Palati, nihil urbis vigiliae, nihil timor populi, nihil concursus bonorum omnium, nihil hic munitissimus habendi senatus locus, nihil horum ora voltusque moverunt?*” (“Does the night guard of the Palatine, the city’s watch, the people’s fear, the gathering of all good men, this fortified Senate meeting place — do none of these move you?”). This establishes the problem (Catiline’s conspiracy) and Cicero’s position (it must be confronted), laying out the stakes for the argument.

3. Supporting Arguments (Confirmatio)

Cicero builds his case with evidence and reasoning:

- **Fact-based Accusations:** He cites specific actions, like Catiline’s alleged plans to murder senators, claiming, “*Omnia haec iam pridem, Catilina, sic a te comparata esse scimus*” (“We know all this has long been orchestrated by you, Catiline”).
- **Appeals to Ethos and Pathos:** He invokes his own credibility as consul and stirs the senators’ emotions by emphasizing the Republic’s peril.
- **Logical Progression:** He details how Catiline’s brazenness—remaining in Rome despite his known guilt—proves his audacity and the conspiracy’s reality. Each point reinforces his thesis systematically.

4. Counterarguments and Refutation (Refutatio)

Cicero anticipates Catiline’s potential defenses. For instance, Catiline might claim innocence or argue that no overt act has been committed. Cicero preempts this: “*Tu ne id, quod iam pridem factum esse oportebat, te ipsum tua manu necatrix?*” (“Will you not, then, by your own hand, do what should have been done long ago?”). He refutes the idea of inaction by asserting that Catiline’s presence and past behavior are damning enough, turning the lack of a “caught-in-the-act” moment into evidence of his cunning.

5. Conclusion (Peroratio)

Cicero closes with a call to action and a rhetorical flourish: “*In te conferri pestem quam tu in nos omnes iam diu machinaris*” (“Let the plague you have long plotted against us all be turned upon you”). He urges the Senate to recognize the threat and implicitly supports decisive measures (like exile or execution), while appealing to divine protection for Rome. This ties the speech together, reinforcing his thesis and leaving a lasting impression.

Analysis

This oration mirrors an argumentative essay’s structure: it introduces a problem, states a clear position, supports it with evidence and reasoning, addresses opposition, and concludes with a persuasive summation. Cicero’s extemporaneous delivery—driven by the moment’s urgency—didn’t

sacrifice coherence. His training in rhetoric, as outlined in works like *De Oratore*, equipped him to organize thoughts on the fly, using techniques like the five canons of rhetoric (invention, arrangement, style, memory, delivery). The speech's polish comes not from rewriting but from Cicero's ability to think in a structured way under pressure.

Other figures, like Demosthenes with his *Philippics* or even modern orators like Martin Luther King Jr. in his improvised moments (e.g., parts of "I Have a Dream"), show similar feats. Cicero's *First Catilinarian* stands out, though, for its blend of spontaneity and forensic precision, proving that oral diction can indeed produce a structured argumentative essay in real time.

It is possible that both LLMs have improperly analyzed Cicero's essay and rashly proposed that skilled orators can create argumentative essays during dictation. For the moment, though, there seems to be reasonable but rebuttable evidence to question Watson's claims of impossibility. Nevertheless, his observations and findings still merit attention.

While I believe that there are orators, story tellers, debaters, politicians, and scholars who may be able to occasionally give oral lectures that seem to carefully integrate and structure the material to meet the requirements of a structured essay, and an argumentative essay in particular, doing this—in the case of the Book of Mormon—numerous times across a 500-page book dictated orally does *seem* like a nearly impossible achievement, but I still suggest that more modest wording would strengthen Watson's argument.

Is it really impossible to make an argument on the fly, supported with evidence, perhaps coupled with consideration of a counterargument, and then backed with a conclusion and a call to action? Watson does not provide a reasonable basis for this assumption. The finding of one extemporaneous oration that meets the criteria for an argumentative or persuasive essay strikes at the heart of Watson's claim. It will only be a matter of time, requiring perhaps just a single query of an AI tool, to show multiple examples of such well-structured essays. Treating the achievement as one that requires great skill and would be difficult (albeit not impossible) to do during dictation may give the reader a healthier appreciation of how difficult the Book of Mormon would have been to create by human skill, during dictation, as opposed to dictating a miraculous translation given by the power of God.

Conclusion

Edward Watson has taken a valuable new approach in analyzing the text of the Book of Mormon, showing that its numerous structured essays meet demanding criteria and show the kind of logical development that normally requires extensive planning and rewriting. However, he does not appear to meet the burden of proof for the strongly worded claims he makes.

Watson does give the reader a new approach for appreciating the complexity and authenticity of the text of the Book of Mormon, as the product of ancient authors who did indeed take the time and thought, perhaps with careful planning and multiple revisions, to create beautiful and powerful structured essays. While Watson is too aggressive in his claims, the essence of his work is worthy of consideration. The Book of Mormon is not just a majestic history and literary marvel, rich in Ancient Near Eastern rhetorical and poetical elements; it is also densely packed with carefully drafted persuasive and argumentative essays that are unlikely to have been created during extemporaneous dictation. I hesitate to say that any or all of these evidences constitute true "proof" of the divinity of the text, but they certainly strengthen the case for plausibility. These factors can serve as evidence to help those who stumble at the denouncements of the world, helping them instead to step over such hurdles and, with an eye of faith, see the Book of Mormon as the miraculous gift from God that it is.



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