

# Unteaching the Five-Paragraph Essay

*The five-paragraph formula confuses and alienates students and undermines our most basic goals as writing instructors.*

by Marie Foley

You may remember the poster distributed by a publisher a few years ago featuring the Five-Paragraph Monster. He was an engagingly silly dinosaur, with a menacing grin ("introductory paragraph—lots of teeth, no bite"), an unpleasingly plump middle ("three paragraphs . . . mostly bulk") and a "somewhat limp and drawn out" concluding paragraph/tail. Many of us gleefully tacked the poster to our bulletin boards, certain that by mocking the beastly formula it would slip away. But unfortunately the five-paragraph essay is alive and well, still being taught in some junior and senior high schools and colleges.

At the university where I taught three years ago, composition faculty were asked how high school students might be better prepared for college composition. One third of those responding called for an end to the five-paragraph essay. "Teach essay structure without relying on the five-paragraph formula," wrote one instructor. "They should get away from formula writing (the five-paragraph essay) and give kids experience in tackling all kinds of writing," suggested another. The most pointed response was, "The one-idea, three-

example, five-paragraph format—AARGH!"

Why does the five-paragraph formula continue to defy extinction? Possibly the answer is teacher survival. Despite our national concern for improving writing, English classes continue to be overcrowded, particularly in high schools. High school instructors are expected to teach 150-plus students how to write an essay when the essay by its very nature requires personalized instruction. Though I begrudge the time spent on unteaching the five-paragraph essay, I often wonder whether I too might be tempted to teach with a formula if faced with that many students.

But the more I encounter the five-paragraph formula and the distorted mindset which it produces in students, the less acceptable it seems, even as a strategy for survival. I am speaking here not of the teaching of structure per se, but specifically of the five-paragraph approach—the formula introduction, the three "support" paragraphs and the summary conclusion. This formula runs counter to our most basic goals as writing instructors. Instead of generating thinking, the formula deters it. As soon as students



meet their quota of three body paragraphs, they are free to stop thinking about their topic. The prefabricated structure invites students to fill the five slots with what they already know, thus often depriving them of the pleasure of discovering new ideas. With sufficient practice, they master the formula, and it becomes so imprinted that they are loath to part with it.

### The Formula Alienates Students

My experience has been that students trained in the five-paragraph method regard essay writing as an alien, unnatural enterprise. Filling in the structure with the requisite 500 words, they go through the motions of writing, but they seldom create something authentically theirs. In their personal letters and in their journals they freely express themselves, but for the essay they adopt an alias. This very point was made almost twenty years ago by William Coles in his critique of "themewriting," his term for the form of "non-writing" invented by English teachers for use exclusively in English classrooms. Coles's main point applies equally to the five-paragraph formula—that it fails to engage the "character, personality, moral nature, [and] convictions" of our students (136–37).

Possibly the five-paragraph formula is a useful first step for beginning student writers. It helps them overcome writer's block and gives them the "I can do it" experience. But when taught as the only writing mode, the formula eventually creates a gulf between the student's self and his or her written expression. Many college freshmen enter composition courses alienated from writing, dreading it or resentful that such courses are required. What pleasure can there be in

learning to write by a formula? Only the dubious pleasure of receiving an A for mastering it. The formula reinforces the writing-to-please-the-teacher syndrome that turns students against the system.

In addition to blocking discovery and squelching authenticity, the five-paragraph formula is unnatural in other ways. For one, professional writers do not use it. On a deeper level, the formula undermines one of the writer's (and reader's) most basic needs—the need for coherence. The problem is not that the five-paragraph formula produces incoherence but rather that it limits students to a superficial, predictable level of coherence. For the body of their essays, students tend to tack any three loosely related ideas onto the prefabricated scaffolding. These three ideas cohere only in the sense that they are three aspects of the chosen topic—three reasons why I have decided to become a dentist, three advantages to joining ROTC, three examples of hypocrisy in *Huckleberry Finn*. As long as students construct a thesis sentence that accounts for their three ideas and they insert transitions between the paragraphs ("Another example of prejudice against Asian Americans is . . ."), they feel they have mastered structure.

But juxtaposition is not coherence. To borrow a phrase from an article on coherence by Anita Brostoff, "next to is not connected to" (278). To be asked merely to enumerate three aspects of any topic relieves students of the need to probe relationships; indeed, it robs them of any motivation to do so. Take the student who decides to write about three benefits of jogging: health, weight control, and stress reduction. What if in the process of writing, the student discovers this interrelationship: that feeling healthy and looking trim help to



reduce stress? The student is likely to let the insight slide since the formula requires only that three ideas be discussed next to one another. Nor does the student know what to do with the insight for the formula creates the notion that an essay is basically three mini-essays joined by transitions.

Something is wrong when a writing assignment deters thinking instead of leading the student to discover connections. Indeed throughout their college careers, students will be expected to write thoughtful papers and essay exams on complex, often abstract, subjects. But how can students explore the relationship, say, between Darwin and fascism, if they have never had to explore the relationship between more accessible ideas, such as how stress affects a person's self-image?

Ironically, students who do attempt to go beyond the five-paragraph formula are likely to be penalized for writing incoherently because they do not know how to signal their more complex structure. In his study of the organization of college essays, Richard Haswell found that although students could generate a variety of organizational patterns, they frequently were unaware of these patterns and thus unable to signal them. Haskell notes that teachers accustomed to the simple structure of the five-paragraph essay will be less likely to recognize this complex organization, since "judged by its appearance as a 'five paragraph theme,' the essay will not cohere" (408). In other words, the student may be penalized rather than helped to develop the complex organization needed for expressing complex thought.

Teaching the five-paragraph formula thus harms students in some fundamental ways, depriving them of the pleasures and challenges of writ-

ing and ill-preparing them for academic and real world writing. While it may solve the immediate problem of teaching form, it does a disservice to students in the long run. Currently our profession is alive with dialogue and research about the writing process, but proportionally little has been published about how writers achieve form and about how form can be taught. Perhaps this neglect is helping keep the five-paragraph formula alive. Even teachers who engage in process-centered teaching fall back on the five-paragraph formula when teaching form. One way to rid ourselves of the formula is to develop a repertoire of alternatives to it. We (that is, all of us engaged in the teaching of writing) need to share whatever practical, workable, nonformulaic strategies we have developed to increase students' consciousness of form.

#### Alternatives to the Formula

In the interest of contributing to such an exchange, let me describe how I wean my students from the five-paragraph formula: by offering the metaphor of the essay as journey. As with any journey, I tell them, an essay should move forward in a purposeful way, with a logical starting and ending point and a rationale for the sequence of stops along the route. Sometimes students map out the route (outline) before writing, but usually it develops during the revision of their rather freely written first draft. As they revise I encourage them to think about relationships and to grapple with contradictions, complexities, and nuances. Also during revision they learn to provide cohesion signals so that the essay becomes a pleasurable journey for their readers.

This journey metaphor gives students the sense of writing as move-



ment, unlike the static quality of their five-paragraph essays (so aptly conveyed by the poster's sluggish dinosaur). But students can benefit from more practical guidance on how to organize their "journeys." For this I introduce them to the patterns of organization most frequently used by writers. The most obvious one, already familiar to students, is moving through time (chronological order). Other such patterns include moving from outside to inside (spatial order), from least to most significant (emphatic order), from effects to causes (causal order), from simple to complex ideas, from narrow to wider implications, from the obvious to the surprising, from the problem to its solution, and from incident to increasingly deeper reflections on it. Anyone wishing a more exhaustive list could read Haswell, who cites 14 "logical organizational patterns" (404-06). A less daunting list can be found in Booth and Gregory's text, *The Harper & Row Rhetoric* (163-72). Frank D'Angelo offers a book-length, theoretical study of discourse patterns in *A Conceptual Theory of Rhetoric*.

These patterns may seem suspiciously like formulas, but they are not artificial, teacher-devised formulas. They have become discourse conventions because they correlate with natural thinking processes. This is the basic point of D'Angelo's study. Starting with a premise from psychology that thinking itself is a structural process—a process of getting at relationships, hierarchies and patterns—D'Angelo posits that there are "innate organizing principles" that determine how we organize discourse (26). In other words, the way writers organize discourse is a manifestation of innate organizing tendencies of the mind.

Unlike the five-paragraph formula, these patterns of organization are ver-

satile: they can structure an entire essay, a sequence of paragraphs, or a single paragraph. They can overlap (a chronological pattern is often simultaneously emphatic), and they can be combined in chains (a causal pattern can merge into a problem-solution pattern). By making students conscious of these patterns, we enable them to develop a sophisticated consciousness of form commensurate with their increasing maturity of thought. And this consciousness of form will serve them at any stage of the writing process, not just in revising but also in prewriting. Simply knowing about emphatic order, for example, can provide the impetus for students to push their thinking beyond the obvious.

I would like to briefly mention introductions and conclusions, two of the five paragraphs required by the five-paragraph formula. The journey metaphor helps students think of an introduction not as an account of what is to come (the formula approach) but as an invitation to a journey. Their introduction is an occasion to make connection with their readers—appeal to them, anticipate their needs—and orient them as to the direction of the coming journey. The concluding paragraph is not merely the slot for reiterating main points; it marks the destination of the journey. It develops the final, most significant point or the climax or the surprise. Or perhaps it develops a reflection inspired by the journey. While it must provide a sense of closure, it is always meaty and never merely drags behind the essay like the tail on the dinosaur.

As I have mentioned, this journey metaphor has helped me wean students away from the five-paragraph formula. It is unfortunate, however, that such weaning ever has to take place. Whenever teachers find them-



selves unteaching what others have taught, the sense of our collective mission as writing instructors has broken down. And as always the real losers are the students. For their sakes, it seems imperative that the

problems created by the five-paragraph formula be addressed by writing instructors at all levels and that those who have created alternative strategies be willing to share their expertise.

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