

Defending the Five-Paragraph Essay

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On Sunday evenings, after my papers were graded and the lesson plans were complete, I'd take an hour out of my week and watch *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. A group of contractors and designers build a new home, basically from scratch, for a needy family. Every show is the same: the family is in dire financial straits; the design team and crew come to the rescue and build a new home. The rising action is the building process; the climax of the show is a mini-conflict that may thwart their schedule; and the resolution is the family in its new, beautiful home, with hope of a better future. After grading a countless number of essays, this uplifting show helped round out my weekend.

One Sunday, I realized that every house was built in the same fashion every time: a foundation is poured, walls are constructed and raised, and a roof is framed and attached. After that, the creativity of the crew sets in, establishing room placement and sizes, paint colors, fixtures, and all of the characteristics that make a house a home.

I found it eerily similar to the way I taught writing skills to at-risk students. Since I followed a standard format, once that format was established, the students were able to add their creative touches to the piece. The formats I used were the five-sentence paragraph and the five-paragraph essay. I admit that I am a behaviorist, old-school teacher. I am didactic in my speech and, to a certain extent, rigid in my methods of teaching writing skills. When teaching literature, I employ a wide variety of techniques to examine and explore literature. It is common to have organized chaos as students use visually creative methods, such as participating in cooperative activities or epistemic games. Students engage in arts and crafts to illustrate poetic themes,

or they may produce a television program to portray characters in a novel, engaging in creative pursuits as they make sense of literary analysis. Such creativity is ideal for at-risk students. Many of these students can express their ideas visually, pictorially. However, these same at-risk students have difficulty using words to express their thoughts and ideas. As a result, this creativity does not apply to my methods of teaching expository writing.

For over a decade, I taught ninth- and tenth-grade students who read and wrote several grade levels below the norm. Ninth-grade students had little concept of a complete sentence, and they believed that a paragraph consisted of a long, run-on sentence that took up four or five lines on the page. Much of their writing resembled rambling journal entries. While I see merit in focused freewriting activities, in academia it is vital for students to write well-organized, clear, expository essays.

The five-sentence paragraph and the five-paragraph essay are clear and easy to follow for an inexperienced writer. In my remedial classes, many students also had some form of learning disability or attention deficit disorder. As a result, they had a difficult time organizing their thoughts when they spoke to me. You can imagine their difficulty when they were expected to organize their thoughts into coherent paragraphs or essays. I began every year with a lesson on the five-sentence paragraph. The five-sentence paragraph gave these students a formula to follow. Initially, students wrote a topic sentence followed by three sentences that gave details or supported the topic sentence. They ended with a concluding sentence. As the year progressed, the students wrote more-detailed sentences, so by the beginning of January, they wrote paragraphs of seven to ten sentences.

Once students got a handle on writing a complete paragraph, they learned how to combine different paragraphs and write complete essays. Again, I used a formula: the five-paragraph essay. Students wrote three different kinds of paragraphs: an introductory paragraph, body or supporting paragraphs, and a conclusion paragraph. I also taught students how to write a thesis statement, comparing and contrasting this sentence to a topic sentence. I initially had students write only three body paragraphs. Eventually, students learned different ways to support their thesis statement, thus adding more body paragraphs. By the end of the school year, they wrote three- to five-page, typed essays.

On standardized tests, the students scored several grade levels below their peers. For some of them, it was a result of poor decoding skills or lacking a rich knowledge of vocabulary words. However, I learned that for most of them, it was because they read slowly, and they did not know how to glean information by identifying the text's organization. Most expository texts are organized similarly: there is an introduction of the topic with a thesis statement, identifying the main idea of the text; then, paragraphs provide details and support to the thesis statement; finally, a conclusion provides closure to the topic of that text. These are all elongated versions of the five-paragraph essay. This format can be seen in newspaper and magazine articles, textbooks, and narrative essays, all texts that high school students commonly encounter during their educational lives. Having students learn and apply the paragraph format helped them identify the topic sentences in paragraphs, understand which sentences supplied support or additional details to the topic sentence, and acknowledge which sentences provided a conclusion and transition to the next paragraph. At the same time, because students learned the basic structure of an essay, they were able to identify the introductory paragraphs, the body or supporting paragraphs, and the conclusion of the essay or article. Understanding this organization has helped students glean information more thoroughly from their textbooks, helping them identify the location of salient knowledge from their texts. While this essay format may not be useful in the comprehension of poetry or dramas, it has helped students comprehend texts from other content areas such as the social studies and the sciences.

The main criticism I receive from fellow high school English teachers when I promote the five-paragraph essay structure is that my rigidity stifles at-risk students' creativity and originality. Enforcing such a formulaic methodology does not allow students' voices or writing styles to be established or acknowledged in their writing. To a certain extent, I would agree with my critics: No, this formulaic writing does not allow much room for structural creativity. However, with my remedial high school students, it was more important for them to learn and apply organization skills to their writing before any creativity could be explored. Because the students had difficulty organizing their thoughts in speaking, organizing their writing was almost impossible. Forcing students to use a formulaic template gave them a tool to organize their thoughts and ideas. Similar to building a house, it is important for the students to have a sturdy framework for their writing. Once the framework has been established, they can employ structural and organizational creativity.

Another criticism I receive is that by emphasizing a rigid writing structure, students will not be able to understand the relationship between writing structure and its content. What I taught my remedial students is that different kinds of writing have different structures. For example, a novel has a different structure than a textbook. While both pieces of writing are examples of prose, they serve different functions. Remedial high school students have a tendency to believe that all writing is equal, with little variation. Instead, they need to be taught that writing comes in different forms, and the content is reflected in the form.

With established writers, veering away from this formulaic writing into other styles makes sense. Such students already have an innate sense of organization and style. However, with remedial students who have learning disabilities or attention deficit issues, using a formula is vital. It gives students an organizational tool that can be applied to reading and writing most expository texts. Like building the house on *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, creative pursuits can be had in their writing only after the framework has been formed and established. Without a sturdy organizational framework, the essay, like the house, would crumble into incoherency.

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