



THE FIVE-PARAGRAPH

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CONCLUSION

Anyone wanting to start an argument among a group of English teachers has only to ask: “How do you folks feel about teaching five-paragraph essays?” Some in the group may smile, but others will be quick to voice disapproval:

“They’re artificial.”

“They stifle creativity.”

“They suppress individual expression.”

“They produce lifeless writing.”

“They discourage thinking.”

Those kinds of accusations and more appeared in the most influential writing-theory book of the 1970s: *Uptaught*, by Ken MacRorie.<sup>1</sup> A single word from that book—“Engfish”—was widely used to denote phony prose from students forced to write mechanically instead of self-expressively. The word seemed to encapsulate everything that was wrong with writing instruction, and one heard it incessantly in those years during presentations at meetings of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), and the Modern Language Association (MLA). With that, the five-paragraph essay was dead, at least officially.

And buried, too, apparently. A quick survey of recent books

outlining the history of writing in American schools turns up little or no reference to it. For instance, James A. Berlin’s *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985* (1987); James J. Murphy’s *A Short History of Writing Instruction From Ancient Greece to 20th-Century America* (1990); and editor Maureen Daly Goggin’s *Inventing a Discipline: Rhetoric Scholarship in Honor of Richard E. Young* (2000) all omit any mention whatever of the five-paragraph essay. This is particularly surprising since a recent Google search found 4.5 million occurrences of the term online! The majority of hits seemed to be from teachers’ essay instructions for their classes. Since the technique is a major feature of writing instruction in America, having historians pretend that it doesn’t exist seems, well, strange.

To their credit, a couple of critics since MacRorie actually have been willing to debate the subject. For instance, Bruce Pirie offers the following succinct criticism: “What does a five-paragraph essay teach about writing? It teaches that there are rules, and that those rules take the shape of a preordained form, like a cookie-cutter, into which we can pour ideas and expect them to come out well shaped.”<sup>2</sup> Despite the mixed metaphor, one can understand his position, especially when he goes on to discredit such essays as being akin to training wheels on bicycles and paint-by-the-numbers kits.

BY JAN HALUSKA

## Formulas Help Learning in Many Fields

Defenders of formula essays, however, can also use metaphors to support their point of view. Consider the analogy of aviation training. Flight instructors teach a formalized system for landing: a standard rectangular pattern featuring power reduction, precise decreases in airspeed, and so on. Weather and traffic conditions make every landing different, so the model can be adjusted here and there each time, just as a student writer might do with a formula essay. If flight instructors taught as some English teachers do, student pilots would have to improvise each approach with no customary structure whatever. The sure result would be clumps of crushed aluminum dotting the neighborhood of every airport in the country. Many practical activities, from golf swings to karate, demand formulaic learning.

So it is with rhetoric. For more than 2,000 years, people patterned their persuasive speaking and writing techniques after Aristotle. In *The Rhetoric*, he acts like a good flight instructor, walking us through the steps of a model argument one might deliver before a court. His structural, objective approach to convincing others went unchallenged for centuries.

## Montaigne's Bright Idea

Then in the late 1500s, Michel de Montaigne changed everything with so-called "personal" essays that exposed his subjective outlook rather than applying rigorous logic to the external world of facts. He himself coined the term *essay* from the French word for "attempt" and wrote about his personal thoughts on various aspects of life. Pirie sums up Montaigne's work very accurately using the words of Peter Womack: It was "the cultivated response of a man of taste."<sup>3</sup>

Less often noticed is that Montaigne's innovation was prompted by his fear that he knew too little for authorship. "And then," he wrote, "finding myself entirely unprovided and empty of other material, I proposed myself to myself for argument and subject."<sup>4</sup> In other words, this approach was a way to accommodate his own ignorance and still be able to write. Thus, for the first time, a writer's inner feelings were presented as stand-alone subject matter, whether or not they related in any provable way to objective truth. Of course, Montaigne used historical references and personal anecdotes, but he was interested more in sharing *subjective* reality, the world of a person's interior musings. Thus, his writing could be free-form, like a rambling stroll through the countryside. This brings to mind Samuel Johnson's famous dictionary definition of an essay: "a loose sally of the mind, an irregular, undigested piece."<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, Montaigne's sweetly informal style gained instant popularity. James Shapiro even suggests that his writings

influenced Shakespeare's soliloquies in *Hamlet*.<sup>6</sup> I find the connection telling, especially since the prince's famously quotable reflection gets him no closer to the decision he needs to make.<sup>7</sup>

Certainly, Montaigne's approach has had enthusiastic imitators ever since. Students are particularly thrilled to have their informal essays published, if only in school literary booklets.

## Informal Essays Work Less Well Than Formal Ones in School

But such essays can present grading problems. If a teacher has asked for a frank account of a student's musings, how can an honest attempt receive anything less than an "A"? Some teachers solve that puzzle by applying a fairly narrow grading criteria, evaluating grammar and creative wording while largely ignoring the question of substance apart from emotional display. If the student has shared his or her love for pickles, the teacher can only suggest supposedly more winsome language: "Instead of saying 'I like biting into one,' Tommy, you need to be more creative. Write something like 'As I nip off a pungent piece, the sharp juice wakes up my tongue,' so the reader can get a feeling of the experience." No wonder many students get the idea that good writing simply involves loading a text with a subjective list of adjectives, adverbs, and metaphors.

By contrast, if the assignment emphasizes persuasion through the use of factual material (personal experience, statistics, quotes from experts, etc.), teachers can make an objective assessment of the paper's effectiveness in clarifying and supporting a point of view. Furthermore, standard formulaic paragraphs—topic sentence, explanation, evidence—can help students learn how to write fact-based essays.

## Formal Essays—A Historical Overview

Perhaps that emphasis on objectivity is why the formal school essay became so popular in the first place. Jeanne Donovan Sanborn traces its first appearance to a 1909 writing textbook, *Composition: Oral and Written* by Charles Sears Baldwin.<sup>8</sup> Sanborn quotes Baldwin as calling an essay "an exposition by paragraphs of a single controlling idea."<sup>9</sup> That definition invites an objective evaluation of the student's success in arguing for a point of view, whether or not the teacher agrees with it.

Baldwin's model writer was the celebrated Thomas Babington Macaulay, an incisive literary and historical critic who wrote for the *Edinburgh Review* in the early 1800s. Sanborn quotes Baldwin as praising Macaulay for being able "to carry a reader through a definite course of thought to a definite conclusion," and others for writing essays that featured "orderly, logical, definite development by paragraphs."<sup>10</sup> We may note in passing, however, that he does not say "by five paragraphs."

## Today's Teachers and Students Can Use Them, Too

More to the point, Baldwin's statement illuminates the formal essay's usefulness in helping learners to attain their full educational potential. As a student, I had long recognized that something was missing from my writing. Like Montaigne, I "knew too little for authorship," and so what I really needed was for a teacher to say, "Well, go out and learn enough about something to have a worthwhile opinion regarding it, and then write a firmly grounded account of why that opinion is valid." That would have spurred me toward healthy self-education while it allowed the teacher to judge my essay as to how intelligently I had supported my opinion on the subject.

Without that enabling plan, I had to rely on creative pizzazz rather than substance in my essay tests and term papers. Typically, I would write an epistle that wandered endearingly (I hoped) among the required facts and quotes, then summed up

1. An introductory paragraph/thesis statement asserting an opinion.
2. Several interior paragraphs explaining that opinion, with evidence.
3. A concluding paragraph that reasserts the opinion.

After producing a few of those simple essays, students can begin practicing more audience awareness by adding a refutation to the mix, thereby answering objections by those whose opinions differ.

## Addressing a More Serious Objection

Interestingly, some teachers object to having student writers take any kind of stand. "The 'authoritative voice' requires a pretense of uniformity," says Pirie, "a pretense that conceals productive stress and honest ambivalence."<sup>11</sup>

In fact, a little flexibility can accommodate "productive stress" without much trouble. In preparation for writing, the student begins his or her task with an inductive process of gathering and weighing facts to build into a solid opinion. If the facts fall into a pair of incompatible piles, we can ask him or her to decide which pile of evidence seems more compelling and to present that opinion in four steps (but perhaps six paragraphs or more), like this:

1. An introductory paragraph/thesis statement leaning toward idea No. 2.
2. Early paragraph(s): "Admittedly, idea No. 1 is attractive. . . ."
3. Later paragraph(s): "However, idea No. 2 is a slightly better choice because . . ."
4. A concluding paragraph that either restates the thesis that the second idea is more

desirable or perhaps suggests a way of accommodating both to some degree.

Any skilled lawyer or salesperson will recognize the standard "yes, but" technique for answering objections in that model.

The flexibility of an intelligently formulaic essay can accommodate virtually every persuasive need, and I believe that it is likely to produce more actual thinking than ambivalent rambling can do. After all, a student might start out his or her research with one choice as the better option, only to find that the demands of proving the claim with evidence have led him or her to tilt in the opposite direction. What better way is there for the student to develop mental muscle?

Most formula essays can be simple to produce, though, even if they are advanced enough to include a refutation. The writer asserts the opinion, explains it, refutes the opposite view, then re-asserts the opinion. That pattern can help students produce essays that challenge them to think long before they reach college. On page 21, you will find a short one, complete with a refutation, by a 7th grader.

Perhaps that is not a perfect essay, but the young writer clearly understands the rudiments of presenting and defending an idea, and there is not a bit of English in it. I wish that more new college freshmen were as capable as she.

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the whole mess with a sufficiently noble-sounding conclusion to ensure a good grade. That would work only with teachers whose expectations were not particularly rigorous, but what else could I do? I had no idea.

Thus, my term papers and test essays for tough teachers went badly until the day my advisor went to the chalkboard and sketched a frontal view of the Parthenon. "The roof is the thesis—what you are trying to prove," he said. "The columns are paragraphs giving explanation and evidence for your idea, and the floor is the conclusion that reaffirms the thesis."

It was as if a flashbulb had gone off in my head. The concept was instantly, joyfully, obvious. So *that* was how you did it! Make your claim, support it in steps with evidence, and then declare victory.

My advisor was certainly wise to avoid calling the model a "five-paragraph essay," thus saving me from fixating on too rigid a structure. After all, what is the sense of insisting on exactly three interior paragraphs? Why couldn't a student's opinion rest solidly on two points—or 20?

Formulaic-style essays thus need a name free of numbers. One teacher uses the term "keyhole essay." I have generally referred to them as "Baconian essays," since their style somewhat resembles the writing of Sir Frances Bacon. Perhaps the best title is simply "a formal essay," and its simplest pattern is as follows:



# American Pit Bull Terrier

Reader: Someone who fears all pit bulls

Most people think that all American pit bull terriers or “pit bulls,” are mean dogs, but I know for a fact that this isn’t true. My grandmother owns a pit bull named Bubba, and he is a very sweet dog.

Bubba really is affectionate. He loves being petted and loves for you to scratch his belly and play fetch with him. For instance, I watched my brother play basketball with Bubba one time, and he accidentally dropped the ball on Bubba’s back. Instead of getting mad at my brother and attacking him as most people think pit bulls do when they are agitated, Bubba simply looked at my brother, forgave him, and kept on playing.

Admittedly, some pit bulls today are trained for fighting in a sick sport. I saw on a television show called *Animal Precinct* that they are sometimes trained to be vicious creatures and to kill other dogs. They are usually abused and are frequently covered in wounds. This treatment and bad care are what make some pit bulls mean dogs.

Even bad treatment didn’t make Bubba a mean dog, though. My grandmother found him lying in a ditch with a rope around his neck. He had broken his leg at some point, and had not had any treatment for it. It had healed wrong, so now Bubba walks on three legs, but he was trained in obedience and was shown a lot of love and care throughout all the years he has lived with my grandparents.

If you love them and take care of them, pit bulls can be very sweet dogs and great companions.<sup>12</sup>

## Grading Simplified

“Yes,” someone says, “but how does one actually grade such an essay?” The simplest way is by scoring five qualities with perhaps 10 points each.

**Unity:** Does every part of the essay support the thesis statement? Do any words, sentences, or paragraphs drift off the opinion that the writer is trying to prove to a specific reader?

**Support:** Does each paragraph contain clear explanation and actual evidence from real life—anecdotal, statistical, etc.?

**Organization:** Does each point/paragraph come exactly where it should to lead the reader along an effective train of thought? Does every interior paragraph begin with a transition that explains why that point needs to come where it does? (“Next,” or “Then we have,” or “Lastly” don’t do that, since an expository essay is seldom chronological. Phrases like “More importantly,” “Even more surprising,” or “As a result,” give reasons for paragraph placement and are better transitions.) However, we should caution students that transitions are ideas, not words. The above student essay has good organization even though its transitions use none of those recommended phrases.

**Style:** Is the wording vivid, clear, and above all, succinct?

**Mechanics:** Are grammar, spelling, and punctuation correct?

Formula essays can be powerful learning tools from grade school through college, making students think more clearly while they learn how to earn high grades in writing assignments across the curriculum. Teachers need to encourage their use. ✍



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3. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
4. Michel de Montaigne, “On the Affection of Fathers for Their Children” in *Essays*, John M. Cohen, trans. (New York: Penguin, 1993), p. 137.
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7. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III.i.
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11. Pirie, *Reshaping High School English*, op cit., p. 90.
12. Katelyn Hassencahl, quoted by permission.