

Slay the Monster! Replacing Form-First Pedagogy with Effective Writing Instruction

Following a discussion of form-first instruction and CCSS assessments, this article provides concrete suggestions for teaching authentic writing processes.

Formula does not equal form—one is static, the other dynamic.

—Thomas Newkirk, *Minds Made for Stories: How We Really Read and Write Informational and Persuasive Texts*

How many of you,” I asked my students, “were taught to write the five-paragraph essay in high school?” Every student in the class raised a hand.

I’m teaching the English Methods class in our credential program, and I knew from entries in my students’ Writer’s Reader’s Notebooks (Rief) that they were struggling with the articles I assigned about the five-paragraph essay. Some were shocked to learn of the long-term instructional damage that focusing on form before attending to the interplay among purpose, audience, and content has on developing writers (Durst; Pirie; Tremmel). Such a form-first instructional focus is not “scaffolding” as many claim, but a leftover from the current-traditional rhetoric of the mid-nineteenth century. Form-first instruction severely misrepresents composing’s complex, messy, recursive nature (Hillocks). This oversimplification by form-first instruction gets in the way of enabling students to develop considerations of audience and purpose that drive authentic content choices and arrangements. Form-first instruction gets in the way of teaching students *how* to write.

In her wonderful monster cartoon, Sandra Boynton perfectly captures and parodies the five-paragraph theme, characterizing its parts as having “lots of teeth but no bite” or being “somewhat limp and drawn out.” Its development contains “some minor points” that are “mostly bulk.” This

is a monster in which form dominates, and content is considered only marginally. Indeed, form’s imposing dominance makes this monster particularly dangerous and especially difficult to vanquish.

“And how many of you are struggling to accept the advice to *not* teach the five-paragraph essay?” Again, every student raised a hand. I’ve seen this response before. I understand students’ difficulty changing a belief that is counter to years of explicit instruction in high school, often from teachers they cherished. Many students credit this instruction with teaching them to write. Many credit these teachers with inspiring them to become English teachers. However, as a writer, as a National Writing Project Teacher Consultant since 1980, and as director of a California Writing Project site, I am passionate about helping these apprenticing teachers understand the constraints that teaching predetermined forms impose on writing development.

“Help me understand your confusions,” I said. “What are your questions?”

Julian raised his hand. “What I read in the articles made sense. Especially the Brannon article about a ‘deficit’ model of instruction. But I don’t know what to replace the five-paragraph essay with. What do I teach instead? How do I teach paragraphing? And topic sentences?”

I nodded.

Another young woman sat, scowling, her arms crossed tightly across her chest. “What about you,

Anahid? I can see you are having trouble with this.” I knew her teaching situation was different from that of the others. She had been hired recently to fill in for a teacher who left mid-semester. She was in the trenches and, she confessed to me, a bit overwhelmed.

“I want to believe this,” she admitted. “But it runs counter to everything my school and my department are doing. It’s against everything they are asking me to do. We are all teaching the five-paragraph essay to help students get ready for the district benchmark exams and for the Smarter Balanced tests in May.”

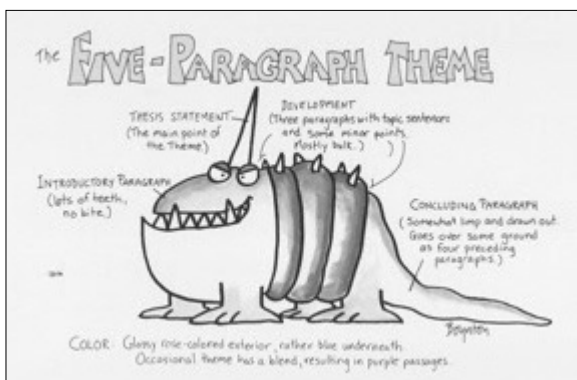
Those of us working to replace the form-first approach to writing instruction with more authentic teaching face two primary obstacles: undoing traditional beliefs and habits, and offering readily adopted, effective replacements for those habits. Teaching the five-paragraph essay is a deeply entrenched instructional habit, repeated unquestioningly across the nation. Ironically, few teachers notice that the five-paragraph form they require from students has no connection to the rich variety of forms found in their pleasure reading. The five-paragraph essay is a school genre with no relationship to real (published) writing.

For years the five-paragraph essay (or closely related forms advocating for a thesis in the first paragraph, a topic sentence in every paragraph, or a certain number of sentences in each paragraph, each with a prescribed function) “worked” decently on state exams and even on the SAT. Indeed, the training is so embedded in instructional practice that English department colleagues at my university describe receiving eight-page papers with only five paragraphs from writers who don’t understand paragraphing as

punctuation—a tool to help readers anticipate shifts and developments in an unfolding line of thought. These students simply didn’t know they were *allowed* to have more than five paragraphs in a college paper.

This is the context that drives the teachers and administration in Anahid’s school to continue promoting form-first writing instruction. It is the context that leads Julian and his classmates to wonder what instruction is available as replacement. It is, by far, the more difficult obstacle to address because it is so deeply embedded in teacher lore (North) and in 125 years of current-traditional rhetoric’s emphasis on theme writing (and correcting) as an instructional tool. Times have changed, however. As Michael W. Smith, Jeffrey D. Wilhelm, and James Fredricksen point out, the new standards “emphasize writing convincing arguments about issues that matter, clear and comprehensive informational texts that can do meaningful work in the world, and compelling narratives that foster an understanding of oneself, others and the world” (45). The Common Core State Standards are eloquently silent about the genres such writing might take, purposefully labeling argument, informational writing, and narrative as “text types” to differentiate these text types from genres. Nothing in the language of the standards promotes the five-paragraph “pseudogenre” (Pirie 75) as it is currently taught from grade school on.

Smarter Balanced’s released questions, and particularly the performance tasks, assess students’ abilities to produce texts in multiple genres using information gleaned from multiple readings. In one example, third graders read two articles about astronauts and then write a magazine article about life in space. Eighth graders read four sources about the penny and write an argumentative essay for a history class webpage. In an eleventh-grade example, students are asked to write an argumentative essay to the school board regarding potential inclusion of a financial literacy course in the curriculum. In another, they must assume the role of a congressional chief of staff and provide an argumentative report to a congresswoman regarding nuclear power. Each task asks student writers to imagine the characteristics of a particular genre and produce a suitable written response. The five-paragraph essay format simply doesn’t fit the generic demands of a magazine article, a webpage argument, an argumentative essay for a school board, or a congressional report.



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PAARC’s released questions are similar, asking third graders to write a magazine article based on their reading and eighth graders to compose an analysis of two characters based on reading excerpts. (Students are explicitly coached that their response does not need to compare and contrast the two characters.) For grade 11, PAARC’s sample asks students to compose an argumentative essay on the concepts of freedom and independence using evidence from three sources. This is a complex task requiring students to define the two concepts and synthesize source material effectively. For Smarter Balanced and PAARC assessments, the five-paragraph essay form is neither nuanced nor flexible enough to provide an effective container for the complex presentation of ideas required by the exams.

The second obstacle, embedded in Julian’s question about the instruction that should supplant teaching five-paragraph themes, is easy enough to answer but has been difficult to implement. Effective writing instruction takes time. Donald Graves advocated a minimum of “four days out of five” (104) for writing, and even went so far as to suggest that teachers who give students only one day each week to write shouldn’t teach writing at all because

they “encourage bad habits . . . and [students] will only learn to dislike writing” (104). Currently, few teachers have the curricular freedom to offer students such generous writing time. Previous standards nationwide ignored writing and focused instructional time and attention on the content students would encounter on state tests. The Common

Core, however, emphasizes providing students with rich, integrated literacy instruction across all disciplines. Both PAARC and Smarter Balanced assessments provide students with all necessary content to respond to the literacy portions of the exams. These shifts demand that we refocus our curriculum and instruction to provide students with the time needed to read and write extensively to develop as competent and effective readers and writers.

Writing Anchor Standard 10 states that students at all grade levels should “write routinely over extended time frames (time for research,

reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.” The key language here is “write *routinely*” and “for *a range* of tasks, purposes, and audiences.” If students are going to learn to write well, schools and teachers simply have to find ways to provide routine writing time and tasks that approximate the multiple purposes that drive writers to compose. Teachers will have to abandon efficiency—providing a one-size-fits-all format for writing assignments—and, instead, provide real writing instruction. There is no “quick fix” for teaching writing. Developing writers need multiple experiences. They need opportunities to work through dead ends, unproductive approaches, and ineffective strategies. Developing writers (and their teachers) need to accept the messiness of writing to develop the “robust conceptual and strategic knowledge that transfers to new composing situations” (Smith, Wilhelm, and Fredricksen 45).

Once teachers and their developing writers have appropriate time, what alternatives are there to form-first writing instruction? Fortunately, we know of proven instructional foci that help writers learn how to discover and shape material for a clear and interesting presentation to readers. The remainder of this article provides answers to Julian’s concerns about the instruction he and his classmates should provide students.

Teach Purpose, Audience, and Context

Teach developing writers to consider what they hope to accomplish with a piece of writing (their purpose). Teach them to envision a specific audience—an individual or a known group who will receive their writing. Help them understand how their piece will be situated. How does it fit with what others have said or written? Why is it useful or timely? Writing formulas don’t work well precisely because the rhetorical situation—purpose, audience, and context—changes with every writing task. Teaching audience, purpose, and context well means creating invitations for writing that envision audiences beyond the teacher-as-grader (Applebee). At the least, position students so they are writing to one another, perhaps in a workshop setting. Teach students how to develop their own topics when practical. For example, ask students to write

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a critical essay on anything they have not yet discussed in class about whatever text they have just finished. Classmates become the first audience for these essays. Writing tasks developed using RAFT (role, audience, format, topic) provide opportunities for students to assume a rich variety of rhetorical roles, experiment with diverse genres, and envision a range of different audiences that might read their work. Both Smarter Balanced and PAARC appear to use RAFT to develop the prompts for their writing assessments.

Teach Invention Strategies

Much student writing, particularly in middle school and high school when students must write about course content, is thin because the writers don't have much to say. They don't know enough or haven't thought enough about their subject. Brainstorming is often the invention strategy of choice, but its use, as commonly applied, assumes that writers already know everything they will write about and are simply capturing existing thinking. We

know, however, that writing can develop thinking and expand understandings. Invention heuristics offer writers systematic ways to explore a subject, thereby expanding the material they have available for their projects. Directions for Aristotle's topoi, Kenneth Burke's pentad, Berke's 20 questions, and Cowan and Cowan's cubing are all readily accessible with a Google search, as are directions for mind-mapping and samples of graphic organizers. Teach these tools. Then invite students to choose the most appropriate while developing and shaping content.

Teach Text Structures

Text structures are the ways in which chunks of meaning are logically organized and linked together. These are not the three "text types" (argument, exposition, and narrative) called for by the Common Core. Text structures are used within many genres. Understanding these organizational structures and their applications enables developing writers to shape and present their thoughts in reader-friendly ways. See Figure 1 for a list of possibilities.

FIGURE 1. Text Structures

Purpose	Text Structure(s)	Organizing Principle(s)
To relate an event	Narration	Chronology (time)
To describe a person, a place, or a tangible thing	Description	Space (think of a movie camera on a dolly: right to left, left to right; top to bottom, bottom to top; near to far, far to near)
To explore and explain something, how it works, how it's put together, or what it's like (e.g., a text, a methodology, a belief, a protocol, an event, an idea, a situation, a behavior, etc.)	Analysis (exposition)	Enumeration (listing) Classification (grouping similar items together) Parts to the whole (relationships among the parts and how each contributes to the unique attributes of the whole) Exemplification Processes Causes and Effects Problem and Solution Comparison/Contrast Definition (classify and differentiate)
To persuade, convince, argue for something	Argument and Persuasion (mixed structures)	Claim (and sometimes counterclaims) and evidence Graff and Berkenstein's <i>They Say, I Say</i>

Teach Genres

Even kindergartners can distinguish between a story and a poem. Use student reading to teach genres and their characteristics. No matter what texts you are using, teach students to use the proper names: *article, song, limerick, epic poem, short story, memoir, film, fable, comedy, opera, portrait, interior monologue, graphic novel, soap opera, argument essay, folk tale, lyric poem, show tune, movie, thank-you note, romance, play, manga, animation, biography, poster, dramatic monologue, spiritual, speech, tall tale, autobiography, slapstick, mystery, rap, fairy tale, parody, anime, business letter, fantasy, docudrama, ghost story, historical novel, saga, analytical essay, sonnet, tragedy*. Teaching the appropriate nomenclature prevents the unfortunate, but common, student practice of referring to every written text as a “story” written by the committee “they” (“In ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,’ they say . . .” for example). Genre taxonomy is untidy, but attention to the conventions and characteristics of various genres provides models students can use to expand their own repertoire of written forms.

Teach Revision

Teach students the difference between revision (re-seeing, rethinking a piece globally) and editing (attending to word and sentence-level issues). Published authors know that revision is the heart of producing effective writing. For many writers, revision is more engaging than initial drafting because they

have something concrete to work with, something to re-imagine, something to make better. Developing writers don’t know this. They think of revising as a chore assigned because they aren’t good writers and can’t get their writing right the first time. Help students understand Linda Flower’s terms “writer-based prose”

and “reader-based prose” as ways to conceptualize revision and their work with a piece. Make revision an integral part of the production process that occurs after writers have received feedback on their work, but before their work is “published” (or turned in for a grade). Teach students to look at both content and structure. Teach them to ask questions of their

work: What else will a reader need to know? Do I need this section? Are the ideas in the best order? Are the connections between the chunks clear? Logical? Reasonable? Teach four key revision strategies (rearranging, adding, subtracting, and substituting) as ways to answer these questions. As they expand their revision skills, developing writers often find it easier to revise a classmates’ work than their own. Authors can then choose whether to integrate their partner’s suggestions, modify them, or ignore them deliberately.

Teach Writer’s Craft

Writer’s craft is the *art* of writing. It is how writers use language intentionally for effect. Craft lifts writing from the mundane to the aesthetically pleasing. In English classes, the texts we teach have value beyond a plot line or a message; our selected authors delight us because they use language in fresh and surprising ways. Help students notice the language choices authors make. (This is the close reading championed by the Common Core.) Use the texts students are reading as mentor texts to introduce craft moves, and invite students to emulate those moves (Fletcher; Noden).

Holistic crafting looks at the writing as a whole. It encompasses experimenting with multiple possibilities before choosing an effective title, crafting a lead, or creating a decisive ending that moves the reader beyond summary (Noden 162–72; Zinsser 59–74). Teach students to develop multiple titles for a piece, making a final selection only when the piece is nearly finished. Alternately, have students suggest multiple titles for a classmate’s writing. Authors can choose their own or one suggested by others. Teach common strategies for developing effective leads: begin with a question, an interesting anecdote, or a startling fact. Use dialogue or a quotation. Compare and contrast key elements.

Strong endings are difficult to write and hard to teach, but they are more than mere summary. Turn once again to published authors and examine effective endings for narration, exposition, and argument as models. Sometimes authors turn back to language from the title or the lead to provide satisfactory closure. Sometimes an ending gives readers something new to think about, or an action they might take. Sometimes a piece ends with

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FIGURE 2. Craft Strategies

Craft Focus	Lesson Suggestions
Wordiness (Cutting Clutter)	Eliminate redundancy (e.g., “the color red” or “past history”). Eliminate “very.” Substitute adjectives or adverbs for prepositional phrases. Use simple past and present verb tenses if possible. Consider replacing forms of “to be” (is, am, are, was, were, be, been, being) with action verbs. Eliminate unnecessary direct articles (“the,” “a,” “an”).
Developing Emphasis	Use parallel grammatical and sentence structures. Combine sentences for effect. Use periodic or loose sentences for emphasis. Vary sentence length for emphasis. Use an occasional sentence fragment for emphasis. Use placement (word or sentence) for emphasis. Use grammatical patterns for emphasis.
Show, Don’t Tell.	Avoid abstractions. Select telling, descriptive details. Use direct quotations or dialogue. Manipulate time: “explode a moment” or “shrink a century” (Gilmore). Use simile and metaphor to make the familiar specific or the unfamiliar accessible.
Rhythm and Sound for Effect	Use punctuation (paragraphing, ellipses, dash, parentheses, colon) for emphasis or to slow a reader. Use “word music” (Brown and Glass 155) such as alliteration and onomatopoeia.

a suggestion, advice, or even a question. A piece might end with what the writer learned or wonders about the future. Few effective endings merely summarize what the writer has already said, especially if the piece is short.

At first, students may find it easier to apply word- or sentence-level craft moves than to consider

global issues in their writing. Craft moves provide material for minilessons offered through the year, beginning with the lessons easiest to apply. Teaching specific craft lessons helps students develop a sense of control as their editing focus becomes concrete. Recognizing their language choices opens students to language possibilities and their impact on readers. Learning to craft language takes developing writers beyond school writing, empowering them to see themselves as authors and motivating them to see their work as authentic and important. Figure 2 provides a chart of some atomistic craft strategies that are easily taught and readily applied.

Sometimes commonsense is nonsense. Now is the time to stop propagating the myth that form-first writing instruction—teaching the five-paragraph essay—provides scaffolding for developing writers. This is somewhat like continuing to teach students that the world is flat because we fear revealing the world as a globe. Now is the time to stop teaching students that the five-paragraph essay is an appropriate container for whatever ideas they want to express. It is time we turned, instead, to our well-researched and time-tested arsenal of effective instructional strategies and slay that hideous five-paragraph monster, once and for all. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Students sometimes have trouble understanding the difference between the global issues of revision and the local ones of editing. In this lesson plan from ReadWriteThink.org, after reading several fractured fairy tales, students make a list of the ways the original stories have been revised—changed or altered, not just “corrected”—to begin building a definition of global revision. After students have written a “revised” story of their own, they revise again, focusing more on audience but still paying attention to ideas, organization, and voice. During another session, students look at editing as a way to polish writing, establishing a definition of revision as a multilevel process. <http://bit.ly/1LsQMom>