

So what's wrong with a five-paragraph theme? In this essay, Elizabeth Rorschach argues that the problem isn't the number of paragraphs but that "the preset format lulls students into a non-thinking automaticity" and that teachers obsessed by form become fellow conspirators in the triumph of form over content.

The Five-Paragraph Theme Redux

ELIZABETH RORSCHACH

In March 1985 a colleague came into our college English as a Second Language (ESL) program's office carrying that day's *New York Times* and declared, "I've found one! After all these years of looking, I've finally found one!" On the Op-Ed page, she had spotted that monolith of writing instruction, the five-paragraph theme. Seventeen years later I don't remember the article's topic or the name on the byline, but I vividly remember that moment—an intelligent teacher thrilled at having found a real-life example of what she had been teaching for so many years.

Even now the five-paragraph theme holds a place in composition instruction. Glenda Moss, in her *Quarterly* article "The Five-Paragraph Theme" (2002), worries that teaching this form not only limits secondary school students' writing repertoire, but also fails to prepare them for the demands of college writing. She calls the form a "straitjacket" and places the blame for its persistence in writing pedagogy on statewide standards and

exams. Her concern about how well this instructional tool prepares high school students for college assumes a more complex level of writing at college. Perhaps once students have left freshman writing courses, they do receive assignments that challenge them to go beyond formulaic writing. But there's not much evidence they will be prepared to complete such challenging assignments by anything that goes on in their college writing classes. I have found that the standardized writing exams used as exit and graduation requirements in college drive writing instruction and encourage teachers to focus on format and correctness, with little concern for content.

The City University of New York (CUNY), where I began teaching in 1984, has required entering students to pass reading, writing, and math skills tests since the 1970s. Even with a recent major revision of the writing exam, the essay format has remained the same—a structure so limited and predictable that as I read these essays for placement, I find introductory para-

graphs and supporting details repeating themselves almost verbatim through dozens of compositions. Clearly, instructors in workshops designed to help these students pass the entrance exams have discovered what they consider to be a successful formula and teach it to the students. It's as though the exam were an initiation rite, with set incantations to be memorized and recited for the ceremony. Students who fail this entrance exam take remedial writing courses until they can write a passing essay (or drop out); once they pass, they take freshman composition courses and prepare for the rising-junior exam, another composition with its own special formulas.

So, even in college, the straitjacketing continues. Just a year ago, a student in my world literature class asked me how many paragraphs I required for written assignments. "Well, Marina, I don't have any minimum or maximum number of paragraphs," I told her. "I just want to learn how you're responding to and understanding what we read."

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Marina's stunned silence, and her drafts of, predictably, exactly five paragraphs, told me she had grown to rely on the security offered by a preset structure, one she had mastered over years of schooling. It's difficult to argue against the apparent success of a form that pleases so many teachers and students in its simplicity and straightforwardness. And,

I have to admit, Marina's papers were good and she earned a B in the course.

Yet, when I carefully read my students' essays for depth of content, I find myself terribly disap-

pointed by how shallow and un-thought-out most of the five-paragraph essays are.

My dissertation, a case-study of three college ESL students in a remedial writing course, revealed to me the shallowness of the five-paragraph theme and its inadequacy as an instructional tool. The three women I studied had failed the CUNY Writing Assessment Test (WAT) and been placed in a course designed to teach them the skills needed to pass the WAT and move on to freshman composition. I had initially set out to examine the three students' sense of audience as they revised but found myself sidetracked by what actually impelled their revisions. Their choices as writers were based on satisfying structural requirements outlined by their teachers (their audience and the college's gatekeepers). Sadly these students had no commitment to their own ideas, even though they were free to select their topics (from within larger categories, e.g., "review a movie you saw recently" or "describe a day with your friends").

These students ended up producing essays that were disjointed, disconnected, unexplored, and weak, with minimal

revision between drafts, and yet the essays received praise and high grades from teachers who seemed to value only adherence to form. One student, Sopanan, a young woman from Thailand who had been in the United States about two years, provides an example of this unthoughtful writing. Her teacher had asked the class to

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brainstorm about different kinds of dreams and then, using the ideas on the blackboard, to write an essay about dreams, using an organizing structure he outlined for them.

Sopanan's first draft for this assignment follows (reproduced with her errors):

Dreams

There are many kinds of dreams, American Dream, dream about your ambition, day dream, and night dream. I believe that dream influences the emotion to be hopeful, hopeless, and amusing.

When I was in my country, I didn't understand why people talked about American Dream. When I came here I realized the meaning of this word. People come from other countries and do business here. They earn lots of money and spend money for everything they want. They spend their lives in the way they couldn't do or couldn't be in their countries. Therefore American Dream has the power to influence people to work or

study harder in order to reach their goals.

Dream about ambition, I have a dream about my ambition. I'm studying the Major of Accounting. I hope I will be an accountant in the near future. I hope my dream will come true. The dream of my ambition pull me to come to school especially in the eight o'clock class even I don't like to get up early in the Winter Quarter.

Day and night dreams make me amusing or sometimes make me feel upset. If I had bad dream, I felt upset. It was warning me to do everythings careful in that day. Sometimes I have day dream. Even my eyes opened, my mind went somewheres. When my mind came back, it made me amusing.

I believe that any kind of dreams has the power to influence our lives. It gives the emotion of hopeful, hopeless, and amusing.

(Sopanan's revision of this paper included no substantive changes or deletions, and only a few changes in word choice and punctuation.)

Sopanan's first paragraph introduces the different types of dreams as well as a thesis that dreams influence the emotions. It's a typical introduction for a five-paragraph theme; it sets up the examples and order of presentation for the following paragraphs without any clues as to why the writer is writing this particular essay or these particular examples in this particular order. Throughout the essay, Sopanan briefly touches on the connec-

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tion between dreams and emotions in her body paragraphs, but without any real analysis of this connection.

As predicted by Sopanan's first paragraph, the second one is about the American dream. It's in this paragraph that she introduces personal experience ("When I was in my country"), a rhetorical device that allows her to step back in time and retrace her growing understanding of the American dream. The implication in this paragraph is that her own experience of immigrating to the United States has helped her understand why others would be drawn here. Her examples of the American dream (earning lots of money, being able to buy whatever one wants) may not match her own experiences, but that's easy to overlook for the moment. The implied subtext of real personal experience draws us in and promises an insider's view of the immigrant experience.

The third paragraph, following the order predicted in the introduction, is about ambitions, and Sopanan again brings in personal experience to illustrate her point that a person's ambitions can inspire him to make sacrifices. But Sopanan misses an ideal opportunity to make a connection between the American dream and her own ambitions, between her reasons for coming to this country and how she works here to fulfill her dreams. The prefab structure lures Sopanan into thinking that she is writing an essay by filling in the blanks, while we, the readers, are left with a series of unconnected vignettes. It's a bit like watching a train pass: each window reveals a different person, with no real connection between them; they're simply

held in place by the structure of the train, and shifting their seats would have no effect whatsoever on the contents of the train or its effect on the viewer.

In the fourth paragraph, Sopanan addresses both day and night dreams. As with the previous two paragraphs, she uses personal experiences as examples,

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although with no actual details to support her ideas about how dreams influence the emotions. The final paragraph summarizes all that she has said so far and reiterates the thesis from the introduction.

This essay is doubly disappointing not just because of the writer's missed opportunity to connect the American dream with her own effort to achieve that dream, but also because she never really explores the connection between dreams and emotions; she never develops her thesis. She quickly skims over her ideas, believing that sentences such as "If I had had bad dream, I felt upset" or "Sometimes I have day dream" constitute supporting details. Ironically, in our conference about this paper, Sopanan explained to me that she wasn't thinking about herself at all when writing about the American dream, and the phrase "When I was in my country" was, in fact, just a ploy to add more words to the essay. Her sense of the American dream had come from watching the Al Pacino movie *Scarface* after she had already been in the United States for

several months. It's a shame that the only method she could think of to lengthen her essay was to misrepresent her ideas; her teacher had given her no other options for developing her thesis.

The teacher made no comments on Sopanan's draft that pointed to any gaps in content, and Sopanan herself was satisfied she had met the requirements of the assignment. She explained to me, "I think that this is, um, clear enough, so I didn't add more idea, because the topic is not too, too wide, is focus, so I think everything on here." She was thus able

to focus on what she perceived to be her main problem, her grammatical errors, while the more critical problems with content were left unaddressed.

Sopanan was not at all committed to the content of the paper and was working instead to "write a passing essay" by following the teacher's instructions as closely as possible. In other words, she was doing a "dummy run," as Britton et al. (1979) call this type of writing, and she had little to do except fill in the blanks with appropriate examples. If the teacher had posed questions about Sopanan's ideas, or drawn her attention to interesting relationships between her paragraphs, or even just challenged her view of the American dream as being overly mercenary, he could have pushed her beyond dummy-run writing to something not only more real but also more interesting.

The problems that we see in this essay illustrate how some kinds of instruction can do more harm than good by providing the student with the mistaken idea that once she has the organization, her

troubles are over. Sopanan's thinking closes down and becomes superfluous to completing the assignments. Careful thought might even get in the way of successfully completing the assignment, since it could pull her away from the prescribed format and leave her with the wrong number of paragraphs.

This closing-down effect is distressing. Teachers, intending to help their students write "passing" essays, are actually encouraging students to give up thinking at all. I've known teachers to advise students facing the CUNY WAT that what they actually believe isn't important, that they can make up facts and examples, and that if they make sure their first paragraph has no errors at all, they have a good chance of passing. This is how we end up with generic student essays, compositions so predictable that we don't really need to finish reading them; we know from the first paragraph what the rest of the essay is going to say. This is what gives us "English," to use Macrorie's term, "a language in which fresh truth is almost impossible to express" (1970, 9). There is no "fresh truth" in Sopanan's essay, merely a concatenation of platitudes, with only the barest hint (those early winter mornings) of the writer's real feelings.

I don't wish to argue here that every five-paragraph theme will always be discon-

nected and undeveloped. The problem is not with the structure itself but rather with the false sense of security it provides teachers and students alike. Others have argued forcefully against the pointlessness of trying to fit ideas into a prefabricated format, what Lil Brannon calls the "muffin tin" view of writing (see Berthoff 1981, Britton 1970, Knoblauch and Brannon 1984, and Kutz et al. 1993). Teachers I've spoken to, mentored, or taught have nearly all reported that the five-paragraph structure is easy to master and gives their students one less thing to worry about. As one high school English teacher I know recently wrote,

I give [my students] a lot of models for writing and a lot of formulas for the less adept writers to help them get their sea legs. The formulas help them get over their fears of the form and focus instead on the content (which is why I am a huge advocate of the five-paragraph essay with thesis statement, topic sentences, and main points).

My objection here is with the initial assumptions: 1) that teaching the five-paragraph theme—or any other structure—is teaching writing, and 2) that "inept" writers are the ones most in need of mastering a simple structural framework. Any prefabricated structure, with any number of paragraphs, still leaves unaddressed the larger issue of where the "content" comes from that goes into these paragraphs. How do we help our students—in college as well as high school—discover what they think, with opportunities to explore complex ideas and delve into their experiences in and with the world? How do we help our students see how writing can help them construct meaning if the formulas we provide

prevent them from doing their own structuring?

Glenda Moss is right to wonder how standards affect instruction and how instruction affects students' concepts of the act of writing. The standards/place-ment essays/exit requirements force teachers and students into a limited view of what good writing entails; preset structures give students a false sense of mastery and make the teachers' jobs easier (one less thing to have to comment on). I've heard many teachers, like the one quoted above, argue that using the five-paragraph structure "lets" students focus on their ideas, yet "focus on ideas" is precisely what Sopanan and the other students in my research did not do. Their teachers never seemed to make ideas a priority, through instruction or comments on drafts.

What I find most objectionable is the view of writing that this shortcut engenders. The preset format lulls students into a nonthinking automaticity. It causes a closing down of the natural human tendency to draw connections and see patterns and relationships in our experiences. Sopanan missed the obvious connections between her personal dreams and the so-called American dream because making connections was not a function of writing that she had been taught.

I would argue also that in this process her teacher's thinking also closed down, making it possible for him to see Sopanan's essay as a good discussion of the topic of dreams. When teachers' attention is focused on grammar and structure, because the exams they're preparing their students to take seem to value only grammar and structure, they cease to be

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real readers who need to be engaged by interesting ideas. Who but a remedial writing teacher could be satisfied with the content of Sopanan's essay?

This "closing-down effect" results in students not using writing to make sense of the world or to trace the routes of their ideas. It also results in teachers failing to read their students' work honestly, looking only for the easy surface features that they can check off a list of "criteria for good writing." The five-paragraph theme is, therefore, guilty of more than just straightjacketing our students when they write; this structure is responsible for teachers forgetting how to read and for students missing opportunities to think. They won't use writing to discover for themselves, and reveal to us, fresh truths.

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