

The Ill Effects of the Five Paragraph Theme

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In her 1973 poem, “A Work of Artifice,” Marge Piercy considers the life of a bonsai tree that “could have grown eighty feet tall / on the side of a mountain” (3–4) but is, instead, “carefully pruned” to “nine inches high” (7–8). The gardener, who controls the growth of the tree, “croons / . . . how lucky, little tree, / to have a pot to grow in” (11–16). Piercy’s extended metaphor satirically compares the tree to a woman, the gardener to a representative of patriarchal society, and the pot to curlers, bound feet, and other methods by which society systematically judges and controls women. Had Piercy been alluding to the teaching of high

school composition, she might have drawn parallels between the bonsai tree and the student writer, the gardener and the English teacher, the pot and the lock-step five paragraph theme (FPT). It is my contention that teachers of the five paragraph theme, like the representatives of patriarchal society, have become complacent in their acceptance of a tool that purports to nurture but, in fact, stunts the growth of human minds.

In the last ten years, *English Journal* has published numerous articles on composition instruction, but only two specifically address the five paragraph theme. In “Breaking the Five Paragraph Theme Barrier,” university professor Thomas Nunnally is critical of students’ reliance on the FPT, which he says has become a “national phenomenon,” but concludes that if “a class’s potential for improvement makes it impossible to accomplish more than teaching the barebones FPT, so be it” (68, 71). This kind of statement, which reinforces the status quo of high school composition instruction, is dangerous. In “Articulation and Student Voices,” D. R. Randsell and Gregory Glau report findings from a survey of first-year college composition students who recommend that their high school English teachers quit “driving the 5-paragraph thing

into our brains” and that “there must be more [types of essays] taught” (19).

As a teacher of English at a private secondary school, I have reflected critically on the five paragraph theme and the way in which this organizational format has come to be the standard for high school essay assignments. This past year I realized just how entrenched the FPT is in student minds. When a senior girl assigned to write a comparative analysis of two novels in seven-to-nine pages asked anxiously, “But how can I fit seven pages into five paragraphs?” a red flag went up. In my student’s mind, the only kind of writing considered “good,” the only kind of essay that would earn an “A” from the teacher, *must* have a thesis with exactly three points, no more, no less. As my student’s query shocked me into realizing that one organizational format was being adopted wholesale by students, it also prompted me to reflect on how I design assignments and what I consider to be genuine growth in student writing. Do I consider a master of the five paragraph form a proficient writer, prepared for the demands of college? How has my past reliance on the FPT shaped my students’ and my own views of writing? Has all my concern about the development of critical thinking been a lot of lip service? In this

article, I examine the effects of the FPT on student learning and the conflict between my enforcement of the five paragraph theme and my conviction that writing is a rhetorical process.

Thomas Nunnally's definition of the five paragraph theme is useful here to establish common ground:

As it is usually taught, the FPT requires (1) an introductory paragraph moving from a generality to an explicit thesis statement and announcement of three points in support of that thesis, (2) three middle paragraphs, each of which begins with a topic sentence restating one of the major ideas supporting the thesis and then develops the topic sentence (with a minimum of three sentences in most models), and (3) a concluding paragraph restating the thesis and points. (67)

In favor of this format, Nunnally points out that "the explicitness of the FPT—the discreteness of its parts and their functions—makes it practical to teach as well as eminently gradable" (68)—perhaps one of the reasons the FPT has become a "national phenomenon." On the other hand, Nunnally acknowledges the limitations of the form for anyone beyond Basic Writing at the college level, saying that the internalization of the FPT encourages writers to produce "bland but planned essays" (69). Nunnally even goes so far as to say that one student's "desire to fit the content of her paper into three neat little boxes" had "distorted" the purpose of the essay (70). By analyzing student essays I, too, find that the rigidity of the five paragraph theme actually dissuades students from practicing the rhetorical analysis necessary for them to become critical thinkers.

In my analysis of student texts, I have examined how the thesis statements of a particular five paragraph theme assignment reflect or do not reflect critical thought. For this article, I asked senior English students to do a comparative analysis of three texts—*The Odyssey*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and *Dracula*—and to construct a controversial thesis statement that fits the three-pronged format (a daunting task!). My suggestion to them was to find one shared character trait and examine its causes or effects in each of the three books. What many of them came up with did satisfy the requirements of the three-pronged thesis. The following is one example: "In all three books, protagonists suffer from a permanent character flaw of excessive pride which causes them to be separated from loved ones, closed to new ideas, and absorbed in self-pity." Although

this thesis follows the FPT format, it produces little analytical development within the body of the essay. The student spends the majority of each paragraph proving merely that the characters are, for example, separated from loved ones, rather than examining how pride causes them to become this way or why some consider a protagonist's separation from family a detriment to his/her status as a hero. The student touches on a more interesting train of thought at one point in the paper, suggesting that characters' insecurities ironically cause them to behave in a proud and defensive manner. The student does not expand on this idea, however, because it does not fit within the neat, prescribed formula of her thesis, which focuses only on the effects and not the causes of pride. Furthermore, had the student tried to develop this idea as her thesis, she may have found that insecurities cause only some characters to behave proudly. Moreover, she may have had a difficult time producing three distinct but equal causes of proud behavior. The result of my analysis of this essay (a valiant effort by my student) suggests to me that the thesis requirement of three separate but equal points hinders my student's thought process as she writes.

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Other student writing samples carry seeds of critical thought that are never allowed to grow. In one written response to the same assignment, a student offers a vague thesis with book titles as points: "In *The Odyssey*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and *Dracula*, the role of women within the novels is similar." Here the three-pronged thesis leads the student into a restatement of plot. Early in the introduction, however, the student says something that

she does not explore anywhere else in the paper: “Each female protagonist shows a sense of strength which was not apparent in the presence of the men.” Inherent in this statement is a feminist critique. Had the student developed this line of thought in prewriting she may have been able to explore her own feelings as a woman in a male-dominated society and could have looked more deeply into the workings of patriarchy in each of the three books. She may not, however, have been able to divide her strong, central idea into three discrete points. Here again, the FPT’s emphasis on organization over content squelches complex ideas that do not fit neatly into three boxes. Students’ mere awareness that they must mold a topic to the FPT style inhibits their learning.

By doing textual analysis of student work, I have come to realize that my primary objection to the five paragraph theme is its tendency to stunt students’ critical thinking abilities. Moreover, I have found the essays that best fulfill format requirements often turn out to be neatly packaged but intellectually vapid. A 1992 University of Hawaii study of student responses to writing assignments, including the FPT, reports similar findings:

In structuring their arguments, [student writers] all wanted to exceed formulaic limits, but their teacher would allow no deviation. Clearly, whatever their instructor’s intentions, these students were discovering thoughts and feelings through composing. And their discovery experiences proved incompatible with the prescribed essay structure. So the students left the writing experience with considerable frustration. (Marsella et al. 180)

Marsella et al. also conclude that students only challenge their own beliefs when “their instructional contexts allow, even encourage, risk-taking” (185). As a teacher assuming a rigid, artificial writing format for my students, I have been limiting their ability to take intellectual risks and discouraging the kind of learning that I believe only writing allows them to do.

Having recognized my error in inculcating students with the FPT, my next question as a composition teacher is this: How do I create writing assignments that encourage risk-taking and mental growth without letting good organizational strategies go by the wayside? The answer is not, of course, to turn to alternative methods of organization that presume to fit every writing situation in the academy. These methods have just as much potential to become “lock-step” as does the five paragraph theme. Rather, the answer is to revisit the pedagogical the-

ory with which I first embarked, starry-eyed, on teaching: that every writing assignment poses a unique rhetorical problem. Viewed as such, any writing assignment requires that writers first determine their purpose and audience. Writers must question themselves as follows: What am I writing about? Why am I writing about this topic? What do I know about this topic and what do I still have to find out? What are my personal feelings on the matter? What effect do I want my writing to have on the reader? What is my reader’s understanding of the issue? What biases or objections should I take into account? These questions are the most challenging ones for any writer and, unfortunately, the ones least often asked of high school students (and of ourselves in creating assignments). With a set “discourse” of writing (e.g., character analysis), a set topic (e.g., Iago),

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a set audience (e.g., the teacher), and a set organizational format (e.g., the five paragraph theme), students have to do very little rhetorical analysis and, as a result, rarely understand the purpose of their papers. As Richard Larson says in his 1992 critique of classes of discourse, high school English teachers too often ask students “to engage in what British educators refer to as a ‘dummy run’: an activity that has no purpose with identified readers but is designed to display the writer’s ability to produce a frozen form” (32). However, if I, as an English teacher, give paper assignments that offer choices of purposes, topics, and audiences, I can prompt students to begin thinking rhetorically. After students have submitted a justification of their choices and answered the rhetorical questions listed above, we can talk as a class about effective methods of organization for sample rhetorical situations.

It is important to acknowledge here to those instructors who are loath to surrender the “practical to teach as well as eminently gradable” FPT (Nunnally 68) that I am not suggesting that we abandon the principles of unity, coherence, and development that the five paragraph theme purports to teach. Rather, I suggest that we continue to teach the essay as a rhetorical form with three units—an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. By treating each of these parts as a rhetorical unit instead of a set number of paragraphs, we can approach student texts as records of their rhetorical problem-solving ability. It is vital that we teach students the purposes that each unit in an essay can serve. The introductory unit of the essay (which may be more than one paragraph, depending on the scope of the rhetorical problem) serves to grab the reader’s attention, establish common ground, and define the problem and perhaps the process undertaken to solve that problem. The thesis (which most likely will occur either at the beginning or the end of the introductory unit—there are good models of both) states the writer’s focus or position on the problem (without sub-points because—as seen in the above discussion—a rigid number of sub-points can inhibit student thought). The body unit of the essay should be an unspecified number of paragraphs, with each paragraph serving one of a variety of purposes: to define terms, to review the literature, to present evidence in favor of the thesis, to analyze that evidence, and to accommodate and/or refute opposing views. Finally, the concluding unit of the essay should serve to reassert the writer’s position, to remind the reader of the importance to him/her of the problem at hand, and to pose questions on the issue that could be addressed by other writers. To help students attain an understanding of the purposes of these rhetorical units and make choices among them, we should analyze and critique papers written by college students in various discourses, articles written by journalists, and essays written by high school students. As Nunnally mentions in his article, doing rhetorical analysis of con-

temporary, professionally-written essays is a good way of giving students choices beyond the FPT (71). Moreover, critiquing these essays effectively helps students to see themselves as critical readers and to understand that the criteria for good writing are subjective and contextual.

In proposing that high school English teachers restructure their writing assignments, I am advocating a view of writing as a rhetorical process. If we accept this view, we cannot possibly continue assigning the five paragraph essay unless we simultaneously teach our students to critique it. Instead of teaching students to memorize a format and then manipulate every teacher-given topic to fit that format, we should ask students to reflect on what format best enables them to voice their concerns and meet the needs of their audience. In doing so, we encourage students to become communicators. If we do any less, we force students to continue as copiers of memorized form, denying them the freedom to think for themselves.

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