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# Against Formulaic Writing

Gabriele Lusser Rico

Actually, writing by formula makes good sense. It is easy to teach, easier to grade, easiest to dispense like a band-aid to make student writing look good—like a paint-by-number product which guarantees immediate success. The five-paragraph essay is to the writing process what the paint-by-numbers kit is to painting. You may get a realistic horse's head or an identifiable landscape, but something is missing: that something is an emerging pattern unique to both writer and content which *e*-volves as writers become *in*-involved in discovering what they want to say and how to say it.

Unlike paint-by-numbers, this process is not crisp and orderly; unlike the five-paragraph essay, for example, in which each paragraph contains a topic sentence and four supporting statements and can be laid out like a math problem to be solved, the organic writing process must be allowed to move through some untidy stages that characterize any creative process:

Chaos and disorder are perhaps the wrong terms for that indeterminate fullness and activity of the inner life. For it is organic, dynamic, full of tension and tendency. . . . It is as if the mind, delivered from the preoccupation with particulars, were given into secure possession of its whole substance and activity. (Brewster Ghiselin, 1955, "Introduction," *The Creative Process*, New York: New American Library, 14)

Rather than acknowledging this indeterminate tension and tendency as natural, we short-circuit the process. Indeed, the five-paragraph essay rewards formulaic writing, and formulaic writing is more often than not dull and lifeless. Not only is it generally boring for the teacher to read, but it is boring to write. The human mind is *not* a

straight thinker. It makes associative leaps, responds to the rhythms and patterns of language, and takes deep pleasure in shaping wholes meaningful to the writing self; for writing is first and foremost an act of self-definition, and the shape it takes is part of that self-defining process.

If we superimpose a formula on this indeterminate process, we will hobble this innate mental capability and block diversity of expression. The standardized shape of the essay cannot be superimposed like a grid into which the writer's thoughts are placed. On the contrary, the thoughts, the reaching for ideas, the searching for words, often *suggest* the shape of the essay to come. Take, for instance, a recent editorial in *Time* magazine by Hugh Sidey (1986, "Cries of the Heart," 128 [Aug. 11]). It is less than half a printed column in length, yet it consists of eleven short paragraphs. Let me quote the first five which set the tone for Sidey's argument that Midwestern farm foreclosures represent "something terribly important in American history, and nobody knows how it is going to come out":\*

We are talking now about the front porches where neighbors in small towns ebb and flow in the summer twilight, murmuring their joys, worries, and loves.

We are talking about young couples who want to marry in the weathered country churches built by their great-grandfathers a century ago—and about their parents who want to be buried there, where the wind whispers always.

We are talking about children and ponies on the rise of the hill, going nowhere and everywhere, beckoned by cumulus crags and a horizon forever.

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\*Excerpts from "Cries of the Heart," copyright 1986, Time Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission from *Time*.

We are talking about kids who want to play full-back with the Tigers or the Bulldogs, just like their uncles did in 1953 when they won the conference.

We are talking about people who want to give birth and grow and love and laugh and die, bonded and sustained by the soil, which is the oldest way of life Americans know.

The farm economic crisis has become a rural crisis, and that has become a cultural crisis unique in our history. It is now beyond bank loans and Government subsidies. It is in people's hearts. . . .

[Here follow five more paragraphs for a total of 11 in a column filling a quarter of a page of *Time*.] (15)

What guides Sidey's writing is not formula but organic language rhythms and intense involvement with his subject, leading to the strong images, the parallel constructions, the recurring patterns. Presented in staccato fashion, they are precisely what spellbinds readers, making them curious to read on, curious to discover what, exactly, it is that "we are talking about."

Formulaic writing has its uses, but its misuse misses the point of what writing is all about: the discovery of what you want to say in the richest pattern possible, unique to each writer and to every newly tackled subject. If, as is increasingly evident, flexibility is the essence of intelligence,

then the rigidity imposed by a formulaic approach will surely produce much unintelligent, dull thinking. M. C. Richards' perceptive observation about human development is surely applicable to the writing process as well, a process that cannot readily fit a formulaic mold:

It is difficult to stand forth in one's growing if one is not permitted to live through the stages of one's unripeness, clumsiness, unreadiness, as well as one's grace and aptitude. (1964, *Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 40)

Let us honor the unique patterns of thought, unripe though they may be. Let writer and writing and thinking and feeling evolve together.

Just as the rewards in painting-by-numbers are quick but superficial, so the rewards of writing by rote give a false sense of having "mastered" a skill that is organic. In so doing, it can kill one of the strongest impulses of the human species: the need to give shape to our experiences, thoughts, and feelings, reflecting our own emerging patterns from within, not those imposed from without.

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