

The Popularity of Formulaic Writing (and Why We Need to Resist)

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Because I am the composition coordinator at a large metropolitan university, I am often asked by high school teachers what “we” (meaning those of us who teach college composition and run writing programs) expect of high school graduates in terms of what they can do as writers. Given the growing political pressure on schools to raise test scores and make sure students graduate from high school prepared to do college-level work, I am busier than ever visiting high schools and talking to teachers about teaching writing. ■ While I enjoy these conversations, I am disturbed that too many teachers are looking for quick

fixes for students’ writing problems. I think, however, that I understand what teachers are up against, particularly in urban schools: resources are scarce, buildings are in disrepair, classrooms are overcrowded, and scores of new teachers are needed; yet too many of these teachers are poorly prepared to teach writing. Those few new teachers who are prepared are eventually defeated by less than desirable classroom conditions. The perceived futility of their teaching tasks leads to early burnout or to a corrosive cynicism. These desperate situations (and they are *desperate*) are ripe for teaching writing as a formula—easy to teach, easy for students to grasp and apply, easy to produce prompt results in raising students’ standardized test scores. But don’t worry, I am not about to rehash diatribes against the five-paragraph essay. In fact, I do not believe formulaic writing is the actual villain in this classroom drama. Rather it is the pedagogical blindness that formulaic writing leads to that disturbs me and that seems to be the real culprit, and it is the seeming advantages that such an approach offers the harried classroom teacher that create the inevitable blind spots. I focus here on the Jane Schaffer Method, not because it is so different from other writing formulas, but because its successes so

well conceal aspects of writing instruction crucial to students’ further development.

The Jane Schaffer Approach to Teaching Writing

Jane Schaffer began publishing her teaching materials in 1995, mainly in San Diego where she teaches. But her approach has rapidly proven attractive to other school districts in southern California, and Schaffer now regularly offers workshops throughout the West and Midwest. In addition to several packets on teaching various works of literature, Schaffer has developed a nine-week, step-by-step method for teaching secondary students how to write the multiparagraph essay. Her writing pedagogy requires some, but not extensive, training; it is accessible and tightly structured; it is applicable to any number of students, regardless of ability; and it promises positive results in a short time.

Schaffer offers writing teachers a formula that she recommends should be adopted, not just by individual teachers, but as the preferred curriculum for all language arts teachers at a given school. In her materials Schaffer identifies and defines key terms

that teachers and students must memorize so that both share a common language when talking about writing. She also provides a visual diagram of the four-paragraph essay she advocates. Each paragraph of the essay follows a specific format, although this is less true of the introduction and conclusion. Body paragraphs are to be arranged in this order:

- Topic sentence
- Concrete detail #1
 - Commentary #1a
 - Commentary #1b
- Concrete detail #2
 - Commentary #2a
 - Commentary #2b
- Concluding sentence

Each body paragraph must have eight sentences. A concrete detail (CD) and two commentary sentences (CM) form a single chunk. A CD is any kind of specific detail such as facts, evidence, examples, proofs, quotations or paraphrase, or plot references. The commentary is the writer's analysis, interpretation, insight, explication, personal reaction, and so forth. The ratio of 1 CD to 2 CMs must always be maintained in the writing students produce so that they internalize this basic pattern. Body paragraphs must have at least two chunks and be a minimum of 100 words. Introductions and conclusions must be 40+ words, with the introduction containing at least three sentences and a thesis somewhere in the first paragraph, while conclusions must contain all commentary and provide a finished feeling to the essay.

Schaffer claims this format replicates what is found in high scoring essays on district-wide tests and AP exams. She says, "We arrived at this figure after counting words in hundreds of essays over the last decade. Essays that earned high grades and teacher praise reflected the 1:2+ proportion" (39). A 1:1 ratio evokes comments like "the student got off to a good start but did not elaborate . . ." A 1:0 ratio in an essay about literature reads like a book report with all facts and no commentary. "If a personal paper has a 1:0 ratio, we call it an 'and then' paper: 'And then I went to mall [sic], and then I bought a pair of jeans. Then I went out with my friends.'" According to Schaffer, teachers are happier with the results when they read essays with at least a 1:2+ ratio (39).

There are other components to the forty-five day Schaffer method such as prewriting activities

that are familiar to most writing teachers and rubrics to guide students in evaluating their own and their peers' essay drafts. Prewriting activities, for instance bubble and spider diagrams, serve as graphic organizers for getting students started in setting up a main idea and finding topic sentences and concrete details. Rubrics reinforce the basic format by having students check for proper ratios between CDs and CMs; having them count the requisite number of words, sentences, and paragraphs; and making sure all parts fit the pattern. Teachers can simply refer to this rubric in responding to student writing, making the task of evaluation much simpler and uniform and less time consuming. Schaffer insists that students not be allowed to advance beyond this basic pattern until they have it down pat. Her packet includes instructions for teaching two types of essays: writing about literature and writing about personal experience. Both types, though, follow the same basic essay pattern and abide by the 1:2 CD to CM ratio.

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Strengths of Schaffer's Formula

Schaffer's method is attractive to teachers because it offers daily lesson plans, worksheets that teachers can copy and put to immediate classroom use, response guides, and a scoring rubric. Equally appealing and important is the common vocabulary that Schaffer insists be used by all teachers and students when referring to writing. Since teachers using her approach teach the same concepts such as *topic sentences*, *thesis*, *concrete detail*, *commentary*, and *chunk*, students receive repetitive and consistent instruction across grade levels about what elements are important in their essays. A common lexicon helps limit the concepts students must learn, and teachers and students can easily talk about an

essay's structure. With teachers and students agreeing on what counts most in an essay, teachers do not have to spend a lot of time writing terminal comments to justify a grade, which is often the purpose of our teacherly remarks on student work (Connors and Lunsford 213–19).

An additional benefit to students is that they learn how to separate fact from opinion. They also learn that evidence taken directly from texts becomes concrete details they must then comment on in at least two sentences. Students consequently learn how to elaborate and develop claims made in their topic sentences, with the intended result that they compose full-bodied paragraphs of at least eight sentences.

The fundamental goal of the Schaffer curriculum guide is obviously to teach students how to write an essay; however, two secondary outcomes are that the writing process is demystified and that it is made “accessible to everyone” (6). Even though Schaffer admits her method is formulaic, she claims that teachers should not worry that students will become dependent on the formula. Yet she does not explain why this is the case. She says, “The formulaic nature of this unit does not bother us because students may leave it once they understand it. Some students leave the format early in the process; others choose not to leave it at all because they like the structure and say it helps them know what to do with a blank page” (7).

This possible dependency is a point I will return to later; for now, I want to emphasize that the virtue of the Schaffer approach is that students acquire a rudimentary schema for what can pass as an acceptable academic expository essay, an accomplishment not to be trivialized. In fact, for those students who have no idea of what an essay looks like and how to go about putting one together, Schaffer's curriculum appears to be a godsend. Her guide offers students a procedure that, if followed properly, will likely result in passable texts—or as Schaffer's lead-in ad copy boldly proclaims, “We Did Our Homework . . . We Passed The Test . . .”

Several high school teachers whom I have spoken with who have been using the Schaffer method generally saw rapid improvement in the writing of struggling students. Since Schaffer's guide offers a clear frame for writing their essays, students do internalize the topic statement–support structure. These teachers likewise loved the efficiency of grading student essays because they could

focus their reading on structural elements and refer students to the rubric. But they also recognized that some students were bored with the approach and found it stifling. They concluded that Schaffer's approach should be used primarily in grades nine and ten, just to provide students a basic structure for writing expository essays, and that by grade eleven students should move beyond the constraints the method imposes—a simple solution for sequencing a writing curriculum, but one based on what's easy for teachers and not necessarily what's best for students.

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One teacher I interviewed stubbornly resisted Schaffer's approach and claimed she would never use it. Students first need to develop “writing fluency,” she argued, not simply learn how to fill out a form. She added, “Yes, Schaffer's approach does remove the mystery for students about what their teachers expect in their essays.” Unfortunately, she observed, the method also removes the need for these students to judge for themselves how to shape their essays. Although this teacher's negative evaluation was in the minority, the majority of teachers did fear that their students might become too dependent on the format, a fear justified by the question one student posed when he asked his teacher if he could use the formula for everything he wrote because he was so pleased with his recent success. Teachers, while acknowledging that students must move beyond the Schaffer method if they are to continue improving, were nevertheless left wondering what to do next. Unfortunately, there is no *next* in the Schaffer approach.

Criticism of Formulaic Writing

Schaffer's curriculum guide is an accessible variation on traditional textbook advice that essays have introductions, bodies, and conclusions and that paragraphs have topic sentences and contain supporting detail of various kinds. Yet the accessibility of the method (and others like it), so attractive when writing must be taught to class after large class of inexperienced writers, sends the wrong message to students and uninformed teachers about what writing really is. To develop as writers, students must develop a repertoire of strategies for dealing effectively with various writing tasks presented to them in different situations. They must also learn to make choices about genre, content, structure, organization, and style; and they must learn to hone their judgments about the effects of the choices they make as writers. Consider that in Schaffer's approach the goal of writing is to produce an essay of requisite length that contains the correct ratio of detail to commentary. In contrast, real writers must decide what they will compose based on their intentions, who will read their texts, and what effects they want their texts to have on these real and projected readers. Moreover, these choices are limited in significant ways by the constraints a given genre exerts and by how well students can use strategies to achieve these multiple rhetorical goals.

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The primary emphasis on achieving the proper format in the Schaffer method renders content a kind of *afterthought*. Bruce Pirie, in *Reshaping High School English*, remarks that we send students "a perversely mixed message" when we emphasize the all-importance of structure and then

judge them on how well they have mastered the form because we are also sending them the opposite message "that structure can't be very important." Structure, we are telling them, has no "inherent relationship to ideas, since just about any idea can be stuffed into the same form" (76). The essay, traditionally a mutable form whose flexibility has been its greatest strength in allowing writers to fuse form with idea and insight, becomes in the Schaffer approach a rigid, unchanging container that works against students possibly discovering new insights through the writing process. This contradiction is curious because Schaffer proclaims early in her guide "that writing is an act of discovery . . ." (6).

The exclusive focus on format does not encourage teachers to help students explore a literary work and come up with alternative interpretations, even contradictory ones, that engage readers in both an intellectual and emotional struggle to construct meaning from their various readings. Students can learn a formula for arranging sentences in paragraphs, but they are pretty much left to their own devices when it comes to identifying and utilizing strategies for inventing content (*commentary* in Schaffer's approach). Prewriting activities are primarily used to generate topic sentences and concrete details, yet students must still come up with their own opinions, interpretations, and reactions to the concrete details they list (39). Schaffer claims that students resist writing commentary because it means they must say what they think, a task they are not used to and one they find difficult (40). Given this difficulty, then, shouldn't that be a primary area where teachers offer students more guidance?

Formulaic writing of the kind Schaffer advocates forces premature closure on complicated interpretive issues and stifles ongoing exploration. In attempting to take the mystery away from writing and make it more accessible, the formulaic approach winds up hindering students from exploring their ideas, reactions, and interpretations—the rich chaotic mess from which true insight and thoughtfulness can emerge. Yes, this definitely nonformulaic exploration takes time and can lead students to question their assumptions and beliefs. It is this exploration, however, that pushes growth in understanding and in writing ability because students must wrestle with language to articulate meaning. Wouldn't it be better for students to explore their reactions in whatever form they wish in early drafts and subsequently use the Schaffer formula as a gen-

eral guide in later drafts to help those who need it to better structure introductions, body paragraphs, and conclusions? In this way students are using their own judgment early on in their writing processes and using Schaffer as an aid for revising an essay's structure. Our reactions to good literature, when they take written form, should reflect the connections we make in our own lives, the tentativeness of those interpretations, the complexity of the human drama, and the often unanswerable questions that inevitably remain with readers. Formulaic writing short-circuits this discovery process.

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To be fair, there is nothing in Schaffer's curriculum guide to preclude teachers from encouraging exploration. Yet the teachers who would be attracted to the guide are typically those who don't know how to encourage such exploration. Even when adventurous teachers try out new pedagogies but do not receive extensive training and consistent support, they typically fall back on default strategies in the classroom. In her research, Judith Langer discovered that teachers who want to create classroom environments where students openly discuss their interpretations in order to see and appreciate differences and recognize that interpretations grow and develop have great difficulty escaping familiar pedagogical routines. These are the routines in which teachers lead students to find the "best interpretations," have students retrace the plot, look for the "author's message," and use "class time to fill in what the students didn't 'get'" (20). These are the practices where teachers make all of the important decisions, and students simply find material to satisfy what they eventually realize is "what the teacher wants." The consequence for students is that they believe the sole purpose of writing about literature is to find a thesis that can be de-

fended with supporting details. Again, Langer notes that teachers often use literature as another textbook from which students must glean certain information instead of allowing and encouraging students to explore "horizons of possibilities" (19). The formulaic approach to writing encourages fact gathering or, as in Schaffer's approach, the gathering of CDs to form adequate *chunks*.

A familiar argument in support of formulaic writing is that many struggling writers really need a simple format to follow so that they can achieve some immediate success in their academic writing. There is some merit to this argument. Struggling writers need lots of carefully structured assignments, but repetitively following the same direction for writing every essay will not help these students advance beyond a kind of "successful" codependency on teachers who have agreed in advance that this sort of formulaic essay will be what they reward. These students are precisely the ones who most need to be challenged and who are continually sold short by their teachers because either someone else (usually the teacher) does their thinking for them, or, as is often the case with formulaic writing, the outer structure becomes the only important element of the text because some teachers believe that these low-achieving students cannot be taught to think or have insights. They are not considered able to develop strategies for accomplishing writing tasks and for sharpening their judgment about the choices they make while composing. Students classified as "remedial" receive remedial instruction: workbook drills, fill-in-the-blank exercises, the same material that has bored them semester after semester and which they perceive has no relevance to their lives.

What is the inevitable result when students never get beyond the formula and cling to it as a life raft from which they never want to disembark? Struggling writers will receive an initial benefit in that they can move beyond using unproductive strategies such as reciting in narrative fashion what they learned from reading a given text or copying passages directly from it (Collins 114–23). They can offer an expository essay-like structure to communicate their understanding. But will they learn other ways to express themselves to other readers to achieve purposes of their own—and not those of their teachers only? By solely using the formulaic approach to writing, the real winners will be the students who always win anyway. These are the advantaged students who have read more widely and who have been encouraged at

home as well as at school to give their opinions freely. These students enjoy a decisive advantage over struggling writers who are not accustomed to offering interpretations and opinions about what they read and who have no confidence that their views will be considered seriously by their teachers.

The Schaffer method is a fitting response to an untenable classroom situation, given the material conditions where writing instruction takes place. The method's popularity is also evidence of the pressure brought to bear by larger political forces. Teachers do not want their students to fail. In the current politically conservative climate, where accountability is stressed, teachers are under increasing pressure to produce students who can write essays that pass proficiency exams and who can score sufficiently high enough on standardized tests to save schools, and entire school districts, public embarrassment and possible censure and, in some cases, to garner monetary reward.

Yet we cannot be blind to what Schaffer's method conceals. Her guide to writing replicates in methodical fashion a tradition of teaching writing focused on the formal properties of the text, a tradition that separates reading from writing, where the reading of literature becomes a search for facts that can support simple first impression claims and where writing about literature becomes a mechanical act of displaying little nuggets of "lessons learned." This sort of writing reinforces the notion that literary knowledge does not so much involve skill in interpreting ambiguity and struggling with the nuances of language but instead becomes a fixed body of literary facts consisting of genres, periods, authors, plot structures, famous character types, and memorable quotes—the sort of knowledge that counts in the Advanced Placement Test and later in the Graduate Record Exam, the sort of knowledge that is quickly forgotten.

Using Formats as Strategies but Resisting the Formulaic

Teaching writing as a formula reduces a complex, messy process to a step-by-step, follow-the-recipe procedure. When we teach this reductive process, we are telling students that each writing task, each writing problem, is essentially the same. No matter what the task, if students follow the recipe, the final product will satisfy all appetites, regardless of variation in the situation. Nevertheless, writing formu-

las are attractive, precisely because they render the "messy" more manageable. But at what cost?

We writing teachers must recognize that writing contexts vary, writing tasks vary, and our students, in order to grow and succeed as writers, must gradually develop a repertoire of strategies for identifying and then handling the differences each situation presents. Based on his extensive research working with struggling writers in grades five through twelve, James Collins argues that, when writing is taught as a formula, teachers are providing students only "declarative knowledge" about writing. Declarative knowledge is information about writing—"facts," if we can call them that—that teachers dispense to students: essays have introductions, body paragraphs, and conclusions; body paragraphs have topic sentences and supporting details; and so on. But students also need two other kinds of knowledge: procedural and conditional. Procedural knowledge answers the question of *how* to accomplish a given task, and conditional knowledge answers the question of *when* to make a particular choice. When applied to writing, all three kinds of knowledge are necessary. Collins claims:

Declarative knowledge provides an awareness of content; procedural knowledge provides ways of remembering, obtaining, and constructing information to achieve communicative purposes; and conditional knowledge tells the writer what conditions call for selecting among options such as syntax, wording, tone, and register. In this formulation, writing strategies consist of both a set of controls (procedures) for accomplishing an end and a clear, intentional sense of when and how to use the controls (conditions). (53)

The Schaffer method offers some useful declarative knowledge about how some expository texts are structured, but it offers very few strategies. Even the 1:2 ratio of CD to CM should not be taught as though all expository essays are structured in this way; rather, this declarative knowledge should serve as a kind of rule-of-thumb understanding of what body paragraphs *can* look like.

A strategy differs from a formula, Collins says, in that students do not apply it mechanically but understand how to adapt a form to fit a particular writing situation and, more importantly, understand when to use that form in specific ways. In the long run it would be more beneficial for students if we taught the Schaffer formula as a strategy in the sense Collins intends. That is, students might use this knowledge about what expository texts look like

to guide them as a strategy to be used in situations where they argue for a particular interpretation of a text and must support their claims with evidence from the work. Declarative knowledge about what body paragraphs look like, for instance, can become a procedural strategy in a timed writing situation to help students remember to alternate fact with commentary and never to write a quotation without commenting on it. However, this strategy won't necessarily be helpful in other situations, such as when students must submit an autobiographical essay with their college applications. The formulaic approach would make their writing sound mechanical and simpleminded. It is also less helpful in situations where reflective, speculative, or argumentative writing is called for. Here writers might need to develop longer chains of reasoning through which they explain their positions on an issue, why something occurred, or why they took a specific action.

One of the toughest challenges in teaching writing is to find helpful strategies that individual students can fit into their current frameworks, strategies that they can then use to build upon current knowledge and extend their abilities. Certainly this individualizing of instruction is much harder to do when teachers are daily facing 180 students, and it is much less difficult when teachers use a method like Schaffer's as a strategy from the beginning rather than as a formula. Taught as a strategy, her approach becomes one of several, instead of the only one a teacher might offer students. Collins argues that strategies should be co-constructed between students and their teacher. Since these strategies are social constructs, they should first be developed in whole class discussions and then practiced individually and adapted for various writing tasks (58–60, 101–03). It will take no more time to engage in these sorts of productive classroom discussions and activities than it would to learn and practice the Schaffer method. The important long-term benefit for students is that they develop multiple strategies so that they do indeed have choices. Writing instruction that supports student writers in the choices they make *when* they are asked to make those choices while drafting and revising is the kind of writing instruction that will produce versatile, thoughtful writers.

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