

2009

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Recommended Citation

Schneider, Dan (2009) "Fusing Two Philosophies to Promote Creativity, Higher-Order Thinking, and Organization in the Writing Process," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 24: Iss. 2, Article 11.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1057>

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Fusing Two Philosophies to Promote Creativity, Higher-Order Thinking, and Organization in the Writing Process

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Recent course evaluations completed by juniors and seniors in my honors and basic level English courses reveal some interesting results. These evaluations asked students to separately self-assess the interest and effort they expended in both reading and writing. Of the four categories, *interest in writing* ranked lowest. This finding existed for all five of my courses, and it is the first year that this category has averaged so low. I believe this change is a direct result of a movement in our district to focus more on formulaic writing to improve standardized test scores. Such obviously frightening feedback from my students tells me that something must be done to reinvigorate students' interest in writing. In this article, I argue that we must find a way to promote creativity and critical thinking without abandoning structural writing.

Formulaic vs. Creative Approaches

A war continues in English pedagogy over the teaching of writing. Teachers often fall to the far side of one pole on the continuum of formulaic versus creative writing due to strong beliefs about "Best Practices" or administrative pressure to improve standardized test scores. Debate continues to rage about where teachers should fall on this continuum and how to create balance and diversity in student writing.

Some English teachers and students have formed an odd alliance when hearing "five-paragraph essay," as sighs, cringes, and revolts follow. These arguments are not without merit. In recent articles from *The English Journal*, authors Vicki Spandel

and Alec Duxbury compose artful and convincing attacks against formulaic writing. Spandel argues that formulaic approaches lead to the creation of itemized rubrics void of room for creativity (21). Duxbury attacks the five-paragraph essay with its rigidity and devotion to the thesis statement above higher order thinking. Duxbury notes that "the tyranny of the thesis statement demands that students write mechanical, lifeless prose in which they have no interest" (17). Lacking room for creativity and depth of analysis, students are often turned off from writing these types of assignments. Because of this formulaic approach and the fact that students have no vested interest in the task, students turn in vacuous, cloned papers. All of them are structured and organized well, but most of the students' papers lack content, style, and argument. The district in which I currently teach creates sentence-by-sentence templates for students; while this helps students understand the order and organization of a paragraph, I also see first hand how this structure can prohibit rhetorical growth, creativity, and an appreciation for the craft of writing. It also promotes passive, dependent cognitive activity, where students are told how to think and what exactly to write. To regain enthusiasm for writing, we need to foster creativity and style in student writing.

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Many, feeling these ill-effects of structural writing, move to the creative writing end of the continuum and choose to, for the most part, ignore formula. Students given creative writing tasks are asked to create meaning through texts and personal experiences using various imaginative and reader-response driven exercises. The results are often powerful, passionate, and thoughtful writing. However, classrooms that focus primarily on this writing often ignore mechanics and organization. Students often turn in assignments without forming paragraphs or revising for clarity.

Because these critical aspects of writing are neglected or ignored in the class, students either do not know how to correct organizational and mechanical problems or disregard them as unimportant.

Still, academic or technical writing pervades in a majority of classrooms, with the formulaic “five-paragraph essay” leading the way. More traditional teachers continue to cling to this approach for several reasons—among them a belief in structural writing or an acknowledgement of the constraints of state mandates and standardized tests. Even teachers that acknowledge Best Practices that foster creativity in writing find themselves floating towards the formulaic side of the writing continuum because they are forced to teach to tests that encourage such structure. The standardized testing wave has forced teachers to teach rigid and structured forms of writing in an effort to raise student and school scores. Because these tests claim to measure student potential and school performance, states tie scores to school funding and student scholarships; as a result, teachers are forced to “teach to the test” by concentrating on cookie-cutter writing prompts in lieu of writing that fosters growth in creativity and higher-order thinking.

However, teachers falling on the formulaic writing approach of the continuum also suggest that academic writing will be a necessity for students in college and that technical writing is essential for successful careers. Many students want, crave, and need structure and formula in learning how the writing process works. In my experience, many students become frustrated with teachers who offer less structure with writing assignments. Moreover, students need a solid understanding of structural writing for future academia and/or their careers. Students will be expected to know how to organize ideas into paragraphs, clarify their explanations, provide support for arguments, and use MLA conventions. They will be expected to know basic grammatical rules and how to write professional memos and letters. These are not skills that can be acquired solely through creative writing or reader-response assignments.

In a recent article from the *English Journal*, Kerri Smith offers an admirable defense of the five-paragraph essay. She asserts that learning this formulaic approach helps students organize ideas, develop their argument, and apply their arguments by drawing conclusions. Such

a structure, she argues, does more than just prepare for a twenty-five minute timed writing prompt, as it also teaches students how to analyze texts critically and revise their writing (16). She says that students should not stop with this structure, but it is positive for them to learn it as a foundation on which they can further build and develop their writing in more complex ways. It is on this point that I would like to suggest an extension of this building process to fuse both academic and creative writing within the same process.

An Approach that Fuses Creative and Academic Writing

Teachers must recognize the need for both structured and creative writing within the classroom. One need not come before the other or be primarily taught in any class; nor should they be taught in isolation. There is still time for both creative writing assignments and academic papers. Rather than view the two types of writing as disconnected, polarized, or having to focus on one end of a continuum, we need to begin to look at ways to *fuse* the two types of writing together to show students that *both* are necessary qualities of good writing. If we foster creativity and meaning making while also showing that such ideas need to be refined and organized through the writing process, we can achieve both goals.

Through careful planning and use of the writing process, such a fusion can be achieved. Within a classroom, both academic and creative writing need to be stressed as equally important. Students need to be given opportunities to write creatively and respond to a text without fear of punishment for structure and grammar. These writings need to be reinforced positively by teachers who encourage students to think critically along the way. But wouldn't it be wonderful if we did more with these assignments than just hand them back and watch them be stuffed into three-ringed binders (or worse) and lost forever? Let's use these assignments as a part of the writing process by encouraging students to use ideas from them when they construct a more formal piece of writing.

If we are able to generate these critical, constructive, and creative thoughts into a more polished product, the end result will be a formal paper that is no longer looked

upon as a meaningless cookie-cutter essay. Rather, it will accomplish the ultimate goal: a well-written, well organized, insightful, convincing, and meaningful essay. Rubrics can then be created which not only specify clear organization and support, but also meaningful insights, style, and complexity and creativity of argument. Such a process just might regain students' interest in the process and make them aware of writing as a powerful medium through which creativity and organization can meet.

Application

While teaching *Hamlet*, I tell my students at the beginning of the unit that eventually we will be constructing a formal character analysis paper. While keeping this end product in mind, students complete various reader-response journals, free writes, and character development assignments that allow them to form passionate arguments about the play. Towards the end of the unit, I have students choose a character about which they feel passionate and construct their own soliloquy as if they were that character at a moment of their choice in the play. Their goal of the soliloquy, like Shakespeare's as he wrote them, was to take readers inside the heart and mind of a character and solve a problem or question relating to motive or plot. Their soliloquies must then be followed by explanations of the characters' motivations; and students must offer support for their claims. Such activities enable students to grow creatively and poetically while forming thoughtful, meaningful arguments.

As the unit ends, I have students re-read these projects. They look for patterns in their arguments and choose a character and thesis based on their creative musings. As a result, students choose a topic they already have analyzed critically and about which they feel confident and passionate. It is important that students have this confidence when approaching a more formal, critical paper. Students can now turn such an assignment, no longer a dreaded technical assignment with little meaning, to one with passion and insight. I encourage students to use aspects of their journals within their papers, but stress that they must now provide organization and support to make their argument more academic and persuasive for other readers. We discuss paragraph organization, support, and

the significance of topic sentences. Students learn how to revise and edit their writing to form polished pieces worthy of publication.

As we conference during the writing process, I often refer students to their creative assignments to help them find meaningful support for their arguments. For example, one of my students was having much difficulty in her analysis of Ophelia's character. While conferencing, I took her back to the soliloquy she wrote as Ophelia that portrayed her as suicidal mainly as a result of her lost love with Hamlet, not the death of her father. We revisited this and the student's journals to find out why she felt this way. She was able to then remember what led her to this conclusion—Ophelia's singing before she leaves the stage for the last time when she speaks of a lost romantic love. We were then able to locate this specific part of her speech and use it as support for her argument on Ophelia's character. Without her creative writing efforts, this student would have never been able to make such an analytically insightful argument.

It is also important to teach students that academic or technical writing is not synonymous with "five-paragraph essay." As we work on the *Hamlet* papers, for example, I challenge students not to follow the exact formula for a five-paragraph format. Students experiment with two-paragraph introductions, paragraphs of varying length, incorporating better style and flow, etc. Many times students will use or revise aspects of their creative writing assignments to accomplish these tasks. By using the creative writing assignments and journals within the writing process, students are able to construct more engaged and passionate essays in an organized fashion. This is just one example, but such a model can be applied to any literature unit; it is simply a matter for finding significant ways to fuse writing assignments together. The process can also work inversely as well by taking a more rigid essay and using it to inspire these creative tasks.

Let us not discard formal, technical writing because it prohibits creativity and growth. Let us also not throw away creativity, critical thinking, and meaning making due to a wave of standardized testing hysteria. Our students need and deserve both opportunities to develop higher-order, independent thinking *and* to learn how to write more

professionally. And instead of teaching them in isolation, let's show our students how creativity and higher-order thinking can be fused within the writing process to create quality writing.

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About the Author

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(For full description see pages 82-83.)