

Writing Practices Beyond the Five-Paragraph Essay

Interactions with and around Texts: Writing in Elementary Schools

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The five-paragraph essay is one of the first forms of writing with which young students in the U.S. come into contact, and its template is far too often the only approach to writing that they are taught to imitate during their formative years in elementary school. Of course, the five-paragraph essay is not all that is required of young writers. A glance at the elementary education standards in the United States known as the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010a) and an examination of the varied writing tasks that appear across the diverse content areas in elementary education reveal that there are, in fact, numerous genres required. Each of these genres encountered in elementary schooling possesses its own purpose, context, and structure. As a result of these unique characteristics,

the overwhelming majority of genres cannot be produced using the same five-paragraph essay formula, because constructing texts within a genre requires particular language and organization features specific to that genre.

The idea that elementary school writing only consists of the five-paragraph essay oversimplifies the large range of literacy demands that young writers encounter, and the sustained proliferation of this erroneous idea and the widespread teaching of the formulaic five-paragraph essay have had detrimental effects on the writing of our youth (Argys, 2008; Miller, 2010). Luciana has witnessed undergraduate university students who have just finished their K–12 education struggling with writing assignments that ask them to move beyond a five-paragraph essay. Sharon has seen fourth grade students struggling to write creatively, verbalizing that they had always been given a prompt to which they would respond utilizing a template composed of a thesis statement, three supporting facts, and a conclusion reiterating the introduction.

This five-paragraph template method for writing instruction implies that writing has merely been reduced to placing information into slots, rather than acknowledging the intricate and multifaceted process that takes place between the writer and the reader to construct and negotiate meaning (Brannon et al., 2008). Use of these rigid templates means that content takes a back seat to organization, structure, and transitions (Campbell & Latimer, 2012). Although students may initially feel constrained by the five-paragraph essay, they often come to rely on and feel lost without it (e.g., Campbell & Latimer, 2012; Miller, 2010), just like Sharon's fourth-graders.

This chapter demonstrates that writing, even at the primary level, cannot be reduced to the “universal” five-paragraph essay. We illustrate how a cycle of teaching and learning that draws on a genre-based writing pedagogy can foster meaningful interactions with and around texts and writing practices that reach far beyond those of the five-paragraph template approach.

The Research

Writing is composed of distinct **genres**, the different kinds of texts that are written or spoken for specific audiences in specific social contexts in order to achieve a specific purpose (see Tardy, Chapter 2). The approach to genre pedagogy that provides the foundation for this chapter is frequently described as “the Sydney School” (Johns, 2002). This concept of genre is based on many years of work in language and education derived from Systemic-Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), a theory of language that examines linguistic choices and connects them to different contexts. The Sydney School's model of genre pedagogy aims to enable all students, especially culturally and linguistically diverse learners, to competently navigate the writing demands in academic and civic arenas (Harman, 2018b; Humphrey, 2018). This approach to literacy instruction has been successfully used since the 1980s throughout school systems in Australia and is increasingly being used internationally (Rose & Martin, 2012), garnering interest in the United States (e.g., Brisk, 2015; de Oliveira, 2011; Gebhard, Harman, & Seger, 2007; Harman, 2018a; Schleppegrell & Colombi, 2002).

In the Sydney School, genres are “recurrent configurations of meanings [...] that enact the social practices of a given culture” or “staged, goal-oriented social processes” (Martin & Rose, 2008, p. 6). Genres are viewed as **staged** because of the multiple moves that it takes to achieve the writer's goal, and they are considered **goal-oriented** because the text is created to accomplish a specific purpose. Finally, they are considered **social** because they are created for a specific audience. The different stages, or moves, within a genre are identifiable not only by their communicative purpose, but also by their linguistic patterns. While the texts within a genre tend to share common characteristics, their complex moves and patterns of language use cannot possibly be reduced to the five-paragraph essay template.

Genre in the Common Core: The Standards versus the Five-Paragraph Essay

Genres with similar purposes and language patterns can be collected into **genre families**. These families are almost always present in educational standards, although they are often referred to by different terms. The Common Core, a set of English language arts and mathematics standards developed in order to meet the perceived need for consistent, common learning goals for students across the United States (de Oliveira, 2016), organizes writing into three genre families, which they call **text types**: (1) narrative, (2) informational/explanatory, and (3) opinion/argument (NGA & CCSSO, 2010a). These standards, implemented in 2010, require students to read and write texts across numerous contexts and for diverse purposes, marking new expectations for writing instruction in elementary classrooms. Through a close examination of the Common Core and by drawing on existing literature (e.g., Derewianka & Jones, 2016; Rose & Martin, 2012), we have identified genres within each text type that are typical of elementary writing (see Table 4.1).

The **narrative text type** includes **stories**, which have the social purpose of providing entertainment, and **recounts**, which have the social purpose of relating a series of events. Although multiple stories might share similar stages, the patterns found within this genre vary vastly, as literary texts often achieve their purpose of entertaining by “play[ing] around with patterns” (Derewianka & Jones, 2016, p. 81). If this genre is forced to fit the five-paragraph essay template, the resulting stories will lack depth, essence, and life and will not be able to achieve their social purpose: to entertain.

An **informational or explanatory text** is used for the purposes of informing, organizing, identifying, describing, and/or explaining. The five-paragraph essay frequently appears with this text type in elementary classrooms. However, when examining the extent to which the social purposes of this text type differ, it becomes readily

TABLE 4.1
Example Genres for Each Text Type in the Common Core State Standards

Text Type	Example Genre	Purpose	Common Stages or Moves	Examples
Narrative	stories	to entertain or engage	Orientation Complication Resolution	Narratives Anecdotes Fables
	recounts	to tell what happened	Orientation/ background Record/account of stages	Recounting a historical event Recounting solving math problems
Informational/ Explanatory	procedures	to instruct how to do something	Purpose Equipment Method/steps Results	How to do a craft How to play a game How to go somewhere How to make candy
	reports	to provide information about a topic	Classification or Positioning Description	Types of sharks A description of Antarctica Greek and Roman cultures
	explanations	to explain how things work/ why they happen	Phenomenon Explanation	How a life cycle works What causes hurricanes
Opinion/ Argument	arguments	to persuade	Issue/thesis Arguments/sides Reiteration/ resolution	Essay taking a stance Discussion exploring various sides Formal debate
	text responses	to critique	Context Description Evaluation Reaffirmation/ challenge	Product review Interpreting a book message Challenging a book message Opinion of a movie

This table is partially inspired by work of Derewianka and Jones (2016, pp. 8–9) and Rose and Martin (2012, pp. 129–130).

apparent that a standardized template is not adequate to address the needs of young authors writing informational or explanatory texts. For example, within the **explanation** genre alone, students are exposed to and expected to produce sequential explanations, cyclical explanations (e.g., the life cycle of a butterfly), factorial (or causal) explanations, system explanations, and consequential explanations (Derewianka & Jones, 2016).

In elementary school, language is used in the **opinion or argumentative text type** to persuade others or to respond to others and their work (Derewianka & Jones, 2016). With the new era of standards, even primary students are being asked to construct responses with the purposes of assessing, interpreting, and evaluating literary texts. The higher-order reasoning skills and personalized responses essential to this genre are hampered when students are forced to fit their responses to the five-paragraph essay template, and the resulting texts are limited in their ability to accomplish their social purposes.

As evidenced by Table 4.1, each of the three text types contains multiple, diverse genres whose purposes are achieved in unique ways and are impossible to produce by a “one-size-fits-all” writing template. This differentiates the production of genres from the five-paragraph essay template, which does not enable students to meet the writing demands and cross-disciplinary expectations of the Common Core nor to achieve the wide range of expected purposes found within the three text types. Indeed, the majority of the genres present in elementary education must employ structures and language features that differ from the five-paragraph essay in order to successfully meet their social purposes (Humphrey, Droga, & Feez, 2012).

Furthermore, the descriptions of text types in the standards address expectations for language use. In other words, they emphasize that, while all disciplinary areas include teaching *through* language, it is crucial that writing instruction also incorporates teaching *about* language. Texts organize language in specific ways, and the features and patterns of meanings in texts are dependent on their purposes and context (Rose & Martin, 2012). A five-paragraph

essay approach to writing does not provide students with clear guidelines about how a particular genre is typically organized because it fixates on only one structure; however, a genre-based approach highlights the typical organization and language features that are expected in each genre across content areas and focuses on these features with students (see Table 4.1 for moves used to organize each genre). For example, an examination of the narrative genre family shows that stories are organized by complications and resolutions, and recounts are sequenced in events, and both tend to use individual nouns like *the hunter*, *his boat*, or *a beach*. A genre-based approach allows and requires language to be taught in context through reading and writing, providing meaningful opportunities for students to understand how authors use language to accomplish their social purposes.

Effective texts within a genre often follow a specific sequence of stages composed of language choices in order to realize these purposes (Brisk, 2015; de Oliveira, 2011), which may initially make this approach appear to be similar to the five-paragraph essay template. However, there is an important distinction: Genre pedagogy is centered around the idea that the choices of genre, stages, and language features are meaningful and completely dependent on situation and purpose, contrasted with the rigid structure of the five-paragraph essay template, which does nothing to prepare students to consider audience or purpose and “forces premature closure on complicated interpretive issues and stifles ongoing exploration” (Wiley, 2000, p. 61). Instead of fostering young writers in developing more abstract and increasingly complex conceptual and meaningful understandings of writing and content as they advance through their schooling, this template approach focuses writers on the structure itself. Some may think that this is helpful for so-called “struggling” writers, including English language learners, but, in fact, its limitations perpetuate a deficit view of these writers by reinforcing the notion that they are not capable of moving beyond a simple structure due to their developing writing skills (Brannon et al., 2008; Campbell & Latimer, 2012).