

Chapter 6

Transferable Principles and Processes in Undergraduate Writing

DANA FERRIS AND HOGAN HAYES

A few years ago, the first author (Dana) was teaching an advanced Composition class, a requirement for upper-division (junior/senior) students at her university. The theme of the class was rhetorical and genre awareness. To find out more about her students' prior experiences with genre in college/university-level writing, she had them, for their first homework assignment, read a short article called "Unteaching the Five-Paragraph Essay" (Foley, 1989) and provide written short answers to this question: *In her article, Foley argues that the "five-paragraph essay" formula taught to students in school (before college) harms them in a variety of ways. As a student writer, do you agree with her? Why or why not?*

Dana went through her students' responses and categorized them according to overall attitude toward the five-paragraph essay (positive, negative, or mixed) and the reasons/themes seen in their answers. The responses were fascinating: Of the 41 students in two

classes, 28 said that the five-paragraph essay was *harmful* to student writers, five said it was *helpful*, and eight had a *mixed* reaction (they could see both benefits and drawbacks to it). Here are several representative quotations.

Harmful

Looking back to my writing experiences in junior high and high school, I think I spent just as much time worrying that my essay followed the five-paragraph format as I did on the content, for fear that deviating from the "proper" method would make me seem an incompetent writer. I can recall how, on a couple occasions, I was forced to remove a strong argument because it did not fit seamlessly into the flow of my 3 body paragraphs.... I can see how this must have restricted the evolution of my personal writing style in some way.

Helpful

I was taught the five-paragraph essay in elementary school and still use it today in college. I've also been taught other organizational patterns for essays but I really do find the basic five paragraphs is always my starting point. Foley has a point that the formula writing allows students to get lazy and can deter growth but overall I think she's overreacting. The formula is only a problem if that's all the student can do.

Mixed

I disagree with her because like she said it is a formula for writing that teaches students the basics of writing. I don't think that it necessarily harms them, but the repetitiveness of the five-paragraph essay is damaging the creativeness of students. It is an easy way to get an assignment done when needed, so the harm is mostly affecting the creative expression of students.

When we identified themes or reasons behind the students' general reactions to the article and the homework prompt, there was quite a range, as shown in Figure 6.1.

The student responses were striking because they cut at the heart of one of the main arguments in favor of teaching younger

FIGURE 6.1
Themes in Student Writers' Responses
to the Five-Paragraph Essay

Theme	Number of Responses	Representative Quotation
Blocks creativity	10	"It is an easy way to get an assignment done when needed, so the harm is mostly affecting the creative expression of students."
Did not prepare us for college writing expectations	8	"It was engraved [in our heads] not to deviate from this format, but once in college we were told to ignore what we were taught. This was difficult since it was the only way I knew how to organize an essay."
Holds students back/limits their idea development	8	"It usually seems that I must choose only three examples to argue with; however, when I do write ideas flow and come to me that can strengthen my argument but I hesitate to incorporate them into my paper because it seems off topic and maybe just a little too much."
Rigid/artificial	7	"A five paragraph essay is too rigid and limiting for people to truly express their thoughts. It constantly frustrates me...." "It feels like a constant hindrance."
Provides a necessary foundation	7	"I believe it was a great foundation to the beginning of writing. Students are able to at least start somewhere with the 'five-paragraph essay.'"
Inhibits critical thinking	6	"I believe it does take away the ability for students to make connections and to use their imagination because the formula is very easy and once it is mastered, not much thought has to go into it. I also think that it doesn't engage students in critical thinking."
Interferes with coherence	6	"I found that I had trouble establishing deeper connections between different ideas. I also had trouble with transitioning between ideas as they were usually only related in a superficial way."
Punishes students who won't conform	5	"The students who break away from this formula and think outside of the box, but get criticized for doing so is when it becomes harmful."
Allows students to be lazy	5	"When the student unthinkingly quotes three different arguments for one hypothesis and slaps them together to make an essay, then the student is not writing to the best of his ability."
Allows teachers to be lazy	3	"The formula provides students with a structure to write essays in a way that the instructor can easily grade them, but the students aren't really learning anything."
Boring and demotivating	1	"It has chained me to a cut and dry technique that follows the same guidelines, and has quite frankly caused me to grow bored while writing."

students (secondary students, developmental college writers, first-year Composition students) how to produce a five-paragraph essay: This form, even if it's rigid and artificial, will give students something to build upon in the future when they must undertake more complex academic writing. It gives them "a place to start." But these advanced Composition students, juniors and seniors at a prestigious university who have nearly finished with their undergraduate studies, overwhelmingly felt the opposite: Not only did learning the five-paragraph essay fail to help them develop as thinkers and writers, it had actually *inhibited* them from doing so. These students, who were a few years removed from their high school and early college instruction, had both the experience and the distance to judge the effects of this ubiquitous approach to writing pedagogy on their own progress, and the verdict was clear: The five-paragraph essay did not "transfer" to more challenging writing tasks. That notion of transfer was a myth.

This chapter first discusses what the literature says about written transfer and why that research predicts that the five-paragraph essay will fail to achieve its purposes with regard to helping students succeed in the future. Then, it presents an alternative classroom approach that addresses teachers' and students' felt needs for a foundation or place to start in writing instruction and in approaching complex writing tasks. This approach focuses not on form or formula (as in the five-paragraph essay) but rather on transferable principles and processes for successful writing that can apply to a wide range of academic and professional writing contexts.

The Research

The term **learning transfer** describes how knowledge developed in a **learning context** impacts subsequent performance in a **target context** (Royer, Mestre, & Dufresne, 2005). Knowledge that has a positive impact on target contexts can be called both durable and flexible, and that is the kind of knowledge educators want students