The Five-Paragraph Theme
Does It Prepare Students for College?

Early in her teaching career, Glenda Moss actively taught the five-paragraph essay. Only later did she consider what had become a concern among educators: that overemphasis on the five-paragraph theme had locked students into thinking it was the only way to write. Now convinced, Moss examines her belief that focusing on the five-paragraph essay underprepares students for college. Further, she adds her voice to the cry of many educators—that students need writing connections across the curriculum.

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I did not always believe that the five-paragraph theme, as a standard, underprepared students for college. I did not make the connection when my own son failed freshman English at the local junior college in our East Texas city. I was pleased that he registered to repeat the course with the same teacher. While I personally felt disappointed with the teacher for “failing my son,” who had “mastered” the skills tested by state standards in Texas and scored high enough on the college entrance exams to be exempted from the remedial English course, I felt that my son’s belief that his college English teacher could “teach him how to write” would result in a much higher level of success than he had experienced in high school. In retrospect, I was right. This past December, my son completed a master’s thesis at the University of Houston.

It was not until he was in graduate school, and I was working on a doctorate, that I heard a freshman English teacher at Stephen F. Austin State University express concern that, since students had been “drilled” on the five-paragraph theme for the state test of academic skills, they were locked into only one way of writing an essay. I then remembered how, when students arrived in my seventh grade classroom, they had already had it ingrained in them that for the state test they were to write five paragraphs: an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion. Each body paragraph was to have an opening sentence and at least two details to support the opening sentence.

Part of our job as seventh grade teachers was to make sure the students could write descriptive, instructive, comparative, and persuasive essays. Following instructional material provided to us, they wrote the essays that generally ended up as five-paragraph themes.

The five paragraph theme was the accepted standard, but whose standard was it? The prompts on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) never referred to the “five-paragraph theme” as a standard. The students were not instructed by the test directions to write a “five-paragraph essay.” I never once referred to the “five-paragraph theme” in my teaching. As a middle school language arts teacher for ten years in Texas, I came to believe in practice that this was the
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writing standard in Texas as we were given models of rubric scoring to evaluate our students' essays. These rubrics resulted in teachers preparing students to write five-paragraph themes.

While I required my seventh- and later, eighth-graders to complete four research projects during the school year, most of the year was spent writing five-paragraph themes. This had become the norm for preparing students for success on the TAAS, the test that supposedly promoted higher-order thinking and held teachers accountable for student learning. For the most part, language arts teachers were successful within this accountability system as demonstrated by test scores, yet the number of students, like my own son, who were not prepared for college writing raised a doubt about the focus on five-paragraph themes.

We began with the best of intentions, focusing on the writing process—brainstorming, drafting, responding and revising, editing, and publishing. I cannot tell you when it happened that the process became a formula resulting in five-paragraph themes, but I believe it was the scoring rubric of the standardized test and pressure to teach our students how to be successful based on that rubric that resulted in formula writing. Students' opening and closing sentences began to appear as standardized. If the prompt read, "compare and contrast life in a rural community with life in an urban community," our students knew to begin the essay with a topic sentence something like this, “It is not hard to compare and contrast life in a rural community with life in an urban community.” Or they might begin by stating, “Life in a rural community and life in an urban area are alike and different in several ways.” Sometimes we would give our students ten prompts and have them write opening and closing sentences for each of them.

We also instructed our students on the importance of using transition words to maintain a cohesive flow between their ideas, examples, details, or reasons. Transition words were to indicate shifts to new paragraphs and were limited to a small word bank of transition words: first, next, then, before, finally, similarly, and a handful of others. We meant well when we had weak writing students memorize transition words and introductory and closing sentences to match with particular writing prompts.

Prepositions took on new currency when the picture prompt was introduced. Students were presented a picture and asked to describe the scene. They could begin anywhere but were required to trace the picture in words by moving from top to bottom, left to right, right to left, or background to foreground—all in a multiparagraph theme. In front of, behind, to the right of, across from, in the distance, and near the right-hand corner were common tools students used to plow through the picture prompt.

The model writing norm, whether descriptive, instructive, classificatory, or persuasive, generally included an introductory paragraph, three paragraphs for the body, and a closing paragraph. Students were instructed to tell what they were going to write about, write about it, and then tell what they wrote about. While this is a standard that I remember being modeled in the fifties and sixties when I was an elementary and secondary student, it was only one model—the five-paragraph theme. In the educational reform of the nineties, one model became the only writing model for Texas students.

In Texas, teachers proudly boasted a high success rate when nearly every student could write a five-paragraph theme to any descriptive, how-to, compare and contrast, or persuasive prompt. Sometimes, we could even figure out the pattern and guess which mode would be tested in a given year. In the elementary grades, the students were given a picture to describe. In the sixth grade, students generally had to give the steps for how to do something. The prompts never invited any analysis of this process, so the resulting writing was usually a series of directions rather than an essay. Typical how-to prompts might read: "Think about your favorite game to play and explain in detail for a friend how to play the game," or "Your mom has given you permission to make your favorite after-school snack. Tell what your favorite after-school snack is and give detailed instructions on how to prepare it," or "Explain for your younger sibling how to gift wrap a present. Give details for all the steps needed to wrap the gift."

Seventh-graders generally were given classificatory prompts. Among the practice prompts that I gave my students was: "Your school is considering a dress code for next fall. Think about the good things and bad things about school dress codes. Write an essay for your teacher in which you explain the good things and
bad things about dress codes." This prompt could then be changed to demonstrate for students the difference between classificatory and persuasive. Students could be prompted to write a persuasive letter to the local school board. The prompt might read: "Your school district is considering school uniforms. In a letter to the school board, take a position for or against school uniforms and give reasons to support your position." Once, I even hit the topic a few weeks before the test. My students thought I was a great teacher. Little did they realize that passing the TAAS would not guarantee them success in college, where writing standards included multiple models of writing to communicate critical thinking, something that does not seem to result from standardized testing that standardizes teaching practices.

It was a complex dilemma that I struggled with as a teacher. While I received praise from my school and district for my success rate among "at-risk" students, I kept asking myself why. Now, as I analyze my ten years of teaching under the TAAS testing system, I think it is accurate to say that the test prepared my students to write a five-paragraph theme, thus raising the level of education for some students, who had been tracked in special education and below-level classes, but it fell short of preparing students to write in multiple genres as expected in college. It is embarrassing as I reflect on some of the middle school teaching practices I used to motivate my students to successfully write for TAAS. In the week before the TAAS test when my students were working on compositions, we might have a dialogue similar to the following:

Students would complain, "These are boring topics."

I would reply, "I know. I am giving you boring topics these last two weeks before the state test because you will probably have a boring topic then, too. I know I created fun situations earlier in the year for you to write about. The camping trip behind the school, the food festival in the classroom, Mrs. Perkins' demonstration of the Inkling loom, and comparing and contrasting the two cars that Mr. Cagle brought were all fun. When you take the state test, you will probably be given a boring topic. If so, we need to practice writing terrific compositions even if we have a boring topic."

"Oh."

"Does everyone understand that on the state test you're totally on your own? You have to use all the skills you have learned to bring a boring topic to life."

Such instruction resulted in students disciplining themselves to write for the TAAS ritual.

I now have a clearer understanding of why my students and I agreed that my prompts were "fun" and the state prompts were "boring." My prompts emerged from the experience and concerns of my students. They knew all about Mr. Cagle's cars. They may never have given a thought to the subject of school uniforms before the day they confronted the topic on the TAAS test. And not only were they expected to write with intelligence on a subject about which they may have had little knowledge and less interest, they were required to accomplish this within the straightjacket of a five-paragraph format.

My frustration with teaching in a system that required me to participate in teaching to low standards ended in my resignation four years ago. That was following a school year in which I was not allowed to attend two professional conferences that I had been attending annually for at least five years. The message I understood was that I was needed in the classroom only to prepare my students for TAAS. Professional development through attending conferences apparently was not perceived to contribute to that end. Innovation was no longer valued unless it resulted in success on TAAS.

Later, I realized that devaluing professional development had resulted in the devaluation of complex writing and critical thinking. Increasingly, I have come to understand the long-range negative affect on our students when the five-paragraph theme is the only standard. I now regret that I spent more time helping them to write to pass the TAAS than I did helping my students to make the connection between writing skills as tools to express their thoughts, values, and beliefs.

College and university teachers in Texas—such as my son's instructor—have a right to pass judgment on the quality of writing instruction as evidenced in their freshman's ability. But I wonder how long it will be until they, too, find themselves teaching to the five-paragraph theme. It was painful for me to watch university professors at various departments at Stephen F. Austin State University, where I was a doctoral research assistant, adapt to the impact of the standards movement as it was having its institutional effect on curriculum and
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teaching. I could see happening at the university level what had happened eight years earlier in the public schools. The examination for the Certification of Educators in Texas (ExCET), an accountability test for teachers in Texas, was shaping capstone courses into test-review courses, just as the TAAS had shaped writing within the five-paragraph theme.

Professors and teachers must work toward raising writing standards across the curriculum. As an educator of teachers, I now make reading, writing, and dialoguing central to the learning process in my classes. While I expect my preservice teachers to state the purpose of their synthesis papers, critically analyze, and synthesize educational research, I have to resist my students' initial tendency to expect me to give them a formula for controlled writing success. My expectation that my preservice teachers will be able to think critically and express their thoughts clearly goes beyond the minimal standards of a five-paragraph theme.

Will this make a difference? I hope so, but I'm not sure it will. Only this week, I sat in on an inservice for the English teachers at one of the local high schools. The principal is genuinely concerned about raising the Indiana State Test of Educational Progress (ISTEP) language scores for the school just like my Texas principal had been concerned about raising student scores on the TAAS. The principal believes that the test will change how teachers teach, and I agree. My concern is that this change will result in formula writing and five-paragraph themes. I am afraid that what Texas began will sweep the nation before the public demands what educators already know—students need writing connections across the curriculum and in multiple genres.

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