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# From the Editor



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Leaning over Kelly's shoulder as she faced the computer, I asked, "Do you need a paragraph there to show a new idea?"

"Oh no," she replied. "I don't have five sentences yet."

Honest. That's what she said. Kelly had learned some *rules* very well, but as a junior she was in a class for students who had not successfully learned academic writing.

I wondered what other ideas about writing these students held. When we returned to the classroom, I put several prompts on the board, including "What goes into a paragraph?" and "How long should it be?" Their answers reveal what they knew mattered:

- > proper use of words, punctuation, verbs, nouns, and all those other grammar (*sic*) things
- > what your point is and sentences should describe what your point is, complete sentences, correct punctuation, no run-on sentences
- > a thesis, sentences, details

Regarding paragraph length they said either "It should be long enough for you to explain your point and describe it in full detail" or that there was an acceptable length ranging from "more than one sentence" to "at least five lines" or five sentences. Those in the paragraphing-by-the-numbers camp all knew there was a right number, even though they differed on what it was.

These juniors and seniors knew what they were supposed to learn. Yet, knowing the rules had not made them writers—in their eyes or in the eyes of their teachers. Many told me that they were not writ-

ers because it wasn't their profession, they didn't know grammar well, or they wrote only for school. Those few who did see themselves as writers used as evidence that they wrote in school or wrote "from the bottom of my heart."

No, knowing the rules had not made them writers. So why do I see so much rule-based, formulaic writing instruction sold as materials and inservices to well-intentioned but ill-informed administrators and overworked teachers? Accordion paragraphs and power paragraphs proliferate. Perfectly fine assessment tools have become perfectly awful straitjackets when a middle school student can say, "I need to add some voice here."

It shouldn't be this way.

*Standards for the English Language Arts* from NCTE and IRA suggests that "students need to learn how to use various elements of writing flexibly and adaptively, shaping their approaches according to the purposes and audiences they have in mind" (36). How do we accomplish these goals? How do we reform writing instruction?

These are urgent questions. Political and pedagogical attention is now turning toward writing instruction. (I fear that we will begin to ignore reading instruction, but I hope I'm wrong.) A new SAT and less-than-satisfactory results on state writing exams compel our interest. The National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges (<http://www.writingcommission.org>) calls for a revolution.

We have resources. The National Writing Project continues to open new sites and support current ones. NCTE has developed the Writing Initiative, "to support sound practices in the teaching of writ-

ing across all disciplines, to increase policymakers' and the public's knowledge about the teaching of writing, and to make available professional development for schools and educators" ("NCTE," par. 1). There are numerous outstanding books available on teaching writing. Best of all, you are reading a rich resource of classroom-tested suggestions.

In shaping the call for "Re-forming Writing Instruction," I wanted authors to address both form and change. And they did—by describing strategies that help students reshape papers, challenging us to rethink our teaching of formula, and offering instruction in alternative forms. They enlarge our vision of what's possible and what matters.

In addition to thoughtful examinations of writing instruction, recommendations for resources, articles of general interest, and provocative columns and features on a range of topics, you will find numerous assignments and activities dealing with form and reform. These include the following:

- > an alternative form for teaching the research paper (Strickland)
- > a yearlong senior research project (Kixmiller)
- > ways to teach argumentative writing through debate (Dickson)
- > writing assignments out of an O. Henry short story and an assignment to write about a murder for different purposes and audiences (Roessing)
- > detailed instructions for setting up and using an interactive feedback method to respond to students' papers (Krucli)
- > a variety of writing prompts to help students think more deeply about the literature they read (Shosh)
- > style analysis of a Hemingway short story, experiments with paratactic style, and seven suggestions for a final paper on Hemingway (Garrigues)
- > using letter writing and speech writing to explore correctness in language (Shafer)
- > teaching peer response to writing (VanDeWeghe)
- > effective writing assignments (Lindblom)

Many aspects of writing instruction are controversial and complex, but teaching organization that supports purpose and audience is central to both

the debates and the complexity. How do we help developing writers understand the concept of form or genre without reducing that concept to instructional formulas? If students believe, as Kelly's classmates did, that an essay is "a whole bunch of words that have to make sense," how do we help them shape those words so that they do make sense?

Reading widely should be an essential part of writing instruction so that students internalize a variety of forms and genres. While teaching high school, I suddenly realized that we had been teaching students to read what they seldom wrote (novels, plays, poems) and to write what they seldom read (essays). No wonder it was so difficult for them to write a thesis sentence. Because they had never read any, they were reliant on my descriptions of the component parts. No amount of instruction could substitute for the familiarity that would have come with reading.

Our understanding of form comes, in part, from reading, but we must avoid the temptation to simplify instruction by translating that understanding into a teachable formula. John Mayher cautions:

[W]hatever was tentative and fuzzy in the original attempt to distinguish between form or function hardens and takes on an independent existence once it is used as part of teaching. This hardening of the categories . . . has led to teaching such things as narrative, descriptive, expository, and argumentative or persuasive prose, or the five-paragraph theme, or . . . transforming descriptive distinctions like James Britton's among transactional, expressive, and poetic writing (1970) into things which should be taught. (163)

"Hardening of the categories" can result in bland, formulaic prose rather than the playful, passionate writing we like to read and write.

A prime example of the effects of formulaic instruction appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* June 15. A middle school principal in Illinois, commenting on the pressure of the state tests and too much sameness in students' writing, said, "even my thank-you notes read like little ISAT tests. 'I really liked having lunch with you. Here are three reasons why'" (Dell'Angela).

Anne Lamott believes a writer's goal is "to help others have this sense of—please forgive me—wonder, of seeing things anew, things that can catch us off guard, that break in on our small, bordered worlds" (100). This is an important tension to maintain—that between shape and surprise—and we see it done well

when students have choice, control, and an understanding of the options available to them as writers. We are seldom surprised by what students write when a formula is uppermost in their minds.

Recently I saw what adolescent writers can do when they understand form and avoid formula, when purpose and audience are clear and compelling. The Student Press Initiative in New York City schools is designed to “develop, foster, and promote writing across the curriculum through student publication” (McKibbin and Daly i). You should see these books! In *Filling in the Blanks*, more than one hundred eighth graders reflect on the qualities of effective teachers they have known. As Erick Gordon explains in “English in the City” in this issue, students knew they were writing for preservice and inservice teachers and received feedback on drafts from some of them. The production quality is excellent; the book is the size of a trade paperback with a glossy cover. *About Face: Portraits of Activism* is a stunning display of writing, photography, and design from seniors in Literature of Social Justice. As Mary Whittemore, their English teacher, writes, “In choosing a subject, conducting an interview, composing a photograph, and finally crafting an article, each student has taken a political stand on what matters in the world and what is necessary for a socially just society” (Whittemore and Mello 7). The Student Press Initiative, directed by Erick Gordon, is a program of the Center for the Professional Education of Teachers at Teachers College, Columbia University, directed by Ruth Vinz. Contact Erick for more information at [epg10@columbia.edu](mailto:epg10@columbia.edu).

On the cover of *English Journal*, three-dimensional reptiles form from a two-dimensional drawing on what appears to be a writer’s desk. Art by M. C. Escher struck me as an ideal choice for an issue ad-

ressing form, because his body of work depicts structure, movement, and change. We recognize and appreciate his technique, but he noted in a speech in 1953 that the artist’s aims were for “something else than a perfectly executed print. His aim is to depict dreams, ideas or problems in such a way that other people can observe and consider them” (Boal et al. 71). In 1965 he wrote that he wanted “to show that we live in a beautiful and orderly world and not in a chaos without norms, as we sometimes seem to. My subjects are also often playful. I cannot help mocking all our unwavering certainties. It is, for example, great fun deliberately to confuse two and three dimensions, the plane and space, or to poke fun at gravity” (124). He seems to have had great fun with *Reptiles* (1943).

I hope that you have fun with the ideas in this issue. Let me know what you think or contact the authors directly. Let’s talk about teaching writing. There’s a lot to say and do.

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