

Changing Practices for the L2 Writing Classroom: Moving Beyond the Five-Paragraph Essay

Nigel A. Caplan and Ann M. Johns (Eds.) (2019).
University of Michigan Press [Kindle edition]

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The book *Changing Practices for the L2 Writing Classroom: Moving Beyond the Five-Paragraph Essay* begins, in the editors' introduction, with a definition of the five-paragraph essay as a formulaic organizational pattern that is devoid of purpose, audience, and authentic genre conventions and innovation. In support of this assertion, the book has a wide-ranging scope, addressing first-year composition, writing across the curriculum, graduate writing, and K–12 writing, to name a few areas of writing instruction. The editors appear to have selected authors whose core mission seems to caution students and teachers against engaging in meaningless writing, suggesting instead working toward understanding the power of engaging in meaningful composition as a means of achieving personal goals in various contexts. To this end, chapter contributors focus on the importance of teaching students to distinguish between, and practice writing in, various genres that are situated, purpose-oriented, and audience-driven. Most genres that students need to be familiar with are considered to fall into one of three main categories: description, analysis, and argument. Within this framework, specific examples of genres that can be explored depending on context might include reflective annotated bibliographies, literature reviews, and restaurant reviews.

The book comprises 10 chapters. Chapter 1 provides a historical overview of the five-paragraph essay, criticizing its (mis)use as a quick fix for struggling L2 writers. Chapter 2 reviews research on the genre approach to the teaching and learning of writing, suggesting that genre conventions can be flexible. Chapter 3 discusses writing instruction globally, demonstrating that much of the world does not rely on the five-paragraph essay formula, except where testing is influential. Chapter 4 criticizes the five-paragraph essay's lack of ability to meet the social needs for writing among elementary school learners by its failure to discuss the unique structures and language features these learners need. Chapter 5 introduces the importance of scaffolding and adaptive teaching, arguing that the static five-paragraph essay approach is not a scaffold. Chapter 6 reviews transfer research, demonstrating how starting with a static genre such as an open letter can serve as a foundation leading to meaningful learning and knowledge transfer to writing required in other classes and in the workplace. Chapter 7 reviews research on undergraduate writing tasks and describes how helping students bring disciplinary assignments and prompts to a writing class can help teach the situatedness¹ of writing, exploring the rhetorical situation of the class, for example, in detail. Chapter 8 delineates how teachers can prepare students to write across disciplines by teaching the difference between argument, analysis, and description. Chapter 9 discusses

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the importance of a genre-based approach to graduate-level writing. Finally, to describe the forces that continue to propel the five-paragraph essay forward, Chapter 10 discusses the role of entrenched high-stakes testing and existing erroneous attitudes and beliefs in preparing students for an unlikely future of five-paragraph essay writing. Each chapter had a theoretical research section and a practical section with templates and activities to supplement a writing class, all debunking the myth of the usefulness of the five-paragraph essay and staking a space for a flexible genre approach.

The book presents resources of practical activities to aid student writers. One possibility is to have students visit the online repository of student writing, the Michigan Corpus of Upper-Level Student Papers (MCULSP), where they can examine samples of successful argumentative essays that are written for various disciplines. Such an activity can help students see how they might choose to go beyond a prescribed form of writing to achieve a particular goal within a disciplinary framework. Another resource suggested in the book is the *New York Times* Learning Network, which provides mentor texts for student writers to model. In addition to these two examples, the book encourages students to bring prompts from discipline-specific classes to general composition classes, where they would analyze the purpose and audience expected by the professor who supplied the prompt. Such an activity can help students see writing as context-sensitive, purposeful, and audience-driven; it can also serve as an opportunity to understand the role of genre conventions in choices they must make in that context, along with exploring possibilities of genre innovation. However, while the book acknowledges the role of scaffolding in moving away from a rigid five-paragraph essay formula to analyzing diverse authentic genre conventions, it does not seem to consider teaching the five-paragraph essay itself as a relevant or helpful scaffolding step. Instead, practical recommendations concluded with a call to move away from the term “essay,” which might result in students resorting to the traditional, often rigid, ways of approaching writing. In fact, questioning the nature of the essay might be helpful as a first-day activity: getting students to think critically about engrained concepts and then moving to consider flexible approaches to writing.

To emphasize the importance of the international dimension to the collection, I note Chapter 3’s highlighting of the fact that many global institutions approach the teaching of writing as part of teaching language across the curriculum. This approach permits the teaching of situated genres over a generic organizational formula. My personal experience with the Algerian context lends support to this construct, with English for specific-purposes courses—for example, in scientific and engineering disciplines helping students and scholars read, write, and publish. Writing as such, however, does tend to receive little attention in Algeria as its own entity, perhaps because it is widely taught as a discrete skill and a means of language learning. Such a goal for learning writing might limit its potential as a means for thinking, learning, and achieving personal and professional goals. That said, recent attention to plurilingual literacy studies can pave the way for developing a stronger writing culture. In the end, while a stronger focus on writing as a means to learning might benefit non-Anglophone contexts, incorporating reading and writing in many languages in Anglophone contexts can also enhance access to diverse content among the myriad advantages of bi/multilingualism.

Finally—while not meant as criticism, because the book editors do make a strong case in support of moving away from the five-paragraph essay in a variety of diverse contexts—an area that could address the abovementioned concerns in teaching writing might be experiential learning. Unless an experiential learning component—which I realize can have resource and logistical constraints—is incorporated into teaching, we perhaps may only approximate authentic communication while hoping that students will transfer much of what they learn about purpose, audience, and genre to other contexts. Writing that is situated as a component of internships, for example, or tied to initiatives across the curriculum or at least current local or personal issues can be made authentically and immediately meaningful. Without an authentic experiential learning component, it could be challenging to address the all-important point raised in the book: Helping students distinguish between demonstrating comprehension of material when they are asked to show comprehension on the one hand, and adapting materials to new rhetorical

situations when they are expected to do so on the other. Current authentic rhetorical situations may effortlessly help students distinguish between describing acquired knowledge, analyzing it, and applying it through writing.

Ultimately, the book nicely draws on interdisciplinary knowledge of rhetorical theory and genre research in rhetoric and writing studies and the communicative approach in applied linguistics, all of which converge to support students and teachers in the pursuit of effective and context-sensitive communication. Largely informed by the genre approach, the authors build on existing work in the area, bringing together over a decade's worth of research (e.g., Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010; Swales & Feak, 2012; Tardy, 2016; White, 2008) to advocate effectively for the teaching of meaningful, genre-based writing to L2 students.

References

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Notes

¹Situatedness refers to contextually specific norms that inform writers' choices in a particular genre. An example, discussed in Chapter 9, is that of the dissertation proposal genre that may vary in page length from five to over 100 pages, depending on departmental norms.

