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# The Five-Paragraph Essay and the Deficit Model of Education

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There is a seductive “commonsense” logic to two opinion pieces that have appeared over the last two years in the “Speaking My Mind” section of *English Journal*: Byung-In Seo’s “Defending the Five-Paragraph Essay,” which appeared in the November 2007 issue, and Kerri Smith’s “In Defense of the Five-Paragraph Essay,” which appeared in March 2006. These two educators are not merely giving their personal views but, we would argue, are also speaking the minds of many teachers. They speak a logic that is important to challenge precisely because this logic perpetuates the commonsense myth that the five-paragraph theme is an actual “form,” and that “forming” in writing is simply slotting information into prefabricated formulas rather than a complex process of meaning-making and negotiation between a writer’s purposes and audiences’ needs. They are speaking a logic that makes this damaging mechanistic practice appear to be an acceptable survival technique for overwhelmed, overtaxed teachers. They speak “down” from the college level in favor of a made-up-for-school essay format, and their voices (albeit uninflected by scholarship and research) can be used as justification to insist on this dominant school practice. Smith even congratulates “efforts to *force* high school teachers back to teaching the basics of essay writing” (16; italics added), when there is nothing “basic” about the five-paragraph essay. Its enforcement, however, is certainly felt by many students and their teachers.

This format is one of those school-created “things” that persist, much like the “modes” of discourse. They persist because they have been enshrined in textbooks and tested by the testing establishment, even after scholars in composition

have documented the irrationality of their use for over 30 years.<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Connors’s “The Rise and Fall of the Modes of Discourse” shows, for example, how and why such artificial discourse “structures” are outmoded and not useful, and he argues, using Kitzhaber’s 1953 claim, that “They represent an unrealistic view of the writing process, a view that assumes writing is done by formula and in a social vacuum. They turn the attention of both teacher and student toward an academic exercise instead of toward a meaningful act of communication in a social context” (119). Teaching writing (rather than teaching formats) takes an understanding of the research and scholarship in composition, takes understanding of oneself as a writer, and takes an in-depth understanding of how writers truly develop *as writers*. Articles such as Seo’s and Smith’s serve only to perpetuate the myth of the five-paragraph essay, advance the power of the testing establishment, and make it more difficult for K–12 teachers to enact alternatives that empower students to truly write. Why, then, does the five-paragraph theme persist when years of research offer richer possibilities for teaching students by engaging them in writing genres that actually appear in the world outside of school? Why does this dominant school practice, which more often hurts rather than helps writers, need yearly voicing in the pages of this journal?

## The Problem of Common Sense

Students are subjected to this ill-conceived and outmoded practice because of the commonsense wisdom that supports it—its seemingly straightforward, self-evident logic. Advocating for the five-

paragraph essay implies that students' problems with writing are the teacher's fault for not doing something so simple as having students write five sentences per paragraph or have three reasons. If only teachers would follow this practice, so the argument goes, writings' ills would be cured. The logic that Smith and Seo are using is what Janet Emig would call "magical thinking," the belief that "children's learning to write is the direct outcome of explicit teaching" (136).

Kay Halasek's *A Pedagogy of Possibility: Bakhtinian Perspectives on Composition Studies* offers a compelling argument for the ideological reasons for the persistence of the five-paragraph essay. There is, according to Halasek, a dangerous paternalism surrounding this pedagogical practice, which stems from objectivist rather than constructivist notions of language and discourse. Such practices, she argues, are repressive acts that compel students to master this one form before proceeding. The premise that this form is somehow "foundational"—"an all purpose approach to writing" (99)—is false because it ignores the generative nature of forming and "disregards the intimate relationship among audience, social context, subject, and author" (100). Even Seo admits that students "need to be taught that writing comes in different forms, and the content is reflected in the form" (16); yet, her insistence on the five-paragraph essay as a "basic form" for struggling writers creates a needless impediment to composing. Imposing an arbitrary format makes learning to write just that much harder, and for no good reason, like learning to play tennis in leg-chains (Knoblauch and Brannon 47). Writers need, instead, opportunities to write, to participate within and through multiple genres because it is in and through writing, over time, through various "authorizing events" (103), that writers gain affiliations, those relationships that mark one as participant in various discourses.

What is troubling to us in Seo's and Smith's reaffirmation of the common sense is that their logic doesn't have to account for this format's lack of existence anywhere outside of the classroom, Smith's undocumented claim that the writing of Virginia Woolf and Oliver Sacks, among others, "adheres" to a five-paragraph theme structure (16) notwithstanding. They merely repeat the building-block mantra of behaviorist conceptions of teaching

while their advocacy masks the reality that the five-paragraph theme is taught year after year, from elementary school through college, in course after course. "Speaking their minds" thus only serves to reinscribe the five-paragraph essay's iconic status, not advance new knowledge in the field.

Even more troubling is that these authors' "opinions" have been published by the leading journal for English language arts teachers. It would seem to us that opinions represented in *English Journal* would open up possibilities for new developments in our field, or would, at least, be informed by professional wisdom. Yet it appears "commonsense" opinions are not scrutinized in ways that scholarship is scrutinized. These authors were not required to research practices in the schools, or review and critique the professional literature to the contrary to gain their authority. Their opinions were, nonetheless, published. As "opinions," their ideas are not intended to be engaged. These opinions are, well, opinions, rearticulations of conventional wisdom and the sustaining of the status quo.

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### **Limited Vision Equals Limited Instruction: The Deficit Model of Education**

Our concern is for *what* the five-paragraph essay teaches students and with *what* the five-paragraph essay does *not* teach them; our concern is with what students learn to do by writing in this format and with what students will *not* learn because of the continued persistence of this mythic form. Our concern is for the students who are subjected to this form and spend their intellectual lives constrained by its insistence.

Smith and Seo couple the five-paragraph essay with the needs of students, a need based on a deficit understanding of those students and an efficiency model of education. The deficit model is often used by educational "consultants" such as Ruby Payne<sup>2</sup>

who get by with blaming the victim and offering a quick fix. When students are considered lacking—lacking organization, lacking ideas to write about, lacking understanding—writing in an arbitrary formula merely sustains the deficit perception. Students learn that writing means following a set of instructions, filling in the blanks. Such writing mirrors working-class life, which requires little individual thinking and creativity combined with lots of monotony and following orders. It's obvious what training the five-paragraph essay is really practice for. Writing, we argue, should not be yet another way to train students to be obedient citizens, but rather provide them with opportunities to develop their thinking as individuals, making meaning through the act of composing.

Smith's and Seo's deficit understanding of students is consistent; the only difference between them is the kinds of students who they see as needing the five-paragraph essay. Smith wants students going to college to get this "foundation," while Seo

claims "at-risk" students are the ones who need it. In the school world, however, the only difference between the two groups is the degree to which the formula is insisted on. Most students do not reach the advanced seminar at Berkeley like Smith did; most students never get a Sharon Marcus as a teacher who demands that their thinking move to the "next level," like Smith did (17). In fact, most students spend their academic lives appearing disorganized to their teachers and structuring their thoughts into pre-

fabricated formats. Most students never experience the power of their ideas or the structuring of them within a larger conversation, never get the chance to use writing to think, feel, and wonder.

While the five-paragraph essay might appear to be a construct of middle grades and high schools, its droppings trail into early childhood in the form of skills-based literacy instruction and a deficit model of understanding of even the youngest children. Children in the lower grades who are con-

structed in behaviorist deficit terms are given step-by-step instruction. Children who "lack reading skills" are taught phonics, taught basic sounds before they are taught words, taught words before they are taught sentences, taught sentences before paragraphs. The deficit model does not allow students to participate as writers and language users—as readers and writers in the world.

In classrooms where children are constructed as knowledgeable students, children are writing *before* they can read and experiencing literature to explore how writers craft their stories.<sup>3</sup> Children in these classrooms understand that writers make meaning in different ways and in different genres. Writers use their creativity, their lives, and their language to make sense of their experiences. In these classrooms, the youngest writers begin writing and enacting their stories during imaginative play, making visible what is important in their worlds and thus what is important to them and their writing. The diversity and the differences of children's experiences are honored and drawn on in the classroom. There is no insistence that every child's writing looks exactly the same or is structured in the same way. The multiplicity of voices, experiences, and stories make these writing classrooms rich and exciting for learning.

A deficit understanding of students would see the diversity of languages and cultures in classrooms as a problem rather than a strength. A deficit understanding labels the language of low socioeconomic students as a problem, often marking them as ignorant. The deficit model labels these same children as remedial or even having learning disabilities. This model is largely responsible for placing minorities or children of the poor in remedial classes. The deficit model gives these children worksheet drudgery and formulaic writing that will occupy the students into passivity.

The effects of the pervasiveness and the insistence on the five-paragraph essay format can be seen at the opposite end of schooling that Smith argues for. In Jennifer P. Courtney's study of first-year writing students at a large southeastern university, students were interviewed about their experiences with writing in school, and they responded that throughout their schooling their writing "had to be a certain length" and had to follow "certain rules." These college students reported

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that their experiences in school were constrained and constraining:

“[Writing] had to look a certain way.”

“I wanted to write about more than three ideas, but because it didn’t fit the format, my teacher forced me ‘to leave it out,’ and I was so upset because I didn’t want to leave it out . . . the format didn’t work for me.”

“[Writing the five-paragraph theme] was not my method but I had to do it.”

“I was really frustrated by the format. It was their three ideas and their three paragraphs.”

Students who spend their primary, middle, and secondary school years rehearsing the five-paragraph essay end up blaming themselves for not getting it right, or hating writing, or believing they aren’t measuring up. If the writing doesn’t fit the mold, then they are the ones with the problem (after all, their teachers taught the format to them). They either grow silent or seek out classes that allow them to fill in the blanks or circle true or false.

### First Things First, But Not Necessarily in That Order<sup>4</sup>: The Problem of Efficiency

Teachers using the logic of Smith and Seo see the five-paragraph theme as the starting point; once students learn this structure, they can then move on, become creative, and develop more sophisticated ways to get organized. Seo, for example, claims, “Once the [five-paragraph essay] framework has been established, they [students] can employ structural and organizational creativity” (16). The five-paragraph essay, with its five sentences per paragraph, appears to be an efficient way to make the writing organized. It is efficient to have students follow orders and not think for themselves. This sort of five-paragraph programming is designed to make teachers feel as though they are giving their deficient students the tools they need to become literate, making them over from ignorant nonwriters into accomplished test essayists. Some students like Smith might even believe that they learned to write this way and then arrogantly insist that everyone must now be subjected to this abuse.

In reality these students and their teachers are being groomed to be good little automatons—

standardized, uniform cogs in the reproduction of the status quo. As Shana V. Woodward’s 2007 study, “Conceptualizing and Enacting Writing: How Teachers of Writing Construct Identity and Practice within a Complex Figured World of School,” indicates, even highly trained, award-winning teachers work from the assumption that the five-paragraph essay is the necessary first step in succeeding in school life. These teachers believe they are being “good teachers,” putting their faith in the institution of schooling and helping their students, they believe, succeed in it. So rather than teach writing, the teachers spend weeks closely monitoring and efficiently requiring students to write topic sentences with two supporting examples, slot in transitional devices, and decorate paragraphs with vocabulary words. Because of the intense pressures from the testing industry, teachers believe that they are required to provide constant structure, scaffolding every aspect of the writing process for students, from the number of sentences per paragraph to the inserting of transition words. Woodward

understands these practices not as a fault of the teachers but produced by the complexity of how teachers work in isolation from one another, with self-imposed pressures and *English Journal* validation for teaching in mechanistic ways. They get caught up, Woodward argues, in “the ‘concreteness’ of the situation (Freire, 2000)”; the teacher sees little room or possibility to do anything otherwise. While these teachers believe they are helping students gain access to the institution by giving them step-by-step ways to write, they are often frustrated by the students’ inability to perform writing according to the standards set before them.

While it might seem to “efficient teachers” that they have a shortcut to help their students succeed and get ahead, they are in fact employing the “efficiency excuse” to rationalize sorting their students into the haves and have-nots. While it may appear to teachers that they are accomplishing something by stressing the formula, they are merely looking for a topic sentence, counting the examples,

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looking for transition words, and not worrying at all about engaging what writers are saying. When they receive the stacks of “horrible” essays, they have no recourse but to continue to teach in the same old worn-out ways and continue to blame the previous teachers for not doing their jobs by stressing the formula. Students who can conform learn that what they think or write does not matter as long as they have the requisite number of sentences and paragraphs. Students who do not conform to the five-paragraph-essay indoctrination, whose thoughts do not easily lend themselves to the five-paragraph-theme format, learn quickly that they and those ideas do not belong in that classroom. Jean-Francois Lyotard posits that such practices breed terror. If new or different ideas are too destabilizing to the system, the message to those who think differently is, change your ideas or else. The highly efficient five-paragraph theme is a great tool for keeping such destabilizing voices under control.

And so, most students learn that school writing has nothing to do with them or their ideas. The

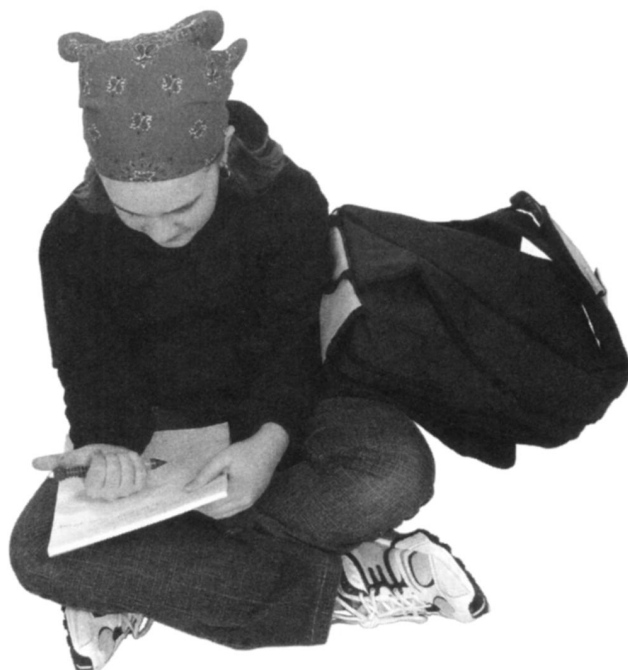
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students’ place is to shut up and follow the rules, confine their ideas to three, write five sentences in each paragraph whether you need them or not, and do as you are told. These rules deny the literacy practices the children bring with them to the classroom and deny students avenues to think critically under the guise of “helping.” The reality is that students are taught this formula year after year, and few, if any, ever escape it. By control-


ling what can be said and how, the five-paragraph-five-sentence formula controls the way students view themselves as writers and thinkers. Given that this deficit model of writing instruction occurs throughout their education, the result of such control permeates the lives and possibilities of students. The five-paragraph-five-sentence formula is always insisted on most urgently and most vigorously when students’ languages and lives appear to need “control.” Teachers can absolve themselves of the responsibility for knowing best practices in teaching writing and insist that the five-paragraph formula is in the students’ interests, while the effects of their

practices silence students and cause students to blame themselves for their failure to comply. And the behaviorist/objectivist educational establishment rolls on, unquestioned and unchanged.

As teachers of writing we call into question the five-paragraph essay and the deficit model of education. We question both the teachers who insist on continually advocating this formulaic practice and the scholarly journals that publish their articles. As writers we know that when we begin to form a piece of writing, we do not first think of a thesis statement with three points, craft topic sentences on each point for each body paragraph, and conclude by restating those three points again. Instead, we write messy drafts, play with the language, ask colleagues to read our drafts, and continue to write and rewrite until we are convinced that we have formed a piece that conveys our intended purpose to our intended audience. We know as teachers that our students—elementary, middle, high school, and college; those whose language practices fit within school-sanctioned discourse and those whose language practices appear “outside”—benefit from this recursive, social practice of writing as well. As teachers we, too, have experienced Freire’s notion of “concreteness,” and as teacher-researchers we have discovered more space to imagine *other* ways of doing things. As teacher leaders we hope to make visible for our colleagues





the space for classroom practices that draw on students' language and cultural backgrounds. We see learning as interestingly complicated, messy, and, certainly, not efficient. We understand the need for time, time to think and explore, time to write badly to write well, time to learn and grow within and through various discourses. With our students, we write our opinions and beliefs, write to reflect and make meaning of our worlds, write to imagine new possibilities and to inspire, write to feel the power of our words on others, write to make a difference in our world. Our students learn that their ideas can be shaped and formed to meet the needs of different readers, their ideas are written to be engaged, their ideas matter. And if we have done our jobs, our students will see themselves as writers, full participants in the ongoing construction of knowledge and in the changing of the world. 

## Notes

1. Archives of the National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy are housed on the website of the National Writing Project: <http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/doc/resources/techreports.csp>. These materials review much of the research that has been conducted in the United States on writing and teaching through 1995.
2. For a recent critique of Ruby Payne's work see Joel E. Dworin and Randy Boomer, "What We All (Supposedly) Know about the Poor: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Ruby Payne's 'Framework,'" in *English Education*, 40.2 (2008): 101–21.
3. Many researchers have documented how children write before they can read. For a review of some of this research and an extended argument for teaching writing before reading, see Peter Elbow, "Write First: Putting Writ-

ing before Reading Is an Effective Approach for Teaching and Learning," *Educational Leadership*, 62 (Jan. 2004), 8–14.

4. This formulation of putting first-things first in whatever order is attributed to Dr. Who.

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