

A Study of the Practicality of the Structured Essay

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構造化された小論文の実用性に関する一考察

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Writing is a craft. Crafts require tools. No one carpentry tool can suit all a carpenter's needs. Likewise, no one writing tool can suit all a writer's needs. This essay is a structured essay to defend the practicality of structured essays. Throughout, various authors are quoted, and use different terminology. Some call it a five-paragraph essay or theme, others use formulaic or formula, such as in reference to the Schaffer formula. These terms remain as they are in the quotes, and some references made directly regarding the quotes. Otherwise, the term structured essay is used throughout to mean the similar concept. In addition to different terms, the authors quoted also have varied views on the structured essay. This essay will lay out these views regarding the structured essay and how it affects students and teachers. Moreover, it will look at the various analogies for the structured essay and attempt to find analogies to better explain what a structured essay is and how it should be used. And, it should be used. It is a tool without positive or negative attributes. Apologies to William Shakespeare but, structured essays are neither good nor bad, thinking makes them so. Please put aside your thinking as you make your way through the essay and see if you can find merit in the much-maligned structured essay.

The structured essay format tends to divide people into two camps—residents of camp one like such a structure for what it brings to the classroom, those in camp two think it is the worst thing to ever foul the classroom. The following compiles various arguments—specifically the effects of structured essays on thinking and interest. Readers should keep in mind the authors quoted do not necessarily reside in the camp their point seems to defend, but the quotes taken from their essays do—this author is not taking quotes out of context to sway opinions. The first volley supports

camp one. Haluska (2012) points out writing while adhering to a structured essays format can help students think. “The writer asserts the opinion, explains it, refutes the opposite view, then re-asserts the opinion. That pattern can help students produce essays that challenge them to think” (p. 30). The ability to parse an opinion with other points of view is a valuable skill and conceivably a bold claim for the structured essay. The counterpoint from camp two comes from Wiley (2000), “In attempting to take the mystery away from writing and make it more accessible, the formulaic approach winds up hindering students from exploring their ideas, reactions, and interpretations” (p. 63). Thus, the opinion students are prevented from thinking when they are forced to write structured essays. And, the arguments continue, as LaSalle (2015) expresses joy at a student’s progress after having learned how to write a structured essay. “She routinely elaborates on her ideas. Until this assignment, Student A’s writing did not contain as many deliberate attempts to express her own opinion, cite evidence she read herself, or form original arguments” (p. 10). LaSalle additionally notes several students flourished after learning the structured essay. Camp two people would say several students is more anecdote than evidence. Moreover, they would quote George Hillocks (cited in Manzo 2001) “The five-paragraph essay is notable for its lack of thought.” And, his further clarification, “It’s organized ignorance” (p. 2). Hillocks credentials add more weight to this quote. He conducted an extensive study of writing assessments in America, resulting in the publication of *The Testing Trap: How State Writing Assessments Control Learning*. Next, Campbell (2014) seems to support camp one when relating how teaching the structured essay, “appears to offer a way into writing for students who need help in organizing their thoughts” (p. 61). This quote is however followed on the same page with a refutation, thus supporting the camp two stance, “Its offer of structure stops the very thinking we need students to do. Their focus becomes fitting sentences into the correct slots rather than figuring out for themselves what they’re trying to say and the best structure for saying it” (p. 61). Thus, Campbell (2014) shows a stronger allegiance to camp two, despite stating while in the process of writing “I found myself wishing for a formula I could turn to to help me organize my thinking—to find a way in” (p. 61). So, perchance we all could use a bit of structure to help us write. Camp two would disagree and say, “the rigidity imposed by a formulaic approach will surely produce much unintelligent, dull thinking” (Rico, 1988, p. 58). This claim of dull thinking leads to the next demerit of structured essays from camp two. Structured essays bore readers. Dr. Cognard-Black (2016) in the Great Courses lecture series *Becoming a Great Essayist* says, “we are not going

to explore the five-paragraph essay. I'm interested in talking with you about the art of the essay, not cookie-cutter pieces that leave readers yawning, wondering what they're going to have for dinner." So, her opinion is clear that there is no art to the structured essay. From camp one, Haluska (2012) is the rare voice to mention joy—specifically the joy of understanding how to use the elements of a structured essay, "The concept was instantly, joyfully, obvious. Make your claim, support it in steps with evidence, and then declare victory. My advisor was wise to avoid calling the model a 'five-paragraph essay,' thus saving me from fixating on too rigid a structure" (p. 29). Everyone can appreciate the joy that comes from understanding something and the structured essay can lead to this understanding. Nevertheless, camp two people would stress the form itself lacks character. Barlow (2000) calls the five-paragraph essay "voiceless and antiseptic" (p. 40). A sentiment repeated by Manzo (2001), "Among many English/language arts teachers, the 'five-paragraph essay' is shorthand for dry, methodical writing" (p. 2). So, structured essays are not seen as special snowflakes; instead, each one simply designed to bore. Thus, structured essays appear to be doing more harm than good as they limit thinking and induce boredom. So, the question is then, why are they taught?

Not everything taught in the classroom is meant to be used forever in the form taught. Structured essays are no different. Some elements will be useful into perpetuity and others should be laid aside as student progress. The true usefulness of the structured essay in the classroom is ease with which it can be taught and graded. Teachers, however, must beware not to teach students to be completely dependent on the format alone. Some would say the structured essay is a positive part of the classroom:

Persuasive essays have the intent of teaching young minds how to write a thesis statement, how to learn principles of organization, and how to practice, use, and cite secondary sources. And this essay form, which is sometimes called the test essay or the five-paragraph essay, is now the gold standard for taking timed exams, writing speeches, or writing research papers in college-level classes. (Dr. Cognard-Black 2016, p. 16)

This quote, taken in conjunction with Dr. Cognard-Black's quote from the paragraph above regarding the boring, artless nature of the five-paragraph essay would

seem to relegate structured essays only to the classroom. Induced boredom aside, structured essays come across rather positively. As readers may expect, there are other points of view. Campbell (2014) cites Courtney, and Fanwetti, Bushrow, & DeWeese to say in universities “First-year writing courses often focus on unteaching the formula” (p. 62). Once again George Hillocks (cited in Manzo 2001) “contends that the kind of instruction promoted by state assessments is of low quality and of little use to students” (p. 2). The reason, again, the structured essay tendency toward “organized ignorance” stated above. Brannon et al. (2008) starts down a slippery slope regarding structured essays:

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. (p. 18)

It seems a far leap to go from teaching structured essays to creating indoctrinating stuffed shirts—an argument often leveled at compulsory education and outside the boundaries of an essay only about structured essays. Teachers may be motivated to teach them because of the ease with which they can be taught. Barlow (2000) admits he has taught structured essays and justifies it as such, “Those of us who teach writing like them because they have nice, identifiable components” (p. 40). Nunnally (1991) would agree, as well as point out the ease with which a structured essay can be graded, “The discreteness of its parts and their functions—makes it practical to teach as well as eminently gradable” (p. 68). Since assessments are an inevitable part of modern education, it is natural that teachers consider grading when choosing what to teach. The problem comes when teachers become too dependent on the format itself, “merely looking for a topic sentence, counting the examples, looking for transition words, and not worrying at all about engaging what writers are saying” (Brannon et al., 2008, p. 19). Therefore, if teachers teach the structured essay simply for the structure and to make their job of grading easier, the results benefit the teachers but not all students. Wiley (2000) says only students who were encouraged to read from a young age and learned to share their opinions, would benefit from learning structured essays. “These students enjoy a decisive advantage over struggling writers who are not accustomed to offering interpretations and opinions about what they read and

who have no confidence that their views will be considered seriously by their teachers" (pp. 65–66). Once again, a systemic problem, going beyond just the structured essay. Nevertheless, something teachers should consider when teaching. Some teachers, however, believe, despite the claims otherwise, the structured essay is what students need. Nunnally (1991) writes, "This highly structured format for essay writing provides for effective inculcation of concepts such as unity, coherence, and development" (p. 67). He then goes on to tell of a student who was trained using the five-paragraph theme (FPT) formula had internalized the skills and was still developing as a writer, "I saw no evidence that she had forgotten the skills that her rigorous training had provided her. Rather, the skills learned within the confines of the FPT gave her the confidence to explore and grow" (p. 70). Haluska (2012) adds to this positive assessment with, "standard formulaic paragraphs—topic sentence, explanation, evidence—can help students learn how to write fact-based essays" (p. 27). Some critics, however, would say teachers are too focused on structure at the expense of actual teaching. Rorschach (1985) relates a story told through mindreading a teacher, "Because Tammy's teacher believes she needs structure to help her write a successful essay (otherwise, why would he teach the five-paragraph theme?), he suspends his normal reader reactions and asks for very little from her" (p. 12). The parenthetical question was added by Rorschach as an opinionated emphasis that teachers do not want to teach such essays. Readers should note the several quotes above from teachers who feel otherwise. In addition, this author is left wondering just whose mind was being read. Smith (2006) points a way around the debate to a commonplace everyone can agree upon regarding teaching structured essays, insisting it should not be about teaching rules, "the three body paragraphs are just a guideline, as any good teacher knows—it's that introduce-develop-conclude structure that gives the form its integrity, not the three "example" paragraphs in the middle" (p. 16). Even, Wiley (2000), who believes we should resist teaching structured essays writes:

I do not believe formulaic writing is the actual villain in this classroom drama. Rather it is the pedagogical blindness that formulaic writing leads to that disturbs me and that seems to be the real culprit, and it is the seeming advantages that such an approach offers the harried classroom teacher that create the inevitable blind spots. (p. 61)

Thus, the crux is revealed. It may not be a matter of whether to teach structured

essays. It may be more a matter of how to teach structured essays. Those who belittle the structured essay as only being taught to pass a test should note the observation by Lucy McCormack Calkins (cited in Manzo 2001), "When writing was not on the tests, it was something that some teachers taught well and a lot of teachers didn't teach" (p. 1). Thus, we should question what teachers should focus on when teaching. Campbell (2014) would say "It is not about following a formula; it's about thinking, evidence, and audience" (p.63). Nunnally (1991) would second this notion, "Students need to understand that they practice on five-paragraph theme to learn the principles of effective composition, principles that can be applied to any writing task, not to master a single format that will answer all their writing needs" (p. 70). So, structured essays are about learning principles, not formats. Students need to go beyond the format. Manning (2006) would stress, "our students should never think that good writing is any set length. Good writing has no set number of paragraphs or number of words because each author writes about a topic in a unique manner" (p. 69). Thus, many opinions seem to coalesce around the idea that teachers must be flexible when teaching structured essays. Wiley (2000) suggests perhaps the structured essay—specifically the Schaffer formula for writing essays—could be used later in the writing process. "Wouldn't it be better for students to explore their reactions in whatever form they wish in early drafts and subsequently use the Schaffer formula as a general guide in later drafts?" (p. 64). Others would say structured paragraphs should be the first step and the follow through is the most important thing, which, unfortunately, some teachers find difficult. "The five-paragraph essay and 'the writing process' are good starting points, but we should not let our students stop there just because the instruction gets trickier" (Barlow (2000) p. 42). Teaching trickier stuff requires teacher training. Wiley (2000) writes teachers have good intentions to teach beyond the formula but since they "do not receive extensive training and consistent support, they typically fall back on default strategies in the classroom" (p. 65). Sally Hampton (cited in Manzo 2001) points out that "in the worst classrooms the types of writing emphasized on tests are all that is taught, often through rote drills." She goes on to tell teachers when learning about tests, "Once you understand the criteria, it can either allow you to see the possibilities, or it can narrow what you do instructionally" (p. 2). The teacher therefore decides how far a student can go with a structured essay. It has become clear that structured paragraphs can be one method of learning how to write. Some students will take to it easily. Some will need more instruction. Some will not go beyond using it. Some will transcend it. Teachers would do well to seek out training

on how to teach in such a way as to understand and expand student writing potential while maintaining a manageable workload.

It may be the case that the structured essay, indeed, just is a tool. It may not be the best tool for every writing need. It is, however, a tool for getting student started writing. Maybe we need a good analogy. For example, the structured essay is like the hammer. All hammers have the same shape more-or-less—handles and heads—but there is variety in them. Each has its limits in what it can do. A rubber mallet cannot drive a nail. A ball peen hammer cannot remove a nail. But it is nice to have both. The greater variety of tools we have, the more possibilities we have. Some may say an essay is more complex than a hammer. This author agrees. That is where the analogy begins to buckle. But, before it breaks, readers will note hammers do not require extensive user's manuals. It is, therefore, good that the analogy needs to shift to a more complex tool—a tool with many moving parts and a great variety of forms, perhaps one requiring a manual as well—one as complex as the essay. Several authors make the analogy to training wheels on a bicycle (Nunnally 1991; Haluska 2012; Barlow 2000). This is apropos if we think of training wheels as a part of a bicycle. Training wheels are often clunky, and unattractive but nevertheless help young riders to keep balance as they master the other functions of riding a bicycle. A structured essay could therefore help novice writers to keep from wobbling around with an idea, not achieving clarity. And, in both cases, when the rider or writer begins to master the bike or the essay, they can remove the training wheels. As we all know, however, falls still may happen. Bruce Pirie (cited in Haluska 2012) offers up an analogy gone awry regarding the structured essay, “It teaches that there are rules, and that those rules take the shape of a preordained form, like a cookie-cutter, into which we can pour ideas and expect them to come out well shaped” (p. 26). This is clearly the improper use of a cookie-cutter, which are not poured into but rather are used to cut out. Thus, a tool used incorrectly, will result in misshapen outcomes. As mentioned above, teachers must be taught how to teach the structured paragraph correctly, then students will use them correctly, cutting their ideas cleanly out from the messy process from which writing begins. Rico (1988) offers an analogy while explaining that structured essays:

make student writing look good-like a paint-by-number product which guarantees immediate success. The five-paragraph essay is to the writing process what the

paint-by-numbers kit is to painting. You may get a realistic horse's head or an identifiable landscape, but something is missing: that something is an emerging pattern unique to both writer and content which e-volves as writers become involved in discovering what they want to say and how to say it. (p. 57)

An interesting analogy, in that some people are content with paint-by-numbers. Not everyone wants to become an artist. Likewise, not everyone wants to become a writer. Moreover, this author does not see how a tool will stop student from being involved in discovering their thesis. As we have seen, structured essays and thinking are not mutually exclusive. It is true, however, structured essays may force students to adhere to a formula, incorrectly, as Brannon et al. (2008) seems to do when objecting to the writing process. "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" (p. 20). That is right. We don't write in such a linear fashion. That is not what student should be taught. The proper way to write structured essays is to have a rough idea of a thesis. Then, think of several ideas to support the thesis. Then, gather evidence to support and refutes those ideas. Then take one of those ideas, and all the evidence gathered and begin to craft a paragraph. Do not just drop the evidence into the paragraph. Explain the evidence. This author was taught it is good to include an explanation before and/or after any quotes included in the paragraph to tell the reader why the quote is there. Such a method does not only serve the reader. More importantly, it lets the writer know their intentions, and helps them think about the quote. Pardon the tangent; but readers will notice, that is how the quotes in this essay are handled. Back to the paragraph in progress—if things go well, it can become one of the supporting paragraphs. Students should then repeat the process until they have all the supporting paragraphs necessary. The total may be more or less than three. If things go well, throughout the process, students will discover their thesis. If things do not go so well—which is often the case—they have to rethink a supporting paragraph or two. And, back to the final point made by Brannon et al. (2008), if the piece is a long one, it will be kind to the reader for the author to repeat the main points from each of those supporting paragraphs in the conclusion. One last analogy similar to Pirie misshapen foodstuffs, Nunnally (1991) writes that structured essays remind him of "novelty vegetables... sometimes encountered at farmers' markets, a square cucumber, for example. Having been forced to develop in the confines of a square container, the cuke takes on that unnatural shape. It is still a cucumber,

but its potential has been robbed by the constraint of abnormal cultivation" (p. 69). The idea that constraints are bad is where critics of structured essays seem to go wrong. Quite a few authors think students will become stuck in only writing structured essays (Barlow 2000; Campbell 2014; Rico 1988) if they just start copying that style. Perhaps they forget copying is how we learn. Kleon (2012) points out, "We learn to write by copying down the alphabet. Musicians learn to play by practicing scales. Painters learn to paint by reproducing masterpieces" (p. 35). Even the prodigal start by copying. "One great mistake of modern education is the assumption that students can jump to the 'fun' stuff before they have learned the 'boring' stuff, which is like forgetting that Picasso was a marvelous figurative artist before he invented cubism" (Smith 2006, p. 17). The critic will say structured essays are not masterpieces on par with Picasso. This author would say neither is a well-formed letter A to Z in a writing primer, but copying those letters is how we all begin to write. Then, as we progress, we may find a cursive form that resonates with us. We take to copying that for a while, but eventually, our own style shows through. If we give up practicing early, our penmanship will suffer for it. Whereas, extended practice can result in beautiful script. Haluska (2012) reminds us, "Many practiced activities, from golf swings to karate, demand formulaic learning" (p. 26). He goes on to say even Aristotle used The Rhetoric to act "like a good flight instructor, walking us through the steps of a model argument one might deliver before a court" (p. 26). Those who would say the structured essay limits student creativity should read the book *Steal Like an Artist*. Therein Kleon (2012) writes, "Nothing is more paralyzing than the idea of limitless possibilities. The idea that you can do anything is absolutely terrifying" (p. 137). Thus, by giving students the constraint of a structured essay, teachers can reduce their fear as well as inspire creativity. "It seems contradictory, but when it comes to creative work, limitations mean freedom" (p. 137). Critics who think student may become stuck in the structured-essay mold are lacking faith in either the students or the teachers. Teachers should be held accountable to make sure students understand the structured essay is not the final goal. It will be the students' choice to decide to keep painting-by-numbers, or take off the training wheels. The structured essay itself is not the problem. Students and the teachers charged with teaching structured essays may fail to understand the essay, or possibly the analogies. Nunnally (1991) would say, "Perhaps an analogous perception of our method for adopting the five-paragraph theme as a teaching aid is not so self-evident" (p. 70). So, the proper expression of what structured essays can be expected to do could right the misunderstanding. Another way to

help students understand expectations, is to give them examples to follow. According to Campbell (2014) “Students must closely read mentor essays showing the kinds of writing we’re asking them to do: literary, persuasive, and expository essays, as well as personal narrative” (p. 63). If Dr. Cognard-Black is to be believed from her quote above, a structured essay is the “gold standard” for a persuasive essay. A collection of well-written examples of structured essays would be a good user’s manual for this tool. Teachers who teach the structured essay should also try their hand at writing a structured essay, so they can understand what student are going through, and students can have examples direct from their mentors to learn from. In the end, the best analogy may be to say that structured essays are more than just tools—they are vehicles. Structured essays are cars. All cars have four wheels, windshields and wipers, and many other similar moving parts. And, like structured essays, not all cars are created the same. The writers of structured essays get to decide if they are happy with a Yugo (a reference that dates this author) or a BMW. The structured essay is a vehicle of their own design.

As long as teachers have to teach writing, the structured essay is here to stay. At first, the critics seem to out number the supporters in thinking such formulaic essays limit thinking and are simply boring. Additionally, some critics say teachers are only falling back on teaching structured essays because they are easy to teach, and easy to grade, but the formula is not what the students need to grow as writers. As we look deeper into the issue, student misuse of structured essays is a symptom of a deeper problem—namely, the method in which they are taught. Thus, improved teacher training appears to be the necessary fix. A part of that training should be learning to express suitable analogies for the structured essay so students will better understand how the limits can help them think and create good writing. For teachers to learn and teach structured essay, they need a user’s manual full of well-written examples. Structured essays should not be seen as being good or bad. Just as any other tools, they are only useful when used correctly, for the purpose they were designed for. Lastly, for the critics who bemoan the BMW or a Picasso analogy, saying structured essays are not high-class cars or masterpieces of art. This author would agree and go one step further to ask, “Don’t students deserve some good examples of structured essays to learn from?” I hope more teachers and authors are up for trying to write good examples. Perhaps we can give our students some masterpieces from which to learn.

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