Chapter 4
Contradictory Genres: 
The Five-Paragraph Essay vs. the Lab Report

Neil Mcbeath
Sultan Qaboos University, Oman

ABSTRACT

This chapter has its roots in Davidson and Spring’s (2008) paper, “Rhetorical Patterns in Academic Writing: Re-Examining Conventional Wisdom,” where the authors questioned the relevance of teaching the five-paragraph essay and the rather artificial division of essay writing into specific types: narrative, descriptive, expository, argumentative, cause-and-effect, and compare-and-contrast. The chapter expands their argument, suggesting that not only is the division artificial, but it is also positively unhelpful to students following English medium instruction at the tertiary level. As an example, a course-specific genre, the lab report, is examined to demonstrate just how its demands are removed from the conventional patterns.

INTRODUCTION

The argument that was initially developed by Davidson and Spring (2008) was further developed by Palmer (2009). He pointed out that the rhetorical patterns that they had criticized could be traced back to a book called Composition and Rhetoric (Holmes, 1880). Henry Wyman Holmes was the Dean of the Faculty of Education at Harvard and the publication date of his book is significant. In 1885 Harvard developed a compulsory course in composition for students in their freshman year (Knoblauch and Matsuda, 2008, P. 7). Where Harvard led, other American colleges followed, with the result that Palmer claims that Holmes’ theories now seem “to be universally and uncritically accepted by teachers of academic writing” (Palmer, 2009, P. 257) in the Middle East. Palmer actually refers to the situation in the Arab Gulf, but Mumford (2013), writing from Turkey, appears to assume that the terms “five-paragraph essay” and “academic essay” are interchangeable.

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RHETORICAL PATTERNS IN ENGLISH FOR GENERAL ACADEMIC PURPOSES

Even so, Palmer rather overstates his case. The American approach is not “universally and uncritically accepted” by British, Indian, or anglophone African teachers of academic writing because, as he himself admits, “British textbooks and teaching were exempt from its baleful influence” (P. 257). Hamp-Lyons (2008, P. 32) reminds us that “there was no equivalent of ‘freshman writing’ in UK colleges and universities” until the massive expansion of British higher education in the 1970s.

Even so, it is hard to underestimate how pervasive Holmes’ influence remains in the United States. In 2009, I was informed by an American colleague from the Language Centre at Sultan Qaboos University that “They gotta learn the rules before they can break them” – the implication being that the rules for writing were immutably fixed. Levy (2012, P. 32), referring to the American biographer Lynn Vincent, says that “she also advocated one-sentence paragraphs, even though in school you’re not allowed to do that,” (emphasis mine). Most recently, I received a letter about a proposed chapter for a book on academic reading which loftily stated: “We do not prescribe a ‘thesis statement – topic sentence’ approach, but currently your article contains one- or two-sentence paragraphs that are more appropriate to a journalistic than an academic genre.”

The result of this, of course, has been the teaching of the prescriptive rubric that Palmer satirizes:

_Introduction_

_1st cause, 2nd cause etc._

_Transition Paragraph_

_1st effect, 2nd effect_

_Conclusion_

(Palmer 2009; 256)

This is particularly true of foundation or preparatory year programs, where the emphasis is on English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) (Hyland, 2006) and where the five-paragraph essay is applied to all of Holmes’ categorizations of writing i.e. narrative, descriptive, compare-and-contrast, cause-and-effect, and persuasive.

This is the type of writing taught in Oshima and Hogue’s (2007) _Introduction to Academic Writing_ (Third Edition), which actually teaches students to write different types of paragraphs, rather than essays. I mentioned this at the Middle East and North Africa Writing Centers Alliance (MENAWCA) Conference in 2009 and a man with easily a quarter of a century’s less teaching experience kindly explained to me that Oshima and Hogue’s rules were designed to act as a scaffold. I had actually understood that. What I was more concerned about was that, to extend the metaphor, the scaffold poles are frequently turned into cage bars and teachers take on the role of the “lynx-eyed error detector” (Creber, 1972, P. 154), more concerned with form than with content.

Ji (2008) of course endorses this approach, saying: “To teach guided writing, I provide a topic sentence as the first sentence in the paragraph” (P.8). This can be effective and I have no doubt at all that Ji’s best students manage to produce technically correct paragraphs using this format. But Ji teaches at the Armed Police Academy in the People’s Republic of China. I may be wrong, but I rather doubt that his institution is one that actively fosters originality and individual thought.

Even more insidious, however, has been the almost automatic rejection of anything that does not fit the “topic-sentence-and-supporting-sentence” pattern. In the light of Ji’s endorsement, it is interesting to read an earlier reference by Ramsden (2002) to Hamp-Lyons and Zhang (2001), where he offers an analysis of two essays, both written by Chinese students, but assessed by English native-speaking and Chinese-speaking IELTS...
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