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Point of View:
In Teaching Composition,
'Formulaic' Is Not a Four-Letter Word*

One of the least-examined assumptions among academics today is that being "formulaic" — using established formulas to structure thought — is always a bad thing. In the field of rhetoric and composition, to say that a mode of writing instruction is formulaic is to charge it with having a "cookie cutter" quality: the student writer presumably inserts raw material into a mold, and the product automatically comes out, no thought required.

That is the charge commonly leveled against the five-paragraph essay that has long been a dominant model for high-school writing. Specifically, it is said that the five-paragraph formula forces students to conform to a mechanical routine that chokes the life out of writing, encouraging them not to wrestle with ideas but to conform to a one-size-fits-all straitjacket.

Dennis Baron, a linguist and English professor, complains that the SAT's "formulaic approach will reverse decades of progress in literacy instruction and ultimately turn students into intellectual automatons." Like many academics, Baron uses "formulaic" pejoratively, as if the word always merits an eye-rolling grimace.

There are several problems with this formulaphobia. For one thing, not all formulas function in the same deadening way. Furthermore, the idea that formulas in themselves are bad — or that we could possibly communicate in some formula-free way — is mistaken. Formulas, less invidiously called conventions, pervade everything we do.

Try writing a sonnet, doing the cha-cha, saying "Hi, how are you?" or "I love you," or even questioning the value of formulas without relying on established forms that you didn't invent. Far from shutting down thought and stifling creativity, formulas structure thought and feeling and make creativity possible.

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Most important, if we try to reject formulas altogether, we forfeit a valuable tool for clarifying academic mysteries to large numbers of students.

The proper antidote to the five-paragraph formula is not to reject formulas as such, but to look for ones that more closely capture the way critical thinking really operates. The reason the five-paragraph essay has survived as long as it has, we suspect, is that it gives students who need it a series of clear operations to perform: offer an introductory claim followed by three supporting paragraphs and then a conclusion that restates and deepens the claim.

The downside of this thesis/evidence formula, however, is that it has the student perform those important maneuvers in an isolation booth, without engaging other people. Thus it bypasses one of the most important rhetorical requirements: that we enter the social fray, presenting what others have said not as an afterthought or as mere support for our own argument, but as our argument's motivating source, its very reason for being.

The problem with the five-paragraph essay, then, is not that it is a cookie cutter, but that it is the wrong type of cookie cutter; the cookies you make with it won't be your best. What critics of the five-paragraph model should be objecting to is not that it is a formula, but that it is a weak formula, one that produces arguments that are disengaged and decontextualized, severed from any social mission or context. Here, we suspect, is what Baron really finds troubling — and he may be right — in the new SAT writing test: not that it's formulaic, but that it's deadeningly asocial and results in a monologue.

A far more engaged writing formula can be found in the work of the composition theorist David Bartholomae, who recalls a professor of his suggesting that, when stuck in his writing, he use the following "machine":

While most readers of ____ have said ____, a close and careful reading shows that ____.

Similarly, the composition specialist Irene Clark, drawing on the work of John Swales, Joseph Williams, Gregory Colomb, and others, asks graduate thesis and dissertation writers to fill in these blanks:

My thesis will address the following question: ____.

It will fill the following gap in the literature: ____.

Formulas like those help students make arguments without abstracting themselves from the conversations that surround them. As a result, they have all of the benefits of the five-paragraph theme without its liabilities.

Building on Bartholomae and Clark, we teach our own students that persuasive writing rests on a single ur-formula, which we call "they say/I say," in

which you summarize someone else's argument (they say) in order to set up your own (I say). Some versions of this include:

Although it is often said that _____, I claim _____.

I agree with X that _____, and would add _____.

Group X argues _____, and I have mixed feelings about it. On the one hand, .
On the other hand, _____.

I used to think _____. Now, however, after _____, I have come to see _____.

Debates over _____ tend to dominate discussions of _____. But these debates obscure the far more important issue of _____.

At this point you will probably object that _____. While it's true that _____, I still maintain _____.

Far from turning students into mindless automatons, formulas like those can help them generate thoughts that might not otherwise occur to them. And such formulas aren't set in stone. Students can and should be encouraged to modify them to suit particular arguments and audiences.

Many students fail to pick up those moves on their own, however, either because they don't read widely, or they don't read with an imitative eye. That is why representing the moves in explicit formulas is often necessary. Teachers who think they are being progressive and student-centered by rejecting such prescriptive methods are passing up a chance to demystify intellectual practices that many students find profoundly puzzling.

This is not to say that all academics know the key formulas of academic discourse and simply fail to transmit them to their students. Even experienced academics sometimes need to be reminded not just to develop an argument, but also to show how that argument constitutes an intervention in some scholarly conversation. Recognizing that fact, the science journal *Nature* requires prospective contributors, on the first page of their manuscripts, to "provide two or three sentences explaining what the main result of their study reveals in direct comparison with what was thought to be the case previously, or how the main result adds to previous knowledge."

If even advanced scholars need such formulaic help, it seems especially hard to justify withholding it from students.

Still, the disdain for formulas runs deep, being rooted in the romantic cult of the genius, which proclaims that creativity and convention don't mix. That romantic dogma leaves no clear way for disseminating the higher-order habits of critical literacy to large numbers of people. Instead it suggests that writers must look within and wait for the muse to strike — and if it doesn't, they simply are not

members of the elect. Formulas, on the other hand, have a democratizing potential, making the complex practices of the few available to the many.

Naturally, not everyone agrees. The composition specialist Mark Wiley argues that formulas “force premature closure on complicated issues and stifle ongoing exploration.” We believe, however, that complication relies on conventional formulas of its own — as when someone says, “Of course the problem is far more complicated than _____,” and then goes on to explain what those complications are. Furthermore, students often have no idea what to do when we as teachers urge them to complicate and engage in “ongoing exploration.” Offering formulas for complication may in fact be the most effective way to help students complicate in the ways Wiley and most of us want.

Unfortunately, bad formulas have been so pervasive in American schooling that it has become easy to dismiss formulas altogether. In attacking formulas, we feel we are being democratic, striking a blow against top-down oppression and defending the diversity of student voices. If it is true, however, that certain formulas can help students engage in true democratic dialogue, then it's time to rethink that logic and stop using “formulaic” as if it were a four-letter word.

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