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## The Unskilled Writer and the Formula Essay: Composing by Rules

*Teri Haas*

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Taking tests have always made me nervous, especially when it comes to taking writing tests, like the writing I took for 021. I thought I had passed because I thought my composition was good. But apparently it wasn't. I don't think that my writing is really bad, I just have to learn to write more details and explain everything I say. But I think I will do very well on the retest because I am going to explain everything in the composition.

Jennie (free writing, June 1982)

Jennie wrote this at the beginning of a special ten day Writing Lab program last June devised to help borderline students improve before they retook the Writing Assessment Test, the CUNY essay examination used to evaluate a student's competency to enter freshmen composition. While Jennie expressed faith in our project, I was pessimistic. The six girls gathered around the conference table for the first meeting of our small group workshop seemed confused about their composing and all, having just failed the WAT, were very anxious. When I asked them to describe their strengths and weaknesses, no one mentioned a strength. And when the students spoke of their writing problems, they sounded exactly like a group of English teachers.

"I'm not too strong in the organization of my ideas and I don't support them," Aida said, almost blushing at her flaws.

"I have a problem with the development of my thesis and supporting paragraphs," Dominique explained.

"I don't use enough specific details," Wanda said; Angelia, Jennie and Lillian nodded their heads in agreement.

I probed to find out what these unskilled writers understood of such non-text-specific terms, and Wanda answered. Just as Jennie had stated in her free writing that she knew she had to explain everything more fully, although she did not understand what “everything” was, so Wanda knew she had to add facts or examples to each body paragraph; however, she had no idea why. This was true of all six students. They had learned to write by formula. Their only problem was that while they could speak glibly of this formula, they could not translate it into successful composing behavior.

Taught to write an essay form with introduction, body, and conclusion, these students considered this one of several inflexible rules. They also believed that they had to state a thesis, organize paragraphs with topic sentences and specific examples while composing first drafts, and they reviewed their drafts by checking them against the formula. They tried to squeeze their ideas into a structure instead of allowing the structure to evolve from their meaning. During their initial composing for our workshop, students illustrated the constraints of following form rigidly without exception. I wish to analyze those constraints and suggest some reader-response methods to loosen them. While my procedure was informal and my observations were limited to six students, my inference could serve as the basis for more rigorous research to investigate beliefs which may hinder the development of some unskilled writers.

Informed writing center people know the theory that defines composing as a process in which the writer discovers what she believes as she writes.<sup>1</sup> Yet many of us refuse to recognize that trying to compose to a pattern may restrict the inexperienced writer’s discovery process. Instead of working out her intention, the inexperienced writer follows a recipe, often with unfortunate results. One of the students in our summer workshop sprinkled examples into each paragraph, substantiating minor references, because she had learned a rule which insisted upon two examples in each body paragraph; another student introduced each body paragraph with a stock transition as she had been taught and thereby destroyed the logic of one essay. Of course, teaching composition patterns does not always produce disastrous student products, but it does encourage unskilled writers to infer a simplistic process and restricts their thinking.

Considering the complexity of composing, many writers do not succeed in achieving their intentions on first drafts; they must review and reformulate their ideas. Early revisions, therefore, are an equally important part of the writer’s search to work out and communicate her

meaning, as Donald Murray suggests.<sup>2</sup> However if unskilled writers learn to compose by following a formula, they construe revising as the procedure in which they correct form. They reread their first drafts and try to fix up the structure and other surface features.<sup>3</sup>

Although the girls in our summer workshop knew the term revision, all considered it an editing process in which they corrected the essay pattern or checked spelling, usage, and mechanics; they did not review their meaning, adding, deleting, and moving ideas to form a cohesive whole as experienced writers do, according to Nancy Sommers' research.<sup>4</sup>

Our workshop seemed an appropriate place for these students to learn a new revising model which might change their conception of how writers created and reviewed their texts. Each day during our two-hour meeting, students wrote first drafts, responded to each other's compositions and then revised them. We used both small group meetings and one-to-one conferences. First drafts were always reviewed by the entire group, while later revisions might be read by one or two of us. We, therefore, spent much of our time together on the initial drafts that inexperienced writers usually correct but rarely reconsider.

During the first meeting I offered a model for our small group response. We never evaluated first drafts but read them with the assumption that they could be improved. In responding, we rejected handbook jargon; we did not talk of thesis, topic sentence or detail. Students who used this jargon were directed back to the text: What did they like? What didn't they understand? Could the author explain her idea? What did the reader want to know more about? Did the author believe that information was important to her purpose? As a reader who questioned specific ideas or described my interpretation of them, I offered an alternative model concerned with meaning rather than form.

We also ignored surface errors of usage and mechanics until the final revision, unless the error impeded our understanding of the text. We did this for several reasons. First, if the reader stopped to focus on mechanical errors, she destroyed the text's continuity and encouraged the writer to view each part separately. Secondly, if the reader responded to superficial errors on the first draft, the writer assumed these were the major problem and never learned to review her work for dissonance between what she wrote and what the reader interpreted.

On the first day, I gave out red pens and suggested students use them to do all revisions, that is, everything the writer added, deleted, changed, or moved after she had completed her first draft and before anyone else read it. These changes are handwritten on the following

drafts. In addition to demystifying the red pen as an enemy weapon, I had another purpose. I collected all first drafts and later analyzed them to discover if students had changed revising strategies between the beginning and end of our workshop. By comparing the first drafts that students composed for our opening meeting with those they created for our last class, I observed that this ten-day workshop was time enough to initiate change. Students such as Wanda and Jennie revised in new ways as they internalized a different model of response to their drafts.

Wanda's first composition offers an example of the constrictions imposed upon an inexperienced writer who has learned to compose by a formula. In response to an invitation to choose a person who influenced her life and describe the effect on her, Wanda wrote the following first draft (A). Wanda later explained to our response group that she had been taught to use the exact words of the writing assignment in her first sentence, as she did here, although the resulting statement sounded stilted. Of course Wanda's mother influenced her daughter's life and long before she taught Wanda to cook. Following a rigid rhetorical form, Wanda presented two examples in her thesis, and she organized these as paragraphs two and three, held together by the transitions *first of all* and *secondly*.

Are these paragraphs, however, parallel? In the second paragraph Wanda described her mother's cooking expertise, and in the third paragraph she described their friendship. Wanda, following a rigid pattern, did not consider the qualitative differences between these experiences. In the paragraph describing her mother's cooking lessons, Wanda added specific details as she had been taught; however she never considered the function of this paragraph in relation to her overall purpose. Therefore Wanda never explained how her mother's lessons affected her life. Again, in her last paragraph, Wanda neglected to consider her overall purpose. She presented a topic sentence and offered examples to prove her belief in her mother's friendship, but Wanda never speculated upon the effect of this loving relationship. Believing that she automatically gained coherence by following a pattern and using stock transitional phrases, Wanda neglected to review her ideas in relation to each other and her purpose.

In revising her draft before she read it to our response group, Wanda changed very little. She added *s* to *always* and *vegetables*, changed the spelling of *no* to *know*, added one missing word and a final period. Wanda had internalized the model of a reader who responded with superficial corrections; therefore she read and "revised" her composition in that way.

Since Wanda's text was the first our group discussed, I believed I had to model a reader responding to meaning and I commented more during that first meeting than I did at later sessions when students took control. I wanted Wanda to reevaluate the relationship between paragraphs two and three, so I questioned how her mother's cooking lessons were connected to their friendship. But Wanda rejected my question.

"I learned to state two reasons in my thesis," she explained, "two different reasons." Her answer reminded me of David Bartholomae's argument that teachers and tutors reinforce their student's belief that all topics should be reduced to their simplest terms when they represent "thinking in terms of structures, and not process..."<sup>5</sup> I did not challenge Wanda's belief directly, but I hoped to do so through our response group.

I also explained that as a reader, informed of Wanda's intention by her first sentence, I still did not understand what effect the cooking lessons had on her life: "What did you gain from the lessons?"

Several members of our group questioned Wanda about her third paragraph. Lillian wondered if there was a difference between solving problems and giving advice. Angelia said she didn't understand why Wanda mentioned that her mother trusted her and believed they were alike. A dialogue between the author and her readers was beginning.

I wish I could report that Wanda's second draft showed extraordinary change, but I can't. Wanda included an additional sentence at the end of her second paragraph: "Knowing how to cook will help me because I can create a well-balanced diet for my husband and children." She also elaborated slightly upon her relationship with her mother, but Wanda's second draft was almost the same as her first.

However, Wanda's perception of revising did change during our ten-day workshop. During the final week, Wanda composed a response to a question about surrogate mothers. Wanda's purpose was to argue the emotional consequences.

Wanda's first draft (B) displays a changed revising model. Wanda edited her draft as before, but she also reviewed her ideas and eliminated unnecessary rhetorical restrictions. She replaced the vague *many people* with the personal *I*, a reasonable change since Wanda was describing her own opinion. She eliminated *first of all* at the beginning of paragraph two, recognizing that she was not presenting two reasons why surrogate mothers suffered. Wanda was developing a cause/effect relationship, although her ideas needed further clarification. As

evidence that Wanda recognized a natural form evolving from her meaning, she placed the symbol for a new paragraph in front of the description of the emotional effect upon a surrogate mother and also moved the first sentence of her second paragraph to the beginning of her newly created third paragraph. While these changes do not produce a perfect product, they reveal the beginning of a changed process. Wanda has recognized that every composing task does not demand the same form; she has started to review her ideas and make larger revisions.

Jennie, the student who free wrote of her test anxiety, also produced a first draft illustrating the restrictive effect of composing to form. Early in our workshop, Jennie composed a personal experience essay that our response group found coherent and interesting. Then Jennie answered a sample examination question which required her to agree or disagree with the statement that children should never be placed with foster parents. Although we had discussed the options a writer might take with the agree/disagree question, Jennie explained later that she became anxious and tried to follow “correct school form.”

By attempting this, Jennie produced an incoherent first draft (C). In her first two paragraphs she expressed belief in the foster child/parent relationship and resisted the idea that these relationships are abusive, as suggested in the question. In fact, Jennie insisted that the foster child could benefit from loving care. However, after considering the positive side of foster care, Jennie moved in her third paragraph to an analysis of the foster child’s emotional pain. She showed insight into two aspects of a complex problem, although the reader doesn’t know whether Jennie believed all foster children suffer alienation or only those who are frequently moved. Instead of trying to resolve her ideas, however, Jennie tacked on a conclusion that refuted her third paragraph.

Jennie’s revisions before our group response were either unnecessary or superficial. She eliminated a phrase containing helpful information in the first paragraph. She added a leftout word in the second paragraph and, in the third, she changed her personal expression, *I believe*, to the formal: *There are also some disadvantages*. With this change Jennie attempted to balance her second and third paragraphs by a rhetorical device. However, her paragraphs are still not symmetrical; in fact, they don’t make sense in relation to each other or to the whole composition.

Basic writing students are often taught devices such as the *advantages/disadvantages* form because the tutor believes these students need a structure to encourage logical thinking. I have found the opposite.

When form is taught too soon or too rigidly, some unskilled writers accept it as a rule for all types of composing; they rely upon devices to create coherence. As she reviewed her essay, Jennie did not notice the dissonance among her ideas because she had never learned to read in that way; she reviewed her form.

Jennie needed to envision a different type of reader. Instead of imagining an editor, Jennie needed to imagine a questioner. In responding to Jennie's draft, I queried her intention: Did she believe children should be placed in foster homes? Why? But all foster children were lonely, according to her third paragraph, weren't they? If foster children suffered, how could Jennie conclude with complete agreement for foster care? Aida, Lillian, and Wanda offered their own questions or interpretations. Our comments and Jennie's responses initiated a discussion in which Jennie listened to our confusion and clarified her intention. Yet this process allowed Jennie full control. She could choose what she wished to change and decide how to do it.<sup>6</sup>

Jennie's revising became more extensive as she learned to question her meaning; she also learned to use tools such as scissors, clear tape, staplers, and print symbols which allow an author to quickly reformulate ideas without recopying her text. These tools encourage the writer to speculate instead of reaching closure too soon, but the unskilled writers in our summer workshop had never learned about these shortcuts.

Jennie's next draft (D), answering a question about the legality of abortion, illustrates her use of new strategies. Jennie discovered that by using a star symbol she could add a block of information to the middle of her text. In this addition, Jennie elaborated the specific occasions when abortion should be legal. While Jennie must still resolve her intent regarding abortion laws, she has started to do that by specifying why two groups, rape victims and overburdened mothers, have the right to legal abortions. Because of her addition, our response group could recognize Jennie's ambivalence and we questioned her: What about women who were not in either group but didn't want to have children? If Jennie had not tried to explicate her idea through her starred addition, we would have had very little to clarify. Now we had a beginning.

Our ten-day workshop was admittedly only a beginning. However Wanda, Jennie, and the other students started to learn new ways to read and revise their papers. Rather than becoming editors who corrected superficial errors, they became readers who reviewed first drafts as incomplete expressions of their ideas. They relied less upon a rhetorical

formula to cement an essay together and more upon the continuity of their ideas in relation to their purposes. As evidence of this, students added, deleted, and moved sentences and paragraphs. Of course, these students need additional practice in revising, as well as in editing final drafts. However, they must understand the distinction between the two and, in order to develop as writers, they should receive response from readers who recognize which part of the process comes first.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>For an insightful discussion of this process, see James Britton et al., *The Development of Writing Abilities 11-18* (London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1979), Chapter 2.

<sup>2</sup>Donald Murray, "Internal Revision: A Process in Discovery," in C.R. Cooper and Lee Odell, eds., *Research on Composing: Points of Departure* (Urbana, Ill. N.C.T.E., 1978), p. 87.

<sup>3</sup>Sondra Perl, "Five Writers Writing: Case Studies of the Composing Processes of Unskilled College Writers" (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, New York University, 1978), p. 317.

<sup>4</sup>Nancy Sommers, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," *College Composition and Communication*, 31 (March 1981), 378-388.

<sup>5</sup>David Bartholomae, "Teaching Basic Writing: An Alternative to Basic Skills," *Journal of Basic Writing*, 2 (Spring/Summer 1979), 35-109.

<sup>6</sup>Lil Brannon and C.H. Knoblauch, "On Students' Rights To Their Own Texts: A Model of Teacher Response," *College Composition and Communication*, 33 (May 1982), 157-166.

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1st draft Wanda  
6-1

① My mother had an effect on my life. She taught me how to cook, and she is like a friend to me.

② First of all, my mother is a good cook. She uses herb and spices in her cooking. For example, in making her beans she uses a dash of cinamion and lemon juice. This prevents the beans from tasting bitter. My mother also taught me never to fry meat or fish, because the fat of the meat stays, and the fish soaks oil. She always broils her meat and fish. Therefore, the meat and fish are less fatty. "Every meal should have vegetables," my mother said. Vegetables should be fresh and boiled.

③ Secondly, my mother is a friend to me. She helps me solve my problems, and she give me advice. She lets me know when I am wrong or right. For instance, if I have an argument with my boyfriend, she makes sure she hears both side of the story, then she talks to both of us. We always end up making up, because she helps us resolve our problems. She also speaks very openly to me about everything she knows. She trusts me because she believes that I am like her when she was young

1st draft Wanda  
6-24-82

1. <sup>I</sup> Many people feel that surrogate mothers may suffer emotionally from the experience of carrying babies, bearing them and giving them up.

2. First of all, a surrogate mother suffers emotionally from carrying a baby. From the first months to the last months the mother feels this baby in her body moving kicking and turning. She relates to these movements by rubbing her bellie, feeding herself nutritious food, and rocking back and forth in a rocking chair singing. She will get emotionally involved with the child she is bearing for someone else. After the nine months is over and she gives birth, she must give the baby up to the prospective parents. She will suffer emotionally because she will think in her mind that the baby was a part of her, and that she has the right to have a part of the baby life. She took care and carried this baby for nine months. Therefore, when she gives up the baby there will be an empty part in her life, and she will think of when the baby grows, walks, runs and talks. She will also want to know if the prospective parents will ever tell their baby of the surrogate mother who beared the baby him or her. This emotional problem will always stay in her mind.

1st draft Jennie  
6-9-82

1. I believe that children who are placed in foster homes are not all physically abused or deprived of love and attention. There are some cases where this may be true and I think that if there is a case where the child is abused then the child should be taken away from the foster parents, ~~and find a new home.~~
2. There are some advantages for the foster children when they are placed in a nice home where they have two two loving and caring foster parents. The child can grow up with things that his real parents couldn't afford or he may re more love from his foster parents than he did from his real parents.
3. ~~I believe that being a foster child~~ <sup>There are also some disadvantages to being a foster child. It</sup> must be a very lonely and emotional experience, ~~because~~ <sup>because</sup> the child is placed in several different homes and he may never really feel that he belongs any where because he has never had the opportunity to live with his foster parents all of his life.
4. Therefore children should be placed with foster parents because that way they can have a chance of living a normal healthy life with parents who will love them.

1st Draft Jennie  
6/29/82

1. I believe that abortion should not be illegal in this country because if it does become illegal there will be many women who will die from ~~internal~~ <sup>internal</sup> bleeding or infections from unsterilized tools, that an unfit of phony doctor may use. There will <sup>also</sup> be many women who will die from performing their own abortions at home with coat hangers. And then there are always women who are raped and faced with an unwanted ~~child~~ <sup>pregnancy</sup>, and their only resort is to have abortion.
  2. I dont believe that abortion should be taken as an advantage as some women may use it as a birth control, but I do think that abortion should be legal for ~~the~~ women who really want it such as women who have an excessive amount of children or rape victims.
  - ★ 3 Afterall, the decision is up to the women it is their bodies and if they decide that they do not want to have any children then they should have the right to have an abortion.
- ★ Rape victims may resort to abortion because they may feel hate towards the unborn child because

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of the man who raped her. Women who have a lot of children may want abortions because they may have too many children and can't afford another child or they may not be able to take care of the child because they may be sick or over thirty six years of age which is the age where the pregnancy may be dangerous for both the mother and the child, the child may be born handicapped or deformed and the mother may in danger both her life and the child's if she does not have an abortion