

A note of explanation: from time to time, college English departments receive letters like the one below that lament the disconnect between high school and college writing expectations. Although some names have been changed, this is an actual letter, followed by my actual reply.

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October 21, 1996

Dear English Department Chairperson:

I am writing as a result of reports made by several 1996 SBCCHS graduates. These students claim their freshmen writing teachers remarked that the writing instruction in high school would best be forgotten. Additionally, "Power Writing" and the "five paragraph essay" are not useful tools.

As a high school English teacher, I am frustrated. I teach at the sophomore and senior levels. At the tenth grade, I am required by the State of Illinois, therefore the local curriculum as well, to prepare students for the Illinois Goals Assessment Program (IGAP tests). The informative and persuasive essays, demanded by the State, require a five paragraph essay. The scoring rubric used ensures this approach. Ideally, the conventions of "Power Writing" make the whole process a logical one. Therefore, I implement both techniques.

Of course, the seniors are required to write extensively. They use power writing for any informative or persuasive essay. At the same time, creative writing assignments are also an integral part of the curriculum. These include satires, sonnets, ballads, epics, and the like.

Quite frankly, I want to know what you want from me. I want my students to go into their college classes as prepared as possible. With the constraints of state requirements and local district demands, my teaching format does not have the same liberties as yours. Considering my dilemma, would you please provide suggestion as to the direction I might pursue in my instruction of writing?

Obviously, my attempt is to achieve as much of an instructional continuum as possible. Our professional objectives are the same; a complementary relationship will be a benefit to all.

Sincerely,

Jeanne Picard

English Chairperson
Soybean Country Community High School

Oct. 25, 1996
Jeanne Picard, Chair
Department of English
Soy Bean Country Community High School
851 N. Temple St.
Mecca, IL 60666

Dear Ms. Picard:

I can see the frustration you and other Illinois high school English teachers face, having to teach for a test and worry about preparing students for the realities they will meet in college writing situations.

You are correct in assuming that the 5-paragraph theme does not “exist” at the U of I. I should add that I do not know what power writing is, though it certainly has the ring of educationese to it. Our official position with regard to our beginning students is this:

- we assume that they have done anywhere from not a lot to a great deal of writing before they get here
- we assume that their previous writing experiences have ranged from the very unsuccessful to the highly successful
- we tell them (officially, that is) that we respect their writing preparation, whatever it may have been, and that whatever that experience has been, their task now is to adapt what they know to the requirements of college writing

I admit that college instructors have perennially told students to “forget everything they learned about writing in high school.” I remember people doing that when I was in graduate school, many years ago. And I’m sure some U of I instructors still convey that negative message, though I do what I can to get them to be much more positive about their students’ training and abilities.

I believe that each new educational stage a writer reaches has new requirements and expectations they must adapt to. As a high school English chair, you yourself may have listened to your staff complain that their students must have learned very little in middle school or elementary school. I know when I taught high school, that was a common complaint. I suppose the first-grade teachers blame their charges' parents for their perceived failings in writing. Certainly editors tell writers fresh from college or even grad school, "You may have been able to get away with this kind of writing in school, but this is the real world. . . ." Editors still remind me that I mustn't aim my writing at a bunch of stuffy academics. I call the continual dissing of writers, the cycle of blame, and I think while the recognition of different writing expectations is accurate, the blame part is misguided.

My concern now, like yours, is that students not be caught in the middle between the requirements of the State Board of Education and the expectations of college faculty. So our official position is to introduce students to the world of college writing, whatever that may be, to expand their five paragraph themes into longer, more thoughtful, critical analyses, arguments, or problem solving activities. And even if they don't bring the "baggage" of the five paragraph theme with them (many in fact do not), they too find they must meet new demands on their intelligence, that they must learn new ways of writing each time they enter a new context for writing.

I am enclosing a copy of a guide we have developed for high school English teachers interested in knowing what their students will encounter at the University of Illinois. In addition, I'm enclosing a copy of our handout, "What Writers Do," which describes in more detail the approach we have developed over the years to teach writing the way writers really write. I hope these will be of use. If only the state could see the educational advantage of abandoning the idea that writing must be taught by formula and its output quantified, then we would really be making progress. But we must also work with the realities that face us, and secure the best possible outcome for our students.

I hope you find my letter and enclosures useful. Please let me know if I can be of further assistance.

Sincerely yours,

Dennis Baron
Professor of English and linguistics