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Formulaic Writing Advice: A False Panacea

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Introduction

Over the past decade, as the long institutionalized process writing pedagogy has been increasingly questioned, many teachers have found it a challenge to create viable classroom teaching philosophies and practices. As Richard Fulkerson (2005) has noted, there is currently a wide lack of consensus about how to teach writing. In this environment, it is not surprising that teachers sometimes tend to rely on commonsensical formulae to ground their instruction. In fact, this tendency toward formulaic teaching has been common in the field of writing instruction for a very long time, although it may have taken different forms. To give an example from the now distant (dead?) so-called "current-traditional" or product rhetoric, a number of Aristotelian topoi, which were originally used in classical rhetoric to interrogate topics in order to generate ideas for speeches, became formalized into "modes of discourse," that is, as text types such as "the comparison/contrast paragraph/essay," "the cause-effect paragraph/essay" or "the paragraph/essay developed by examples." Many textbooks and composition courses were centered on applying these formulae to the classroom. This went on for decades, and indeed even to this day one can find textbooks (e.g., *The Bedford Reader*, 2006) and self-help books (and undoubtedly some teachers) advocating this approach to composition instruction.

Closer to our current experience, the insights of Process theory have often been applied to the classroom by following a reductively simple set of practices and institutionalizing these generic activities into the syllabi of writing courses (e.g., inventing on Monday, drafting on Tuesday, peer review on Thursday, revision on Friday, etc.) in a mechanical way, regardless of the writing task.

Even if the tendency to use formulae when teaching writing is strong, it is essential that it be resisted by teachers. Although undoubtedly teachable and testable, formulae over-simplify the composing process and provide a false sense of security to student writers, restricting

their ability to effectively analyze rhetorical variables and make contextualized decisions as they compose written texts.

Discussion of a typical example of formalistic advice

As an example of the sort of formulaic instruction that should be resisted, I will refer to a set of advice often given to student writers in the form of "the 5Cs" (or sometimes the "7Cs) of composing." The "5 (or 7) Cs" is frequently offered to student writers as a powerful tool to guide composing and process-activities such as peer editing. A typical set of 5Cs includes: Clear, Complete, Correct, Concise and Considerate. The formula is commonsensical and easy to teach, and on the surface, it seems odd that anyone would find fault with such a solid set of advice to writers. However, as I will show, it grossly oversimplifies crucial rhetorical elements writers need to analyze. Even worse, its use may easily subsume more contextualized and exacting rhetorical analysis and ultimately impoverish student writers' responses to writing tasks.

There are dozens of incarnations of the "5 (or 7) Cs" with slight wording differences, sometimes ostensibly tailored to particular fields of endeavour, such as technical writing, public relations or business (e.g., US Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration; Burne) but they all share the same underlying motivation, which is to provide a set of universal descriptors of good writing that can guide writers as they compose or revise. Such descriptors are generally based on unarticulated assumptions about writing and naturalized notions of correctness and preferred style.

Use of the "5Cs" is often suggested as a default practice to guide writing and revising, similar to how a set of safety checks are performed by pilots before powering up an airplane. Sometimes, however, the formula becomes central to instruction, as in the following self-description of a Japanese teacher of English's classroom practice (Tamada, 2001):

> *Every session is rigidly structured, starting with the question: Is the writing complete? Then I go on to clear, correct, concise, and considerate. I repeat these five C words like a mantra. Because of this fixed format, the students soon become familiar with these concepts, and consequently we spend less time reviewing one essay. The required time is reduced from 30 minutes to 10-15 minutes by the time we finish reading all 30 essays.*

Whether default or central to instruction, the formula is arbitrary at best and the component parts not clearly defined. Its use is therefore often ill-suited to the rhetorical analysis of particular student-generated texts. A brief discussion of complexities inherent in each of the "5-Cs" will clarify my point.

Complete. No piece of writing is "complete" in and of itself. All writing refers, either explicitly or implicitly, to other texts and engages in a discussion about the topic of the writing. This fundamental quality is associated with Bakhtin's theory of the "dialogic" nature of all language (Holquist, 2002). There is always a "next text" and in that sense, no text is autonomous or complete. There are always lacunae and gaps in the text in which meaning is never finally shut off, and that invite a response.

Clear. Clarity is a function of the interaction of the reader with a text, and not a feature of the text itself. To understand this point, one has only to consider the so-called COIK Fallacy (i.e., Clear Only If Known). This term, coined by Edgar Dale, refers to the situation in which a given text can be completely incomprehensible to a reader who lacks sufficient background information to understand it, but crystal clear to anyone sharing this knowledge with the writer ("Instructional Clarity," n.d.). Therefore, clarity is a relative term closely related to audience and content.

Correct. Correctness is often used to describe syntactic and mechanical features of texts, as well as diction and perhaps rhetorical issues like tone. Correctness is not absolute, but rather relative to the audience and purpose of a given text. Decades ago, Martin Joos (1962) illustrated the correctness, in terms relevant to their particular registers, of widely different English forms. Unanalyzed, often prescriptive notions of correctness ignore variables such as

register and mode, which are crucial to determining acceptability of a given form used in a particular text.

Concise. Preference has swung, pendulum-style, between "concise" and "elaborated" styles for centuries. Indeed, the debate between "Ciceronian" and "Longinian" styles has raged since classical times. Although it is true that since the 1920s there has tended to be a preference for plain style in English writing, it is by no means a universal value that such a style is "better" than a more elaborated style.

Not only is this stylistic preference historically grounded, conciseness *per se* is by no means universally appropriate in all writing. The decision whether or not to extend and elaborate a discussion, perhaps using longer and more descriptive sentences and diction, depends on the context of the writing task. There are many reasons such a style would be more appropriate than a concise one in a given text, depending on the purpose of the writing and audience expectations (e.g., narrating an event, arguing a legal point, introducing an unfamiliar concept or analysis, etc.)

Considerate. It seems self-evident that writing should be considerate. After all, it intends to engage a reader in a discussion about a topic. However, there are plenty of examples of very successful writing that is forceful and not particularly considerate, such as manifestos, editorials, political position papers, policy statements, evaluations, written complaints, exposés, etc. It's clear that being considerate has at the least very broad parameters and is often sacrificed in order to strengthen the persuasive effect of a text.

Conclusion

The discussion of the "5Cs" above suggests the difficulty inherent in using formulaic approaches to writing instruction. There is nothing wrong *per se* with any of the "5Cs" descriptors; it is just that these terms are so complex and context-bound that they are not useful as a formula. To act as if they were simple and self-evident does a disservice to students.

Post-process composition theory highlights the concept of context in writing (e.g., Kent, 1999). With their distrust of universal description of processes and values, Post-Process

theorists point out that no formula has universal application because all writing is first and foremost bound to the context of its use. By feeding student writers formulaic advice about writing, teachers lull them into a false sense of security and promote over-simplified and shallow decision-making strategies while composing.

Educators, even if they recognize the reductive nature of formulae, may believe that using them is necessary at early stages of instruction and that they can be replaced by more sophisticated strategies for rhetorical analysis later in the student's educational career. Unfortunately, neither students nor teachers are usually very motivated to revisit the issue and the result is shallow analysis, leading to mediocre responses to writing tasks on the part of students, and discontent on the part of teachers. A more difficult but more productive approach in the long term would be to introduce the complexity of rhetorical decision-making to student writers, at an appropriate level, providing them with a foundation that can be built upon as they mature and gain more experience as writers.

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About the Author

James E. Martin was born in Cleveland, Ohio, USA, and raised in Hawaii. He holds an MA in ESL from University of Hawaii, Manoa, and a PhD in English, concentration in Rhetoric/Composition Studies, from Bowling Green State University (Ohio, USA). He's spent most of the last 30 years in Asia and the Pacific, teaching in Taiwan, Guam, Saipan, PR China and now Singapore. He is currently affiliated with the University Town Writing Program at National University of Singapore (NUS), where he teaches composition and does curriculum development.