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Book Review: Beyond The Five Paragraph Essay

Reviewed by: **Leslie Cook**

Abstract

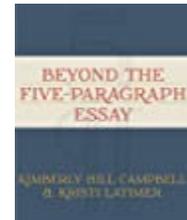
A book review of *Beyond the Five Paragraph Essay*, by authors Kimberly Hill Campbell & Kristi Latimer (Stenhouse Publishers, Portland, isbn # 1571108521, 2012). Reviewed by **Leslie Cook**.

Cook, L. (2013). Review of *Beyond the Five Paragraph Essay*. Teachers College Record, 2013. <https://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 17216. Publisher version of record available at: <https://www.tcrecord.org/books/Content.asp?ContentID=17216>

Beyond the Five Paragraph Essay

Reviewed by Leslie Cook

Title: Beyond the Five Paragraph Essay
Author(s): Kimberly Hill Campbell & Kristi Latimer
Publisher: Stenhouse Publishers, Portland
ISBN: 1571108521, **Pages:** 232, **Year:** 2012



The most heated debates that occur in my Teaching Composition courses take place over the use of the five-paragraph essay. My students, all future English Language Arts teachers, are uneasy about the thought of getting rid of this beloved formula. Most have grown up with some rendition of a commonly taught graphic organizer for the five-paragraph theme, whether it be the keyhole, the hamburger, the diamond, or another figure to aid understanding. Teaching writing without it seems dangerous.

Beyond the Five-paragraph Essay adds to the debate over this entrenched formulaic writing (c.f. Brannon, et al., 2008; Byung-In, 2007; Johnson, Thompson, Smagorinsky, & Fry, 2003). Opening with a scene of an over-burdened English teacher grading another stack of redundant essays, the text proceeds to offer a way out of the Sunday night rut. A complement to Kirby, Kirby, and Liner's *Inside Out* (2003), *Beyond the Five-paragraph Essay* suggests specific, research-based strategies for 6-12 literature-based integrated writing classrooms.

That such a book should appear at a time when standardized writing is at a peak should be no surprise to writing educators. Critiqued before and at the Dartmouth Conference in 1966, the five paragraph theme has been characterized as a "Procrustean bed" that stretches or cuts off students' writing to fit into its mold (Rossenwater & Stephens as cited in Johnson, et al., 2003). Five decades of reliance on the five-paragraph essay led researchers to question why this formula is so ensconced in schools. Johnson, et al. (2003) argue that teachers and students expect and therefore manifest this type of writing in school. They also assert that the five-paragraph essay has developed into a genre itself, albeit one that is considered a safe formula for standardized writing tests.

In order to combat the assumptions that the five-paragraph essay is a necessary form that prepares students for standardized tests and college writing, Campbell and Latimer (2012) tackle "the myths of the five paragraph theme" in their first chapter (p. 4). I have heard future and practicing teachers argue that teaching this standard essay gives students an edge on college entrance examinations, but as Campbell and Latimer's research points out, "SAT evaluators do not favor the five-paragraph formula" (p. 7). Their call to action presented in the beginning of the book to future and current teachers and to teacher educators encourages a restructured classroom supporting students as readers of and writers about literature. Hill and Latimer's emphasis on meaning making through writing is important, especially with the Common Core Standards adoption replacing a significant portion of literature study with the study of non-fiction texts.

Chapter Two is an amalgamation of best practices from some of the curriculum and instruction and English Education gurus. As a way of showing the reader how to plan an integrated writing unit, Campbell and Latimer discuss backward design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), essential questions (Hayes Jacobs, 1989), and literature workshop (Blau, 2003). They clearly state their beliefs about teaching writing, asserting that a challenging writing curriculum is in support of thinking and strives to create a classroom

where collaboration is encouraged, where the teacher shares his or her own processes as a reader and writer, where skills are modeled and practiced in support of reading and writing, where ongoing assessment is used to inform instruction, and where feedback on students' writing is timely, targeted to specific objectives and includes students' self-assessment and reflection. (p. 14)

This clear teaching philosophy echoes the work of Zemmelman & Daniels (1988) in *Community of Writers*. Both author duets view the ideal English classroom as centering on students becoming writers and readers who build trust with each other and the teacher and who practice intelligent choice in the material they choose to read. The chapter also provides strategies for writing and assessing introduction letters and developing personal reading histories.

Teaching writing is messy business. Getting students to read literature and talk about it can be a challenge enough for an English teacher. Campbell & Latimer give the reader strategies to elicit responses to specific pieces in Chapters Three and Four. In "Reading like a writer," Chapter Three, the authors suggest using shorter texts and graphic novel adaptations of classics. Often students and teachers find themselves studying texts they would not have chosen because of curricular or institutional mandates; Campbell and Latimer have suggestions to stimulate interest such as first impression free writes and character tea parties. One of the most valuable activities from this chapter is the haiku summary in which students are assigned sections of a book to summarize in a couple of haikus. The class then works to put together their haikus in chronological order. The Appendix handout for this activity states "This is a messy process and does not have an exact 'correct' answer . . . Exercise your brain and make order out of chaos!" (p. 163).

Chapter Four, "Writing and discussion in support of thinking," offers a continuum of ways to keep writing journals. Initially making a case for the importance of low-stakes writing opportunities, the chapter proceeds to describe how literature journals can be modified based on the students' and teacher's needs. The three types charted—journals with strict requirements, journals with minimal requirements, and independent journals—all have the potential to make the reading/writing connections that prepare them to have meaningful discussions about literature.

Messy writing is central to Chapter Five, "Writing to explore." In this chapter the authors present eight "bridge assignments" that encourage students to "wrestle with the complexities of literature rather than seek one correct 'answer' to a text" (p. 79). Beginning with a discussion of how to teach students to ask questions, Campbell and Latimer use a tri-level questioning approach to lead students in "silent discussions" (p. 81). The rest of the chapter is dedicated to seven different

exploratory essay approaches including “focus essays” (p. 85), which students can use as a way to explore an author’s craft; “collaborative essays” (p. 87), which, though time consuming, can serve to scaffold students’ writing through peer interaction; and “personal vignette/text-to self-connection essays” (p. 89), which can either serve as a precursor to more analytical writing or as assessment of the students’ understanding of the text. The authors’ emphasis on inquiry writing further highlights the shortcomings of the five-paragraph formula and emphasizes the importance of teaching students how to have a written dialogue with a text.

Though it comes toward the end, Chapter Six is the heart of the book. “Writing as an authority” tackles the tough question of how to teach students to write non-formulaic analytical essays apart from the five-paragraph form. The authors introduce Hillocks' research on the five-paragraph theme as well as Johannessen, Kahn, and Walter’s (2009)' discussion of the Toulmin model. Their sample lessons on incorporating evidence are helpful, but the chapter does not delve into important research on how the Toulmin model has been integrated (Rex, Thomas, and Engle, 2010) or on teaching counter argumentation. It does, however, provide narratives of the authors' experiences as they integrated these approaches into their own teaching. Chapter Six also references how the authors develop mini-lessons and provides appendices of lessons they have used successfully, which will be useful resources for learning to teach writing.

The introduction to Chapter Seven, “Writing with mentors,” promises a focus on assessment and the “importance of clear criteria.” Though the chapter does provide an expository roadmap for genre-based writing instruction, it does not adequately discuss writing assessment. Citing Romano's multi-genre work, Campbell and Latimer emphasize the power of mentor texts on learning to write. Not only do mentor texts provide lessons in syntax and structure, they also offer students a range of styles for experimentation. The first half of Chapter Seven, dedicated to literature as a mentor, offers ideas for activities to increase students' range of choices such as the *This I Believe* essay, six word memoirs, and poetry copy-change. Their exploration of pastiche, where a “student uses the original text as a model, taking the style of the author while creating a new text” (p. 126), provides examples of this genre including writing a new ending, changing the setting, and creating a dialogue between characters. The examples are helpful; however, most of these options will not be new to more experienced teachers of writing. The second half of the chapter, “Literature as inspiration,” looks at ways students can create their own literary artifacts in response to literature. Again, the ideas presented in this chapter are well-known, but the authors do contribute unique discussions of the approaches used in conjunction with specific pieces of literature.

Given the strengths and significance of *Beyond the Five-Paragraph Essay*, I was surprised that while reading it, I felt that I was reading something that had already been written. Then I began to wonder: Is it possible that I have reached the age where that which was once new to me has now come back around to being new to another generation? Have the older resources worn out, and is it time for new books to take their places? If so, I do think Campbell and Lattimer have a place in the new generation of texts on how to teach writing. Their claims and examples are researched based and current, but they are not new or groundbreaking, nor do they shatter the five-paragraph essay formula. Nevertheless, with pacing guides and common assessments taking the element of risk and chaos out of some teachers’ planning, the book does call for English teachers to embrace the messiness of their students’ meaning making.

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Cite This Article as: *Teachers College Record*, 2013, p. -
<https://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 17216