

The Essay as an Alternative Form in Composition Instruction

OR

The King Is Dead,
Long Live the King and Queen

Radical skepticism. Anti-scholasticism. Chrono-logic. The new unholy trinity of composition instruction? A new trio of god terms to be worshiped by legions of composition teachers? I certainly hope not. I am definitely not suggesting that we remove thesis/support writing from the composition curriculum and replace it with the essay. Thesis/support writing, for better or worse, is the standard by which almost all academic writing is judged. Obviously, students need to be able to do thesis/support writing well, and we have a clear responsibility to help them learn to do so. To help us achieve these ends, I *am* advocating that we use the essay as an *alternative* form in composition instruction.

I am referring here, of course, to the essay in a strict and narrow sense of the word, a rehabilitated sense: the essay as a textual attempt to come to some understanding of a problem, however partial, provisional, and ephemeral; a weighing out of alternatives; an experiment in thinking whose outcome is unknown at the outset; a Montaignean exploration of a self and world in flux that leaves the known behind. The word *essay*, in this rehabilitated sense, does not refer to what we called “feature writing” in my undergraduate journalism classes. It does not refer to the primarily narrative and/or

descriptive writing, or to the in-depth investigative reportage, or to the essentially autobiographical works, or to the fundamentally argumentative or editorial pieces that are typically and mistakenly gathered together under one rubric and mislabeled as “essays” in most anthologies.

The essay, in this rehabilitated sense, embodies and enacts numerous, marked departures from and contrasts to the “normal school writing” students expect to be doing in composition classes. Through these departures and contrasts, the essay allows students to become critically conscious of the artifice and constructedness of thesis/support writing, which, after many years of uninterrupted and unexamined practice, have become opaque or invisible to them. Working with the essay creates a certain distance between students and thesis/support writing, a distance that allows them a new perspective on what has seemed “natural” and inevitable for years, on what has seemed the only possible way to construct a text of critical inquiry. The departures and contrasts that result in this distance and new perspective demonstrate that the essay is in many ways antithetical to the thesis/support form. The essay embodies and enacts corrective complements to the thesis/support form’s developmental, epistemological, ideological, and feminist rhetorical inadequacies, which we traced in Chapter 1.

First, the essay does not thwart students’ development, but fosters it. Far from being an internalized “default drive” for writing, an automatic and unthinkingly invoked routine for composing, the essay is foreign, unnerving, and challenging. It invites students to work with alien notions of textuality, to deal with what appears to them to be a slippery and amorphous form, and thus to consciously concentrate on their composing, rather than rely on yet another faithful but mindless slotting-in of information in a rigid, formulaic, and too familiar vessel. In this way, the essay addresses what Durst considers some students’ greatest need: “a loosening of some of the formal constraints, the scaffolds they [have] come to rely on at the global level, to lead them toward other, more heuristic forms of writing” (102). Similarly, the essay fosters students’ development by urging them to open and complicate their topics, often to the point of paradox and ambiguity, rather than narrow and focus them to the point of obviousness and inconsequentiality. It encourages students to open their minds and move beyond an “objective”

disinterestedness in their topics to a consideration of how the subjective half of their experience affects how and why they think as they do about issues. Moreover, the essay opens students’ minds by inviting them to address their topics from multiple points of view and with a diversity of voices, rather than mandating that they work from a single, static perspective in a single voice. In contrast to the immobility required by the thesis/support form, the essay fosters student development by allowing them to change their positions relative to their topics, to change their minds. Rather than stopping inquiry by trying to fix an idea in certainty, the essay fosters student development by starting inquiry, by celebrating and embracing uncertainty and inconclusiveness, and thus encouraging the writer to freely explore and learn as much as possible about an idea.

A second inadequacy of the thesis/support form that finds its corrective complement in the essay is its overly simplistic positivistic epistemology. In contrast to the thesis/support form, the essay understands that truth is not immutable, not prior to language, not readily available, not objectively, clearly, distinctly, and univocally communicable, not unproblematic, not certain, not definite, nor knowable from a single point-of-view. Rather the essay embodies and enacts the operations of social epistemology, seeing truth and reality as, at best, multiple, provisional, and tentative linguistic entities that arise from a complex dialogic interaction and transaction among different discourses and voices, from an endless dialectic between the subjective and objective. The essay acknowledges and portrays the world as a complex web of perplexities. It does not pretend to offer our students the same simple, easy, straightforward, and insufficient procedure and answers to the world’s problems, as the thesis/support form does. Rather, the essay often ends uneasily, in paradox, ambiguity, and contradiction, which lets students understand that it takes perseverance and the willingness to experiment with a variety of innovative approaches to address the difficult interconnectedness of the problems they will face in the world. It lets them understand that sometimes they just will not be able to neatly solve the problems they will face.

In much the same way that it offers complementary correctives for the thesis/support form’s developmental and epistemological deficiencies, the essay also compensates for the essay’s ideological

inadequacy. While the thesis/support form's convention of "objectivity" on the part of the writer makes the implicit claim that the author can (and, indeed, *should*) be "un-ideological," disinterested and unaffected by the sociopolitical structures operating in her environment, the essay recognizes that subjectivity and objectivity are perpetually mutually redefining and reconstructing each other. The essay embodies and enacts the notion that the writer's discourse is not somehow separated from and immune to the cultural, economic, and political influence of the voices of others around her, but rather formed through interaction and contestation with those voices. The essay recognizes that a writer does not speak in a vacuum, untouched and unaffected by others, but rather can speak only *through* those other voices and in intimate relationships with them. Additionally, unlike the incredibly tight discursive structure of the thesis/support form, the essay's form does not make the ideological claim that the enigmatic wrangles of the world's problems and issues are really, after all is said and done, neat, "slottable," and solvable in a short space using a single point of view and rigidly formulaic thinking. Rather, the essay makes the counterclaim that discord and disagreements are often far more intractable and difficult to resolve than we might like to think, that the road to resolution is often confusing, exasperating, and messy, requiring remarkable heterogeneity and flexibility in our thinking, and often, in the end, leaving us with many loose ends to worry about. The implicit ideological claim of the essay form is that sometimes the very best we can do is to arrive at paradox, ambiguity, and contradiction. Furthermore, rather than mystifying the nature of authority and thus making students unthinkingly revere and replicate the existing hierarchy of power structures in society, as Fort claims the thesis/support form does (633), the essay's radical skepticism constantly interrogates the "hidden omniscience" authorities try to display, constantly underscoring each of their interpretations as the product of the mind of a fallible human being. Rather than inculcating the obeisant and deferent attitude toward authority and hierarchy that can unconsciously reinscribe the extant status quo privileging rich, young, able-bodied, highly educated, scientific, white, Christian, business-minded, materialistic, type-A males, the radical skepticism of the essay form resists, questions, and undercuts all of these privileges, and critiques the system that presents these privi-

legings as the obvious, "natural," inevitable order of things. Through its skeptical, social epistemological critique of authority and hierarchy in all its arrangements, the essay supports economic, social, political, and cultural democracy.

Finally, the essay offers a corrective complement for the thesis/support form's overemphasis on the use of masculine rhetoric. While the thesis/support form encourages the use of a primarily masculine thinking and discourse, emphasizing an abstract, logical, impersonal, rational, linear, agonistic, framed, contained, preselected, and packaged thinking and discourse that presses for explicitness and closure, the essay celebrates an opposing feminine rhetoric (sensual, contextual, committed, intuitive, associative, holistic, indirect, open-ended, generative, less processed, and less controlled) that values implicitness, multiplicity, simultaneity, openness, and inconclusion. The essay liberates both the female and male students in a composition class, allowing them to "speak in foreign tongues," to use taboo rhetorics and marginalized voices, and thus to rhetorically reinvent themselves. Using the essay in the composition class undercuts the public-private dichotomy, that two-edged hierarchical structure that empowers men to dominate women by excluding women from positions of epistemological authority, but forces men to throw away half their nature, resources, and potential in the process. While the thesis/support form requires students to use only the father tongue—the discourse that has its power in dividing self from other, subject from object, human writer from human fallibility and emotion—the essay allows them to employ the mother tongue—the discourse that binds and connects self to other, subject to object, human writer to human frailty and feelings. The essay, in short, gives students in the composition course the option of exercising a more fully human discourse.

Students who work with these various corrective complements and compose essays in the composition class, who have the opportunity to negotiate these various antitheses between the thesis/support form and the essay, gain a critical distance and a new perspective on the thesis/support form. They become more aware of aspects of the form that had previously been invisible or opaque, that had seemed natural or inevitable. In other words, composing essays seems to help students compose better thesis/support texts. The overall quality of the arguments my students have composed after

first working through the processes and products of essay writing is notably better than the overall quality of those composed by other students in my past who had no experience with the essay. There are a couple of reasons for this, I think. First, in addressing opposition arguments, the students who have had experience with the essay do a far better job of examining, understanding, and fairly presenting the opposition's position. Compared to the performance of past classes, they are much more able to get beyond the surface appearance of their oppositions' positions and thus far less likely to present straw persons to be easily disposed of; they are much more able to elaborate on *why* the opposition holds the positions it does and thus do not too simply and too rapidly sketch out only *what* the opposition believes. Second, the students with essay-writing experience seem better able to examine their own positions. Thus, they are better able to locate and plug the holes in their defenses, to articulate *why* they believe *what* they believe, and so to argue from positions that are far more sophisticated and stable, supported from multiple angles. In both cases, I think, these improved abilities in thesis/support writing are traceable to the willingness to explore alternative views characteristic of successful essay writing. The essay urges the writer to look at what may appear to be simple phenomena from multiple and diverse perspectives, complicating her vision in fruitful ways. The cognitive and textual richness and density characteristic of successful essay writing, I believe, complicates and broadens student writers' visions of the world, gives them a newly problematic and sophisticated perspective which can improve their performance in thesis/support writing tasks.

By rehabilitating the essay, by rehabilitating both our and our students' notions of what this challenging kind of text is and what it can do, by using the essay as an alternative form in composition instruction, we can offer our students new, more expansive ways of seeing and being in the world, new, more complex ways of thinking and using language, and new, more active, engaging, and provocative selves to become.

A f t e r w o r d

Kineticism Incarnate: Motion/Movement and the Form of the Essay

OR

Moving Violation: These Boots Were Made for Walking

I know you think the question tedious. . . . Yet I believe . . . that all the discussions have barely touched upon the essence of the real question: what is an essay?

—Georg Lukács

Is, then, the Essay in literature a thing which simply stands outside classification, like Argon among the elements, of which the only thing that can be predicated is that it is there? Or like Justice in Plato's Republic, a thing which the talkers set out to define, and which ends by being the one thing left in a state when the definable qualities are taken away?

—Arthur Christopher Benson

INTRODUCTION

While the essay has recently been enjoying a new wave of literary, critical, theoretical, and pedagogical interest, four hundred years after its invention, it continues to doggedly defy our attempts to define it in a way upon which we can generally agree. The consensus is that of all literary forms, "the essay most successfully resists