

The Transition to College Writing

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2 Footstools and Furniture

There is a general theme that freshmen in college experience throughout their first year: you have to adapt, but not necessarily abandon, what you've learned in high school to fit into your new college environment.

— A college junior

What Is Good Writing?

Many of your college teachers assume that you learned the "basics" of good writing in high school. They also assume that your freshman writing course will review and supplement the skills you need to write well in your other courses. For this reason, teachers who assign writing in fields such as history, anthropology, or biology might not tell you how to complete those assignments effectively.

You probably have learned some basic strategies for completing the kinds of essays teachers assign. When you apply that knowledge to particular assignments, however, you might find that your teachers had different expectations. The "basics" they thought you should have learned for writing in their courses might differ from the ones you were taught, and an approach that works well in one college course might not work in another. Following methods of organization you learned in high school, you might produce an essay that, according to your teacher, "lacks organization." Yet in another course the same strategy might satisfy your teacher's expectations. The effort to meet these diverse, unpredictable expectations leads some students, like this senior, to conclude that there are no reliable standards for good writing:

It's all luck. I used to think I was a good writer, but now I don't know. Sometimes I work for days on a paper, and the teacher hates it. Sometimes I whip it off in a couple of hours and it turns out great.

Maybe it's my mood. Maybe it's the teacher. I don't know. It's always a gamble, so I avoid writing whenever I can, and when I can't avoid it I just do it, and see what happens.

For the purpose of resolving these doubts I'll first reduce the problem to more manageable proportions. Among your teachers and fellow students you will probably encounter two ideas about good writing that seem to conflict:

1. All good writers and all good writing should follow some basic principles. For example, *All good writing should have a thesis, clearly stated in the introduction. Following paragraphs should each present a point that supports this thesis, and the essay should end with a logical conclusion. Writing throughout the essay should be clear, concise, and correct.*
2. Features of good writing vary from one situation to another. These variations depend, for example, on the *subject* of the writing, its *purpose*, and the *reader's expectations*. The *form* of writing used in a field of study often structures those expectations. As a consequence, the features of good writing in a literature course will differ greatly from the features of good writing in business or astronomy, and what seems clear to one audience might not be clear to another.

These statements appear to conflict, but writing is similar to other complex skills we master gradually. If you learned to play a musical instrument, for example, you started with very simple compositions that strengthened basic skills necessary for moving on to more complex forms and styles. As you became more accomplished, the basic skills you first learned remained important, but standards for performance changed, and the range of music you could play expanded. Although it was once important for you to learn to play those simple pieces well, you wouldn't choose to perform them in an advanced recital.

A different analogy might help to resolve this apparent contradiction in the case of writing: Imagine that you have learned woodworking skills by perfecting the construction of a good footstool. Your instructor has chosen this task to teach you basic principles of woodworking: the selection of materials, the use of tools, methods of shaping and joining parts, and techniques for completing a nicely finished product. With practice and guidance, you have learned these lessons well. In the final tests of your skill, you produce foot-

stools that are solid, functional, and unblemished. You have become adept, your teacher informs you, at the basics of woodworking.

Now suppose that on the strength of this success, you take a job at a large furniture factory. In addition to the occasional footstool, the various departments produce many styles of tables and chairs, beds, wardrobes, dressers, cabinets, and bookcases. There are also different lines of these products, some purely functional, others ornate, elaborately joined, and highly polished. Different departments employ different materials and methods and maintain different standards for quality. "Eventually," the manager says, "you'll work in one of these departments, depending on your abilities and preferences. But for the first year or two we want you to try several of them, to give you a sense of the whole range of our operations and all of your options."

For more than a year, then, you move from one department to another, working as an apprentice in all of them. Many of the tools, materials, and procedures are familiar to you. Most of the types of furniture you are supposed to build have legs and tops, like a footstool, but some do not, and there are also drawers, doors, shelves, and frames, hinges and pulls, dovetail or mortise and tenon joints, different glues and dowels for different purposes, and varied finishes for different styles of furniture. In each department you are a novice and make mistakes. And as you attempt to carry the knowledge you have gathered from one department to another, you find that expectations vary. One supervisor wants you to follow detailed instructions; another expects you to be creative. One department emphasizes the quality of materials and simple, sturdy construction; another is concerned with style and the development of original, interesting designs. These standards for the production of "good furniture" differ, yet each supervisor describes these standards as though they were absolute.

"Don't get discouraged," an experienced worker reassures you. "Eventually you'll pass through this phase and settle into one kind of job. For now, just pay attention and learn as much as you can." And indeed, as the range of your experience expands, you gradually become better at adapting the skills you have already acquired to new tasks.

In the business of higher education, the departments I have in mind, of course, are academic ones, and their main product (apart from college graduates) is writing. Every academic field has its own literature. These literatures include specialized journals in which scholars must, as the saying goes, "publish or perish." They also

include books written primarily for colleagues in the profession, textbooks, and books and articles for more general audiences. In the field of psychology, for example, scholars in various subfields publish articles in dozens of highly specialized research journals such as *The Journal of Personality* and *Social Psychology*, in journals that represent the entire discipline such as *American Psychologist*, and in magazines for the general public such as *Psychology Today*. All of these periodicals have their own guidelines for the length, form, and style of articles they publish. Many other types of informal and official writing (such as research notebooks, grant proposals, reports, and professional correspondence) add to the great demands of writing in the working lives of scholars in every field. In academic communities, writing is the primary medium through which the work of scholars becomes known. **[Exercise 1]**

In an introductory biology class no one will expect you to write according to standards for publication in *Nature*, *Evolution*, or *The American Journal of Physiology*. In any field, the standards for student writing and for professional writing differ. But professional literatures do shape the kinds of assignments you will be asked to complete. Like our apprentice woodworker, you will spend your first year getting basic experience in a variety of departments before you decide, on the basis of performance and preference, which field you will pursue. In the process, you might be asked to produce historical arguments, philosophical discussions, scientific reports, literary analyses, social science research papers, business case studies, autobiographical essays, poetry, or fiction. Most of these forms of student writing derive from professional literature of one kind or another. And although individual teachers might imagine that their standards for "good writing" are universal, they are not. As you move from one course and department to another, writing assignments will lead you to write for very different audiences, in different forms and styles, for different purposes.

What are the components of a good piece of writing, and how are they assembled? What qualities are teachers looking for when they assign writing: creativity? logic? factual content? brevity and simplicity? elaboration? evidence that you have learned what you were taught? Evidence that you can think independently, with originality? Should good writing be simple and functional, or should it be elaborately, stylishly designed? Should its significance be clear to everyone or only to certain types of readers? Diverse standards for writing can't be reduced to a single form or procedure any more than woodworking can be reduced to the construction of footstools.

To become adept at building furniture, therefore, you have to stop making footstools, even though many of the skills you learned for making them remain useful.

The Limitations of the "Footstool Essay"

I suspect that most of you have identified the footstool in this analogy: a basic form of essay, composed of a few parts assembled in a certain order. In your junior high and high school English courses you probably learned that every essay should have three parts: an *introduction*, a *body*, and a *conclusion*. "As a writer in high school," one college freshman recalled in a slightly macabre way, "I was told to follow a certain formula, introducing the topic with an introduction, concluding with a conclusion, and filling the space in between with a body."

The "formula" this student refers to is sometimes called the "five-paragraph theme" or the "keyhole essay" (a term coined by Sheridan Baker in a writing text titled *The Practical Stylist*). According to this formula, the introduction should take the shape of a funnel, beginning with a broad statement of the topic and narrowing to a thesis statement at the end. This statement lists the subtopics, or "points," of the following paragraphs, and the body of the essay raises these points in order. The final paragraph should begin somewhat narrowly, perhaps as a reiteration of the thesis, and broaden in the form of an inverted funnel to some kind of conclusion. The typical choice of three supporting points plus the introduction and conclusion accounts for the term "five-paragraph theme," and "keyhole" roughly describes the overall shape of the essay, which my students often diagram like Figure 1.

High school teachers often use some version of this formula to prepare students for the Advanced Placement English exam and other timed assessments of writing ability because it provides a structure for writing a brief essay on almost any subject. Whether you are writing arguments, summaries, explanations, or comparisons, on the causes of a war, the advantages of managed health care, or the duties of a citizen, this model allows you to begin with a basic outline. Once you have identified a central thesis and three supporting points, you know that you should begin with some general observations about the topic, narrow the introduction to a topic sentence that lists your supporting points, discuss these points in order in the body paragraphs, return to your thesis in the con-

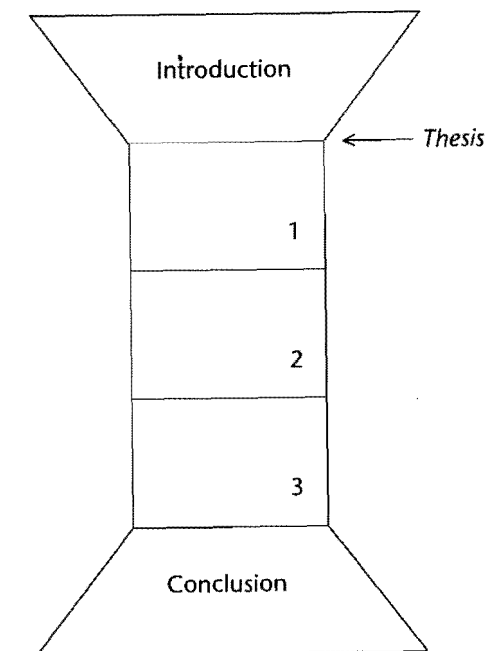


FIGURE 1

clusion, and end with further generalization. If you "say what you are going to say, say it, and say you've said it" (as some teachers instruct their students), neither the writer nor the reader can possibly get lost. If you follow these simple instructions, your essay should turn out every time, like a ready-mixed cake. **[Exercise 2]**

This basic outline is so easy to use that students often bring it with them to college and use it habitually as a template for writing essays. As an all-purpose recipe, however, this formula does not work very well or for very long. We can observe some of its limitations in the following essay written by an entering freshman in response to a timed (50-minute) writing assessment asking students to "discuss factors that facilitate or hinder learning":

In order for people to learn there must be a good learning atmosphere. Many things can affect the atmosphere in which people try to learn. Some of them are class sizes, stress, and the professor's way of teaching. A bad learning atmosphere hinders

learning because people can't concentrate and absorb the material to be learned.

Large classes hinder learning. Large classes cause the student to get less individual student-professor contact. They also put the student farther from the teacher so it's harder to focus on him/her. The student would have a greater distance between him/her and the front of the room where the professor is speaking.

Stress from outside of class hinders learning. Stress also could distract students in class by giving them other things to think about. It might also cause headaches that would hinder or prevent proper concentration. If students have large amounts of stress it messes up sleeping patterns. This could cause students to fall asleep in class, or be too tired to learn properly. Stress hinders learning because of the effect it has on both the mind and the body.

Professors who speak in a language only they can understand hinder learning. Students then spend too much time trying to figure out what the professors are saying. This causes the students to not be able to take proper notes. Students might also lose interest in the class that is needed for them to survive. Students might continue to fall below an ever increasing pile of work as they try to understand. Students' ability to learn is hindered when professors speak in a language only the professors can comprehend.

Learning is hindered when the atmosphere isn't conducive to learning. This happens when the student has too many stresses outside of class. It also happens when students are in large classes because students don't get as much contact with the professor. Professors who speak in a language only they

can understand hinder learning because the students try to understand them instead of the material. The atmosphere of the classroom is hindering learning when things such as these occur.

This is a particularly rigid, skeletal example of a "five-paragraph theme," yet it conforms to the "basic" requirements for clarity, organization, and correctness (apart from a couple of minor errors) taught in many high schools. I suspect that the student who wrote it believed that he was doing exactly what he should do to demonstrate to college teachers that he could write a decent essay.

The assessment readers, however, considered it the work of a weak writer who might not be able to meet the demands of college work. Use of the five-paragraph formula made this essay seem an empty formality rather than a thoughtful response to the question. It is too obvious that the writer was simply manufacturing an introduction and conclusion and "filling the space in between with a body," severed into three parts. Paragraphs consist of flat, disconnected statements of nearly the same length, and "say what you are going to say, say it, and say you've said it" becomes a recipe for redundancy. In fewer than two pages the essay says almost everything at least three times, as though readers suffered from attention deficit disorder.

Actually this diagnostic essay tells us very little about the student's writing ability. It tells us instead that on this occasion he used a simplistic formula that interfered with thought and communication. Once he had chosen the requisite thesis and three supporting points, writing became a task of filling in the blanks in a standard outline. While he was writing he did not think more deeply about the topic, establish connections among the supporting points, or ask himself whether "stresses outside the class," for example, can be considered features of the "atmosphere of the classroom." A conclusion that simply reiterates the introduction confirms that the essay takes the writer and the reader nowhere.

The assessment readers' main concern, therefore, was that this writer might be inflexibly wedded to a model that would undermine his responses to assignments in college courses — that he would produce a "footstool" when teachers expected a more complex, specific form. **[Exercise 3]**

Student writers who have moved beyond these formulas recognize both their functions and their limitations. One college junior

realized that the prescription for good writing that he learned in his senior year of high school was really a prescription for getting through the AP English test:

At the time, I believed that what I was learning were the "laws" of writing that every college student everywhere used to write effective papers. It is true that what I had learned worked perfectly for my specific purpose; it was exactly the style the Advanced Placement test-givers and my instructor wanted and encouraged. Although the style and rules that I learned are not totally useless (I use them sometimes to give my writing organization and direction if it is straying), they had negative consequences on style and creativity.

For some reason unbeknownst to me, many of the rigid rules I observed had to do with the number three.

Rule #1: Each paragraph should have at least three sentences.

Rule #2: There should be at least three paragraphs to the body of a composition.

Rule #3: The writer should strive to have three forms of proof or evidence for each of the three supporting ideas of the thesis.

This student's ability to look back and examine what he was taught as a way of moving forward represents the kind of flexible, reconstructive attitude that college writing teachers encourage.

What Remains True?

All of us who teach freshman writing courses are familiar with the five-paragraph formula, and most of us believe that our students need to move beyond it, into a wider range of forms and styles. We know that formulas do not automatically generate the kinds of thought, cohesion, fluency, and interest that characterize effective writing, and even a quick glance at published work reveals that good essays do not always consist of five paragraphs and three supporting points. Thesis statements do not always land at the end of the first paragraph, and a "thesis" can take many forms: a question the essay will try to answer, a statement of intention, an observation, or a strong argument, among others. Conclusions rarely mirror introductions. Successful writers pursue arguments, explanations, and other types of work in a great variety of forms that we cannot reduce to any one kind of outline or recipe. Using a single

formula for all writing will bring your development to a screeching halt.

On the other hand, we know from experience that if such formulas represent in your minds the "basics" of academic writing, we cannot simply say "Abandon this formula!" without creating confusion and loss. Prohibiting the use of this model or any other standard format suggests that everything you previously learned about writing is wrong. And if these principles do not represent the basics of good writing in college, what are the *real* basics you can rely on? Writers who were left entirely to their own devices in high school, without models and standards, face equally difficult problems of adjustment, as one college junior recalled, in reference to his AP English class:

Sometimes I regret having been given so much leeway in writing. It seemed that sometimes I could do no wrong. My writing became more and more embellished. . . . Clichés and pretentious claims were the tricks of my trade. None of my teachers bothered to tell me that half of the time I wasn't even saying anything in my writing. I dealt in trite, pseudo-intellectual discourse when direct, honest answers would have been much more effective.

College came as something of a shock.

Fortunately, you can explore the complexity of writing without rejecting everything you previously learned. And there is nothing inherently wrong with a footstool as long as you don't try to use it for every purpose. It has its own design and functions, and like other objects it can be made well or badly, out of materials strong or flimsy, assembled with care or disregard. With some adaptation, skills you developed for one purpose might become useful for a very different purpose. As I'll explain in Chapter 4, for example, the basic shape of the "keyhole essay" will be most appropriate not for writing papers in an English class (where you probably learned it) but for writing science lab reports.

With some reinterpretation, furthermore, the notion of three basic sections — *introduction*, *body*, and *conclusion* — represents some valid observations about the structure and development of almost every kind of writing you will read and produce in college. Effective writing usually has a recognizable *beginning*, *middle*, and *end*. It starts somewhere, goes somewhere, and ends up somewhere. In this respect almost all writing, from short stories to scientific reports, has

a quality of *narration*. It tells some kind of story, and the particular kinds of stories that academic writers tell largely define what it means to know something in that field. Historical narratives differ from philosophical or scientific ones, but all have some very general features in common:

1. *Beginnings* are points of departure, and even if they do not explicitly map the routes the writing will take, they tell us where this journey will start, point us in a certain direction, and provide some bearings for the next move. **[Exercise 4]**

2. The *middle* portions of an essay (or, for that matter, of a short story, a report, or a book), should carry the reader smoothly from the point of departure through a series of connected passages. As readers, we shouldn't feel that the route we are taking is completely arbitrary. Even if we do not know *en route* exactly where we will end up, we should feel that the writer is taking us somewhere in a particular direction. We shouldn't feel lost, either in a fog or in a thicket; if paragraphs can be rearranged without disrupting the flow of the writing, that usually means there is no flow to disrupt. We are just reading a bunch of paragraphs, a random collection of points, disconnected clusters of information. **[Exercise 5]**

3. *Endings*, then, are destinations. They might or might not present formal conclusions; they might offer new questions, explain what remains unresolved, or point out some new direction for further exploration. But they do give readers a sense of having arrived somewhere: at some new understanding or a new way of thinking about the topic. **[Exercise 6]**

Thinking about where a piece of writing will start out, where it will go, and where it will end up is a good idea, whether you are working within or without a prescribed format. While all-purpose formulas for writing ensure a measure of skeletal, structural organization, they do not automatically provide this essential quality of *movement* through and between sections—a quality that results from the relations among ideas you have thought through. This principle of movement partly explains why the five-paragraph assessment essay presented earlier was unsuccessful. The problem was not that it contained five paragraphs or three points. The main problem was that it ended up precisely where it started out. It didn't go anywhere.

For comparison, consider this response to the same writing assessment question — to “discuss factors that facilitate or hinder learning”:

Many factors contribute to an environment where learning occurs. Comfortable settings, skillful teachers, and motivated students all facilitate learning. When all of these factors are positive, something like a chemical reaction happens in the minds of students.

Even one negative factor, however, can keep this reaction from happening. Students who have no desire to learn can't be taught, even by the most inspiring teachers. On the other hand, even when students are fascinated with the subject a poor teacher can make learning almost impossible.

Unfortunately this happened to me in my senior physics class. Most of us were very interested in science and wanted to go on to college with a strong background in physics. Mr. Gabler failed to satisfy our interests because he spent most of every class period telling us stories about his own experiences that often had nothing to do with science. He seemed to think we needed to be entertained rather than taught, but actually I believe he was the one who was bored with physics and with teaching. I think he was trying to entertain himself.

Because Mr. Gabler was such a poor teacher I had to learn physics mostly on my own, by studying the textbook at home. This means that learning can happen without teachers and outside the classroom. If the classroom was uncomfortable, or if the other students caused distractions, I could probably learn more by studying alone. If you are motivated to learn something you can find ways to learn unless some factor makes that “chemistry” impossible.

These examples tell us that missing factors do not hinder learning as much as negative factors do. Although a nice classroom, other good students, and a skillful teacher can all contribute to a good learning environment, learning can happen without them. On the other hand, a horrible classroom, disruptive students, and a bad teacher can actually prevent learning.

This assessment essay is similar to the first in some ways. In the opening paragraph it introduces three factors that influence a learning environment, and it mentions these factors both in the following paragraphs and in the conclusion. It also has five paragraphs and is therefore a "five-paragraph theme."

Unlike the first essay, however, this discussion of learning moves from the opening statements through a series of connected points to a real conclusion. In other words, it has a real *beginning*, *middle*, and *end*, and as a consequence it takes us somewhere, beyond the place where we started out. It has a *point of departure*, a *direction*, and a *destination*.

We also have a sense that the writer was actually thinking about the question both before and while she wrote. She wasn't just dividing the topic into three parts, according to a formula, and filling in the blanks. In fact, I suspect that when she wrote the first paragraph she wasn't entirely sure where the discussion would end up. The conclusion that "missing factors do not hinder learning as much as negative factors do" probably occurred to her while she was explaining what happened in and outside her physics class. If she had followed the common formula, discussing three separate points in disconnected paragraphs, this idea may not have occurred to her at all.

In a timed assessment or essay exam, of course, you won't have much time to think, and using a formula might seem to be the safest alternative. In some cases students begin essays in an exploratory fashion that leads nowhere or becomes too complex for them to finish in the allotted time.

But teachers recognize these hazards of exploratory thinking, just as they recognize the use of formulas that minimize thinking. *The great majority of your college teachers want you to use writing as a way of thinking and conveying your thoughts about a subject, not as a demonstration that you can follow a simple recipe. [Exercise 7]*

Breaking Out of a Rigid Structure

The main problem with the "footstool essay," therefore, is not that it consists of five paragraphs, three sections, and three supporting points. Instead, the problem is that student writers often use this formula habitually as a substitute for thought about the topic or question. Used in this rigid way, a prescription for writing will limit thought, limit the movement of your essays, and limit your development as a writer. While reliance on the formula might allow you to assemble an assessment essay or respond to an essay exam question quickly, students who depend on this model often have trouble writing longer papers that require more complex arguments and analysis. Using the same strategy whenever you get an assignment also becomes tedious. When students tell me that they no longer enjoy writing, they often mean that they no longer enjoy the routine ways in which they write.

None of these limitations apply to the idea that *a good essay is a vehicle for thought that moves from a clear point of departure, in a certain direction, toward a destination*. That conception of what you are doing can apply to writing of all kinds, of any length, at all levels of complexity.

And this is what high school teachers are trying to get across when they teach students highly structured models for writing essays. They are trying to emphasize some basic principles of organization that you can later use to develop essays of great variety. Unfortunately, students often miss the point of this instruction and assume that if they divide a topic into three subtopics the essay will more or less write itself. When they have let a prescribed formula determine the content, as I'll explain in the next chapter, they lose the flexibility and freedom they might have gained in the process of writing.

Some types of writing do occur within specific organizational frameworks that look like recipes, and I'm not encouraging you to ignore these prescribed structures. Scientific reports, for example, should carry the reader through a series of sections, with particular functions, in an order that is fairly predictable. Business reports and some kinds of correspondence, such as cover letters, have similarly predictable formats. Some writing assignments will tell you how your essay should be organized and what kinds of information it should contain. In order to write well, you must write within these guidelines, and in later chapters I'll describe some of them.

Even in these cases, however, the prescribed structure is only one feature of good writing. The quality of thought, information,

and explanation is another. The way writing flows within and between sections also affects the quality of the work as a whole. It is a serious mistake, therefore, to imagine that if your paper conforms to a prescribed format you have written well.

EXERCISES

Exercise 1. Go to the recent periodical section of your school library or public library, find five issues of different professional journals in a variety of fields, and photocopy the first page of the first article in each. Arrange these pages on a table and read them, paying attention to similarities and differences in the ways they introduce the subject, the writing style and language, graphic features, and other details. Make a list of ten differences you notice among these examples of professional writing.

Exercise 2. In a couple of pages explain what you were taught about writing essays in high school. Does the diagram of the "five-paragraph theme" or "keyhole essay" in this chapter look familiar? If it does, did your teachers show you ways to adapt or elaborate the model? If it does not, were you taught other forms or rules for organizing effective essays?

Exercise 3. To recognize how the formula structures your thinking and writing, write a conventional five-paragraph theme either for or against competitive grading in schools. Argue either that grading improves learning or that grading interferes with learning. Begin in the conventional way, with some generalizations about grades or learning, divide your argument into three points, discuss these points in body paragraphs, and restate your position in the conclusion.

Then in retrospect, assess what you gained and lost in using this approach.

Exercise 4. To test my descriptions in this section, analyze the ways in which some published essays actually work. Choose three essays or articles from an anthology of readings used in your writing class, from other collections of essays, or from magazines.

First look at *beginnings*. You should be able to identify the introductory section of each essay, from the first sentence to the point at which the author has finished telling readers what the essay will be about. How do these authors actually start out — with generalizations (as the five-paragraph model predicts) or with a specific anecdote, example, or question? Are these introductory sections a single paragraph or several? What are their "shapes" in terms of the general and specific? How and where do the authors tell you the

"thesis" or topic of the essay? Is this delivered as a statement or as a question? Does the introduction list the "points" that will follow in the body?

Exercise 5. Now look at the *middle* sections of the same essays or articles. Do the paragraphs that follow the introduction represent a simple list of supporting points, or do they follow in some other kind of logical order? How do these writers get from one place to another in the middle sections? Can you identify transitions? Could you move paragraphs within the essay without damaging its flow?

Exercise 6. Finally, you should be able to identify the *endings* or concluding sections of the same essays. Do they repeat assertions in the beginnings, or do they represent "destinations" that leave you with the sense that the essay has taken you somewhere? Are they shaped like inverted funnels, ending with generalization? What are the functions of the last sentences?

Exercise 7. Now write another brief essay about the advantages or the disadvantages of competitive grading in education. This time set the formula aside. Just think about the question until you find that you have a position from which you can start writing, begin by explaining what that position is, and then try to explain and support your position in a series of connected paragraphs. In the conclusion explain where the discussion has led you, or perhaps what issues remain.

In retrospect, what are the main differences between your essay in Exercise 3 and this essay? While you were writing the second, did you feel that you had to resist using the formula for structuring the essay?