Muddying Boundaries: Mixing Genres with Five Paragraphs

Deborah M. Dean

The *Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch is a charming children's picture book. Part of its charm lies in its ability to anticipate the conventions of the fairy tale genre, creating expectations for readers, then pushing the boundaries of the genre in novel ways. As the story moves outside traditional expectations with its unexpected reversals (the princess fights the dragon to save the prince, and the fight is more mental trickery than physical battle), the boundaries of the genre are muddied, making my secondary students smile when I read to them. But it is the ending that surprises them most. In fairy tales, the happily-ever-after ending is so strongly expected that it becomes a cliché. The students expect it, even as they don't want it, which is why they are so tickled at the nontraditional ending. The story not only doesn't end the way they expect, but the ending is so totally like their lives, tiptoeing as it does over the appearance-versus-reality conflict they see all around them, that they laugh out loud. "You look like a real prince, but you are a bum." The ending truly delights them.

For many of our students, writing for school is a dry, formulaic process. *The Paper Bag Princess* demonstrates a strategy we can teach students to help them engage in academic writing more personally and inventively.

Genre Theory

It has been suggested that one way to make writing interesting is to create the expectations of the genre in the mind of the reader and then tweak one or two of these aspects or boundaries a little, just enough to surprise and delight. Genre theory provides a way to do that, even with genres as tired as the five-paragraph essay. Underlying the theory is the concept that types of writing develop in response to particular social contexts, "that genres are basically social actions and only incidentally textual forms" (Cooper 26). This theory itself is controversial; it could, if applied without thought, mean a return to a focus on forms and product over process. Opponents say it is a return to the traditional methods and interests of writing, a movement away from empowering the individual. Supporters claim it is just the opposite—a more logical way to empower our students, to give them the ability to write in ways that will help them be successful in the social situations in which they'll find themselves. The application of genre theory is a process because it asks students to analyze the social context and the needs that must be addressed by writing within that social context. I'm proposing a way to approach with a new eye what we often must do as teachers, a way to bridge the present and the future needs of our students through mixing genres.

The Five Paragraph Essay

The five paragraph essay form has an unsavory reputation in some corners of the profession, but, quite frankly, it still lives on in classrooms—and probably for good reasons—one being that, in some states, students need to know this form to score well on state writing assessments. Additionally, teachers in other content areas expect our students to understand and

use the five paragraph format when they write for their courses. Why does the form persist in so many areas? Because it is easy to teach—it's a formula. And it's easy to grade. It's fast. It's predictable. The problem is that it's also often boring, both to write and to read. Enter genre theory. Enter the lesson of *The Paper Bag Princess.*

Those of us who are obliged to teach five paragraph essays (for whatever reasons) can learn to see beyond the limitations of the form to what else it could be.

My students understand the concept of dressing to fit the occasion. They wouldn't consider wearing pajamas or a yellow rain slicker to the prom. Neither would they wear a formal dress or a tuxedo to play soccer. In a similar way, I teach them, they will encounter academic situations where five paragraph essays are the expected form. Hopefully, they'll also encounter situations where other forms are possible—and I try to expose them to those forms as well so the students are prepared to make the appropriate choice for each situation. Understanding various contexts and how to write within them really gives our students more options, as Devitt points out: "Only when we understand genres as both constraint and choice, both regularity and chaos, both inhibiting and enabling will we be able to help students use the power of genres critically and effectively. In such power is individual freedom" (54). Those of us who are obliged to teach five paragraph essays (for whatever reasons) can learn to see beyond the limitations of the form to what else it could be.

Muddying Boundaries

To begin, students must be familiar with the characteristics of the five paragraph essay, just as they must know the characteristics of a fairy tale in order to be intrigued by the interesting ways Munsch plays with those characteristics in his book. They need to comprehend the inverted triangle introduction with the thesis statement at the end. They need to understand body paragraphs, with topic sentences linking the idea of the paragraph to the thesis, followed by (at least) three objective examples/facts/quotes and their explanatory commentary. Finally, they need to know the summary conclusion.

Once students know how to create the expectations of a genre, how can they play with those expectations a little to create lively writing that reveals more individual voice? One way is to start off with mixed genres, keeping the form generally intact. For instance, we often suggest an anecdote as a possible beginning to the introductory paragraph. Why not make it a personal narrative? Does it have to be short? Can students begin the paper with a poem? How about a news brief or memo? What about supporting evidence? Does it always have to be objective? Can it be creative? Can it be another genre altogether? Tobin says, "Essays should reflect the way we think and experience the world. And the fact is, we often think and experience the world in a multidimensional, multivoiced way" (47). Using one of my student's five paragraph essays, I showed how students could mix genres, stretching the boundaries of what is expected. The essay was written in response to Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.* The student compared Stamps to San Francisco, concluding that San Francisco was a better place for Maya to live as a teenager, despite what happened to her there. To begin the first body paragraph, I inserted lists of characteristics of the two places to intensify the contrast the student intended. The first paragraph also discussed the fact that Maya could get jobs in California that she wouldn't have been able to get in Stamps. At that point, I added a want ad for a trolley car ticket person, emphasizing the student's point specifically. This is the paragraph now (italicized parts are added; plain text is the student's):

> *San Francisco: cable cars, the Golden Gate Bridge, winding roads down steep hills, Ghirardelli Square, fog, Chinatown, mimes and musicians on the sidewalk, the wax museum, Fisherman's Wharf.* San Francisco was very open to new ideas, which resulted in a less segregated community. Because of the intermixing of races, the inhabitants were accustomed to different types of people and respected different beliefs and customs. *Stamps:*

> *Black Stamps and White Stamps, cotton pickers, dust, baskets full of white people's laundry, segregated schools, the Sheriff on his horse, hiding, fear.* Stamps was a small town and set in its ways. In many respects, when compared to San Francisco, it was behind the times. There were major divisions between races, and as a result, they rarely interacted with one [another]. During Maya's eighth grade graduation a white man spoke to the graduates and their families. He spoke of all the wonderful new equipment the "white" school would be receiving. He assured them that they wouldn't be left out. He promised them new sports and home economics equipment. This is one example of how the different races in Stamps were expected to pursue different occupations. The whites were able to choose from numerous careers and had many more chances to succeed in life. On the other hand, the best job a black could obtain was a cotton-picker, washwoman, butler or maid. In San Francisco because of the little segregation, many jobs were open to all races and more opportunities were present. *Wanted: Trolley ticket taker. Training provided. Some high school required. All eligible applicants apply at 443 Southern Ave.*

Because of the changes, the paragraph doesn't begin with a traditional topic sentence. Lists aren't even complete sentences (horrors!). But the contrasting lists do serve a purposeful function in the text and, additionally, provide an interesting rhythm to the fluency of the paper. Despite the additions, the paper still has the kind of unity that Alexander Hill and Barrett Wendell idolized as essential in current-traditional rhetoric. Neither does the paragraph end with a "clincher" or concluding sentence, but the point is still made, and, I would argue, more interestingly.

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In another paragraph, the student wanted to show that, since we often learn most from our mistakes, Stamps would not have been a good place for Maya to make mistakes, since everyone watched her too closely. In San Francisco, she had the freedom to learn to deal with the mistakes she made. The student was making the point in a traditionally expected (and accepted) way, citing evidence from the text and commenting on it. I wanted to show students another, less obvious way to make the same point. I inserted an imaginary dialogue into the paragraph:

> While living in San Francisco, she became pregnant. She felt very guilty and felt she had to hide it from everyone. Being watched over constantly in Stamps, big mistakes, like Maya's, were very hard to come by. Can you imagine the gossip that would have followed discovery of her pregnancy in Stamps?
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> *Mrs. Goodman: Did you hear about Maya? No? Well she is in the family way.*
> *Mrs. Taylor: Who is the snake? Is he from 'round here?*
> *Mrs. Goodman: Well, I don't rightly know. Maybe one of that bunch of pickers that came through last summer. But you'd a thought that Mrs. Henderson would a kept better track of her comin' and goin'. Ever since she quit workin' at Mz. Cullinan's, she's been thinkin' she's pretty high and mighty, able to come and go as she pleases.*
> *Mrs. Taylor: You think Maya will go live with her mama now?*
> *Mrs. Goodman: I don't know about that. Don't know how she'll stay around here in this condition, though.*
> *Mrs. Taylor: Well, you know we got to keep our mind on the Book. We'll just pray for them.*
>
> Because of being self-reliant in San Francisco, she was able to make important mistakes that taught her important lessons.

In this case, I had to know the text well in order to anticipate the reactions, language, and context of such a conversation. So would students. In fact, nontraditional responses to literature often encourage students to dig more deeply into a text, to see it differently than they might with more traditional responses. And anyway, isn't the purpose of the paragraph achieved? Isn't the point still made clearly?

This mixing of genres can help our students push the boundaries of what is expected of them in five-paragraph essays. Who says we can't have creative writing mixed in, that we can't mix in other genres like lists, want ads, dialogues, short stories, or diaries as evidence of the point we are trying to make? We are seeing more and more of this mixing of genres, even in academic journals on composition, in the writings of Wendy Bishop, Kim Korn,

and Lad Tobin, for example. I can envision pushing boundaries further. What if students used existing forms for support instead of creating their own—forms such as comic strips (if the punch line supported the point of the paragraph) or art? Couldn't they be considered legitimate support?

Don't Expect a "Happily Ever After"

Generally, genres change through time as the situations that initiated the genres change. Those of us who teach in the secondary schools see a form that has remained relatively unchanged for almost a century. Statewide assessments and textbooks pretty much ensure that the five paragraph form will not change appreciably in the near future, despite journal articles and conference presentations. However, perhaps teachers can help students incorporate into the necessary form other genres, a combining that gives students a chance to make writing decisions. It is not easy to know what genre will best fit a particular point as support. It requires more of an investment in the text and in the content. It can lead to more in-depth revision and thinking. Lemke, in a discussion of genre as resource rather than as rule, explains that features of genre are flexible. When we incorporate unusual features into text, "they will be noticed as unusual features and they will have to prove themselves, to justify themselves, or we may judge the text to be inappropriately written or somehow unsatisfactory" (2). Students can't churn these mixed-genre essays out as quickly—and teachers will probably enjoy reading them more.

Furthermore, such practices also move us to a point of discussing contexts for writing. Will the readers of state tests want dialogue or poetry in the middle of a persuasive essay on extending the school year? Will the social studies teacher want a dream sequence in the middle of a description of the effects of nuclear bombs on Japan? Will a science teacher appreciate a paragraph on the care and treatment of a hybrid plant in the middle of a report on the effects of pollution on jungles? Our students will have to decide. And in making such decisions, they begin to make the choices writers make—at the same time working with the accepted form for these situations. Students will need to consider the social context of their writing even more because of the choices they have open to them.

Students tend to like the five paragraph form. It's safe—and they can use it almost without thinking once they understand it. By gradually introducing other genres into a form they feel comfortable with, students may become risk-takers in their writing. Eventually, they may push the boundaries of our expectations beyond what we anticipate in creative and individual ways. They will learn to make writer's choices and see beyond the expectations of the five paragraph form. Then, as we read their writing, expecting one thing, they will have the tools to surprise us with something else altogether, like the prince and the princess in the story who don't get married and live happily forever after all.

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A former public school teacher, DEBORAH M. DEAN now teaches in the English education program at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.