



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Shooting the Essay

Form and content make up the material world. And we all know that writing matters; writing *is* matter. Why, then, is it so difficult for students to see that form is every bit as essential as content, that the way something is written is equal to (or greater in importance than) what the writing is about? Many students come into my classes unable to analyze the form of an essay and with little understanding of why it is important to do so.

For one of their first exercises, my Writing I students read another student's essay that provides a good model for studying form and has content that is relevant. The story is "Thick Sliced Bologna," by Bill Ferguson. Bill wrote about the relationship he had with his grandfather, especially the fishing trips they took together, when they sat by the stream talking, occasionally fishing, and always eating thick sliced bologna sandwiches. Bill reveals in the conclusion that he didn't really care for these sandwiches but ate them anyway to please his grandfather.

The content of Bill's story is easy to discuss since it is about a relationship most students can understand. And when Bill learns from his grandmother that his grandfather has a fatal illness, students also can easily understand how it is that our parents teach us how to live while our grandparents teach us how to die. The content, then, is easy. But what about form? How is writing structured into an introduction, body, and conclusion?

It has proved instructive to look at Bill's story (and later at the students' own essays) as if it were a film script. Looking at how a filmmaker would instruct a camera person to shoot the story not only reveals the form of the essay in a dramatic fashion but also demonstrates two aspects of writing often lacking in student essays: (1) physical details that produce images for the reader and (2) a sentence style that is varied and rhythmic, producing movement that engages the reader through form rather than content. Here are the first few sentences of Bill's story:

The fraying edges and scuffed finish distort the photo, but since I know what to look for, the picture is crystal clear. The young Marine is

frozen proudly in his dress uniform. Brass buttons, polished to perfection, line his breast. The royal blue jacket fits him like a glove. Beneath his snowy white hat, his young face yields a slight smile. The smile is quite familiar. I think about him often, not as the young Marine in the photograph, but as my grandfather.

Having the students look at the details that Bill provides interests them very little. However, having them analyze these sentences in terms of how they might be filmed interests them enormously.

First, the camera zooms in, giving us an extreme close-up of the "fraying edges and scuffed finish" of the photo. The camera moves out a little to reveal the whole photo: "the young Marine...in his dress uniform." Then another zoom to an extreme close-up that reveals the polished brass buttons, then a zoom out a little to show the man in the jacket. Then there is a movement inward to show his face, then another extreme close-up to show the marine smiling. And then, finally, the camera gives us an establishing, medium shot that reveals Bill holding the photograph.

The camera's movement provides the opportunity to talk about induction and deduction: the camera begins with the details and then reveals the completed scene, rather than starting with the establishing shot and moving to the revealing details. But, more important, seeing the writing in terms of filmmaking does two things that are important for student writers.

First, it gives them an easy way to analyze writing, introducing them to the need to distinguish form from content. And, second, it gives them practice in writing what I call the Basic Academic Sentence: their opinion plus quoted textual evidence. Most of my students are good enough at summaries. Some are good at giving detailed expression to their likes and dislikes. But very few have had any practice in writing the kinds of sentences that they will write throughout their entire academic career—i.e., their opinions supported by evidence quoted from a text.

An even more interesting quality of students' analyses emerges after more practice in considering writing as film scripting. They begin to understand and



appreciate how the form of sentences, individually and collectively, influence the reader. And once they begin to think in terms of the reader, they are on their way to becoming writers instead of translators. Translators are lucky if they make connection with readers; they merely write down the thoughts that were in their heads. Writers rely on their knowledge of form and how form determines content.

Bill's essay has incessant movement. And this, I explain, is what *they* expect, not what I expect. They are accustomed to rapid movement. After all, they are movement experts, influenced by television, especially commercials, where lack of movement is fatal. And once they really understand that good writing is not good because some teacher claims it is—but that good writing is detailed, imagistic, rhythmic, approaching at times the rapid-shot sequence of television commercials—then they no longer are dependent upon me. They depend on their own ability to influence the reader.

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