INTRODUCTION FOR TEACHERS

What a pleasant surprise to find that one is not alone. Prior to the national TESOL convention in 2005, I had thought that using writing templates was my own idiosyncratic response to my students' inability to use the instruction and correction they had been given to produce reasonable papers. By *template* I mean a skeletal syntactic framework that can be used to craft a roadmap/introduction, a conclusion, a summary, or the body of an analytic paper. In giving that TESOL presentation, I discovered that many teachers use and teach rudimentary templates. The after-session conversation became a kind of support group, among a dozen or so of us "closet-templatists" who had finally found one another. I left with an e-mail list two pages long of teachers hungry for more information on templates. Quite simply, they had seen that, despite all the instructions they gave students on how to write a conclusion or an introduction, the results almost never approached what they were after and what students needed to produce in their academic work. Many teachers turned to inventing their own templates, although they seldom called them that. I am happy to report that writing templates are now out of the closet, perhaps for good.

➡ GENERAL REMARKS

Few are born with the swing of Tiger Woods or Charlie Sifford, the first African American to "make it big" on the PGA tour. Sifford relates that as a teenager he picked up some clubs and within a week was shooting in the 70s. Sifford's golfing ability is clearly expressing one of Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences, and the ability to write could be another. While these abilities in some practitioners appear to be innate, the analogy of writing to golf is appropriate when we focus on the nature of the writing as science. One salient feature of the scientific process is replicability, a feature that figures significantly in templates. *One key to good golf is a reliable, replicable swing; one key to good writing is reliable, replicable syntax.*

On the Internet, one can obtain templates for letters of recommendation, refunds, reprimands, resignations, invitations, and a host of other rhetorical occasions. What does the marketplace tell us about the direction of our writing instruction in high school and college? One response

is that templates are available for the kind of writing most people do in the real world—that is, past high school or college. At one time, one might have argued that these functions (recommendations, etc.) were part of what we should be training our students to perform. But in the Internet age, that argument is no longer robust. Students can easily find unimaginative, simplistic templates for these functions themselves. Another response might be that our writing instruction should be directed toward areas that templates do not address, primarily areas that involve thought, analysis, and argumentation. It is precisely these areas that I want to address, with templates in mind, to explore how our methods of writing instruction might profit from cross-fertilization via templates.

We already teach vocabulary, transitions, outlines, and even structure by means of a five-paragraph essay (whether you agree that the five-paragraph structure is valuable is irrelevant here). That structure is, arguably, a kind of template. What we have largely ignored or under-emphasized is help with the syntax necessary to create those larger structures. In effect, we say, "Here are the bricks *(vocabulary)*, the mortar *(transitions)*, and the scaffolding *(essay structure)*, now you put it together." Every architect learns reticulation (setting square stones on edge diagonally) from a master, a mentor, but writing students are left to their own devices to discover what the verbal equivalent of reticulation is. What I suggest is that we show students what this syntax consists of via templates that are general enough to be used in virtually any structured essay, which differentiates them from the templates for specific functions (recommendations, etc.) that have been mentioned.

While writing templates are of great value to students on standardized tests, they also have instructional benefits within the standard writing curriculum. First, they teach organization in a hands-on way. When students actually experience an imposed structure and practice using it, it tends to rub off. Further, noun clauses, inverted subject/verb order, subjunctives, and other difficult structures are scaffolded so that students can use them correctly. Idiomatic expressions that good writers use and that few non-native speakers of English and emerging native writers would ever use become a standard part of their writing repertoire.

My own complete conversion to templates occurred when I found myself lecturing for the nth time about stressing the limitations of one's work in a conclusion. Whereas the texts I had been using primarily taught that conclusions restate the main points, I had asked students to see their work as part of an intellectual continuum, where they were writing in the present, cited the past, and then in conclusion pointed to directions that

further work could go, since they had not said all that could be said about any particular topic.

David Posner, writing in *Profession* (2005), concurs with this approach: "If we are able to conclude that while we may have learned something there is still more to be learned, we may mitigate some of the evil inherent in the idea of a conclusion and along the way do some good for both our readers and ourselves."[1]

While the majority of my students bought into the concept of stressing limitations in a conclusion, I very seldom saw the principle applied in their papers. It is clear to me that, if one wants results, it makes no more sense simply to talk about a concept, even with an example, than it does for Tiger Woods to tell a neophyte golfer how to swing, even with a demonstration. The neophyte golfer needs to get to the practice range with a club in hand and with the golf template:

> **Position your feet with respect to the ball here.**
>
> **Keep your left arm stiff here.**
>
> **Throw your hips into the ball here.**

Similarly, when I provided a template for the conclusion I had been advocating, almost all of my students used versions of it, and their conclusions were orders of magnitude better. An additional benefit of conclusion templates is that they teach something about tone as well as structure. The tone of these conclusion templates is humility, as opposed to the self-congratulation teachers more normally see.

⇒ ART, CRAFT, OR SCIENCE?

Writing is often referred to as an art or as a craft. I want to stress the scientific aspect of writing, which means, simply, *syntax*. Putting words together is like putting bricks atop others. They go in patterns. The process is mostly mechanical and rarely artistic.

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[1]David Posner, "Rhetoric, Redemption, and Fraud: What We Do When We End Books," *Profession*, no. 1 (2005), 180.

This claim does not come without some version of an Augustinian confession. I have felt at times like a philistine, an apostate, abandoning the "intern model" of teaching writing. What I mean by that is the typical long-term process of writing as an internship in the physician-apprentice sense—long hours and little sleep, along with the sense that, although the process was seriously flawed, unnecessarily harsh, and burdensome, the interns did it, emerging scathed but knowledgeable. Why shouldn't the new crop of interns be similarly brutalized?

In my view, it is unfortunately rare that the effort is made by students to dissect the syntactic structure of an argumentative or analytical essay. It is as if we expect students to intuit this structure magically or, in the humanities version of medical residency, expect our writer-interns to go through the same lengthy apprenticeship we did and to emerge as equally capable writers. But on the whole, this is a fantasy and does a gross disservice to the majority of student-writers who show the same disinclination toward writing that many of us with strong verbal intelligence have often felt toward math. We feel free to rail at how poorly math is taught but are similarly uncritical of the tedious and antiquated methodology often employed in teaching writing, the results of which are unsatisfactory to a growing number of writing teachers.

Caveat: Students need to note that one size does not fit all. They can't just plug a topic in the right place and expect the template to always work. Some syntax needs manipulation. Usually, this is easy. Will errors be made? Sure. But such syntax errors would probably be consistent with similar usage errors in the student's paper, and the resulting essay will still be superior to what would have been written without the template. Templates are no panacea. We still have to do our job. No matter what we teach students—citation, organization, or support for an argument—they will make mistakes from which they will learn. Templates are no different in this regard. And templates will be internalized; they will teach.

Some colleagues are worried that if template use becomes widespread, all papers will look alike. The cynic's response is that too many are already alike, in their incompetence. My answer is that while some, or even many, papers may bear syntactical resemblance in certain parts, for the most part, the papers will be better than what we are seeing now. Similarity wins, hands down, over incompetence. Good students will eventually develop their own templates. For them, however, the process of intuiting the syntax of an introduction/roadmap or a conclusion will be accelerated. We are training our students for the real world, where clarity and content are what count. No one ever complained that the

scaffolding for all of Louis Kahn's buildings looked the same. The scaffolding comes off and you get the architecture; the syntax comes off in the readers' heads and they get the ideas.

Other colleagues have raised the question of plagiarism in templates. This is a non-starter. Plagiarism is most fundamentally the theft of ideas. There are no ideas here; there is only syntax, which in most cases is just parts of sentences. Templates are patterns, and no one owns a pattern that has been used millions of times. Even the rare short complete sentences in these templates have been used in their entirety tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of times. They are mainly transition sentences, acting like one-word transitions. Further, every template in this book came from another source. I didn't make them up. So no teacher can say, "That phrase, linked to that phrase, minus a few original words in between, further linked to that phrase came from Kevin King's book," for that author got the phrases from someone else. They are not mine, and they are not anybody else's. They belong to the English language. They are the linguistic commons, and everyone has a right to them. Moreover, numerous writing texts use rudimentary templates. *Ready to Write More*, a textbook by Karen Blanchard and Christine Root,[2] gives the following templates for topic sentences and thesis sentences:

There are several	| causes of
	| reasons for ————.
	| effects of

One writing teacher at my former school advised using the following template in her written instructions for an essay: "A good model for the last sentences of your first paragraph would be:

This advertisement seems to be about _____ but is really about _____. I will argue that _____."

Obviously, these texts and teachers are not teaching anyone to plagiarize. The writing templates in this book are different from these examples only in that they are designed for specific parts of *any* essay students may write; they are much more comprehensive and more expansive, and they use more sophisticated language and structures.

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[2]Karen Blanchard and Christine Root, *Ready to Write More: From Paragraph to Essay* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2004).

⇒ TEMPLATES AND STANDARDIZED WRITING TESTS (SAT®, TOEFL®)

While the goal of writing templates is not simply to enhance scores on standardized tests, templates are very effective tools for such tests. I believe that students armed with templates will outperform a similar group of students without templates for a couple of reasons. First, organization is, while not assured, at least significantly enhanced by a roadmap template. At whatever point in the writing process students create a roadmap, referral to that segment will help the students to ascertain whether or not they have followed their plan. Second, graders of such tests, who are being paid a sum for each graded essay, generally allow themselves about three minutes to evaluate the writing. Some graders will look only at the introduction and the conclusion, the two areas where templates can be most useful. The writing there will be better and more impressive than in similar sections in the exams of students who do not have templates. While there is, as yet, no empirical evidence to support this claim, disbelievers would be hard-pressed to come up with more compelling reasons for the theoretical template-less group equaling or surpassing the performance of the template-armed group.

Caveat: Going into a standardized test situation, students may forget some or even much of the template they had hoped to use, but some skeleton of it will probably remain, so that a student may recall something like: *What I've argued here is . . .* and *Only furter studies will show . . . .* Just remembering a few components will result in students performing better than they would have without the template.

⇒ CONCLUDING REMARKS

I hope that writing teachers will expand the repertoire of their instruction by assigning essays for syntactical analysis, allowing students of all proficiency levels to discover on their own the syntactical structures of good essays. With that our story comes full circle, for those students will arrive at structures similar to the ones I have presented.

Only longitudinal study will prove or disprove what I think is the case—that students who use templates for various parts of their papers will eventually lose their need for templates, and that the various syntactic structures that comprise many good conclusions, introductions, etc., will be imprinted in the heads of the students who used templates to a much greater degree than in the heads of the students who never used them.