

## Book Review

Caplan, N.A. & Johns, A. (Eds). (2019).  
Changing Practices for the L2 Writing  
Classroom: Moving Beyond the Five-  
Paragraph Essay. University of Michigan  
Press.

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As a multilingual learner and educator, I constantly explore the challenges faced by multilingual student writers who are learning to write in English as an additional language. My goal is to find ways to support their writing practices and help them develop a strong academic writer identity. The book's intriguing title, *Changing Practices for the L2 Writing Classroom: Moving Beyond the Five-Paragraph Essay*, caught my attention, motivating me to review it.

Although the book strongly criticizes the five-paragraph essay, I plan to use some of its formulaic elements in my review, as it can still serve as a framework and be adapted to various genres.

### Summary

The book presents theoretical and practical strategies for multilingual students, writing instructors, educators, and researchers, organized into three main parts. **Part 1** explains that the five-paragraph essay is not historically longstanding, not a distinct genre, and not universal. **Chapter 1** reviews the history of the five-paragraph essay and critiques its format, describing it as a barrier to meaningful L2 writing. The author suggests a genre-based instruction that better reflects real-world writing by emphasizing audience, context, and purpose. **Chapter 2** provides a definition of genre and argues that the five-paragraph essay

is merely a predetermined form, far from the social nature of genre. The author encourages adopting genre-based practice as a flexible approach to L2 writing to foster authentic, purposeful writing across various contexts. Finally, **Chapter 3** argues that the five-paragraph essay is not a universal standard and supports culturally responsive teaching that accounts for diverse educational settings and writing conventions.

**Part 2** discusses the use of the five-paragraph essay in assessment, its inadequacies across all educational levels—from elementary to graduate studies—and how it poses a barrier, especially for English learners' progress. **Chapter 4** argues that the five-paragraph essay does not meet the writing needs of young learners and outlines the Teaching/Learning Cycle (TLC) as an instructional model. The authors suggest that such a genre-based approach can prepare learners for future tasks, each with its own unique language and structure, to accomplish its social purpose. **Chapter 5** critiques the five-paragraph essay as too rigid for L2 learners in secondary schools and emphasizes the importance of scaffolding and adaptable, genre-based instruction that addresses students' goals and proficiency levels. **Chapter 6** notes that the five-paragraph essay fails to prepare students for future writing tasks and offers an alternative, genre-based approach as a foundation, not a formula, that can help L2 students transfer their writing skills to more advanced tasks. The writers stress that genre awareness and context-based writing practices, such as open letters, are essential for long-term adaptability.

In **Chapter 7**, the author argues that to escape the five-paragraph essay, university students, especially first-year students, need to be aware of the importance of task analysis in their discipline. This chapter suggests that genre awareness and scaffolded activities such as "Reading Your Classes" can help students transfer rhetorical skills and make informed writing decisions across contexts. **Chapter 8** emphasizes that the genre varieties across disciplines have little resemblance to the five-paragraph essay and underscores the importance of understanding assignment expectations for L2 writers by examining differences among three common language patterns across disciplines (i.e., description, analysis, and argument). The authors suggest that, for university students to write effectively in their discipline, they need to use scaffolded strategies, such as genre mapping and guided revision. Lastly, **Chapter 9** highlights that the five-paragraph essay does not prepare

students for graduate school because it does not help them develop transferable skills. The author emphasizes that through strategies such as genre analysis and peer review, L2 students can be equipped with the necessary tools rather than a formula for writing across various academic genres, and encourages scholarly voice, genre awareness, and rhetorical flexibility.

**Part 3** discusses the five-paragraph essay's role in standardized testing and how such tests, which are limited to evaluating students' writing abilities, reinforce the five-paragraph essay by rewarding formulaic writing. **Chapter 10** promotes assessment literacy and alternative models—like portfolios and integrated tasks—that support authentic, context-based writing and greater rhetorical flexibility.

In the **Conclusion**, Caplan and Johns reemphasize that it is essential to move beyond the five-paragraph essay and view writing as a rhetorical, social, and disciplinary practice. They highlight that genre awareness, authenticity, and educators' collaboration can promote more effective, purpose-driven writing practices across various contexts. The book offers a foundation for ongoing reflection and growth in L2 writing pedagogy.

## **Strengths**

As I read the book, I found several strengths that resonated with my experiences as both a multilingual writer and instructor. Together, these features underscore the book's major contributions and make it an especially valuable resource for teachers and researchers in writing pedagogy. First, it adopts a genre-based, socially situated approach to writing, helping students understand not only how to write but also why specific rhetorical choices matter in particular contexts. This approach is advantageous because it reflects how writing functions in academic and professional settings. Another notable strength is the book's capacity to connect theory and practice. The book effectively connects research-based discussions with practical classroom strategies, enabling instructors to apply complex ideas in an accessible way. The book's contributors are from various institutions and teaching backgrounds, enriching the discussions with multiple perspectives on writing instruction. Finally, the book offers conceptual tools through the integration of genre theory, discourse

analysis, and sociocultural frameworks, along with reflective questions and sample assignments. These features further assist instructors in incorporating these ideas into their everyday teaching practices.

## **Limitations**

Although I found the book well-organized and highly informative, some conceptual, pedagogical, and structural limitations could be refined to enhance its impact further and ensure inclusivity for all readers. Regarding conceptual limitations, while the authors acknowledge global contexts, most chapters contain few examples from outside the Global North, which limits the book's relevance for multilingual writers and instructors working in diverse cultural, linguistic, and institutional environments. The book can effectively demonstrate how genre pedagogy works in various multilingual contexts by providing more examples of this kind. Another conceptual limitation is the frequent use of terms such as "L2 learners" and "L2 writing," which imply a deficit view of speakers of English as an additional language and fail to capture the complexity of writer identity in the academic context. Although identity, voice, and self-representation in academic writing are crucial components of multilingual writing practices and help build confidence and agency as writers within the English writing context, the book briefly mentions some accounts and provides no details on this important aspect of academic writing in the genre-based writing approach.

The book often assumes readers are already familiar with genre theory, discourse analysis, or linguistic terminology which creates pedagogical and practical limitations. For new instructors or those without a background in applied linguistics, this assumption may create barriers and reduce the accessibility of the content. Moreover, the book paid limited attention to digital and multimodal writing, such as videos, infographics, and digital texts, which is increasingly important in writing classrooms. As a result, instructors receive little guidance on integrating technology-mediated writing practices into genre-based pedagogy. Ultimately, the book provides minimal discussion of assessment practices, giving instructors few tools for evaluating student writing within a genre-based or socially situated framework.

As for structural limitations, the chapters vary in their overall consistency and contextual

specificity. Some chapters offer rich examples, detailed classroom activities, and clear explanations of the context of the activities (e.g., Chapter 4), while other chapters (e.g., Chapter 5) remain more theoretical, with less guidance for implementation. This uneven depth may leave readers wanting more practical direction.

Furthermore, although the book critiques the limitations of the five-paragraph essay, some of the reasons the authors present to challenge it are less compelling. For example, in Chapter 5, the author states that the formulaic nature of the five-paragraph essay prevents students from thinking critically (p. 95). However, when students use the five-paragraph essay formula, they still need to provide a reasonable discussion and support their arguments with reliable sources. They need to think critically to evaluate the resources and present convincing reasons. In Chapter 6, although the authors criticize the effectiveness of the five-paragraph essay, they acknowledge the usefulness of certain structures as principles (p. 126). For example, they noted that including topic sentences or transitional words is not necessary; instead, the authors can use subheadings. Additionally, the authors noted that writers' main ideas can be inferred rather than explicitly stated as a thesis. Nevertheless, subtle intentions are not always obvious or correctly implied, and this type of writing can lead to misunderstandings. Such misunderstandings by readers, especially in the context of multilingual writing practices, can portray these writers as incompetent writers and shape their writing identity in ways that are not desired by these students (Farzinpur, 2025). In contrast, explicit presentation of the writer's opinions can help improve communication with readers, and help the writers establish an authoritative writer identity.

I believe that when we consider genre, audience, and context, the five-paragraph essay formula can still provide a useful framework for multilingual writers, especially for those like me who may not have received formal writing instruction in their dominant languages and previous educational settings. The usefulness of the five-paragraph essay as a foundational framework for organization and coherence is undeniable. Even as writers move towards more flexible and rhetorically responsive forms of writing, elements of the five-paragraph essay—such as main points, discussion, and conclusion—can still be found in various genres, including reflection essays, lab reports, and emails.

Moreover, writing instructors need to follow Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

principles and recognize individual differences. They need to consider that many students—especially multilingual writers—consistently express a need for clear guidelines. Based on my teaching experience, these students often feel disoriented and uncertain about expectations when there is no explicit structure or direction. I believe that while students can benefit from the five-paragraph essay framework, they can adapt it to genre, context, and audience, incorporating cultural elements to create a strong academic writer identity in their writing.

Finally, given the dynamic evolution of writing practices, I suggest that the authors update future editions to address writing with AI and the changing nature of authorship in multilingual settings. Despite these gaps, I highly recommend this book to writing instructors and educators. The book offers rich theoretical insights and engaging classroom activities that inspire more practical and flexible approaches to teaching writing.

## **References**

- Farzinpur, L. (2025). Perceived writer: The construction of academic writer identity in the interaction of multilingual student-writers and instructor-readers. *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 16(1).  
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