

Book review

Caplan N. A., & Johns A. M. (Eds.). (2019).
Changing practices for the L2 writing
classroom: Moving beyond the five-
paragraph essay. The University of Michigan
Press.

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Second language (L2) writing pedagogy has taken tremendous strides forward in recent times owing to growing interests in the field of L2 writing in general, but more importantly, because of the quality of research and scholarship that has emerged in the field (e.g., see Silva, 2016 for a review). Among other issues, L2 writing scholars have devoted much of their time investigating how classroom instruction can be made effective. For example, much research has focused on effective feedback practices, grammar correction in student writing, and so on (Bitchener, 2008; Ferris, 2004). However, one topic that is closely related to classroom L2 writing instruction but has mostly remained unexplored is the five-paragraph essay (a structure of academic prose that consists of five paragraphs—i.e., introduction, three body paragraphs and conclusion). The five-paragraph essay has been a much talked about topic not only in the field of L2 writing but also in composition studies in general. It has been argued that the five-paragraph essay was “a mediocre solution to teach mediocre writing to students” and was “a quick fix for L2 students who do not immediately write in ways that are effective in the academy” (Caplan, 2019, p. 11). The impact the five-paragraph essay has on L2 writers and L2 writing instruction is unique, considering the disparate academic and cultural backgrounds that L2 learners come from and their unfamiliarity with the notion of the five-paragraph essay. Consequently, it was imperative for the field of L2 writing to have a focused, in-depth scholarly dialogue addressing the issue. Caplan and Johns’ (2019) edited volume titled *Changing practices for the L2 writing classroom: Moving beyond the five-paragraph essay* does just that—provides those who are interested in L2 writing, in particular, L2 writing teachers, critical insights into the five-paragraph essay. Of much importance is a focus on an effort to help L2 writing teachers to consider alternative

practices to teach L2 writing and provide L2 writers with more freedom of choices to achieve their writing goals. The volume is an important addition to L2 writing scholarship.

Caplan and Johns have divided the book into three main parts, with each part focusing on a distinct issue regarding the five-paragraph essay. Part 1, encompassing chapters one through three, provides insights into the five-paragraph essay itself—e.g., its origin, characteristics, and use in different writing contexts around the world. Part 2, encompassing chapters four through nine, focuses on classroom practices, providing readers with alternative practices to the five-paragraph essay in a variety of contexts of L2 writing instruction (e.g., elementary and EAP contexts). Part 3 comprising of only one chapter—chapter ten—focuses on issues outside of the classroom such as high-stakes assessment practices that are responsible for perpetuating the five-paragraph essay worldwide. Caplan and Johns conclude with a few unanswered questions—e.g., what role writing process should play in writing activities, and provides future directions involving the five-paragraph essay—e.g., asking teachers to advocate for curriculum changes against the five-paragraph essay and to not adopt textbooks that use the five-paragraph essay.

As can be seen from the breakdown of organization of the volume, the book is heavily focused on providing insights into alternatives to the five-paragraph essay for L2 writing instructional practices. Each chapter is structured as follows: (a) at first, the authors provide the constraints of the five-paragraph essay in a specific teaching context (e.g., K-12 settings, undergraduate/graduate writing, and so on); (b) they then provide an overview of the extant research related to the topic; and (c) finally, they focus on the alternative approaches to L2 writing instruction that can be adopted in these contexts. Having read each chapter, the readers can expect to gain insights into a range of alternative L2 writing instructional practices that they can consider integrating into their own teaching contexts.

In chapter one, Caplan provides a historical overview of the five-paragraph essay, surveying relevant literature to trace the origin of the five-paragraph essay as a pedagogical heuristic in response to “chaotic compositions” by students. Caplan notes that the five-paragraph essay was adopted in the classroom in USA in late 1950s and 1960s as a “tried-and-tested model for good writing” (p. 8) and as a “quick fix” (p. 11) to teach writing to L2 writers later. Caplan critiques the rigid form and structure of the five-paragraph essay and offers four principles to teach writing as an alternative approach, instead. In chapter two, Tardy wrestles with the question regarding whether or not to call the five-paragraph essay a genre and concludes that the five-paragraph essay does not have the characteristics (e.g., purpose, social functions, conventions other than the form, and so on) to qualify for a genre. She argues that although genres may share conventions or patterns, these

conventions typically are flexible. Her suggestion is that the five-paragraph essay can be projected as a structure for some genres, but with certain limitations. Tardy then goes on to offer six different pedagogical principles with useful writing activities to illustrate her arguments. In chapter three, Connor and Ene make the case that the five-paragraph essay is not written everywhere and by everybody around the world. They trace relevant research suggesting that the five-paragraph template is not followed much in other English-speaking countries outside USA. They also note that the writing assignments are more rhetorically situated in these contexts (i.e., English-speaking countries other than USA). Surveying relevant literature, the authors note that the five-paragraph template is largely absent in non-English-speaking countries as the goal of writing in most of these places revolve around learning the English language or passing high-stakes English tests. In offering suggestions for alternative classroom practices, they focus on making learners aware of context-specific writing cultures and contriving the pedagogy accordingly. In sum, these three chapters of Part 1 shed light on the origin, evolution, and use of the five-paragraph essay.

As noted earlier, the six chapters that comprise Part 2 of this volume focus on classroom practices in a variety of instructional contexts. In chapter four, de Oliveira and Smith, for example, focus on L2 writing pedagogy at the elementary level. The authors offer steps to employ genre-based pedagogy in conjunction with teaching/learning cycle. They provide numerous examples and activities that de Oliveira herself used in her teacher education workshop. In chapter five, Ortmeier-Hooper offers insights into L2 writing in secondary school contexts. Her discussion revolves around the metaphor “scaffolding” in the L2 writing classroom. Like de Oliveira and Smith, Ortmeier-Hooper illustrates how a genre approach can be utilized to “scaffold” L2 writing in a variety of ways for secondary students. In chapter six, Ferris and Hayes provide insights into the “transferable principles and processes” (p. 119) of L2 writing in the undergraduate classroom. Shedding light on different types of transfer of knowledge that occurs in the academy, the authors create a taxonomy of writing “principles” and “processes” that L2 writing instructors can use. They provide examples of how these principles and processes can be used in an actual classroom. In chapter seven, Johns provides insights into teaching writing to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students, who may have just started their first-year university or college courses but have not fully acculturated the norms of the academy. Johns illustrates how these students can be apprenticed into academic and disciplinary writing through, what she calls, the “Reading Your Classes” assignment. In particular, Johns stresses the importance of teaching students how to carefully analyze the writing prompts in the discipline before they respond to them. In chapter eight, Pessoa and Mitchell further build on how writing can

be taught in disciplinary contexts “to meet genre and assignment expectations” (p. 151). To this end, the authors distinguish between writing as a way of “knowledge display” and “knowledge transformation.” They illustrate how both genre and assignment expectations vary when writing is used for each of these distinct purposes. Pessoa and Mitchell use annotated assignments from History and Information Systems to further exemplify their points. In chapter nine, the last chapter of Part 2, Feak focuses on graduate writing in disciplinary contexts. In this chapter, Feak highlights the importance of: (a) genre in graduate writing, (b) intertextuality or the impact of other texts in the discipline on current texts, and (c) situatedness of content. With an example text of an Art and Design student, Feak illustrates how each of these aspects plays an important role in meeting the expectations of the audience in specific disciplines. The author concludes by offering a couple of suggestions for teaching graduate writing. In sum, each of the six chapters of Part 2 offers ideas for L2 writing instructional practices, adopting an approach that is vastly different from the five-paragraph essay. By reading these chapters, one can expect to be enriched by a range teaching practices and classroom activities in different L2 writing contexts.

In chapter ten—the only chapter in Part 3 of the volume—Crusan and Ruecker focus on how standardized tests contribute to the perpetuation of the five-paragraph essay. They note that in spite of these tests’ inability to check “good writing” in the real sense of the term, the pressures of preparing for such tests make L2 learners follow the structures of the five-paragraph essay. The authors note that there are signs that some high-stakes tests are gradually moving away from the five-paragraph template. The authors’ suggestions include enhancing assessment literacy; analyzing writing tests, prompts and marking rubrics to identify alternative ways of assessment; introducing alternative writing assessment, e.g., writing assessment that may integrate reading and listening skills; and conceptualizing writing assignments that would force students to not follow a rigid five-paragraph template. Finally, drawing the “conclusion,” to both Part 3 and the volume, Johns and Caplan reflect on how the authors of this volume described what good writing is, what good writers do, and what teaching writing entails beyond the five-paragraph essay. They also reflect on some unanswered questions in this regard—e.g., how teachers should select and organize genres and what genre theory should be adopted for teaching. The authors then offer a few practical suggestions for L2 writing instructors and conclude with future directions for researchers, teachers, teacher educators and student writers.

Caplan and Johns’ (2019) *Changing practices for the L2 writing classroom: Moving beyond the five-paragraph essay* is a valuable addition to the scholarship in the field of L2 writing. The volume would

be an excellent resource particularly for L2 writing teachers and teacher educators. The editors of the volume have carefully organized the chapters in ways that they offer helpful suggestions for L2 writing instructors engaged in teaching at a variety of contexts such as elementary and secondary schools, EAP as well as disciplinary and graduate writing. Thus, the book offers something for everyone if they are looking for an alternative to the five-paragraph essay for teaching L2 writing. To the credit of the authors themselves, each chapter is replete with teaching ideas, activities and suggestions that teachers will find valuable. Overall, the volume is a must read for L2 writing teachers and researchers.

This review will be incomplete unless a few limitations of the book are pointed out. Having read the book, readers may feel that the editors and authors (except for Connor & Ene, who note that the five-paragraph essay is less common outside of USA) bear an explicit assumption that the five-paragraph template is used the world over, which by itself is a narrow perspective to conceptualize the volume. In addition, it may appear that in writing for the volume, the authors have only the U.S. classroom contexts in mind. This has resulted in discussion and analysis that may not be relevant to teachers or teacher educators in many other contexts around the world. For example, how will a teacher adopt genre-based L2 writing pedagogy in a context where students' English proficiency level is extremely low? How can a teacher ask students to conduct genre analysis (e.g., analyzing genre conventions) when students cannot derive meanings from discrete sentences? What techniques should teachers follow for large classes (which is common in many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts)? How can teachers make marking of writing assignments in large classes more manageable when they are not using the five-paragraph template? These are but only some of the questions that L2 writing teachers and scholars who teach outside of USA might find wanting answers to after reading the volume. Most important of all, however, is that the editors could have done a better job had they invited a few L2 writing scholars outside of USA as contributors. That would have made this volume more comprehensive in terms of representative discussions and analyses of the five-paragraph essay in a variety of contexts, including those outside of USA. It is possible, however, that the editors have saved such an undertaking for a future volume.

In summary, *Changing practices for the L2 writing classroom: Moving beyond the five-paragraph essay* is a fine piece of work. Reading the book will no doubt provide L2 writing specialists with insights into instructional practices beyond the five paragraph essay.

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