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## A Plea for Re-Form: Aesthetics in the Writing Classroom

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## A Plea for Re-Form: Aesthetics in the Writing Classroom

### Cover Page Footnote

Anne Mullin is Associate Professor of English and Writing Lab Director at Idaho State University. Her interests include unconscious influences on the writing process, poetry, and creativity.

# A Plea for Re-Form: Aesthetics in the Writing Classroom

Anne Mullin

From the window of the plane I relish the geometric boldness: green squares, brown crescents, yellow rectangles striped with beige and bordered with this Tuesday's blue morning. I realize, though, that the farmer on his red dot of a tractor moving in the midst of one brown curve cannot see this grand design, this whole made up of complex relating forms. Nor can any of us on the plane see what he sees, the seeds being drilled into the furrows, the occasional scooting mole, the curious worm.

This momentary reflection serves as a metaphor for a concern that is fundamental, I think, to our teaching of writing: we and our students "see" the writing in different ways, from differing perspectives. Our constant involvement with a panoply of professional and student writing gives us an aerial vista. We view a particular essay as a whole with its parts in relationship. We have probably, consciously or not, developed our perspective through the aesthetic appreciation of form in the work we have read, done, dreamed, loved, hated.

I believe from experience that the more we help our students appreciate the aesthetics of form in writing, the more effective we become as writing teachers. Yet, I also believe that our training in teaching composition may not have prepared us explicitly to do this. We are likely to see our major function as helping students discover and express content, their ideas. We know that conventional usage provides a means for that end, and so we are concerned when unconventional forms or "errors" get in the way of those ideas. We have tended, I think, to link notions of form with notions of norms or standards, and to deal with them when we teach about editing and proofreading.

Our approach, I would argue, has not been so much wrong as limiting. I would further argue that we can enrich our repertoire of writing activities and responses when we teach form with approaches based on the principles of aesthetics. To do so, we needn't be intimidated, although we may well be fascinated, by discussions ranging across the centuries and involving myriad attempts to define form and its relationship to content or idea in works of art. We can trace positions taken by Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Burke, Kant, Bell, Beardsley and Langer vis à vis formal properties like smoothness, wholeness, freedom from imperfection, unity, and variety (Dickie, 1971). We can observe debates about whether art works "contain" specific properties, whether the formal properties or the conceptual content should be privileged, or whether a beholder determines art through aesthetic experience (Dziemidok, 1993; Kennick, 1966; Lind, 1992).

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Rather than becoming entangled in such debates, however, we may simply wish to recognize that traditional terminology such as “proportion” and “harmony” and “arrangement” can be useful for talk about writing, because such terms relate to considerations of organizational coherence, tension, and style. We may want to remind ourselves that aesthetics has much to do with pleasure, and indulge ourselves again in the pleasures we feel when the form and content of an artistic work mesh, as Coleridge (1962) aptly demonstrates:

The reader should be carried forward...by the pleasurable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself. Like the motion of a serpent...at every step he pauses and half recedes, and from the retrogressive movement collects the force which carries him onward. (p.11)

We would probably agree with W.E. Kennick’s point (1963) that form and content are “neither exclusive nor exhaustive concepts” (p.194). Yet, as he notes, there are useful distinctions to be made between them: “the distinction between WHAT is said, depicted, presented, etc., and HOW it is said, depicted, presented, etc., connects with the distinction between form and content” (p.198).

We may be sensitive to literary form. Indeed, as one-time English majors and rhetoricians we can’t help but be. Our students, though, especially students in our freshman composition classes, may not have acquired the taste. We may very much want them to understand something about coherence, wholeness, variety in unity, or tension as desirable characteristics of writing; but we know we shall have tough sledding through such abstractions.

Ah, but the concepts don’t have to remain abstract. They can become concretely experienced as properties of art objects. We can bring students the campus art gallery to demonstrate the harmony of colors, the balance of mass, the detail within a unified shape as properties of paintings, sculptures, or other pieces on exhibit. Slides of art work can do the same. I like to invite a painter friend into my classes to illustrate how he confronts problems of unity, detail, center of interest, backgrounding and foregrounding, relevance, tone, mood, contrast, balance—all the elements of *his* process of “composing.”

Students can “see” and “feel” how the colors of mountains in a painting’s background are subdued versions of the bright tones of a building, the center of interest. They can follow paths of light that conduct a viewer through supporting details to the main event. They can perceive how one selected figure dominates while others are put in appropriate relationship. Or how, although some elements have been left out or obscured, viewers apprehend a sense of wholeness. We need not engage professional colleagues for such demonstrations. In our classes are photographers, potters, jewelry designers, musicians, and dancers who will share their experiences in creating various aesthetic forms in different media. Once students focus on forms and their relationships in masses of paint or bronze or movement or melody, they can, with explicit assistance, begin to appreciate texts as made up of similarly relating elements.

Such explicit assistance for me is a response heuristic based on Anthony Petrosky’s 1982 adaptation of David Bleich’s (1978) “subjective criticism.” Students and I use four categories for comments: Content, Affect/Associations,

Form, and Expectations. I emphasize the “form” category by asking in prompts, “What do you notice about patterns of language, about words and phrases that keep being repeated?” Students list these for each other when they give peer feedback, noting “You use questions a lot” or “Short sentences, like a child. So I believe this is what you remember” or “You use ‘the beach’ a lot. So I wonder what is it you think is so important?”

Student writers further sharpen their sense of form when they give self-responses. Admittedly, looking at the form of one’s own writing is hardest of all. The pull back into the writer mode with its concentration on making meaning, akin to the tractor-driving farmer’s absorption within his furrows, exerts a powerful force. But with practice, writers do achieve enough distance to spot certain patterns, state what feelings these evoke, and speculate on what their significance might be (Mullin, 1994). Students look at how their sentences and paragraphs are put together, whether long or short, questions or negations, or bursting at the seams with ideas.

These observations can also be represented tangibly by felt strips or by cuisinaire rods of equivalent or disparate lengths or by Tinker Toys. The representations can be arranged in parallel or contrary directions, in clusters containing similar or unequal numbers of strips, in configurations with conjoined segments or loosely dangling or separated pieces. It is eye-opening for students to see such concrete, non-verbal depictions of what aestheticians from Aristotle to the present mean by “arrangement.” Linda Hecker and Karen Klein (1994) offer still other ideas, such as choreographing essays to develop awareness of kinesthetic and spatial dimensions in language, in “The Write Moves.” Physically positioning and repositioning elements, seeing and feeling their effects give new meaning to the process of revision. Or students can sketch the shape of the essay to which they are responding; is it a straight-line path from Point A to Point B? A meander that connects several seemingly unrelated issues? A drawer with neat compartments? A pie composed of variously sized wedges? A trunkful of odd bits of fabric, outgrown boots, slats from a broken chair?

Once aware of how the formal aspects of written language may operate to trigger response in much the same way as do elements of a painting or tapestry or a symphony, we may more truly appreciate the relationships of form and content and their effect on audience. Cloudy or not, these are the depths into which I believe we and our students should plunge. Coleridge (1962) reminds us that connections between form and content are not always consciously perceived by the artist:

In every work of art there is a reconciliation [sic] of the external with the internal; the conscious is so impressed on the unconscious as to appear in it...He who combines the two is the man of genius; and for that reason he must partake of both. (p. 258)

Freud, of course, offered a deeper analysis of how perception of aesthetic pleasure derives from form and how form may trigger unconscious impulses. In *Creative Writers and Daydreaming* (1959) he wrote of the artist (in this case the writer) who

bribes us by the purely formal—that is, aesthetic—yield of pleasure which he offers us in the presentation of his phantasies [sic]....In my opinion, all the aesthetic pleasure which a creative writer affords us has the character of a fore-pleasure of this kind, and our actual enjoyment of an imaginative work proceeds from a liberation of tensions in our minds. (p. 153)

Unconscious responses may mingle with the conscious in the perceiver as well as in the creator of the form. As teachers, we may wish to disavow unconscious influences on our readings of student papers. But perhaps we will accept the notion more readily if we can appreciate how our response to form in, say, a piece of sculpture, may result from non-conscious associations to elicit feelings deep inside ourselves, some longing, some tension that needs to be released, some wish or inchoate memory.

When, for example, I stand in the Portland, Maine Museum of Art before Benjamin Akers' marble, *The Dead Pearl Diver*, my response is powerful: white, smooth, solid marble conveys, however improbably, a sense of limp flesh and wet netting. The formal shapes and surfaces produce in me a wish to touch them and experience their coolness and textures. They also evoke emotions, associations, further sensory reactions, and intellectual responses: awe at the artist's genius of design and expression, grief and longing to caress and revive that dead son, a whiff of kelp, and recollections of starfish collected during childhood summers. I reexperience delight at reading the description of this work in progress in Hawthorne's (1882) *Marble Faun*. I remember admiring the sculpture in Portland once before with my daughter. I sense intimations of an existence beyond dichotomies of death and life, matter and spirit, ephemera and eternity. The mix of sensory, emotional, and ideational responses is obviously evoked by elements of both form and content. But I also acknowledge the impact of my unconscious reading of the formal properties, which are then brought into conscious association to ideas, memories, or dreams.

Understanding the complexity with which I respond to an aesthetic object enables me to understand my response to students' texts and, in turn, to facilitate their peer responses. Ideas about tension and release, pain and pleasure, and openness to possibilities abound in Eco's *The Open Work* (1989) and in writings on fractal imagery, such as those by Short (1991), Voss (1988), and Gleick (1987). An appreciation of "fields of stimuli" and the dynamics of seeming randomness gives teachers grounds for dealing with papers we may find stimulating but are tempted to fault for lack of "coherence" or "adherence to an organizational plan" or "not meeting the expectations of the assignment." Artistic forms that balance on the brink of instability do evidence more "liveness" as the artist struggles for mastery over ideas and materials; the "safe" paper fails to raise our pulse rate. We can explore with students how to establish bounds for instability and chaos.

When asked, students will identify places in drafts where tensions or conflicts appear. The selected "places" may involve ideas or narrations of conflict, or they may be sentences that contradict each other, have an important word left out, or string themselves together with too many commas or no punctuation at all. Students point out such troublesome areas, often affective descriptors such

as "I was confused," or "lost," or bothered by "too much going on," where the writing breaks down. Similarly, where the writing is devoid of intensity or liveness, responses suggest "it goes on too long" or "it moves too slowly." Teachers can use such responses as opportunities to show how form and content interact.

For example, in response to a basic writer's paper about leaving her home and family to come to the U.S., peer readers pinpointed three episodes where they felt "confused." Yet, the class also highlighted these as points of greatest interest. Here are the three: "I always hated the smell of my father's cigar. Now I miss it." "It was a beautiful necklace. I was shocked. My sister and I had never got along." "My mother and I held each other so tightly. After we broke apart and I ran onto the plane."

When as a class group we focused on the formal patterns in each of these examples, we noticed how clauses and phrases push up against each other, cling together with commas or, as in the last sentence, separate abruptly. We could then see the joinings or partings not only as problems in punctuation but as points of tension, calling attention to possibilities for exploitation—which is why class interest was piqued. Readers asked the writer what it was about the cigar smell that she hated, when she realized she missed it, and why; they wanted to know lots more about the necklace, whether she accepted it as a gift, what she thought her sister had meant by it; they asked if she and her mother had embraced again after they "broke apart" once. The writer was able to add details to enrich and clarify those points of liveness.

On the other hand, one long paragraph about the train ride to the airport was questioned in ways that suggested a need for more variety and intensity. "Did anything happen on the train?" "Was it really a long way? Or did it just seem that way?" "Maybe it was all very noisy, with kids and everyone yelling, but you and your family were just sitting there quietly?" The writer decided to eliminate the whole section, which, she said, had described "just a long, boring three-hour trip on the train."

This episode illustrates another benefit from a focus on form. Formal elements, as Langer (1974) notes, may be seen as both presentational (what is seen) and representational (what is meant) (p. 94). In the above examples, presentational aspects such as incongruous juxtapositions or unexpected divisions of phrases and clauses in some sentences may be interpreted as representations of ambivalence or of enforced separation. The presentation of the drawn-out paragraph describing the train ride suggests deferment of the inevitable good-byes once the train reached the airport. In other words, the form may express a meaning different from that purported by the words and expected syntax. As Derrida (1976) has alerted us, "gaps," or "erasures," or "brissures" can be read as "traces" which open a text to meanings that are "beyond it." Similarly, Mina Shaughnessy (1974) pointed out that students' "errors" often betray the strain of unfamiliar discourse patterns, mislearned or misapplied rules. She notes how a student "avoids crisp beginnings with real subjects," uses empty filler words and passive voice, and "backs off in other ways, both syntactically and semantically...out of a tentativeness that is not of his making" (p. 86). By perceiving as presentational forms omitted words or non-parallel constructions

or sentence boundary problems, teachers can point writers to underlying significance that they may want to explore more fully and move into consciously represented content.

Admittedly, considerations of aesthetic form are not necessary in order for writing teachers to respond effectively to student papers. But such considerations lead me to different and far more interesting responses than I once gave. In taking up a set of student drafts, I ask myself about their formal properties. I ask how these formal elements of balance, or breaks in a line of development, or shifts in tense or person are acting in what Eco (1989) would call my “field of stimuli.” My perspective on my task shifts.

When students focus on the form as well as the content of their writing, they also shift perspectives. Their vision and their revision of their texts alter. They can break out of the trap of their ideas and play with arrangements, with effects. They, and we, can exchange vantage points and expectations. We can narrow our sights on formal convention and notice formal disruptions or broaden our view to range across contrasts and unities. We can sense the “what” and the “how” of a piece in harmony or in conflict. We can be on the ground, or circling aloft, or anywhere in between, experimenting with angles of vision. ☐

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