CHAPTER 13.

STANDARDIZED TEST WRITING AND THE FEAR OF FAILING

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I encountered my biggest writing failure during my prospectus defense for my doctoral dissertation, a teacher-research study of how college students experience and approach writing as a result of writing primarily for standardized tests in K-12. A member of my dissertation committee told me my proposed project was not intellectually daring enough and suggested that this was partially because I was the product of the standardized testing culture I sought to study and critique. If I had been taught an approach to writing that centered on critical thinking and valued exploration, perhaps I would have been able to come up with a more interesting plan for my dissertation project.

This was a hard piece of feedback to swallow, in part because of the truth it contained. It's not a coincidence that all of my writing failures are from college or graduate school. I grew up in Texas public schools during the No Child Left Behind era, and thus, being "good at writing" meant I was good at producing an essay that fulfilled the requirements of any standardized writing test I encountered: the TAAS, TAKS, PSAT, AP, SAT, and GRE. The clarity of my communication was valued more than the quality of my ideas on each of those exams, in part because each took place in a closed, timed environment that severely limited my ability to engage in invention or create an argument that *could* fail. I was tested on my ability to write a test essay, and I usually succeeded.

My stellar performance on these exams can be credited to the majority of my writing instruction centering on how to replicate a formula that would guarantee my success on them. In ninth grade, our pre-AP English teacher taught us exactly how she wanted us to write essays: the five-paragraph method, including an introduction with a thesis statement at the end, three body paragraphs whose topic sentences consisted of "thesis + reason," and a conclusion that restated your argument. We were also taught an eight-sentence paragraph with exact proportions of evidence and analysis. I used that formula on the practice AP exam essays we wrote in class (called "timed writings"), but I was also evaluated on how well I used it on the handful of essays we wrote and revised (the "non-timed writings"). It was that formula that earned me passing scores on my AP

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English exams, which in turn got me credit for first-year writing classes at the University of Texas at Austin. By giving me credit for college writing courses based on my performance on a 50-minute timed AP exam essay, I assumed this formula would prepare me well for writing in college.

But it didn't. The formula failed me. It did not prepare me well for the diverse genres I encountered, nor did it give me the critical thinking skills I needed to succeed on my college writing projects. The first time it failed me was in a required essay for my US history class. The details of the prompt are fuzzy, but I knew they included direct instructions to make an argument. I didn't know how to make an argument in a *history* paper. History was static, either a list of correct answers on a multiple-choice TAKS test or a well-organized timed essay on the AP US History exam synthesizing the factors that led to the Great Depression. One could not create an argument *about* history. And what would that even look like in five-paragraph format? How could I "thesis + three reasons" that argument?

Standardized test writing is writing with guardrails. For many students, failure happens only when you venture outside of the box you were told to stay within. "Real" writing—writing for real audiences, contexts, and purposes—has no guardrails. Failure is a real possibility in real writing, and this explains why students may cling to formulaic, test-friendly writing over exploring new writing processes and forms.

I didn't understand that until I took a Principles of Rhetoric course, my first required lower-division class for my rhetoric and writing major. I learned that all texts were not slight variations of the ideal essay (a five-paragraph argumentative essay with topic sentences at the beginning of each paragraph, a one-sentence thesis statement, and ample transition words sprinkled throughout). Instead, I learned texts were shaped to meet the rhetorician's purpose for a specific audience within a given context. I was excited. And I was scared.

When we're asking students to step away from the formulas they learned in the past, we are asking them to risk failure in a way they have rarely been asked to do in their writing lives. That's a big ask. As Ruth Mirtz (this volume) conveys, testing has greatly shaped how today's writers think about writing failure; its high-stakes nature has created a greater fear of failing that prioritizes a "safe," formulaic final product above pursuing daring arguments.

And these stakes are the highest for student populations with the least amount of privilege. You would not be surprised to learn that my students who have the most extensive experience with writing outside of the testing environment are those who went to private schools or well-funded public schools. While students in AP classes do often focus heavily on exam prep, my dissertation research revealed that students who did *not* take advanced courses often take English classes that focus more heavily on passing statewide exams whose prompts ask simpler

questions than those on the AP exam. Other students, often low-income and non-white students, attend college prep charter schools that focus almost exclusively on college entrance exams, touting their scores on those exams as signs of educational effectiveness. Multilingual international students often spend months preparing to take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), which includes timed writing, to be granted admission to American universities. While writing primarily for standardized tests hurts all students, it can be particularly harmful to students who have seen success on standardized test essays as their "ticket" into higher education; these students see "failure" on writing projects as keeping them from accessing the life they desire, and yet, adhering to these formulas in college will limit their success in college and beyond. Helping students move from the five-paragraph essay to a more intellectually daring and rhetorically flexible approach to writing is an equity issue in our classrooms.

I'll end with a few ideas for how we can start to help our students begin overcoming their standardized-test-induced fear of writing failures. If we lack understanding of how destabilizing this risk of failure can be, our students may not take us up on the opportunity to explore what writing can be outside of these formulas. We must take an empathetic approach, beginning by considering how we guide students to reflect on their past writing experiences. One of the most harmful things we can do to our students is declare everything they learned about writing in K-12 useless and ask them to start from scratch—that's overwhelming and inaccurate. Instead, we can contextualize their past experiences using the same tools that will prepare students to discern the appropriate approaches to different writing scenarios. I start my classes by guiding students through a written reflection on a five-paragraph essay they wrote in the past, asking them to consider the audience, purpose, and context of this five-paragraph essay and why those factors led them to use this form. We then discuss their experiences and thoughts; I share some of my experiences as an AP grader, explaining how the five-paragraph formula facilitates speedy evaluation. We then consider which writing habits, principles, and skills might transfer well to other environments, like paragraphs having a single controlling idea.

Second, we must structure our courses in a way that allows failure to be generative, not devastating. I have worked with the concept of growth mindsets in first-year writing courses, encouraging students to see failure as an opportunity for growth rather than an indictment on their permanent writing abilities, but most students did not fully embrace this notion until I made a major shift to my course structure: adopting a labor-based grading contract. Popularized most recently by Asao Inoue (2022), these contracts guarantee students grades for completing coursework rather than averaging grades awarded on major writing projects submitted throughout the semester, thus allowing students to submit

ambitious writing projects without fear of being evaluated in a way that will harm their overall grade in the course. With grading contracts, students feel freer to explore new approaches, knowing that failure will not harm their GPA. Standardized testing is emblematic of the achievement-oriented, grade-obsessed culture of our education system, and grading contracts combat that by making space for failure in education.

Lastly, we must create opportunities for students to reflect meaningfully on the failure they encounter in their writing processes. My students apply their growth mindsets by writing responses to the written feedback they receive from me on their first writing project, acknowledging places where they failed and considering what they've learned from those specific failures. I also guide my students to reflect critically on their writing *process*, not just their written products. For standardized tests, most students are taught to engage in minimal prewriting and to dive into replicating an essay formula immediately. I teach students the process of invention and spend time in individual paper conferences considering where their ideas led to dead ends or "failures" and what that taught them about the argument they're making. Integrating failure as a part of a successful writing process is pivotal for students who have viewed writing primarily as producing a specific product with minimal consideration to the process they engage in to generate ideas and produce effective reader-based prose.

That piece of feedback from my prospectus defense is my biggest writing failure, and so I share it with my students. I know many of them are in the same boat that I was once in: champions of standardized testing who now find themselves in a brave new world of critical thinking and strange genres. It surprises them to know that I was once the captain of that boat, crashed it into some rocks, had to swim to a deserted island, build myself a new boat, and find a better land, one where writing failures of all kinds (including terrible metaphors) are welcome.

REFERENCES

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