

# They Just Don't Add Up: How Formulas Are Out of Place in Composition

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In this article, Ashley Dolce examines why she has struggled with the pains of creating “writing formulas” for different writing situations. She illustrates how students are sometimes taught to write using a specific formula in school even though those tools may be useless in other kinds of writing situations. Finally, she explores a new way of approaching writing that helps to create individualized formulas for specific writing situations to help writers get through the battle of composing.

Being a person whose strengths lie in mathematics and science, I spent most of my high school years searching for the one way to conquer any essay assigned to me. I could easily use derivatives to find how far a car traveled, how fast the car was going, and how fast it was accelerating, but writing a research paper with an intriguing introduction, an effective structure, and a well-developed argument seemed impossible. Sitting in class, all I wanted to do was demand from the teacher, “Just tell me what I need to do to write a good paper!” Unfortunately, I never got my response, because the truth is, there is no one right way to write a quality essay for every writing situation.

Because there are no easy answers when it comes to writing, some people try to create formulas to make sense of the puzzling situation essays (and other genres) corner us in. Struggling writers, like me, search to create a set of criteria that make up a good essay. These writing formulas typically consist of a specific type of structure, diction (or word choice), and manner of presenting evidence in a paper. This could mean a linear structure that leads from one point to the next, or a structure in which the paragraphs alternate between the writer’s argument and a correlating story, for example. The diction could be dry and to the point, or it could be descriptive and colorful.

Authors can simply say, “The evidence suggests that . . . ,” or they can imbed quotations and make the evidence part of their own sentence. These are just a few examples; the possibilities are endless. However, what writers may not realize is that these formulas they are taught to use are traps.

In an ideal world, there would be one formula for writing, no matter the genre, but in reality, that simply does not work, due to the differences within and between genres. Poets should not use the same diction as newspaper reporters, nor should they use the same structure. Poetic diction is meant to be symbolic, elaborate, figurative, and descriptive—at least in some kinds of poetry. Poets use this kind of diction because their work is meant to evoke emotions in their readers. On the other hand, reporters use concrete, blunt, and simple language that allows all of their readers to comprehend the story.

While formulas seem to fail us, actually, in almost every aspect of writing, they are still commonly taught to students in their high school English and composition classes. Each year in high school, I established a new writing formula for myself based on the expectations of my teacher. Freshman year was all about the “mel-con” essay and eliminating “weak verbs” from my papers, also known as “to be” verbs. Mel-con stands for Main idea, Evidence, Link, and CONcluding statement, the structure that is meant to govern the entire essay and each of the paragraphs within it. The typical mel-con paragraph was formatted around the mel-con formula, starting with the topic sentence of the paragraph, which is followed by evidence supporting this point or an example. The writer must then answer the question, “So what?” In order to answer this question, I had to start the following sentence with, “This means that . . . .” Then I would have to explain the importance of the evidence. This process can be repeated as many times as necessary based on the evidence available, but it is usually about three times. The paragraph is then concluded with a closing sentence. The structure of the essay would include an introduction, three body paragraphs, and then a concluding paragraph. Thus, the mel-con paragraph is essentially a smaller version of the essay as a whole. This formula carried on in my English classes throughout my sophomore year.

When I took AP English Language my junior year, the formula changed completely. My teacher, Mr. Bottiglieri, was a stickler for grammar, despised the five-paragraph essay, and would not even bother reading an essay that did not have an attention-grabbing introduction. In this method, the structure of the essay was almost as important as what you wrote. We were given pieces such as “The Falling Man” and “A Modest Proposal” as examples. I spent a week trying to figure out how to structure my essay before I could even write it, but it was part of my formula, and I had to follow it. Finding grammar mistakes in an essay was like playing *Where’s Waldo* for my teacher,

so grammar was a major focus while writing. While this particular formula promoted more creative writing and left more room for variation, it was still very strict and structured, like the mel-con.

Senior year took me for another turn as I soon learned that everything I knew to be true was “wrong.” My teacher, Mr. Assmussen, drilled into our heads that attention-grabbing openers were a waste of ink and paper, and that introductions should be blunt, representing our arguments. Structure was no longer extravagant, but instead illustrated the flow of ideas and the logical development of the argument. Writing “This means that . . . ,” which at one point was crucial for an argument, was now characterized as unnecessary, and “I believe that . . .” at the start of a sentence was considered redundant. As he put it, the words “I believe” are “assumed, as you are, obviously, the one writing it.” Another waste of precious space on the paper were simple explanations of an argument. Our essays were meant to provide in-depth analysis of literary works and complex arguments, and thus, should only include highly developed ideas. All of the straightforward ideas were assumed to be known by the reader. There was no summary of the story or explanation of the plot, unless the sequence of events was symbolic or added to the meaning of the novel. The writer never “did anything”; rather the “diction symbolized . . .” or the “imagery depicted . . . .” If he were to read this article today, he would probably scold me for my use of first person and demand that I rewrite the entire essay. (Of course, he’s probably not familiar with the genre of the *Grassroots* article.) This specific formula containing requirements for diction, structure, syntax, and the development of ideas was geared towards providing quality analysis in the eyes of my teacher.

While it is clear that none of these formulas work universally, my experience in high school taught me another lesson: the audience dictates what the writer does. I never once wrote what I would have chosen to write, were I given the choice. I wrote what my teachers wanted me to write; I wrote what would give me the best grade. While that may seem like I have a lack of integrity as a writer, it is what we all do as writers. Even for those not writing for a grade, people will selectively choose their topic, wording, and organization to best please their audience. Facebook users use slang, abbreviations, acronyms, and short structured phrases that sometimes disregard the “grammar rules” because they are trying to write efficiently and only need to worry about getting their message across. Some bloggers write in first person, using informal language to connect with their readers on a more personal level. Most writers, even if they don’t realize it, actually place enormous focus on how to write for a particular audience. In fact, one could go mad trying to please everyone with his or her writing while also being specific. While each of my teachers had different expectations for me, real-

world audiences also have expectations for non-student writers. For example, romance novelists probably will not include alien invasions in their stories. The authors know that this would not appeal to their primary audience, who are interested in reading about sensitive treatments of people in relationships. On the other hand, writers of science fiction know that their main audience is going to be looking for action, futuristic technology, and adventure. Authors want not only to appeal to their audiences, but also to avoid offending them in a way that will drive them away.

Even writing within the same genre can have different circumstances, and therefore, writers have different options for how to go about writing particular pieces. For example, writers for *The Wall Street Journal* have a different writing style than those who write for *The Black Sheep*. These are both national newspapers, available in print and online, and they each have professional writers. The differences between these magazines can be seen, at least at first glance, by the categories for articles on their websites. *The Wall Street Journal* has a list of categories including: “Home,” “World,” “U.S.,” “New York,” “Business,” “Tech,” “Markets,” “Market Data,” “Opinion,” “Life & Culture,” “Real Estate,” and “Management.” Thus there is an emphasis on mature, informative news in *The Wall Street Journal*. On the other hand, *The Black Sheep*’s categories are listed as “Local Articles,” “Bar Specials,” “All Articles,” “Party Pics,” and “Submit.” These categories appear to emphasize the importance of partying and drinking, much more immature and flagrant pieces. *The Wall Street Journal* writers use diction that is more developed and politically correct than that of *The Black Sheep*. For example, a reporter from *The Wall Street Journal* would not single out his or her friend in an article, calling the friend an “asshole” because he has “had [his] Halo ODSF for like four months,” as a reporter did for *The Black Sheep* (Dreidelschleitze, 2012). Rather, a reporter from *The Wall Street Journal* might talk about how “the White House and Republican lawmakers faced pressure to reach a solution to the looming budget crisis” (Paletta et. al, 2012). The titles of the articles also contrast greatly. A *Black Sheep* author chose the overly dramatic title, “The Great Watterson Flood,” to represent a sarcastic article (Dreidelschleitze, 2012). On the other hand, “Pressure Rises on Fiscal Crisis” covers the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*, illustrating a more serious approach to reporting. Thus, while they are both published newspapers, the same article content and diction rules do not apply.

Because of this variation that occurs within and between genres, rather than creating formulas for writing, a better approach is to have a set of guidelines for how to approach the particular writing situation. Essentially, I think of it as a formula for creating a formula. In every writing situation, we must consider the audience, genre, diction, structure, and persona that the

writer wishes to take. The writer first needs to determine what the audience expects from him or her and what the values of the audience are. *The Black Sheep* knows that its audience is college students who are unlikely to be offended by the use of curse words or vulgar language and will probably appreciate the caustic tone. However, *Black Sheep* writers must be careful because some of their articles could offend the audience they are trying to please. While the newspaper is meant to be comedic, content such as, “I’m sick of these religious nut-jobs blocking our walkways and clotting our minds with nonsense religious bullshit through this ‘point and shoot’ adoption policy,” could easily offend anyone who would subscribe to the religious beliefs being promoted by the people in question (Staff). And yet, since this article was published, it’s clear that part of *The Black Sheep*’s attempt at appealing to their audience is to print potentially volatile and controversial material, perhaps to attract both readers who would agree with the articles and those who would take offense.

At the other end of the spectrum, *The Wall Street Journal* knows its main audience is educated adults interested in more serious topics. This is why they focus on politics, the economy, and worldly news. Yet, the writers for each of these venues have, essentially, the same situation and genre: both are reporters trying to inform their audiences of current events through the genre of a newspaper. Writers for both newspapers must also decide whether they wish to use a developed and creative vocabulary or more simple and concrete diction. These are not the only options for writers, but rather a broad sense of what they can choose from in terms of diction. The audience also affects this choice, as writers must present their arguments in such a way so that their audiences will comprehend and accept them. The structure an author chooses can vary widely from a few long paragraphs to several small paragraphs. Newspapers might choose to present a story and then connect it to bigger ideas or alternate between parts of the story and how those connect to certain concepts or themes. They must create a structure that interests their audience and gives them a reason to keep reading. If a structure is too complex, the reader might give up on the article. Finally, these writers must consider how they want their audiences to think of them. A reporter could choose to deliver the truth no matter how much it may upset people, but an advice columnist is probably going to want to please his or her readers in order to build a fan base to keep his column going.

Now we will look at how authors from these two newspapers approach their writing. Because I can’t reproduce the entire articles here, I’ve included some short excerpts from one article from each source that I want to comment on. (Readers can access the full text of each article at the websites listed below.) Under each of the excerpts, I have provided some analysis and thoughts regarding the authors’ choices in this genre in order to compare the two.

Newspaper: *The Black Sheep*

Article Title: “Top 10 Things a Dictator Could Do to Improve America”

Author: Diego Salazar

Date of Publication: March 27, 2013

URL for Full-Text Access: <http://theblacksheeponline.com/article/top-10-things-a-dictator-could-do-to-improve-america>

Excerpts:

1. “Top 10 Things a Dictator Could Do to Improve America”

Structure: The author organizes the article into 10 separate points, all of which are described in a few sentences. This makes it easy to read and keeps it short, so the audience will not have to spend too much time reading it.

2. “America is dying. The economy is a piece of shit, our social issues are a piece of shit, and even our pieces of shit are pieces of shit. It’s sad. Our country is going nowhere, and it’s all because of Democrats and Republicans.

We need someone to take action, not to just talk about taking action. We need a revolution! We just need to establish a new leader . . . A dictator!”

Situation: The author begins by addressing what he believes are the current weaknesses in America and how we should address the problem. The author approaches this through satire, which is obvious by the promotion of a dictator, a notion that goes against the core beliefs of the country.

3. “The dictator will do everything in his power to improve our country, whether we like it or not, and whether it’s a good idea or not.”

Audience: The targeted audience for *The Black Sheep* is college students. This article is relevant to college students who are moving into adulthood and worrying about what kind of situation society will be in when they move into the workforce and begin to occupy positions of power.

4. “Your dictator will divide the U.S. in two: He’ll make every Democrat move to the North and every Republican move to the South, and then let them be for ten years and see who advances the most. The winner gets ice cream and bragging rights, the loser gets annihilated!”

Persona: The author is comedic, approaching what could be a sensitive topic with jokes.

5. “Our dictator will put a ban on people wearing key chains on their belts so they don’t jiggle whenever they walk: It’s fucking annoying!”

Diction: The writing is very subjective, which brings out the personal opinion of the writer. This shows readers that the article is based on the interests of the author rather than the general public. It also portrays a sense of passion about the topic that can easily engage readers, whether they agree with his viewpoint or not.

6. “The dic’ hates bad parenting and second-hand smoking more than anything else in the world . . . And that’s saying something, because he really hates democracy.”

Diction: The diction is in first person and uses abbreviations, perhaps in an effort to relate to other forms of communication (e.g. texting and Facebook) that college students use in their day-to-day interactions.

7. “BOOM: Is North Korea misbehaving? Venezuela? The Vatican? BOOM! With a Dictator we could just bomb those fuckers into submission! BOOM! BOOM! There, what used to be a country is just another Grand Canyon.”

Diction: The diction also becomes vulgar and offensive at points. While many college students may be open to cursing, this could still be offensive to some readers, so writers for *The Black Sheep* are taking a risk in this way.



Newspaper: *The Wall Street Journal*

Article Title: “States Harden Views Over Laws Governing Abortion”

Author: Louise Radnofsky

Date of Publication: March 31, 2013

URL for Full-Text Access: [http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324883604578394873113377806.html?mod=WSJ\\_WSJ\\_US\\_News\\_3#articleTabs%3Darticle](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324883604578394873113377806.html?mod=WSJ_WSJ_US_News_3#articleTabs%3Darticle)

Excerpts:

1. “States are becoming increasingly polarized over abortion, as some legislatures pass ever-tighter restrictions on the procedure while others consider stronger legal protections for it, advocates on both sides say.”

Situation: The author sets out to inform readers regarding the opposing viewpoints of the abortion controversy and the results of the debate in legislation across the United States.

2. “At the same time, Washington state is weighing a measure that would require all insurers doing business in new health insurance exchanges created by the Affordable Care Act to reimburse women for abortions.”

Audience: Here are the demographics for the readers of *The New York Times*:

- Average Age: 47
- Male/Female: 58.7% / 41.3%
- Household Income \$100,000 and up: 31.5%
- Household Income \$150,000 and up: 10.4%
- College Graduates: 57.9%
- Business Decision Maker: 22%

(*The Wall Street Journal*/Digital Network)

The article is tailored towards this audience because this topic affects the insurance business; women from adolescent age and older; advocates, physicians, and hospitals; and politicians, among others. In addition to the content, other features of the writing are tailored to this “business class” audience. The diction is professional and advanced, and the information is presented as factual and direct, so it is easy to follow for those who are busy and do not have much time to read.



3. “State legislators seeking to limit access to abortion have the backing of a 1992 Supreme Court decision, *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, confirming states can restrict the procedure in ways that fall short of banning it entirely. In recent years, more abortion opponents have turned their attention to state legislatures, especially after gains by conservative lawmakers in 2010 elections.”

Diction: The author seeks an objective stance and removes herself from the situation by using third person. The language is formal and utilizes an advanced vocabulary, which is fitting to the content and this particular newspaper’s audience.

4. “Court rulings have found that physicians determine viability, which generally is considered to occur after 22 weeks of pregnancy. The laws in North Dakota and Arkansas link viability to the presence of a fetal heartbeat, using differing detection methods.

Leading antiabortion groups typically have given lukewarm support to restricting the procedure early in pregnancy, saying they think they have stronger legal grounds for tightening access to abortion through controls on clinics and regulating abortions carried out using a pill rather than a surgical procedure.”

Structure: The article follows a logical topical structure that correlates with the development of the argument. It is broken up into several short paragraphs, which keeps it organized and easy to follow—a feature typical of this genre.

5. “Sixteen state Constitutions protect the right to an abortion and an additional five states have laws that do so. In New York, Mr. Cuomo said he aims to incorporate protections for abortion late in pregnancy into state law in case the U.S. Supreme Court ever reconsiders the *Roe* decision.”

Persona: The author portrays herself as an objective third party who is a professional reporter of current news and events. She develops her credibility through references to past court cases and legislation, comparing them to the new laws being put in place now.

These two articles share the same broad generic category of newspaper articles. However, they are written very differently based on the guidelines expected from their editors and audiences. I chose these two articles because they represent the newspapers' styles very well. *The Wall Street Journal* tends to stay neutral (or at least as neutral as possible), informative, professional, and direct. On the other hand, *The Black Sheep* uses humor, sarcasm, opinions, descriptive language, and more colloquial terminology. Despite their differences, both of the articles cover major topics that are currently affecting United States citizens. An analysis of the two articles shows that there are multiple ways (or different formulas) one can use to address serious topics and to attract readers' attention. It all depends on who you are writing for and your own voice as a writer.

It is a cruel world we live in that presents us with writing challenges that aren't easily addressed through a single catch-all formula. If you are anything like me, when you sit down to write that dreaded paper for your composition class, it feels like your teacher is punishing you. That same sense of dread might also plague a reporter trying to meet a deadline or a teacher writing out a report to give to his or her administrator. We have a few tips and tricks, but, unfortunately, no two writing situations are the same, and we can't treat them that way. However, developing a set of criteria for your writing and analyzing examples can make this seemingly impossible task manageable. As writers, we need to understand and appreciate that every audience and every situation is different. Once we accept this, writing for a specific audience will appear much simpler, and who knows, you might just enjoy it.

### Afterword: The Formula for "They Just Don't Add Up"

I had to consider several factors at several stages of my writing of this article: before I starting writing, while I was writing, and while I was editing. I followed my own model of analyzing the genre, situation, audience, persona, structure, and diction for this article, which I will review for you below.

1. Genre: My genre was an article for a professional journal about composition. The fact that the journal is in the field of writing studies affected my topic choice and the structure of the article.
2. Situation: My situation was writing an article for an academic journal. I had read articles from a former issue of the journal, and so I knew that topics were not restricted to basic writing, and that the authors kept their writing more informal than some scholarly journals. Once I had my topic, I also knew I would have to model the ideas I was talking about within my writing.

3. Audience: My audience is you! I knew that a large portion of my audience would read this for a composition course assignment, so I wanted to keep it personal and relaxed to avoid it being dry and tortuous to read. I knew I would be reaching people both interested and disinterested in writing, so I tried to create something that appeals to both groups. Having been in your shoes, I thought back to what I thought made these articles enjoyable (unique topics with a relaxed tone) and tried to emulate those features in my writing.
4. Persona: After researching articles in previous issues of the journal, I knew that I wanted to use first person, informal, and clear language. These make the articles much easier to read and understand. However, I still wanted to display my credibility by using developed vocabulary and several examples. I started the article with a subjective tone in order to make it easier for the audience to connect with me, but then moved towards a more objective nature when analyzing the newspaper articles and presenting my own solution to the problem.
5. Structure: My structure was based mostly on how I thought I wanted to present my argument. I started off with my personal connection to the topic, and then I presented my thesis and showed how two pieces even within the same genre can be radically different. I then explained the focus on writing for a specific audience in the field of composition. After displaying how complex the writing process can be, I included my “solution” to the problem: using a formula to create a formula for each writing situation. Then, I analyzed two articles from the aforementioned newspapers to show the method in work. After a brief conclusion, I chose to include this analysis of my paper so that my audience could benefit from my analysis of this process as it applies to my own writing.
6. Diction: It was very important to me that my diction included my voice, which essentially means that my personality and my style are portrayed through my writing. That is why I kept the diction informal and used first person language. My diction is largely concrete because I am describing a process, analyzing information, and presenting a solution.

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