

Foreword

A Tailor of Fun-Sized Suits

There is an old story about a wonderful tailor who makes the best suits. A man decides to go have a suit made by the tailor and he goes to his shop for a fitting. The man tries on the suit but the sleeve does not seem right.

He tells the tailor, “This sleeve does not fit.”

The tailor eyes him up and down. Finally, he speaks. “I see the problem. It’s your arm. You must hold it out straight in front of you.”

Indeed, the man held out his arm in front of him, and the sleeve fell into place.

“You’re right,” the man said. “Thank you, but you know, this right pant leg seems a little long.”

The tailor looked down. “I see the problem. “You must keep your right leg stiff and extend it behind you.”

“You are so right,” said the man. “It fits much better, but this other sleeve is now too long.”

“No worries,” said the tailor. “Just bend your elbow and suspend it in the air like this.” The tailor bent the man’s elbow.

“Perfect,” said the man as he slowly limped out of the tailor’s shop and into the street, dragging his stiff leg behind him, with his elbow crooked in the air and his other arm stretched out in front of him.

At this point, two little old ladies see the man coming out of the shop.

One turns to the other and says, “What a wonderful tailor! Look, the man is so crippled, yet the suit fits him so well!”

This story describes what’s wrong with many traditional textbook program approaches to teaching nonfiction essay writing. Instead of liberating the unique voice of the writer, they conform the writer to a common monolithic template, such as the five-paragraph essay, the hamburger paragraph, the topic sentence and mandatory three supporting details, and so on and so on. If students succeed on a test using these ready-made formulas, everyone remarks, “What a wonderful program! The children are from such different economic backgrounds, yet they have all succeeded on the test.” However, what they are really saying is, “The

children are so unique, but have fitted their minds so successfully to this common boring template.” Bravo!

In a flat world economy that depends on creativity and innovation, this is a tragedy of epic proportions for American education only exacerbated by a plethora of new, robot-scored, high-stakes writing tests, all of which claim close alignment with the Common Core State Standards. If we are not careful, writing will soon be seen as the act of formulating sentences and paragraphs to be scanned for syntactical structure and lexile level by machines. Yuck. All of this might be a bad science fiction movie if it weren’t truly happening.

The good news is that the book you hold in your hand is a lifeline to real writing instruction. Based on careful observation of wonderfully varied student writing, Grades 4 through 12, and organized around the genres of the Common Core State Standards, *Fun-Size Academic Writing for Serious Learning* is the best book I know for giving students a fun-sized suit that fits their true voices as writers and thinkers. To the extent that all students seek deep engagement and joy in the task of nonfiction writing, we can say that all students come to class “fun-sized,” and it is only bland, myopic curriculum that reduces their voices to uniform gray paragraphs that sound correct but say little.

The power of this immensely practical, kid-friendly book of craft lessons is that it teaches more than writing; rather, it teaches classical rhetoric, that ancient art of learning to say stuff different ways. For example, the Renaissance teacher Erasmus would be delighted to see that a fourth grader from Florida named Samantha has mastered his famous lesson, Scesis Onomoton, by writing about her blue-eyed Barbie doll, using different words to name the plastic figure each time she repeats it within a piece. The humor and voice in Samantha’s writing makes it useful for teaching this valuable lesson at every grade level with joy and vigor. The same is true when an eighth grader named Eileen teaches us a lesson on literary analysis by writing about character tension, or when a tenth grader named Adrian teaches us a how to write powerful openings. Every writing teacher knows that the best lessons come directly from the classroom and student writing. These expert student authors will inspire those who use this book to discover this truth every day. After a few months of use, teachers will have their own inspiring examples to add to those Gretchen and Judi have collected.

Along with the dozens of simple two-page lessons, *Fun-Size Academic Writing for Serious Learning* provides a structural analysis of each piece of writing. Gretchen Bernabei introduced this dynamic concept of the kernel essay,

back in 2003, in her groundbreaking book *Reviving the Essay: How to Teach Structure Without Formula*, and since then, teachers all around the country are learning to teach structure in a more playful and varied way that mirrors what real writers do at their desks. Experimenting with text structure like this is like extracting the DNA from a mentor text and showing all students how to reproduce something like it in a simple and direct way. For centuries, students in all fields have learned this way. The apprentice copies the work of the master and learns craft in the process. Since the masters in this book are students, there is extra motivation because students can see that the success of their peers is within their reach.

The other day I received an e-mail from a teacher friend who was trying to source a quote from me for a book she was writing. The quote was,

“I don’t teach writing; I teach possibility.”

If you are a language arts teacher and believe this quote, then you are very lucky indeed, because you are holding in your hand a writing lesson bible of rhetorical possibility to explore with your students for many years to come.

—Barry Lane