Beyond the Box: Why the Formal Writing Rule Needs Rewriting

Alex Lofton
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There's a reason I used to believe formal writing was the only kind that mattered. After 25 years in the Army, most of it in the medical field, everything I wrote had to follow a strict structure. Reports, lessons, and communications were all written to be clear, professional, and above all, formal. That habit stuck with me when I transitioned to college and nonprofit leadership. I approached every paper, email, and social media post like I was still writing for a commanding officer. For a long time, I thought that was how you earned respect, by sounding polished and official.

But over time, I realized that rule, the one that says writing must always be formal to be taken seriously, was doing more harm than good. It was silencing the very voice I needed to use to connect with others, especially the Veterans I was trying to reach.

The expectation to write formally isn't new. As Susan Naomi Bernstein and Elizabeth Lowry point out, the five-paragraph essay and other structured formats are drilled into students from high school on, often presented as catch-all tools for any writing situation (Bernstein and Lowry). Bruce Bowles Jr. adds that these rigid templates exist not because they help students become better writers, but because they serve standardized testing companies by making writing easy to score (Bowles). What started as a teaching tool has become a barrier, one that filters out emotion, complexity, and authenticity in favor of clean, predictable formats.

The rule of always writing formally should not be abolished or followed blindly, it should be amended to emphasize flexibility, audience awareness, and authentic voice.

Formal writing has long been treated as the gold standard in academic spaces because of its perceived objectivity, professionalism, and clarity. In “What Is Academic Writing?” L. Lennie Irvin describes academic writing as a conversation grounded in logic, evidence, and structured argument, qualities often delivered through formal tone and strict conventions. For students entering college, learning to write this way is framed as essential to being taken seriously in scholarly or professional settings. This mindset has solidified over time, especially through teaching models like the five-paragraph essay, which serve as a blueprint for how to present information neatly and predictably.

As Irvin explains, students are often taught that good academic writing follows a narrow set of rules, including “don’t use ‘I,’ never start a sentence with ‘because,’ and always write in third person” (Irvin 8). These instructions may help beginners avoid basic errors, but they also create an environment where personal voice and contextual awareness are often seen as mistakes instead of tools.

Bernstein and Lowry go a step further in critiquing how this structure is tied to a deeper problem in education, the “banking model,” where knowledge is deposited into students, and writing becomes little more than a way to prove retention rather than demonstrate original thought. They write, “The five-paragraph form emphasizes shutting down processes of inquiry... by providing the illusion of having resolved complex problems” (Bernstein and Lowry). In other words, while formal writing began as a way to organize ideas, it has evolved into a formula that discourages exploration. Instead of

encouraging students to think critically and engage meaningfully with their audience, it rewards predictability. This history helps explain why the rule of always writing formally has endured for so long—it's easy to teach, easy to assess, and easy to replicate. But as the rest of this paper will show, that ease comes at a cost.

For writers like me, those who come into college from professional or military backgrounds, the rule of always writing formally doesn't just feel restrictive. It feels like erasure. I spent decades learning to communicate in a clear, structured way, and that discipline served me well in the military. But once I started writing in college classrooms and nonprofit spaces, that same structure became a barrier. I found myself constantly editing out the parts of my writing that felt most like me: the emotion, the directness, the lived experience. One professor told me an early paper sounded more like a field report than a reflection, and she wasn't wrong.

But the truth is, I didn't know how to write any other way, and I didn't feel like I had permission to try. I knew what I wanted to say, but I didn't know how to say it without "breaking the rules." That uncertainty silenced my voice before I even got to the page.

This silencing effect isn't unique to Veterans or nontraditional students. In "Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language," Mike Rose argues that students often internalize writing rules so deeply that they become paralyzed when it comes time to actually write. He describes how students get stuck believing that "good writing" must always follow rigid structures, which leads to anxiety, avoidance, and a sense of failure (Rose 90). I saw that in myself, I wasn't just trying to write well; I was trying not to get it wrong.

Anne Lamott echoes this in her chapter “Shitty First Drafts,” where she explains that even professional writers struggle with getting words on the page when they’re too focused on perfection. Lamott insists that messy, honest writing is where true voice begins, reminding us that “all good writers write them [shitty first drafts]” (Lamott). Together, Rose and Lamott show that rigid writing expectations don’t just shape structure, they can destroy confidence. And when confidence goes, voice goes with it. That’s what I experienced firsthand: the more I tried to sound “correct,” the less I actually said what I meant.

I didn’t fully understand the power of authentic voice until I stopped trying to sound “right” and just told the truth. One of the first times I did that was in a BUMA social media post about a Marine Veteran who had lost his leg in combat. His family loved to ride motorcycles, and he used to ride with them, until his injury made it impossible. We were raising money to modify a bike so he could ride again.

I could’ve written that post like a press release. Instead, I told his story honestly. I wrote about what he had lost, what riding meant to him, and what we could do to help. It wasn’t perfectly polished. It was raw, emotional, and direct. And it worked. That post got more shares and donations than anything I had written before. People didn’t connect because it was formal. They connected because it was real.

This is the kind of writing that Stuart Greene advocates for in “Argument as Conversation.” He argues that writing should be an entry point into ongoing dialogue, not just a one-way delivery of polished ideas. According to Greene, good writing invites others in, saying, “Here’s what I think—what do you think?” (Greene). That kind of

openness and vulnerability doesn't always fit within rigid formal writing rules. It requires voice. It requires emotion. And most of all, it requires trust in the writer.

Bernstein and Lowry reinforce this when they argue that "meaningful writing is far from formulaic" (Bernstein and Lowry). When students are encouraged to write from experience, rather than just regurgitate a preset structure, they begin to understand writing as a tool for transformation, not just compliance. In my work with BUMA, that kind of writing is what reaches people. And in the classroom, it's what made my professors start noticing not just my papers, but my perspective.

To be clear, I'm not arguing that we should throw structure out the window. Even as someone who pushes back against rigid formality, I recognize its value—especially for new writers who need a foundation. That's one reason why the five-paragraph essay and other structured formats are still taught. As Kathryn Vieregge argues in "The Five-Paragraph Essay is Rhetorically Sound," the format "offers an accessible rhetorical tool for helping students organize their thoughts and practice argument structure" (Vieregge). For many first-year college students, especially those who have never been taught how to form an argument, structure can be empowering. It gives them a roadmap.

The danger isn't in teaching the format, it's in teaching it as the only option.

Bruce Bowles, who critiques the five-paragraph essay elsewhere, still acknowledges that it can be useful for students who struggle with organization or who are just learning how to write within constraints. He refers to it as a format that students can "modify for a variety of writing tasks" (Bowles). That's the key word: *modify*. A strong writing rule should teach students how to think about audience, purpose, and

voice, not just how to follow instructions. If we treat structure like a tool instead of a cage, we can preserve its benefits without sacrificing individuality or depth.

This is why I don't support abolishing the formal writing rule altogether. It's not the existence of structure that's the problem, it's the rigid enforcement of it that turns helpful guidance into a silencing force.

So, what would it actually look like to amend the formal writing rule instead of keeping or abolishing it? It starts with teaching writing as a process, not a product. Instead of pushing students to polish every sentence on the first try, we should encourage them to start with messy, voice-driven drafts and shape them over time. Nancy Sommers, in her research on student and professional writers, notes that experienced writers see revision not as correcting mistakes, but as "re-seeing their ideas" (Sommers). That kind of flexibility allows students to find their voice before editing it for clarity and audience. It's how real writers, myself included, work when we're trying to say something that actually matters.

In practical terms, this means letting students write more reflectively in early drafts, encouraging multiple formats beyond just five paragraphs, and helping them analyze their audience and purpose before picking a tone. It also means valuing storytelling, personal perspective, and emotional insight when appropriate, especially for students whose lived experiences give them something powerful to say. In my case, learning how to blend my professional tone with personal honesty made me a stronger communicator. And I'm not the only one. Veterans, first-generation students, adult learners, so many of us have voices that fall outside the traditional academic mold.

Amending the rule to allow room for those voices doesn't weaken writing. It makes it real, and more importantly, it makes it heard.

The rule of always writing formally may have started as a tool to teach clarity, but over time it has hardened into a barrier, one that too often silences the voices that writing should amplify. From my own experience in the military and as a nonprofit leader, I've seen how rigid formalism can strip meaning and connection from writing that's supposed to matter. Research backs this up, showing that formulaic writing discourages inquiry, confidence, and creativity. But it doesn't have to be that way. Formal writing has value, but only when it's taught alongside flexibility, voice, and purpose.

Amending the rule means teaching structure as a starting point, not a finish line. It means helping students understand when and how to adapt their tone to suit the audience, and giving them space to write with emotion, personality, and lived experience. It's not about abandoning discipline or grammar, it's about making room for humanity in our writing instruction. Because when writers are allowed to bring their full selves to the page, their work does more than meet expectations. It changes minds, moves people, and sometimes, even makes a difference. That's the kind of writing worth teaching.

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Instructor: Patricia Giménez-Eguíbar

Abstract: This essay examines the long-standing expectation that serious writing must always be formal. Drawing from academic research, military experience, and nonprofit leadership, the paper argues that rigid writing structures often silence authentic voice and discourage meaningful communication. Rather than abolishing formal writing, the essay advocates for a more flexible approach that values audience awareness, storytelling, and personal perspective alongside clarity and structure.

Bio: Alex Lofton is a U.S. Army Veteran with 25 years of service in military medicine, leadership, and instruction. He will graduate from Western Oregon University in June with an undergraduate degree in Interdisciplinary Studies focused in Humanities and Social Sciences. Alex also serves as a nonprofit leader with Brotherhood United Motorcycle Association (BUMA), where he advocates for Veterans, community outreach, and authentic communication through communication and service.