Chapter 3

Less Is More in College Students' Writing:
Extremely Short Stories as a Bridge to Academic Writing

Celine Kamhieh
American University of Madaba, Jordan

ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on a study of the content of extremely short stories (ESS) written by freshman undergraduates in the language and literature department of a university in Jordan. It looks at the origins and benefits of extremely short stories, with particular reference to the extensive work of Peter Hassall who established the first Extremely Short Story Competition (ESSC) for non-native English speakers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This study is the first in an Arab country outside the UAE. Students' most popular themes included problems and problem-solving, travel, student life, family, and friends. Stories contained features of academic writing as well as many literary elements, including character, plot, metaphor, simile, and more. The chapter concludes by suggesting that the ESS can successfully serve as a bridge to academic writing and bring writer and reader closer together by generating interesting texts for audiences other than the instructors.

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences … This requires not that the writer make all sentences short … but that every word tell. (Strunk & White, 2000, p.10)

INTRODUCTION

"Academic English is no one's mother tongue" (Huang, 2013, p.17), yet academic life revolves around writing in English, even in many non-English speaking countries. When studying for a degree in English language and literature, students must be able to write well-organized academic essays, usually in response to long, complex, literary texts. These are often seen as a form of "specially-designed torture" (Whitaker, 2009, p.2) by native and non-native English speakers alike. Instructors who wade through such long essays with multiple, repeated errors will testify that quantity is no guarantee of quality and that demanding such huge leaps from high-school writing to full-blown academic writing often results in plagiarism. This chapter suggests one way to bridge that divide by placing quality before quantity, asking for less in one area to achieve more in others. Having college freshmen write 50-word stories about topics of their own choosing early in their studies, enables them to establish a stronger foundation in writing, reduce errors, gain confidence and motivation, and find their voice and agency as writers. These short, pithy stories can then be successfully used to introduce freshmen to the key features of narrative and other literary elements which are essential in the discipline of language and literature.

BACKGROUND

Academic Writing

Academic writing requires students to be able to write different types of essays, each with its own special purposes and features. Argumentative writing must defend a position, descriptive writing must show not tell by appealing to the senses, and expository writing has various subgenres such as, cause and effect and problem-solution, for example. Narrative writing must tell a story, its purpose being "to entertain and instruct via reflection on experience" (Hyland, 2006, p.47). Before students can write long essays, however, they must be able to convey meaning on the page or screen, construct a coherent sentence and a well-organized paragraph, and have mastered the basics of how to spell, punctuate and connect sentences. They

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