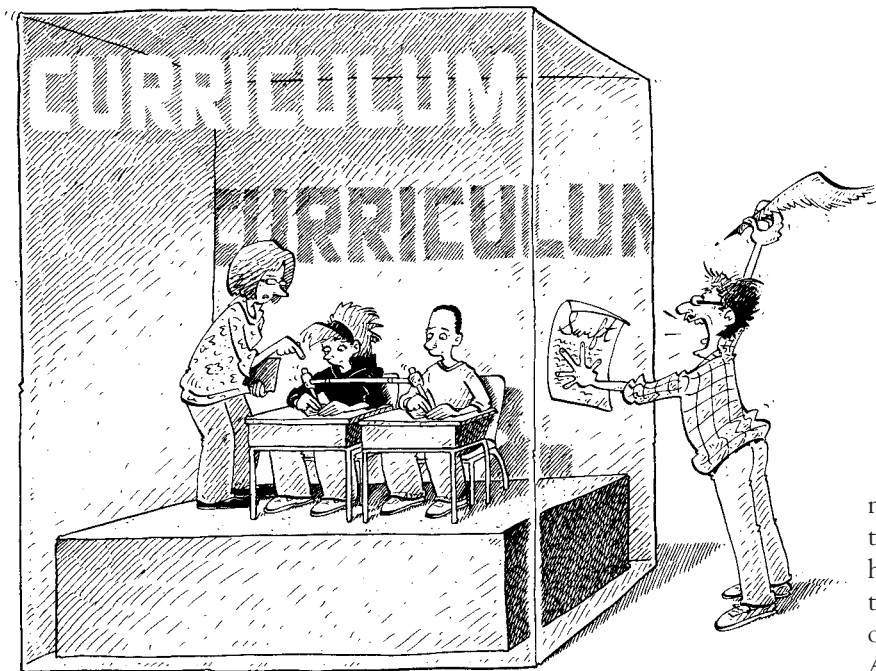


In Search of a Modest Proposal

by Fred Stenson



My gratitude to the education system for teaching my children to read lasted for many years. Whenever teachers were attacked in my

earshot, I rose to defend them. Then my daughter hit Grade 9 and was taught to write the essay.

When she told me she had been assigned to write an essay, I felt a thrill. She was about to learn one of the great literary forms, used for hundreds of years to persuade and argue. In the hands of a great writer, the essay could shape society. Part of the thrill was also that she had finally reached a topic about which I knew something. I was eager to help, and she allowed that I could.

The essay, as I recall (it's been a few years), was about "why it is good to converse with seniors." I was surprised in that I didn't know my daughter held that opinion, and here

she was making it the thesis of a personal essay.

When I asked her about the choice, she said, oh no, it was just one of a list that the teacher had given them to choose from. "But yet you chose it?" I countered. "Well, my small group did. We did all the preparation in group."

Teacher? Group? The whole point of a personal essay is to be personal. Her personal opinion. Something she wanted to convince others of. She waved this away as immaterial. Time was wasting. The essay was due on Friday.

The thesis statement, that it was good to visit with old people, had to be in paragraph one. That was

mandatory. Also, the first paragraph had to contain the three arguments, one per sentence. After that, she must devote one paragraph to each argu-

ment. Restate the argument; give five points to support that argument. And so on.

Her arguments were on a very messy piece of paper, covered in many people's handwriting, the result of a brain-storming session in the small group.

"Seniors know a lot."

"Seniors get lonely because their families neglect them."

"Seniors deserve respect."

"Seniors are nice."

"A lot of seniors are not neglected by their families," I said. "Some seniors are not even slightly nice. I might turn out to be one of them."

Again, I was waved silent. My daughter and her friends were much

better qualified than I to determine how the subject should be approached, and what should be said about it.

My daughter had already started writing. I read what she had so far.

"It's fine," I said, "but you shouldn't use all those words like 'therefore' and 'consequently' at the start of every paragraph. I mean, really. 'Henceforth'?"

My daughter looked at me with pity. She pulled out a sheet, a class handout, and she read: "Each paragraph is to be connected to the next paragraph by a transitional word or phrase at the beginning of the new paragraph. Use transitional words within each paragraph as well for greater unity and cohesion." There was a list. 'Henceforth' was on it.

"And you're repeating a lot," I said. "That's not good writing."

She pointed to a different place on the hand-out.

"Repeat important words and phrases."

"What's with all the adjectives and adverbs?"

"Says here: 'Use bright descriptive language.'"

"What else does it say?"

"Support each of your three arguments with five points, in three separate paragraphs. Then repeat the three arguments in the concluding paragraph, ending with a strong conclusion statement."

"That's not an essay!" I cried.

"That's, that's..."

"A formula," she said. "A formula I have to stick to, or I will flunk. Now, let's get busy."

A COUPLE OF MONTHS LATER, it was parent/teacher day. I confronted my daughter's Language Arts teacher with my concerns about how the essay was being taught. I suspect I buttered it on a bit thick about the tradition of Rousseau and Swift, and the great modern practitioners like Richler and Fussell. The teacher was a pleasant, able-seeming woman, who instantly deflated me with agreement. No, theirs was not a creative approach to the essay. No, that

approach probably would not endear the students to the essay form.

Asked why it was so, she shrugged and said, "It's the curriculum, on which they will be tested. The results of the test will determine their future in high school. So we teach it that way."

I sought out the Grade 9 curriculum for Language Arts. Everything was there. "Bright descriptive language." The mathematical equation: this many arguments each supported by this many points. Special emphasis on transitional words and phrases, the more the merrier. I said no more about it. My daughter passed her provincial Language Arts exam and moved on into high school.

Nonetheless, it is sad about the essay. I find myself thinking about Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," the essay he published in 1729 to address the problem of Irish poverty and starvation. He proposed that the higher classes eat Irish children while they were still young and succulent, thus reducing the number of poor to a more manageable level.

This "modest proposal" is the essay's thesis statement. When I examined the essay with the Alberta Language Arts curriculum in mind, I was disturbed to find that Swift does not actually state his thesis until he has expended over 1,000 words! His use of transitional devices is equally shoddy. Out of 28 paragraphs, he uses transitional words and phrases to begin only eight of them. Of the eight, six are an enumeration of his six strongest points toward the essay's end. This enumeration is good and would get him some important marks. *But*, "finally," "similarly" and "in addition" are absent from the essay, leaving Swift's thoughts sadly unconnected.

However, let us remember that this essay was written almost 300 years ago. On that account, let us be kind to Mr. Swift and give him a "C." It would be a shame to keep him out of Grade 10.

Fred Stenson's new novel, *Lightning*, was released this fall.