

A RESPONSE TO GINA KEPLINGER: PURSUING EVOLUTION (AND REVOLUTION) THROUGH FORM

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Gina Keplinger crafts a creative, inspired appeal to traditional academic writers in her essay “Don’t Dismiss the List: The Value of Writing Extraordinary Issues Into Ordinary Forms.” Keplinger presents the list as an unconventional genre, simultaneously examining and implementing the form in a call for more accessible and interactive forms in academic writing. This response applies rhetorical genre theory to further explore the strengths and weaknesses of the list as a genre itself, as well as examines the list’s tradition in academic writing.

Genre conventions provide a framework, a skeleton to which individual writers add flesh and blood. In *Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action*, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson define genre as a rhetorical tool “composed of a constellation of recognizable forms bound together by an internal dynamic” (21). Anis S. Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff further explore this dynamic in *Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy*. They suggest that “genres normalize activities and practices, enabling community members to participate ... in fairly predictable, familiar ways in order to get things done” (Bawarshi and Reiff 79). Writers learn to start from a foundation and build upon it through form to accomplish something within their given genre. Thus, genres are about both form and function. Conventional forms provide familiarity and ease to both writer and reader. There is comfort in expectation, and yet with the overuse of the “predictable, familiar ways” comes a certain death to writing. Writing can

and should be able to move, engage, disrupt, provoke.

Thankfully, there are writers who are willing to take risks and explore a revolution in genre, one which allows writers the elbow room to experiment and play with conventional form and function. Gina Keplinger (2017) attempts to disrupt the status quo of academic forms in her article, “Don’t Dismiss the List: The Value of Writing Extraordinary Issues Into Ordinary Forms.” The essay is a list (except for the introduction, which itself breaks traditional academic stuffiness through personal narrative and metaphor) that analyzes the use of list form in the texts of Peggy McIntosh, Kate Bornstein, and Jamaica Kincaid. Each list’s title is clearly distinguished in boldface type, followed by a series of italicized points. The format is familiar, structured, and succinct. Then comes something less familiar to the everyday list: the list is annotated, each annotation making space for more detailed discussion. A cursory glance at the individual lists provides the reader with the general aims

and arguments of Keplinger's essay, while diving into the annotations reveals delightful insights and explorations. The list format invokes an invitation, which is the aim. "I hope you interact with this essay," Keplinger states in her introduction (18). That is precisely what I intend to do here through a close examination of Keplinger's arguments and an exploration of the academic list, particularly in terms of "traditional" (18) versus "alternative" (Keplinger 17). Ultimately, I argue against Keplinger's claim that the list is nontraditional to academic writing; rather, the list is a traditional academic genre that is ready to serve a revived purpose in the revolution for accessible writing.

"Intellectual Risk in the Writing Classroom" by Alexis Teagarden, Carolyn Commer, Ana Cooke, and Justin Mando explores the idea that "intellectual risk-taking is about engaging controversial ideas or unconventional topics" (127). While Keplinger advocates for many revolutions throughout the essay, the most significantly present one is the revolution of form as a means of accessibility. She defines the list genre's benefits: "fragmentation, simple language, and avoidance of literary complications like simile and metaphor further drive home the form's accessibility" (17). For Keplinger, risking the use of an alternative genre is a vehicle for discussing potentially unusual or uncomfortable topics. The question arises: is the list as risky or unconventional as suggested?

Keplinger asserts that "traditionally, the list is used for common things, household things" (27). But as Keplinger discusses form as it pertains to academic writing, she needs to observe and explore list-making traditions in academia. Open any book, and you'll often

find a table of contents, neatly organized with titles and subtitles signaling the important concepts that will be discussed within. Open any textbook, and you will find outlines of data and bullet points that summarize, all with the hopes that a reader will continue exploring the presented ideas. Keplinger's annotated list may seem unfamiliar compared to a grocery list, but it is indeed a genre easily recognized in the scholarly world.

Simplifying form to promote ease of access is a centuries-old academic concept. In the 1500s, Petrus Ramus transformed academic teaching by attempting to strip knowledge to its barest bones through diagrams, creating a "conceptual framework" where "competent students would be able to sort out other peoples' teachings and to derive new arguments of their own" (Hamilton 22). According to Elizabeth Tebeaux in *The Emergence of a Tradition: Technical Writing in the English Renaissance, 1475-1640*, Ramus's aim was much like Keplinger's: to more efficiently organize knowledge through clear visual forms. In doing so, these texts would invite more efficient discourse amongst students and scholars. Transforming the traditional, "snarled" presentations of academic knowledge would provide clear and precise communication and "refreshing relief" for students and readers (Tebeaux 56). Keplinger herself utilizes a similar skeleton of bullet points, though fleshed out in annotation. Yet without her annotations, the lists are merely suggestive. There are no discussions, only fragments of ideas.

Consider a more contemporary source. In his essay "Grammars of Style: New Options in Composition," published in 1976, Winston Weathers advocates that teachers of academic writing allow the exploration of less

conventional styles and forms. He requests a congruent teaching of both convention and the unconventional (22). Again, this sounds like the allowance for which Keplinger advocates. However, in Weathers' assessment of list form as an unconventional method, the same weakness is exposed: "The list is basically a presentation of items without commentary" (13). This idea is echoed by Keplinger herself in her analyses. Stripping content to bite-sized pieces makes confrontational subjects more "neutral" (Keplinger 25). This has the ability to provide comfort and access, yet also the ability to remove the very thing that compels writers: to present, inform, and provoke readers with fully formed, fleshed-out ideas. More questions arise. To what extent should radical ideas be simplified? Does oversimplification revoke the content's radical nature? And does it strip the author's own voice from the text?

It is also important to consider the context of the lists analyzed in "Don't Dismiss the List." Given that McIntosh, Kincaid, and Bornstein's works are intended to reach more widespread, casual readerships, it seems logical that their rhetorical choices would reflect their intended audiences. Overpowering their texts with jargon or technical verbiage typical of more specialist academic writing would diminish their aim of broad accessibility. The most strictly academic text analyzed is McIntosh's, though reading Keplinger's analysis (19-20), one might not realize that the knapsack-list itself is an excerpt, originally couched in pages of standard academic block text (McIntosh). McIntosh's 26-item list was not originally a standalone text, no "95 Theses" tacked to a door. This distinction alters the argument to a certain degree. Do other rhetorical methods beyond the list form contribute

to the effectiveness of the texts Keplinger analyzes? This reader believes so, and Keplinger herself does too, as she notes patterns of clarity and casual diction in her examinations (19, 20, 24, 25, 28).

Despite Keplinger's suggestion, academic list-making is not a uniquely radical or unconventional genre. That is not to say that the annotated list form is not interesting, interactive, or accessible. A list might make information more easily parsed, particularly for modern readers who are accustomed to gathering information in short spurts. William Strunk notably advised writers to omit needless words (37). The list form must omit both needless and needed words to maintain its short and sweet character. If form and function are the skeleton of a text belonging to a particular genre, then details are the unique features layered upon it. They are the means by which a writer expresses their individual perspective and voice. This requires substance and elaboration, which require (and deserve) to be housed in a different type of body than the list provides.

It is admirable to explore the use of alternative forms and their application to academic writing. In "Genre as Social Action," Carolyn Miller defends the consideration of "homely discourse" (155), a category I believe Keplinger would find list-making falls under. As Miller points out, considering everyday genres such as the user manual or the progress report is "not to trivialize the study of genres, it is to take seriously the rhetoric in which we are immersed and the situations in which we find ourselves" (155). Keplinger takes list-making seriously because she considers it an accessible genre. However, the success of a list truly depends on whether or not the reader will engage in the

way the author hopes. Keplinger's title itself indicates a worry that her use of alternative form will be dismissed. And for all the "normalized" rules she bends, she does not truly come to a revolution of organizational style, nor fully commit to the list forms described in her analyses ("High Achiever" an exception, though it isn't academic discourse). In her introduction, she wonders if the outline of an essay can contain the entirety of the essay itself (17). While list-making can provide certain revolutions to the academic forms, it cannot successfully hold an entire essay. Yet neither Keplinger nor any of her examples can achieve this. Her application of the list is an unusual way of structuring the standard outline, a reconstruction of traditional organization of title, subtitle, and discourse. But rather than make full-fledged statements in her list, she hedges and relies on bulky annotations to "hold" the essay (17). Rather than writing "one pound of dried black beans" on the grocery list, she simply writes "beans." When reading a list that is missing crucial, specific details, one might bring home the wrong ingredient. When reading an essay that does the same, an audience might take home a completely different interpretation than the author intended to convey. So perhaps the revolution for more accessible and interactive academic writing does not occur in a revolution of organizational genre. Perhaps it occurs when there is acceptance that academics *can* and *should* be free to use alternative forms, more casual rhetoric, more creative flair. Perhaps it occurs when readers are

encouraged to find delight in engaging and interacting with texts that challenge them. Perhaps it occurs when writers are emboldened, knowing the academic world is willing to nurture the risk-takers and receive them with more open arms. Author and literary scholar Helen Sword positions that the principle of choice must be as important as any other style principle in writing. Choice allows writers the freedom to use language to their best advantage (Sword 173-174). Language itself is a constant evolution and manipulation of norms and standards. Establishing choice as a fundamental aspect of writing allows for alternative genres to be openly explored without the worry of being cast as an outsider. Freedom begets inclusivity.

Although the list is not exactly an unconventional genre, "Don't Dismiss the List" is a meaningful contribution to the call for an ideological revolution of writers, readers, and teachers. Keplinger builds her stances thoughtfully and creatively, crafting an effective and persuasive work of praise that resonates. In a steadily (and rapidly) changing world of how we accept and process information, academics must be open and quick to change. And in a modern climate that not only calls for but demands inclusion and accessibility, alternative forms must be explored, just not at the cost of discourse or detail. As Sword says: "The good news is that we all have the power to change the contours of [the] map, one publication at a time—if we choose to" (10). And if the list isn't your thing, it's only a list.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'm very grateful to Drew Keane for giving me the opportunity to interact with Keplinger's essay, his thoughtful guidance and revisions, and his encouragement to submit this piece. I would also like to give many thanks to Dr. Sarah Polo for her support, feedback, and patience throughout the revision process.

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