



## Beyond High School Writing: Rethinking the 5-Paragraph Essay

- What is the 5-paragraph essay?
  - Introduction paragraph
  - 3 body paragraphs
    - Topic sentence
    - Alternating between 'Concrete Evidence' and 'Commentary' sentences
    - Concluding sentence
  - Concluding paragraph
- Why is it the standard format in high school English classes?
  - It's a good structure to follow when first learning how to write an essay, which can be overwhelming
- What are good points to take away from it?
  - It is good to always provide analysis/commentary on each quote or piece of evidence provided (although it doesn't need to always be immediately following)
  - Helps reader focus & remember—when used for right kind of assignment
  - 3 main units: introduction, body, and conclusion
- What are the problems with the 5-paragraph formula?
  - Doesn't always show the writer's train of thought, but rather molds it into a certain formula
  - This formula calls for the writers to rank their ideas in order of most-least significant; this does not necessarily mean that the paragraphs will be in a logical order, since they're ranked on quality rather than building off of each other's ideas
  - Cookie-cutter approach; "bland and planned" (<http://www.english.illinois.edu/people/faculty/schaffner/Nunnally.pdf>)
  - Can be too narrow; doesn't necessarily allow for the writer to go more in depth into a certain topic, because there may not be room within this structure for further elaboration
  - Can lead students to spend more time proving that something is a certain way than explaining possible reasons why
  - Can lead to "a restatement of plot" or summary more easily ([http://www.csun.edu/~bashforth/406\\_PDF/406\\_Genre/00Sep\\_EJ\\_IIIEffects5ParaEssay.pdf](http://www.csun.edu/~bashforth/406_PDF/406_Genre/00Sep_EJ_IIIEffects5ParaEssay.pdf))
- How do you go beyond the standard 5-paragraph format?
  - Discover the questions the assignment is asking you to tackle: *What am I writing about? Why am I writing about this topic? What do I know about this topic and what do I still have to find out? What are my personal feelings on the matter? What effect do I want my writing to have on the reader? What is my reader's understanding of*

*the issue? What biases or objections should I take into account?* These questions are the most challenging ones for any writer and, unfortunately, the ones least often asked of high school students”

([http://www.csun.edu/~bashforth/406\\_PDF/406\\_Genre/00Sep\\_EJ\\_IIIEffects5ParaEssay.pdf](http://www.csun.edu/~bashforth/406_PDF/406_Genre/00Sep_EJ_IIIEffects5ParaEssay.pdf))

- Match the demands of the assignment to the type and structure of writing you will do: close reading, research papers, compare/contrast assignments, assignments that require analysis of causes/effects, assignments that require you to apply theory
- How do you form a thesis without simply finding 3 supporting arguments to a point?
  - How + what + why
  - specific topic + debatable view + significance to the audience  
(<http://www.chicagonow.com/white-rhino/2012/05/if-you-teach-or-write-5-paragraph-essays-stop-it/>)
    - See example between “5-paragraph thesis” and “college thesis”:  
(<http://www.csulb.edu/~eguzik/fivepara.html>)
- How do I write an introduction if it’s not just one sentence about each of the body paragraphs?
  - Allow the introduction to become “kind of like a movie preview,” where you provide enough information to give the reader an idea of where your argument is going and how it’s going to play out  
(<http://www.csulb.edu/~eguzik/fivepara.html>)
- How do you know how many paragraphs to write?
  - Brainstorm ways to support your thesis, or main points that you want to argue or present within the paper
  - Group these together as makes sense, cut out ideas that don’t seem as strong, and make sure that the final list of topics could form a logical argument to support your main claim (thesis)
  - Assume that each paragraph will take up roughly ¼ of a page, and make sure that the number of paragraphs you have will result in the assigned page length of your paper, if there is one
  - Several potential purposes for a paragraph, see which of these fit and how many are necessary:
    - to define terms, to review the literature,
    - to present evidence in favor of the thesis, to
    - to analyze that evidence
    - to accommodate and/or refute opposing views  
([http://www.csun.edu/~bashforth/406\\_PDF/406\\_Genre/00Sep\\_EJ\\_IIIEffects5ParaEssay.pdf](http://www.csun.edu/~bashforth/406_PDF/406_Genre/00Sep_EJ_IIIEffects5ParaEssay.pdf))
- Let your thesis determine your organization – break the thesis into parts and plan how many paragraphs each “part” will require.
- How do I conclude?
  - reassert the writer’s position
  - remind the reader of the importance to him/her of the problem at hand
  - pose questions on the issue that could be addressed by other writers  
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