HARVARD Writing Program

HARVARD WRITING PROJECT BRIEF GUIDE SERIES

A Brief Guide to the Elements of the Academic Essay

by Gordon Harvey

Gordon Harvey's "Elements of the Academic Essay" provide a possible vocabulary for commenting on student writing. Instructors in Harvard College Writing Program tend to use some version of this vocabulary when talking about and commenting on student writing, so it's likely that your students will be familiar with some of the terms and concepts below. Using these terms consistently when you comment on student writing will help your students see patterns in their own writing that might otherwise remain elusive to them.

- 1. **Thesis:** your main insight or idea about a text or topic, and the *main* proposition that your essay demonstrates. It should be true but arguable (not obviously or patently true, but one alternative among several), be limited enough in scope to be argued in a short composition and with available evidence, and get to the heart of the text or topic being analyzed (not be peripheral). It should be stated early in some form and at some point recast sharply (not just be implied), and it should govern the whole essay (not disappear in places).
- 2. **Motive:** the reason, which you give at the start of your essay, why someone might want or need to read an essay on this topic, and to hear your particular thesis argued— why that thesis isn't just obvious to all, why other people might hold *other* theses on your topic (that you think are wrong or insufficient) or be puzzled or unclear about it. This won't necessarily be the reason you got interested in the topic (which could be private and idiosyncratic) or the personal motivation behind your engagement with it. It's the reason why

- your argument *isn't* idiosyncratic, but rather is interesting to the general reader. The motive you set up should be genuine: a misapprehension or puzzle that an intelligent reader (not a straw dummy) would really have, a point that such a reader would really overlook. Defining motive should be the main business of your introductory paragraphs, where it is often introduced by a form of the complicating word "but."
- 3. **Keyterms:** the handful of recurring concepts or basic oppositions upon which your argument rests, usually literal but sometimes a ruling metaphor. An essay's keyterms should be clear in their meaning and appear throughout (not be abandoned half-way); they should be appropriate for the subject at hand (not unfair or too simple—a false or constraining opposition); and they should not be inert clichés or abstractions (e.g. "the evils of society").

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- 4. **Evidence:** the data—facts, examples, details—that you refer to, quote, or summarize in order to support your thesis. There needs to be *enough* evidence to be persuasive; it needs to be the right *kind* of evidence to support the thesis (with no obvious pieces of evidence overlooked); it needs to be sufficiently *concrete* for the reader to trust it (e.g. in textual analysis, it often helps to find one or two key or representative passages to quote and focus on); and if summarized, it needs to be summarized *accurately* and fairly.
- 5. **Analysis:** the work of breaking down, interpreting, and commenting upon the data, of saying what can be inferred from the data such that it is *evidence* for a thesis. Analysis is what you do with data when you go beyond observing or summarizing it: you show how its parts contribute to a whole or how causes contribute to an effect; you draw out the significance or implication or assumption not apparent to a superficial view. Analysis is what most makes the writer feel present, as a reasoning individual; so your essay should do more analyzing than summarizing or quoting.

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- A key aspect of analysis is *logic*: the reasoning—explicit or implied—that connects your evidence to your thesis, that determines how it is relevant evidence for that thesis, how a claim follows or can be inferred from the evidence. This includes the unstated beliefs or *assumptions* that your argument makes about life, history, literature, reasoning, etc., which you don't argue for but simply assume to be true. These should bear rational inspection, and if arguable should be unpacked and explicitly acknowledged.
- 6. **Structure:** the sequence of main sections or sub-topics, and the turning points between them. The sections should be perceptible and follow a logical order, and the links in that order should be apparent to the reader (but not heavy-handed: see "stitching"). But it should also be a progressive order—there should have a continuous direction of development or complication, not be simply a list or a series of restatements of or takes on the thesis ("Macbeth is ambitious: he's ambitious here; and he's ambitious here; and he's ambitions here, too; thus, Macbeth is ambitious") or list of elements found in the text. And the order should be supple enough to allow the writer to explore the topic, not just hammer home a thesis. (If the essay is complex or long, its structure may be briefly announced or hinted at after the thesis, in a road-map or plan sentence—or even in the thesis statement itself, if you're clever enough.)
- 7. **Stitching:** words that tie together the parts of an argument, most commonly (a) by using *transition* (linking or turning) words as signposts to indicate how a new section, paragraph, or sentence follows from the one immediately previous; but also (b) by *recollection* of an earlier idea or part of the essay, referring back to it either by explicit statement or by echoing key words or resonant phrases quoted or stated earlier. The repeating of key or thesis concepts is especially helpful at points of transition from one section to another, to show how the new section fits in.
- 8. **Sources:** persons or documents, referred to, summarized, or quoted, that help a writer demonstrate the truth of his or her argument. They are typically sources of (a) factual information or data, (b) opinions or interpretation on your topic, (c) comparable versions of the thing you are discussing, or (d) applicable general concepts. Your sources need to be efficiently integrated and fairly acknowledged by citation—see *Writing with Sources*.
- 9. Reflecting: a general name for places where you pause in your demonstration to reflect on it, to raise or answer a question about it—as when you (1) consider a counter-argument—a possible objection, alternative, or problem that a skeptical or resistant reader might raise; (2) define your terms or assumptions (what do I

- mean by this term? or, what am I assuming here?); (3) handle a newly emergent concern (but if this is so, then how can X be?); (4) draw out an implication (so what? what might be the wider significance of the argument I have made? what might it lead to if I'm right? or, what does my argument about a single aspect of this suggest about the whole thing? or about the way people live and think?), and (5) consider a possible explanation for the phenomenon that has been demonstrated (why might this be so? what might cause or have caused it?); (6) offer a qualification or limitation to the case you have made (what you're not saying). The first of these kinds of reflection can come anywhere in an essay; the second is usually comes early; the last four often come late (they're common moves of conclusion). Most good essays have some of the first kind, and often several of the others besides.
- 10. **Orienting:** bits of information, explanation, and summary that orient the reader who isn't expert in the subject, enabling such a reader to follow the argument. The orienting question is, what does my reader need here? The answer can take many forms: necessary information about the text, author, or event (e.g. given

- in your introduction); a summary of a text or passage about to be analyzed; pieces of information given along the way about passages, people, or events mentioned (including announcing or "set-up" phrases for quotations and sources—see *Writing with Sources*). The trick is to orient briefly and gracefully—and not to orient when your audience doesn't need it: e.g. "writer William Shakespeare."
- 11. **Stance:** the implied relationship of you, the writer, to your readers and subject: how and where you implicitly position yourself as an analyst. Stance is defined by such features as style and tone (e.g. familiar or formal); the presence or absence of specialized language and knowledge; the amount of time spent orienting a general, non-expert reader; the use of scholarly conventions of form and style. Your stance should be established within the first few paragraphs of your essay, and it should remain consistent.
- 12. **Style:** the choices you make of words and sentence structure. Your style should be exact and clear (should bring out main idea and action of each sentence, not bury it) and plain without being flat (should be graceful and a little interesting, not stuffy).

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HARVARD Writing Center

WRITING CENTER BRIEF GUIDE SERIES

A Brief Guide to Writing the English Paper

The Challenges of Writing About English Literature

Writing begins with the act of reading. While this statement is true for most college papers, strong English papers tend to be the product of highly attentive reading (and rereading). When your instructors ask you to do a "close reading," they are asking you to read not only for content, but also for structures and patterns. When you perform a close reading, then, you observe how form and content interact. In some cases, form reinforces content: for example, in John Donne's Holy Sonnet 14, where the speaker invites God's "force" "to break, blow, burn and make [him] new." Here, the stressed monosyllables of the verbs "break," "blow" and "burn" evoke aurally the force that the speaker invites from God. In other cases, form raises questions about content: for example, a repeated denial of guilt will likely raise questions about the speaker's professed innocence.

When you close read, take an inductive approach. Start by observing particular details in the text, such as a repeated image or word, an unexpected development, or even a contradiction. Often, a detail—such as a repeated image—can help you to identify a question about the text that warrants further examination. So annotate details that strike you as you read. Some of those details will eventually help you to work towards a thesis. And don't worry if a detail seems trivial. If you can make a case about how an apparently trivial detail reveals something significant about the text, then your paper will have a thought–provoking thesis to argue.

Common Types of English Papers

Many assignments will ask you to analyze a single text. Others, however, will ask you to read two or more texts in relation to each other, or to consider a text in light of claims made by other scholars and critics. For most assignments, close reading will be central to your paper.

While some assignment guidelines will suggest topics and spell out expectations in detail, others will offer little more than a page limit. Approaching the writing process in the absence of assigned topics can be daunting, but remember that you have resources: in section, you will probably have encountered some examples of close reading; in lecture, you will have encountered some of the course's central questions and claims. The paper is a chance for you to extend a claim offered in lecture, or to analyze a passage neglected in lecture. In either case, your analysis should do more than recapitulate claims aired in lecture and section.

Because different instructors have different goals for an assignment, you should always ask your professor or TF if you have questions. These general guidelines should apply in most cases:

• A close reading of a single text: Depending on the length of the text, you will need to be more or less selective about what you choose to consider. In the case of a sonnet, you will probably have enough room to analyze the text more thoroughly than you would in the case of a novel, for example, though even here you will probably not analyze every single detail. By contrast, in the case of a novel, you might analyze a repeated scene, image, or object (for example, scenes of train travel, images of decay, or objects such as or typewriters). Alternately, you might



analyze a perplexing scene (such as a novel's ending, albeit probably in relation to an earlier moment in the novel). But even when analyzing shorter works, you will need to be selective. Although you might notice numerous interesting details as you read, not all of those details will help you to organize a focused argument about the text. For example, if you are focusing on depictions of sensory experience in Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale," you probably do not need to analyze the image of a homeless Ruth in stanza 7, unless this image helps you to develop your case about sensory experience in the poem.

- A theoretically-informed close reading. In some courses, you will be asked to analyze a poem, a play, or a novel by using a critical theory (psychoanalytic, postcolonial, gender, etc). For example, you might use Kristeva's theory of abjection to analyze mother-daughter relations in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. Critical theories provide focus for your analysis; if "abjection" is the guiding concept for your paper, you should focus on the scenes in the novel that are most relevant to the concept.
- A historically-informed close reading. In courses with a historicist orientation, you might use less self-consciously literary documents, such as newspapers or devotional manuals, to develop your analysis of a literary work. For example, to analyze how Robinson Crusoe makes sense of his island experiences, you might use Puritan tracts that narrate events in terms of how God organizes them. The tracts could help you to show not only how *Robinson Crusoe* draws on Puritan narrative conventions, but also—more significantly—how the novel revises those conventions.
- A comparison of two texts When analyzing two
 texts, you might look for unexpected contrasts between
 apparently similar texts, or unexpected similarities between
 apparently dissimilar texts, or for how one text revises or
 transforms the other. Keep in mind that not all of the
 similarities, differences, and transformations you identify

- will be relevant to an argument about the relationship between the two texts. As you work towards a thesis, you will need to decide which of those similarities, differences, or transformations to focus on. Moreover, unless instructed otherwise, you do not need to allot equal space to each text (unless this 50/50 allocation serves your thesis well, of course). Often you will find that one text helps to develop your analysis of another text. For example, you might analyze the transformation of Ariel's song from *The Tempest* in T. S. Eliot's poem, *The Waste Land*. Insofar as this analysis is interested in the afterlife of Ariel's song in a later poem, you would likely allot more space to analyzing allusions to Ariel's song in *The Waste Land* (after initially establishing the song's significance in Shakespeare's play, of course).
- A response paper A response paper is a great opportunity to practice your close reading skills without having to develop an entire argument. In most cases, a solid approach is to select a rich passage that rewards analysis (for example, one that depicts an important scene or a recurring image) and close read it. While response papers are a flexible genre, they are not invitations for impressionistic accounts of whether you liked the work or a particular character. Instead, you might use your close reading to raise a question about the text—to open up further investigation, rather than to supply a solution.
- A research paper. In most cases, you will receive guidance from the professor on the scope of the research paper. It is likely that you will be expected to consult sources other than the assigned readings. Hollis is your best bet for book titles, and the MLA bibliography (available through e-resources) for articles. When reading articles, make sure that they have been peer reviewed; you might also ask your TF to recommend reputable journals in the field.

When analyzing two texts, you might look for unexpected contrasts between apparently similar texts, or unexpected similarities between apparently dissimilar texts, or for how one text revises or transforms the other. Keep in mind that not all of the similarities, differences, and transformations you identify will be relevant to an argument about the relationship between the two texts.

Taking the First Steps: Close Reading Towards a Thesis

Below are two examples of how close reading can help you work towards formulating a thesis for your paper. While neither is a complete recipe for an English paper, both should give you some idea of the kinds of textual features close readers look for and the kinds of questions they ask.

Example #1: Close Reading Prose

Let's say that you decide to write on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's autobiography, *Confessions*. Rousseau's autobiography is notably the work of a novelist, and it has been read as a novel by numerous scholars of literature. Because Rousseau's *Confessions* is a long work, your analysis will need to be selective. One way to narrow your focus is to look at a pattern of repetition: a repeated scene (say, a theft), a repeated object (say, a book), or a repeated word (say, "heart"). If a scene or an object is depicted repeatedly, it is probably important for the book as a whole. In most cases, it will be depicted in different ways that complicate or conflict with each other. A consideration of this kind of friction could trigger a thought-provoking thesis. Here's one way you might break down the process of reading towards a thesis:

1) **Identify a pattern of repetition.** Let's take the example of the word "heart." Rousseau uses this word compulsively. From page one, "heart" seems to designate Rousseau's most authentic and sincere self; it also seems to serve as a guarantor of "truth," for instance when Rousseau asserts that his "heart is content" with the accuracy of the autobiographical stories he has recounted. But it is worth wondering whether a word used as frequently as "heart" might have some other, less obvious meanings. As mentioned, it is rare in a literary work for a charged, often repeated word to mean exactly the same thing every time. As you read Rousseau's *Confessions*, mark all the instances of the word "heart." Once you have finished the book, you can then proceed to...

If a scene or an object is depicted repeatedly, it is probably important for the book as a whole. In most cases, it will be depicted in different ways that will complicate or conflict with each other.

- 2) Make a list of passages in which the word "heart" appears. This should be a list not just of page numbers but of quotations. With a couple of pages of "hits" for the word "heart," you will have a body of data that you can begin to analyze.
- 3) Identify the different meanings of the word "heart" and analyze their relationships. How does "heart" seem to function primarily, according to Rousseau? And what other functions and capacities does it have in the text? You might notice that Rousseau's heart is very susceptible to fantasies: when he fantasizes about being a soldier, his "heart swelled at this noble idea"; elsewhere, he admits that "love of the marvelous comes naturally to the human heart." In these cases, the heart seems to foster illusions—quite a contrast to the primary definition of the heart as a sincere guarantor of truth! This tension is worth identifying and analyzing. If Rousseau's autobiography is invested in a heart-based model of the self, what are some of this investment's unexpected consequences for how the autobiography constructs a self-consequences which Rousseau himself doesn't acknowledge? As you notice relationships between different meanings, ask questions about them. The meaning of the word "heart," however obvious it might be to you in day-to-day conversation, is not obvious in Rousseau's autobiography. Use the less obvious meanings and functions to interrogate the more obvious meanings and functions.
- 4) Select a "friction-rich" relationship to focus **on in your thesis.** Some of the meanings of "heart" will seem more unexpected than others. In your paper, you need not account for every single usage of the word "heart"; select the examples that are most in tension with the primary meaning of "heart" as the seat of an authentic self and a guarantor of truth. With the above data, you are in a position to make an argument about how a self gets constructed in Rousseau's work and what the unacknowledged limitations of that construction are. So you might argue the following: "From the outset, Rousseau's autobiography represents the heart as the seat of Rousseau's most authentic and truthful self. However, as Rousseau's personal narrative develops, the heart assumes other functions: it fuels personal fantasies and superstitions, for example. The conflict between Rousseau's early, dominant characterization of the heart and its later more delusional capacities suggests that the concept of an authentic self is more volatile, more unreliable, than Rousseau admits. Indeed, insofar as a self's authenticity rides on the subjective emotions of the heart, authenticity appears to be a rather unreliable guarantor of truth. If Rousseau's autobiography formulates a model of the authentic, feeling self that remains familiar today, it ultimately puts pressure on that model."

Notice that this thesis does not judge Rousseau as a human being. Instead, it makes a claim about how a self is constructed in a particular work—a work that occupies a particular historical moment when selves have a particular vocabulary available to them. Ultimately, you are analyzing "a piece of language" and not a human being. Consequently, you do not need either to judge or to justify Rousseau. Write about Rousseau's autobiography as you might write about a first-person fictional narrative (which, like Rousseau, has a culturally-specific vocabulary with which to depict a self).

Finally, keep in mind that there are a number of ways to approach Rousseau's text. Analyzing a pattern of repetition is hardly the only one. For example, you might close read a pivotal scene in the *Confessions*, such as the scene in which Rousseau accuses a maid of stealing a ribbon that he himself has stolen. Even when focusing on a pivotal scene, however, you would probably analyze it in relation to other moments in the text in which Rousseau discusses guilt, relationships with women, etc. Usually it is through a set of relationships between words, images, or scenes that one can better understand the significance of a single scene.

In short, as you start to make sense of the poem, consider the conventions and structures of the poetic genre you're encountering.

Example #2: Close Reading Poetry

Let's say you're asked to write a paper about William Wordsworth's sonnet, "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802." At first reading, the poem might seem like a straightforward, 'poetic' description of what the speaker sees and feels while looking at London one beautiful summer morning. But how might you figure out what else is going on in the poem?

1) Begin by identifying structures and developments in the text. Look for unexpected developments. Notice that Wordsworth's poem is a modified Petrarchan sonnet, consisting of an octave (or, two quatrains) and a sestet. (The rhyme scheme goes abba abba cdcdcd, instead of the usual Petrarchan cdecde.) Usually in a Petrarchan sonnet there is a turn (or volta) between the octave and the sestet. This is a good place to start looking for transitions and developments in the poem, but it's not the only place to begin. When reading this poem you might also consider the relevance of the structure of the English sonnet, in which the final couplet (the final two lines) marks a development in the speaker's attitude—

some change in point of view or mood. In short, as you start to make sense of the poem, consider the conventions and structures of the poetic genre you're encountering.

In the case of Wordsworth's sonnet, you might consider the final two lines (as a quasi-couplet in the English tradition): "Dear God! The very houses seem asleep/ And all that mighty heart [i.e., the city] is lying still!" There's a lot of emotion in these final lines, as the exclamation marks suggest. But what kind of emotion is it? Has it changed since the earlier description of the speaker's pleasurable response to "a sight so touching"? To get a handle on the final couplet, you might consider that a "still" heart amounts to a dead heart. So by the final line, the poem seems to be in unexpectedly sinister territory, in contrast to the superlatively "fair" city of the first line. This contrast marks a strange, unexpected development—a development worth analyzing further. To that end, you might ask: How does the poem arrive at the strange final couplet? In other words, you need to...

- 2) Analyze how the unexpected development happens: You've noticed a transition from a "fair" city to a dead city. How does the speaker get from "fair" to dead? Look for figures—for metaphors, similes, synecdoches, personifications, etc. (For more on figures, see the indispensable Abrams, cited below.) In Wordsworth's poem, the speaker notably personifies the city from line 4 onward, where the city "doth, like a garment, wear/ The beauty of the morning; silent, bare." So the city takes on the aspect of a human being (which can die), and the poem has now moved from the realm of empirical description to fiction (as line 13's use of "seem" suggests).
- 3) Reflect on the significance of the unexpected development in the poem as a whole: Having noticed an unexpected development puts you in an excellent position to begin formulating a thesis. Your thesis won't simply point out the development, however; it will make an argument about the development's significance. To recap, we have observed a transition from beauty to something more sinister, a transition enabled by the use of figurative language (specifically, personification). So figurative language is the mechanism that appears to enable, even trigger, the unexpected development. It appears to have a power—an agency—not only to vivify but also to kill what it depicts.

As you consider this development and how it happens, you might look for moments when this development is foreshadowed: notice, for example, words like "lie" (in the line "Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie": why "lie"? Why don't they "stand"?) and phrases like "a calm so deep"—which might describe sleep, but could also describe death.

4) **Parlay the unexpected development into a thesis:** With these observations in mind, we might devise a thesis

- about the volatile power of poetic language dramatized by the unexpected development from life to death in Wordsworth's poem. We might argue that: "Wordsworth's sonnet about London offers a case study about the volatility of poetic language. If poetic language begins by vivifying the city through personification, ultimately personification depicts the city's demise. In short, the poetic device that represents the city's beauty is as volatile as it is powerful, exemplifying the instability of poetic language. Notice a couple of features of this thesis:
- It identifies a transition (from vivified beauty to death) and gives an account of the significance of that transition (the 'culprit' is a volatile poetic language, which is no mere passive tool as it turns out).
- The thesis identifies a tension between two moments in the poem and doesn't try to tidy up or argue away that tension. This thesis is interested in a complication, in the unexpected and even uncomfortable transition from life to death. Weird complications tend to offer richer material than complications easily overcome and tensions tidily reconciled.
- The thesis isn't particularly combative or controversial. Instead, it offers a way of understanding the poem that wouldn't be apparent to a first-time reader, engaging the conceptual question of poetic language's power by analyzing particular details in the poem itself.

QUESTIONS TO ASK AS YOU READ A TEXT

Below are some questions that will help you develop a more active and interrogative mode of reading. Not all of these questions will be appropriate for every text, of course, and sometimes the answers to appropriate questions still won't yield potential theses. Nonetheless, these questions provide a good starting place for close reading.

For novels and short stories

- What is the genre of the text? What are the conventions of that genre, and what do those conventions lead us to expect as readers? Are those expectations always realized? Is there a mix of genres (as there is, for example, in *Jane Eyre*, which is a gothic bildungsroman)? If so, how do the conventions of those different genres interact? (In the case of *Jane Eyre*, there's a fraught interaction between development or "bildung" (which looks ahead to the future) and haunting (which implicates the past).)
- Is the narrator first- or third-person, omniscient or not? What does the narrator's position suggest about the characters and events depicted in the text? How much do we know about the narrator? How reliable is he or she?
- Does anybody (narrator included) contradict himself or herself? How can we make sense of this contradiction? Does it mark a development, a response to a new environment, or something else?
- Is there a gap in the story—a secret or an event that is never depicted but only alluded to? What is the effect of such a gap on how we read the story? How can we analyze the gap without trying to fill it in? For example, in Henry James' novel *The Turn of the Screw*, we are never informed of the substance of Quint's horrifying crime against the children. Rather than trying to name the crime, we can instead analyze how the story's gaps and secrets induce a "paranoid" mode of reading, whereby every detail seems to harbor deep, repressed meanings.

For Poems

- What kind of poem is this? What is the poem's rhyme scheme? How does its rhyme scheme structure and dramatize the poem's content?
- What kinds of relationships develop between rhymed words? Do rhymed words reinforce each others' meanings or ironize them? For example, Alexander Pope's poem, *The Rape of the Lock*, regularly pairs serious and trivial words, such as "despair" and "hair" to exemplify the intimacy of serious emotions and trivial circumstances in his mock-epic poem.
- Who is the speaker? What can we infer about his or her environment? Does his or her mood remain constant throughout the poem or does it change? What are the significant changes of mood and mind in the poem?

In the case of drama, you will likely ask a combination of questions relevant both to prose and to poetry. Finally, notice what kinds of questions are *not* listed above. For example: what did the author intend? In some single-author courses you might work with manuscript drafts and biography, and thereby have sources with which to speculate about an author's intentions. More often, however, you will not have enough evidence to speculate intelligently about the author's intentions. In the absence of such evidence, orient your claims towards the text.

FOR FURTHER READING

Tips and Conventions

Like any genre, the English paper follows some conventions you'll want to be aware of. If you have any questions about your paper, consult your TF or professor—for clarification on the assignment, for tips on how to approach the paper, and to receive preliminary feedback on paper ideas. If the guidelines offered here conflict with what your TF or professor tells you, you should of course follow their advice.

- Avoid plot summary. A paper that recounts what happened in a novel (or a play)—or that analyzes selected scenes in the same order they occur in the novel—is letting the novel's author rather than the paper's author structure the paper's argument. Sometimes papers fall into plot summary because a student imagines that he or she is writing for a reader unfamiliar with the novel. But if you imagine that you are writing for someone who has read the novel at least once, then you don't need to rehearse the plot for your reader. Instead, you can focus on selected scenes, briefly identifying them before analyzing significant details. Resist shadowing the novel's chronology in your own paper. One rule of thumb is to begin with the most obvious piece of evidence and move progressively to the least obvious piece of evidence. Ultimately, you should plot your own paper.
- Use block quotations appropriately. When quoting longer stretches of prose (more than four lines in your paper), set it off from the body of the paper in an indented block quotation. In the case of poetry, more than three lines of verse should be quoted *en bloc*. Block quotations are a great opportunity to do some extended close reading. When you use a block quotation, make sure that it is rich enough to reward extended analysis (which should be at least as long as the quotation itself). A well-chosen block quotation will not only corroborate a claim that you have already argued, but will also offer a new, related emphasis or implication for your argument to pursue. In this way, block quotations can help your argument to maintain momentum, averting the stagnant paper structure in which a thesis is followed by a list of illustrative examples.

- Avoid basing your argument on opinion. Sometimes a work of literature provokes personal feelings and opinions in a reader. When this happens, the reader should try to suspend those personal feelings and opinions as he or she close reads, paying attention instead to structures and features in the text. Textual evidence and not personal conviction should be the basis of your thesis and argument.
- Focus on speakers, not authors: Because English papers make claims about texts rather than about authors, first-person poems and narratives have a "speaker" or "narrator" who should not be confused with the author. David Copperfield, while he has autobiographical features, is not Charles Dickens himself. Likewise, "Rousseau" in his *Confessions* is a linguistic construct with an ambiguous relationship to the man himself. Therefore, as a reader of Rousseau's *Confessions*, you have evidence to make a claim about the linguistic construct or "character" of "Rousseau" rather than about "Rousseau" the man.
- Write in the present tense. Because English papers approach literary works as linguistic artifacts rather than as historical documents, they discuss characters and events in the present tense rather than the past tense. For example, one might write: "In *Middlemarch*, Dorothea expresses relief that Casaubon does not enjoy piano music."
 - If you're taking a historicist approach to literary analysis, keep in mind that when referring to historical events outside of the novel you should use the past tense, as you would in a history paper. For example, "Although Dorothea has little interest in music, George Eliot herself was very interested in music."
- **Use MLA style citations.** Because English papers quote frequently, often from the same text, they cite page numbers parenthetically. For example: "Dorothea expresses disdain for "domestic music and feminine fine art" (65).

FURTHER READING

- Abrams, M.H. and Geoffrey Harpham, A Glossary of Literary Terms. 9th ed. Boston: Wadsworth Publishing, 2008.
- Joseph Gibaldi, *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. 6th ed. New York: MLA, 2003.

story ask about the interests of the storytellers and their effects on their stories: How have politicians used the story? How have the storytellers' motives changed? Whose purposes does each story serve? These can be combined into a single more significant question:

How and why have users of the Alamo story given the event a mythic quality?

With only a topic to guide your research, you can find endless data and will never know when you have enough (much less what to do with it). To go beyond fact-grubbing, find a question that will narrow your search to just those data you need to answer it.

3.4 FROM A QUESTION TO ITS SIGNIFICANCE

Even if you are an experienced researcher, you might not be able to take the next step until you are well into your project, and if you are a beginner, you may find it deeply frustrating. Even so, once you have a question that holds your interest, you must pose a tougher one about it: So what? Beyond your own interest in its answer, why would others think it a question worth asking? You might not be able to answer that So what? question early on, but it's one you have to start thinking about, because it forces you to look beyond your own interests to consider how your work might strike others.

Think of it like this: What will be lost if you *don't* answer your question? How will *not* answering it keep us from understanding something else better than we do? Start by asking *So what*? at first of yourself:

So what if I don't know or understand how butterflies know where to go in the winter, or how fifteenth-century musicians tuned their instruments, or why the Alamo story has become a myth? So what if I can't answer my question? What do we lose?

Your answer might be *Nothing. I just want to know.* Good enough to start, but not to finish, because eventually your readers will ask as well, and they will want an answer beyond *Just curious.* Answering *So what?* vexes all researchers, beginners and experienced alike, because when you have only a question, it's hard to predict

whether others will think its answer is significant. But you must work toward that answer throughout your project. You can do that in three steps.

3.4.1 Step 1: Name Your Topic

If you are beginning a project with only a topic and maybe the glimmerings of a good question or two, start by naming your project:

I am trying to learn about (working on, studying) _____.

Fill in the blank with your topic, using some of those nouns derived from verbs:

I am studying the *causes* of the *disappearance* of large North American mammals . . .

I am working on Lincoln's beliefs about predestination and their influence on his reasoning . . .

3.4.2 Step 2: Add an Indirect Question

Add an indirect question that indicates what you do not know or understand about your topic:

- I am studying/working on ______
 because I want to find out who/what/when/where/whether/ why/how ______
- 1. I am studying the causes of the disappearance of large North American mammals
 - 2. because I want to find out whether they were hunted to extinction
- 1. I am working on Lincoln's beliefs about predestination and its influence on his reasoning
 - 2. because I want to find out how his belief in destiny influenced his understanding of the causes of the Civil War...

When you add that *because I want to find out how/why/whether* clause, you state why *you* are pursuing your topic: to answer a question important to you.

If you are a new researcher and get this far, congratulate yourself, because you have moved beyond the aimless collection of data. But now, if you can, take one step more. It's one that advanced researchers know they must take, because they know their work will be judged not by its significance to them but by its significance to others in their field. They must have an answer to *So what?*

- 3.4.3 Step 3: Answer So What? by Motivating Your Question
 This step tells you whether your question might interest not just you but others. To do that, add a second indirect question that explains why you asked your first question. Introduce this second implied question with in order to help my reader understand how, why, or whether:
 - I am studying the causes of the disappearance of large North American mammals
 - 2. because I want to find out whether the earliest peoples hunted them to extinction
 - 3. in order to help my reader understand whether native peoples lived in harmony with nature or helped destroy it.
 - I am working on Lincoln's beliefs about predestination and their influence on his reasoning
 - because I want to find out how his belief in destiny and God's will influenced his understanding of the causes of the Civil War,
 - 3. in order to help my reader understand how his religious beliefs may have influenced his military decisions.

It is the indirect question in step 3 that you hope will seize your readers' interest. If it touches on issues important to your field, even indirectly, then your readers should care about its answer.

Some advanced researchers begin with questions that others in their field already care about: Why did the giant sloth and woolly mammoth disappear from North America? Or: Is risk taking genetically based? But many researchers, including at times the three of us, find that they can't flesh out the last step in that three-part sentence until they finish a first draft. So you make no mistake begin-

ning your research without a good answer to that third question—Why does this matter?—but you face a problem when you finish it without having thought through those three steps at all. And if you are doing advanced research, you must take that step, because answering that last question is your ticket into the conversation of your community of researchers.

Regularly test your progress by asking a roommate, relative, or friend to force you to flesh out those three steps. Even if you can't take them all confidently, you'll know where you are and where you still have to go. To summarize: Your aim is to explain

- 1. what you are writing about—I am working on the topic of . . .
 - 2. what you don't know about it—because I want to find out . . .
 - 3. why you want your reader to know and care about it—in order to help my reader understand better...

In the following chapters, we return to those three steps and their implied questions, because they are crucial not just for finding questions, but for framing the research problem that you want your readers to value.

Seven ways to make your essay Better.

1. Motivate your essay. From The Craft of Research: "

Once you have a question that holds your interest, you must pose a tougher one about it: So what? Beyond your own interest in its answer, why would others think it a question worth asking? You might not be able to answer that So what? question early on, but it's one you have to start thinking about, because it forces you to look beyond your own interests to consider how your work might strike others.

Unlike what you may have been previously told, it is fine to use "I" in the essay.

- 2. Don't have redundant discussions. If you are handling (or more) texts, then explain why it is helpful or useful to discuss the second one. There is nothing to be gained by saying that one text ahs a theme and another also shares that theme. Instead, use the second text to show how another text can cast a different (or better) perspective on the question at hand.
- 3. Consider how your essay's last paragraph might actually be a better first paragraph. Sometimes authors feel that it helps to have a dramatic finish by a last minute revelation. Usually this doesn't work effectively, and it would be better to tell the reader as soon as possible what it is that you'll be deciding.
- 4. Avoid the "5 paragraph essay. A common pre-university essay structure is to make a claim provide 3 illustrations of this and then repeat the initial claim. Now this structure prevents you from using the essay as a persuasive development of your ideas. The 5-paragraph structure (which may involve more than five paragraphs, of course) has nowhere to go once it has begun, and will always have difficulty in reaching the first-class degree level.
- 5. If including a block (long) quotation, then analyse the passage. Otherwise, paraphrase.

Few readers actually read block quotations. They have a purpose if the author is spending time making several interpretive claims about the passage. But if its purpose is simply to back up a claim, it's better simply to trust the reader trusts you and paraphrase it, in order to be more concise.

6. Use secondary elaborations to build up longer essays. If you can "answer" your initial question, then put that answer back with a question mark. Use your arguments recursively to string together multiple sections.

Additionally – it is often helpful to have subsections with their own headings!

7. Look at the last line of each paragraph and the first line of the next to see if the transitions are present and make sense.

How to Revise Your Essay: Reverse Outlining

One way to make your essay stronger is to reverse outline after the first draft. This process works in this way:

- 1. Write a draft of the essay.
- 2. Print it out and number every paragraph.
- 3. Now re-read each paragraph and write a very short summary (a few words, not a complete sentence). This summary should describe what each paragraph is about or doing. For example: "Explains this concept"; "defines my term or keywords", "applies my terms of keywords. Sometimes paragraphs do ore than one thing, and that's ok.
- 4. If you can't simply describe what is the function of the paragraph, then there's probably too much going on in it, and it either needs to be broken up or given more transitional passages.
- 5. You can use this process to highlight paragraphs that need more work, to discover concision by seeing what may be repetitive (especially in terms of arguments), and how paragraphs might be renumbered or rearranged to make the argument flow more effectively.



Breaking the Five-Paragraph-Theme Barrier

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Breaking the Five-Paragraph-Theme Barrier

Thomas E. Nunnally

"What's wrong with the five-paragraph theme?" I suppose I can best answer the question with another question: What's wrong with a junior tennis racket, a student-model flute, and a bicycle with training wheels? The answer is, "Nothing is wrong with any of these things, including the five-paragraph theme, as long as one understands their purposes."

And the standard five-paragraph theme (FPT) fulfills its purpose very well. As it is usually taught, the FPT requires (1) an introductory paragraph moving from a generality to an explicit thesis statement and announcement of three points in support of that thesis, (2) three middle paragraphs, each of which begins with a topic sentence restating one of the major ideas supporting the thesis and then develops the topic sentence (with a minimum of three sentences in most models), and (3) a concluding paragraph restating the thesis and points. This highly structured format for essay writing provides for effective inculcation of concepts such as unity, coherence, and development.

I have no problem, then, with the form or its teaching. My desire is to explore the issue of how students perceive the FPT and the role of teachers in molding that perception.

Over a decade ago I learned of the efficacy of the FPT through an "experiment" at an openadmission junior college where I taught in north Georgia. The University System of Georgia obligated all students to demonstrate their basic literacy before receiving a four-year degree. The writing part of this basic literary test consisted of a single essay upon a choice of unannounced topics such as "Name a modern-day hero or heroine and explain why you think the individual qualifies." (If you guessed that we received scores of essays about "Mother," you are absolutely right.) English faculty members representing area institutions met together to grade the essays, holistically assigning scores ranging from 1 (student must try again) to a near-mythical 4.

Since seventy-five percent of the entering students at our junior college placed into at least one remedial course, the state essay presented a considerable challenge. When my colleagues and I discovered that the FPT helped our students improve their woefully inadequate theme-writing skills on several fronts, we standardized our program around it, codifying our approach when several of us collaborated upon a departmental text— B.A.S.I.C. Writing (1976, Aubrey Kline, Thomas Nunnally, and Earl Payne, Dubuque: Kendall/ Hunt). Our curriculum clearly influenced the success rate of our students. For while the average SAT score for our college hovered in the lower third of the thirty-plus state institutions, our students' group success rate on the essay put us in the top five to seven schools. Our students were weak in diction, ideas, and literary experience, but in a sea of rambling papers, our group of bland but planned essays rose to the top.

But our anomalous success rate did not hold. Our sister institutions saw the five-paragraph writing on the wall and developed similar strategies; consequently, our results declined to a level closer to what the SAT scores of our students would predict. When nearly every student taking the test in the state was formulating that thesis, intoning those supporting points, developing the three middle paragraphs, and chanting all again at the end, the relative poverty of ideas and expression



of our students became salient. Furthermore, a backlash developed among scorers, as they began penalizing mechanically produced but conceptionally empty FPTs.

By this time, my colleagues and I had expanded our one-dimensional approach in our revised texts to include the "modes" approach, that is, comparison/contrast, process, and the like along with the FPT "thesis/support" mainstay (1979, Aubrey Kline, et. al., Grammar and Composition, Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt; 1981, Raleigh: Contemporary). But it was interesting that we were now encountering a different kind of high-school graduate in our freshman classes, one who "knew" how to write "college" essays, aka the fiveparagraph theme. At the time, I supposed that our department was influencing area secondary schools through a "trickle-down effect," but since then, having spent nearly a decade teaching in large state universities, I have concluded that the FPT is a national phenomenon. Students from all over are as proficient in the form as Georgians, even without the threat of a state proficiency examination.

Perhaps my colleagues in secondary-school English have simply discovered, as I did, how useful the FPT can be as a general-purpose teaching tool for inexperienced writers. Also, as a response to the task of instructing multiple sections of overenrolled classes, the explicitness of the FPT—the discreteness of its parts and their functions—makes it practical to teach as well as eminently gradable. Students learn to do one thing at a time, such as form a thesis statement, before putting all the parts together, and their progress can be monitored and evaluated piecemeal.

But to my experience of discovering the merits of the FPT I have added experience as to its disadvantages, not so much of the FPT itself but of students' perceptions of it and where it should be leading them in their writing skills.

To explain my concern, I reproduced below one of the clearest examples of an FPT I have ever received—written to specs, you might say. But first I need to give you enough background to understand the situation under which the essay was produced.

The student author was in her second course in honors freshman composition. The essay is the student's first full-length theme of the quarter, written in class during the sixth class meeting. During the fifth meeting, class members had discussed their prewriting in pairs, while I had gone about listening in on their criticisms and suggestions for each other and checking that each student had produced notes or an outline to be used while writing the essay when we convened again.

In a sea of rambling papers, our group of bland but planned essays rose to the top.

(This was an unusually self-disciplined group—they kept their voices down and, with the exception of two fellows who strayed over into a discussion of rappelling, stayed with the assignment. I caught another student narrating the story of Ferdinand the Bull at length, but she convinced me that it was germane to her topic!) In other words, although the essay was written under a fifty-minute time constraint, the students had taken five calendar days to prepare, and they brought a page of notes to class. The kind of pressure gener-

ated by an impromptu assignment, pressure that might urge one to fall back on the comforting FPT format, was absent.

My topic choices were responses to essays from Gary Goshgarian's *Exploring Language* (1986, 4th ed., Boston: Little) illustrating the usage controversy. Here is the particular topic chosen:

Write a paper on the kind of writing training you had in high school. Did it teach you how to write? Do you think it left you poorly qualified as a writer? Cite specific reasons. (10)

The five-paragraph theme is a national phenomenon. Students from all over are proficient in the form.

Here is the student's response, edited only to remove personal names and a few spelling slips:

Writing Training

Ugh! We have to write another five paragraph essay. We must not forget to write a creative introduction or to cite a thesis with three main points; however, we must not forget the most important item, proof. And finally, we need to make sure we have that conclusion which "ties it all in." All of these listed characteristics were drilled into my head during high school whenever I was asked to write a composition. Though they may seem sarcastic, these characteristics are the basis for college writing, and I am fortunate to have been taught them along with many others in high school. In fact, I view myself as a confident writer because of the excellent writing training that I received from three of my high school instructors.

An important part of all writing is the use of effective vocabulary. My vocabulary skills were heightened in my sophomore English class by a Mrs. Ann Batey. Batey was a stout, scholarly woman with magnetic crystal blue eyes who employed effective vocabulary in her lectures every day. Consequently, she expected this same vocabulary to appear in the writing of her students. Instead of "good" she expected "excellent," and in the place of "bad" she demanded "harmful" or another synonymous word. With effective vocabulary she felt a writer could use vivid details to describe anything. Thus my writing training began with a firm vocabulary base and, an eye for vivid description.

Organization is also vital to any type of writing. This fact I learned from Carl Dunston, my senior English teacher. He also emphasized the need for correct grammar and logical support. In his distinct, often dramatic, voice he would say, "Without correct organizational and grammatical skills, you will not survive in the intellectual world!" At the time I believed this statement to be ridiculous, but now I see how the endless essays have paid off.

Finally, the use of standard English is an absolutely necessary element of good writing. I believe the best of my high-school writing training came from my Speech teacher. As my Senior English teacher had done, my speech teacher, Ella Finley, also emphasized organization. Her strongest point, however, was the need for distinct, correct, standard English. She required it from every student and expected perfection. She made me see how important it was to be an individual in the world as well as in my writing. Ms. Finley sincerely believed standard English would separate you from the crowd. Thus, my writing training ended in high school with one of the best Speech or maybe English teachers I have ever encountered.

"Tell them what you're gonna tell'em. Tell'em. And then tell them what you told 'em," was a favorite saying of Carl Dunston. So now, I will tell you that my excellent writing training is due to three high-school teachers who taught me correct English, correct organization, and effective vocabulary. These elements are necessary to complete a good writer.

Obviously this isn't an immortal essay. On the other hand, at the open-door institution where I taught earlier, I would have turned cartwheels to see my students reach this level of competence—ever. And, as mentioned before, this was the student's first full-length assignment of the quarter. So why should I question the format? Why not stop with marking the few weaknesses in diction, clarity, and reference?

I suppose it's because such papers remind me of those novelty vegetables I've sometimes encountered at farmers' markets, a square cucumber, for example. Having been forced to develop in the confines of a square container, the cuke takes on that unnatural shape. It's still a cucumber, but its potential has been robbed by the constraint of abnormal cultivation.

Following is the note I wrote on the student's paper, which, fighting every composition teacher's instinct within me, I have left basically unrevised. If it starts sounding a bit hysterical to you, please note that I was grading late at night after a long day. But I hope it begins to explain why we can't be satisfied with essays like the one above.

This is a cleverly done, well-written five-paragraph essay. My problem is, what did your reliance on this canned format keep you from saying, learning, discovering about the topic? Past, present, future; Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; the good, the bad, and the ugly—yes, there are many sets of three that seem allinclusive. But what about day and night, the four seasons, the ten commandments, Ali Baba and the forty thieves? I can see very clearly that you can write a five-paragraph theme. What I want to find out is whether you can allow a subject and line of thought to



develop into an appropriately organized and developed paper. *Grade:B*

Fortunately, this student possessed both the equanimity to accept criticism and the flexibility to change. She went on in subsequent papers to experiment with organizations more organically generated from her topics. For example, in revising the essay reproduced above, she realized that in her desire to fit the content of her paper into three neat little boxes, she had distorted the concerns of the second and third teachers. Her revision included a two-paragraph sequence examining how both the teachers had stressed organization and standard English.

Her final essay on gender-related language differences provided more evidence of skill extension. Responding to John Pfeiffer's article "Girl Talk—Boy Talk" (Goshgarian 1986, 236–42), she compared her own practices to *four* gender-associated linguistic characteristics discussed in the article: use of questions, interrupting, voice pitch, and content of storytelling. Significantly, she felt confident to continue discussions of two topics for more than one paragraph, and most impressive was her fluid cause/effect transition in

moving from the topic of use of questions to that of interrupting (she talks in questions because her boyfriend constantly interrupts whenever she tries to sustain discourse!).

When I assigned the class a paragraph evaluating their writing progress for the quarter, she turned in the following response:

Throughout high school I was taught to adhere to the form of a five-paragraph essay. My high school English teachers told me this was the correct way, the only way, to write an essay; however, in English 106 I have progressed and expanded my writing to include essays which are formed by a train of thought or perhaps ideas. I have learned that a train of ideas firmly holds an essay together and makes for an interesting, easy-to-follow essay. This new way to write an essay has been my greatest achievement since the beginning of English 106. . . .

My student had removed the training wheels from her composition-cycle and seemed to be enjoying the ride. Yet I saw no evidence that she had forgotten the skills that her rigorous training had provided her. Rather, the skills learned within the confines of the FPT gave her the confidence to explore and grow. The inside cover of Wayne C. Booth and Marshall W. Gregory's Harper & Row Rhetoric (1989, New York: Harper) quotes a cogent couplet from Pope's An Essay on Criticism which fairly well sums up the issue here: "True ease in writing comes from art, not chance, / As those move easiest who have learned to dance." It appears that all this student needed was a better

Students should be encouraged to see the FPT for what it is: a helpful but contrived exercise.

understanding of what the FPT had really taught her and how she could transfer these skills to a broadened range of writing.

I continue to believe that the FPT is a valuable teaching tool; comp teachers just need to be sure that their students don't perceive it as an end in itself. A fledgling biker does not use training wheels for the sake of it but relies on them for security while learning to balance. Perhaps an analogous perception of our method for adopting the FPT as a teaching aid is not so self-evident. Students need to understand that they practice on the FPT to learn the *principles* of effective composition, principles that can be applied to any writing

task, not to master a single format that will answer all their writing needs.

"But I warn my students repeatedly that the FPT will not serve all their writing needs," you may be saying. And I'm sure many teachers communicate this fact. However, I doubt students will take the warning to heart unless they are actually required to produce essays which, on the one hand, are less mechanically generated and formally proscribed than the FPT but which, on the other hand, continue to reflect the principles underlying the "student-model" essay.

I'm suggesting, therefore, that perhaps toward the end of their composition instruction students be encouraged to see the FPT for what it is: a helpful but contrived exercise useful in developing solid principles of composition. One excellent way is to look together at short thesis/support essays by professionals, helping students realize that the familiar functions associated with the parts of the FPT are present though the essay is not bound by a contrived format. Then for their next thesis/support essay assignment, encourage students to ask, "What *ideas* can I use to support my thesis?" Thus the principle of support has taken precedence over the form.

Another effective technique for broadening the students' organizational horizons is to spring a fundamentally different kind of topic upon them for an essay, such as a comparison/contrast or process analysis but without introducing possible organizations. After a few minutes of prewriting work, someone will almost certainly ask how such an essay can be written using *the* three middle paragraphs. The discussion that follows will help the class to understand that they must retain the essay skills while adapting the essay form.

And lest I have discouraged some of you, let me add a last point. You may have struggled and slaved to turn out students who can at least write a unified and coherent essay, thanks to the FPT.

I'd rather have students dancing ever so stiltedly than thinking that formless flailing about is artistic achievement.

"These college teachers are never satisfied with what secondary school teachers do, and we're always the scapegoat," you may be thinking (though I sincerely hope I haven't left you feeling this way). Therefore, I'll conclude by saying that if a school teacher's workload and a class's potential for improvement make it impossible to accomplish more than teaching the bare-bones FPT, so be it. I'd rather have students enter my freshman English course dancing ever so stiltedly than thinking that formless flailing about is artistic achievement.

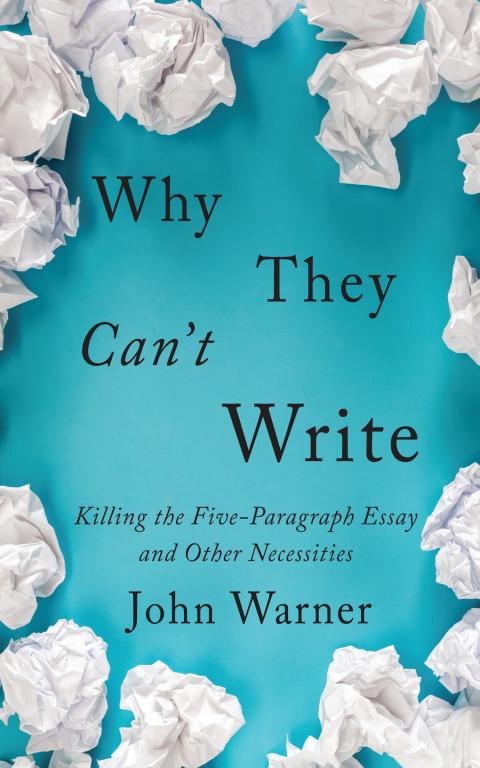
Auburn University Auburn, Alabama 36849

EJ SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO

Recipe for Rabbit Stew

Won't it always remain true of reading as of rabbit stew, that before you can have it you must first catch your reader or your rabbit? And is our much reading different from our experience with the victrola and the player piano? Won't the appreciation of the good and the beautiful rise above the plane of the mediocre and the noisy with which we begin?

E. H. Kemper McComb. January 1916. "The Anniversary of the Council," the fifth annual NCTE presidential address, *EJ* 5.1: 1–9.



Our Writing "Crisis"

There seems to be widespread agreement that when it comes to the writing skills of college students, and even recent college graduates, we are in the midst of a crisis.

I have twenty years of experience teaching writing at the college level. Despite my best efforts, people sometimes discover this fact, and when they do, they ask: *Why can't my new employees write?*

I ask my new friends what they mean when they say this. My new friends shake their heads like a fly is buzzing around their faces as they wave their hands in annoyance. What they write doesn't make sense! I can't even understand the sentences, let alone the message! I have to redo everything! And why do they keep saying "plethora"?

We're often talking about young people of significant promise, graduates of highly selective universities. Some of them even have postgraduate degrees in law or business. They are supposed to be better than whatever it is they are.

"Why do you think they can't write?" I ask.

They guess that the current generation is somehow defective—coddled snowflakes who have never been properly challenged.

"So, lack of rigor," I say.

Exactly!

"It's not lack of rigor," I say. At least it's not lack of rigor in the ways they're thinking about the term. They look doubtful, but for the moment they are willing to defer to my alleged expertise.

So, it's the cell phones . . . that makes sense. We should get a time machine and destroy the damn things.

Sometimes they say this while simultaneously looking at their phones.

"It's not the cell phones, either," I say.

Their faces now look fully skeptical, side-eye city. They're wondering if, despite my credentials—not just the many years in the college writing classroom, but also a parallel career as a writer and editor—I might not know what I'm talking about. Maybe *I'm* the problem, a bad teacher who won't hold students accountable.

I am partly to blame, no doubt, but the fault isn't in bad students or bad teachers. I turn to my new friends, wondering if they're ready for the truth. Willing to give me one more chance to prove I'm not a lost cause, they ask one more time.

What is it then?

"They're doing exactly what we've trained them to do; that's the problem."

The Danger of Training Wheels

I was upset one recent morning after clicking a Facebook link and seeing that generations of American children were taught, incorrectly, how to ride a bike.

I am one of them.

At first the training wheels were a gift, allowing me to range freely throughout the neighborhood and even ride my red-, white-, and blue-streamered Schwinn Pixie in the 1976 bicentennial Fourth of July parade. I was six that summer, which is plenty old enough to ride without training wheels, but why bother to learn how to ride a bike without training wheels when the training wheels don't actually keep you from doing what you want to do anyway?

As I turned seven and headed toward eight, though, things started to change. For one, I became the last kid still tooling around with training wheels, a juicy target for bullies. For another, I had set my eye on a red Schwinn Stingray with a banana

seat, but I knew the bike's cool factor would drop considerably with the addition of training wheels.

When I show my students pictures of the Stingray, they have a hard time believing it was once an object of deep desire. The heart wants what it wants, though, and I wanted a Stingray. So, finally needing to learn to ride without training wheels, I engaged in the time-honored tradition of pedaling away while my father ran alongside, holding me steady until I was off on my own.

In theory, it was the training wheels that allowed me to ride freely without help not long after my father released his grip and yelled at me to "pedal, pedal." In reality, we've learned over the intervening years that those training wheels were far more hindrance than help when it came to learning to ride a bike.

The reason? Training wheels actually prevent young riders from practicing the most important skill for riding a bike: balance. For sure, training wheels make it safer for kids who don't know how to ride a bike, but when it comes time to ride for real, they haven't spent quality, focused time on that much more essential skill.1

Now, just about every expert recommends that kids as young as two start on "balance bikes," pedal-less bikes where the child's feet touch the ground and they propel themselves like they're walking or running. The focus from the beginning is on the key underlying skill that allows for the development of the bigger, more complicated, more important skill.

When it comes to teaching writing, we've been doing something similar, giving students training wheels that actively work against their ability to learn how to write.

The worst of those training wheels is the five-paragraph essay.

If you do not know the form, ask the closest school-aged child or, indeed, anyone who has been through school in the past twenty or so years:

- I. Paragraph of introduction ending in a thesis statement that previews the body paragraphs.
- 2-4. Body paragraphs of evidence supporting the thesis.
- 5. Conclusion that restates the thesis, almost always starting with, "In conclusion."

You might be thinking that this sounds like good, sound writing. Organized, focused, purposeful. After all, writing has rules, doesn't it? You've got to know the rules in order to break them. I have said this very thing in my teaching career, but I was wrong to say it—because it isn't helpful when it comes to *learning* how to write.

Students arrive in my college first-year writing class well familiar with what they've been told are the rules of good writing, most of which come in the form of prohibitions:

Never use "I" in a sentence.

Never use contractions.

No fewer than three and no more than five sentences per paragraph.

No fewer than five and no more than nine words per sentence.

And on and on . . . When I ask students what they've been told about writing, they can list rule after rule. When I ask them where these rules come from, why these rules are rules, they shrug.

Because the teacher said so.

Sitting before me in their first-year college writing class, my students are ready to get their next set of rules, prepped for the authority figure to describe the circumference and height of the hoop I would like them to jump through, worried because this is college and I may also set the hoop on fire. They're not exactly enthusiastic about it—you should see their "ugh" faces when I even say the words "five-paragraph essay"—but instead of giv-

ing them more rules, I introduce them to the skill that is the writing equivalent of balance when it comes to riding a bicycle.

Choice.

To write is to make choices, word by word, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph. Writers choose what they want to write about, whom they want to write to, and why they're writing.

For example, I am writing this book because my many years of teaching writing have convinced me that we have taken a wrong turn in our collective approach to teaching writing and we show few signs of getting back on a better path. This is my subject.

With this book I want to speak to policy makers, educators, parents of school-aged children, and even students themselves, so we can engage in conversation and collaboration that will meet the needs of our culture and communities. This is my audience.

I am writing this book because writing and teaching writing have been the focus of my day-to-day work for a long time. I'm convinced I have some worthwhile things to say that deserve to be heard and that no one else is saying on a broad scale.² Writing a book is a lousy business proposition, and yet I've done it anyway because I had to. This is my purpose.

Unfortunately, the way our nation's schoolchildren are taught—and, more importantly, the way their learning is assessed—gives them little experience with making choices in the context of writing. These distortions of what it means to write offer students even less opportunity to write about things that matter to them or to engage with their own passions.

Instead, much of the writing students are asked to do in school is not writing so much as an imitation of writing, creating an artifact resembling writing which is not, in fact, the product of a robust, flexible writing process.

This is not the fault of teachers, or parents, or students, but instead is a consequence of a system put into place bit by bit without sufficient thought as to the larger implications. It is our American enthusiasm for believing in solutions that has caused us to lose sight of the real problems. Much of the work to address the achievement gaps among different categories of students is well-meaning, but it has been terribly misguided.

By trying to guide students toward "proficiency" or "competency," we wind up providing them with rules and strictures that cut students off from the most important and meaningful aspects of writing. In order to be judged "proficient," students are coached to create imitations that pass muster on a test a grader may take all of three minutes to read, or even worse, a test that's assessed by a computer algorithm on the lookout for key words and phrases.

The writing need not be accurate or well argued, and it definitely doesn't need to be interesting; it merely needs to seem like something that *could be* accurate and well argued if we actually cared enough to read it closely. We are asking students to write Potemkin essays, fakes designed to pass surface-level muster that are revealed as hollow facades when inspected more closely. Students are more aware of this than anyone else and it colors their attitudes toward writing.

Acting Like an Actor

Imagine an acting school where rather than helping students develop the individual skills of building a performance, students are instead required to learn a series of impressions of genuine actors performing a role. De Niro 101 would cover Travis Bickle and the father in *Meet the Parents*, for example. Meryl Streep's various performances would be 400-level, no doubt. Our aspiring actors would be graded on 45-second snippet imitations, judged on how accurate they are to the standard set in the original performance.

But what happens when our young thespians are tasked with a role they haven't learned how to mimic, a performance that doesn't yet exist?

This is how we teach students to write. Don't be a writer, we tell them, just do some things that make it look like you know how to write. And when in doubt, at least sound smart by using words like *ubiquitous* and *plethora*. If you want to really show off, try myriad.

And when students wind up in college in classes like mine and I tell them the game has changed, that in fact it isn't a game at all, students feel like someone has played a cruel trick. Each successive cohort seems less prepared for the challenges of my college-writing class than the last, not because they're getting less intelligent, or don't want to learn, or have been warped by an "everyone-gets-a-trophy" culture, but because they have been incentivized to create imitations rather than the genuine article.

When confronted with a writing assignment, this is how they respond, larded with rules from origins unknown, yet rules that must be important because a teacher who is tasked with preparing them for a high-stakes standardized assessment has told them so.

For example, on the first day of class I ask students to write in response to two questions: (1) Who are you as a writer? and (2) Who do you want to be as a writer? I am asking them to reflect on their experiences, to share what those experiences with writing mean to them, and to consider what role writing might play in their futures.

Ninety percent of the responses focus on how good students think they are at writing. Almost no one talks about what they want to say, the types of writing they're interested in, or what kind of writing they may have to do in the future. They do not recall a favorite example of their writing. Very few express ever having enjoyed any act of writing. Often, it seems like they barely understand the questions, because they have no selfconcept of themselves as writers. They are "students," and the worth of a student does not come from the self but from the grades assigned by a teacher.

These are voting-age adults who are old enough to go to war, and when asked about writing they have almost nothing to say. For the most part, even though I have taught exclusively at selective (or better) institutions, students express little confidence in their own abilities. Even those who got A's in high school often say they doubt they're good writers, knowing the work they've been producing is something of a confidence game, good enough to fool at a surface level, but not genuinely meaningful, most significantly to themselves.

This distresses me. We say education is meant to turn students into critical thinkers, to help them prepare for the demands of a dynamic and changing workplace. School is to make students "college- and career-ready." We are not doing this when it comes to teaching writing. We are training students to pass standardized assessments, not teaching them how to write.

The good news is we have broad agreement that something must be done, that students are falling increasingly behind whatever it is they're supposed to be ahead of. Unfortunately, most of what we hear from the education reform front—Standards! Accountability! Grit! Computery Things!—will only exacerbate the problems we're already facing because they address surface-level issues.

Doubling down on what's already failing is not a solution. We need a thorough rethink, starting with a couple of shibboleths that seem hard to shake when it comes to writing.

3

The Five-Paragraph Essay

The five-paragraph essay is more avatar than direct cause of what ails us. Simply banning its use would have little effect by itself. The ubiquity of the five-paragraph essay is primarily a sign of bad incentives and dysfunctional processes.

The barriers standing in the way to better student writing are systemic. They are baked into the culture of how we approach schooling in the United States. Most of our problems are rooted in a combination of neglect for the big-picture conditions that put students in a position to succeed, and well-meaning quests for solutions that nonetheless fail to address those core problems.

It is as though we are in a leaky boat and 100 percent of our attention has been focused on bailing faster, rather than trying to plug the hole that is letting all the water in. For so long we've been focused on helping students "achieve" that we've lost sight of what this achievement might mean. In teaching writing, this has left our practices largely divorced from the kinds of experiences that help students develop their writing practices.

By itself, the five-paragraph essay isn't necessarily a problem. The form or template appears neutral, an empty vessel into which content can be poured. The five-paragraph essay originally rose out of notions of "correctness," as opposed to classical rhetorical purpose or rhetorical forms, and it has been linked to the Harvard entrance examinations of the late nineteenth century. Even at its inception, the five-paragraph essay was a tool of convenience and standardization.¹

But there is a difference between an essay with five paragraphs and the "five-paragraph essay."

If writing is like exercise, the five-paragraph essay is like one of those ab belt doohickeys that claim to electroshock your core into a six-pack, so you can avoid doing all those annoying sit-ups.

The five-paragraph essay is an artificial construct, a way to contain and control variables and keep students from wandering too far off track. All they need are the ideas to fill in the blanks. It is very rare to see a five-paragraph essay in the wild; one finds them only in the captivity of the classroom.

This is because writers working with real audiences and real stakes understand that form and content are inseparable. As Kim Zarins, an associate professor at Sacramento State University, says, we need to encourage "students to give their essays the right shape for the thought that each student has."²

In reality, every piece of writing is a custom job, not a modular home, and by steering students toward the five-paragraph essay we are denying them the chance to practice real writing by confronting the choices writers must navigate. The five-paragraph essay as employed does not allow students to struggle with the important skills underlying effective writing the same way training wheels don't allow nascent bike riders to practice balance.

The five-paragraph essay has taken root for explicable reasons, even if they are not good ones. They are easy to teach for the purposes of passing standardized assessments. The standardization makes them easier to assign and grade for teachers who are burdened with too many students. If the alternative is no writing at all, surely the five-paragraph essay is better.

And perhaps it is. Many of the form's proponents claim that once students master these basics they can then "play around with them," but we have little evidence that this happens. It certainly isn't in evidence in the first-year college students I work with.

The five-paragraph essay is a shortcut, a compromise enacted so we can efficiently compare students to each other as we drive them toward proficiency or competency.

But proficiency and competency is too low a bar, and efficiency as a value is inconsistent with learning. To make progress we have to pursue excellence and recognize that with learning, the journey is the destination itself, and sometimes that journey may not follow the shortest route.

In the process of writing this book, I've realized that most of what I "know" about teaching writing has come about through my own experimentation and exploration. I now recognize what a gift it has been to be allowed to learn in this way. Essentially, I examine what's happening in a class, identify a particular problem or shortcoming, consider the evidence, and formulate a response. Once I've developed that response, I investigate the scholarship of others and find out that 95 percent of the time someone else has already articulated something similar.

The same pattern has repeated over and over, both in my teaching and my writing: for the learning to be meaningful I must "discover" something for myself that many other people already "know."

This is my practice.

This is identical to the process through which students will become confident and skillful writers. Their identities must transcend being just students in search of grades. During the process of self-invention, students will come to know and understand the world and their place within it.

I can declare some general truism about what makes a good piece of writing, but until students discover this truism on their own, often by doing the opposite and seeing the negative result, it tends to have little currency or impact. Over time, this approach has evolved into a personal pedagogy involving much less direct instruction and many more (sometimes loosely) structured situations to help students "experience" writing, reflect on what's happened, and use what's been learned from that reflection next time around.

This pedagogy has the benefit of being true to how writing works in the world beyond school, but the structure and demands of school often make it hard to resist the lure of aiming for proficiency and smoothing the path toward that goal. Our incentives align against teaching students to write (and think), and instead favor a performance of proficiency.

Prohibitions may prevent disaster, but they also may close off the possibility of great discovery.

If we take away the five-paragraph essay and all the baggage it carries, we'll have to make something new, something that reflects the true challenges of writing.

But before we even get to the specifics of how we can help students explore their writing practices, we must first confront some of the systemic problems that stand in our way.



The III Effects of the Five Paragraph Theme

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The Ill Effects of the Five Paragraph Theme

KIMBERLY WESLEY

n her 1973 poem, "A Work of Artifice," Marge Piercy considers the life of a bonsai tree that "could have grown eighty feet tall / on the side of a mountain" (3-4) but is, instead, "carefully pruned" to "nine inches high" (7-8). The gardener, who controls the growth of the tree, "croons / . . . how lucky, little tree, / to have a pot to grow in" (11–16). Piercy's extended metaphor satirically compares the tree to a woman, the gardener to a representative of patriarchal society, and the pot to curlers, bound feet, and other methods by which society systematically judges and controls women. Had Piercy been alluding to the teaching of high

school composition, she might have drawn parallels between the bonsai tree and the student writer, the gardener and the English teacher, the pot and the lock-step five paragraph theme (FPT). It is my contention that teachers of the five paragraph theme, like the representatives of patriarchal society, have become complacent in their acceptance of a tool that purports to nurture but, in fact, stunts the growth of human minds.

In the last ten years, English Journal has published numerous articles on composition instruction, but only two specifically address the five paragraph theme. In "Breaking the Five Paragraph Theme Barrier," university professor Thomas Nunnally is critical of students' reliance on the FPT, which he says has become a "national phenomenon," but concludes that if "a class's potential for improvement makes it impossible to accomplish more than teaching the barebones FPT, so be it" (68, 71). This kind of statement, which reinforces the status quo of high school composition instruction, is dangerous. In "Articulation and Student Voices," D. R. Randsell and Gregory Glau report findings from a survey of first-year college composition students who recommend that their high school English teachers quit "driving the 5-paragraph thing

into our brains" and that "there must be more [types of essays] taught" (19).

As a teacher of English at a private secondary school, I have reflected critically on the five paragraph theme and the way in which this organizational format has come to be the standard for high school essay assignments. This past year I realized just how entrenched the FPT is in student minds. When a senior girl assigned to write a comparative analysis of two novels in seven-to-nine pages asked anxiously, "But how can I fit seven pages into five paragraphs?" a red flag went up. In my student's mind, the only kind of writing considered "good," the only kind of essay that would earn an "A" from the teacher, *must* have a thesis with exactly three points, no more, no less. As my student's query shocked me into realizing that one organizational format was being adopted wholesale by students, it also prompted me to reflect on how I design assignments and what I consider to be genuine growth in student writing. Do I consider a master of the five paragraph form a proficient writer, prepared for the demands of college? How has my past reliance on the FPT shaped my students' and my own views of writing? Has all my concern about the development of critical thinking been a lot of lip service? In this article, I examine the effects of the FPT on student learning and the conflict between my enforcement of the five paragraph theme and my conviction that writing is a rhetorical process.

Thomas Nunnally's definition of the five paragraph theme is useful here to establish common ground:

As it is usually taught, the FPT requires (1) an introductory paragraph moving from a generality to an explicit thesis statement and announcement of three points in support of that thesis, (2) three middle paragraphs, each of which begins with a topic sentence restating one of the major ideas supporting the thesis and then develops the topic sentence (with a minimum of three sentences in most models), and (3) a concluding paragraph restating the thesis and points. (67)

In favor of this format, Nunnally points out that "the explicitness of the FPT—the discreteness of its parts and their functions—makes it practical to teach as well as eminently gradable" (68)—perhaps one of the reasons the FPT has become a "national phenomenon." On the other hand, Nunnally acknowledges the limitations of the form for anyone beyond Basic Writing at the college level, saying that the internalization of the FPT encourages writers to produce "bland but planned essays" (69). Nunnally even goes so far as to say that one student's "desire to fit the content of her paper into three neat little boxes" had "distorted" the purpose of the essay (70). By analyzing student essays I, too, find that the rigidity of the five paragraph theme actually dissuades students from practicing the rhetorical analysis necessary for them to become critical thinkers.

In my analysis of student texts, I have examined how the thesis statements of a particular five paragraph theme assignment reflect or do not reflect critical thought. For this article, I asked senior English students to do a comparative analysis of three texts—The Odyssey, The Mayor of Casterbridge, and Dracula—and to construct a controversial thesis statement that fits the three-pronged format (a daunting task!). My suggestion to them was to find one shared character trait and examine its causes or effects in each of the three books. What many of them came up with did satisfy the requirements of the three-pronged thesis. The following is one example: "In all three books, protagonists suffer from a permanent character flaw of excessive pride which causes them to be separated from loved ones, closed to new ideas, and absorbed in self-pity." Although

this thesis follows the FPT format, it produces little analytical development within the body of the essay. The student spends the majority of each paragraph proving merely that the characters are, for example, separated from loved ones, rather than examining how pride causes them to become this way or why some consider a protagonist's separation from family a detriment to his/her status as a hero. The student touches on a more interesting train of thought at one point in the paper, suggesting that characters' insecurities ironically cause them to behave in a proud and defensive manner. The student does not expand on this idea, however, because it does not fit within the neat, prescribed formula of her thesis, which focuses only on the effects and not the causes of pride. Furthermore, had the student tried to develop this idea as her thesis, she may have found that insecurities cause only some characters to behave proudly. Moreover, she may have had a difficult time producing three distinct but equal causes of proud behavior. The result of my analysis of this essay (a valiant effort by my student) suggests to me that the thesis requirement of three separate but equal points hinders my student's thought process as she writes.

When a senior girl assigned to write a comparative analysis of two novels in seven-to-nine pages asked anxiously, "But how can I fit seven pages into five paragraphs?" a red flag went up.

Other student writing samples carry seeds of critical thought that are never allowed to grow. In one written response to the same assignment, a student offers a vague thesis with book titles as points: "In *The Odyssey, The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and *Dracula*, the role of women within the novels is similar." Here the three-pronged thesis leads the student into a restatement of plot. Early in the introduction, however, the student says something that

she does not explore anywhere else in the paper: "Each female protagonist shows a sense of strength which was not apparent in the presence of the men." Inherent in this statement is a feminist critique. Had the student developed this line of thought in prewriting she may have been able to explore her own feelings as a woman in a male-dominated society and could have looked more deeply into the workings of patriarchy in each of the three books. She may not, however, have been able to divide her strong, central idea into three discrete points. Here again, the FPT's emphasis on organization over content squelches complex ideas that do not fit neatly into three boxes. Students' mere awareness that they must mold a topic to the FPT style inhibits their learning.

By doing textual analysis of student work, I have come to realize that my primary objection to the five paragraph theme is its tendency to stunt students' critical thinking abilities. Moreover, I have found the essays that best fulfill format requirements often turn out to be neatly packaged but intellectually vapid. A 1992 University of Hawaii study of student responses to writing assignments, including the FPT, reports similar findings:

In structuring their arguments, [student writers] all wanted to exceed formulaic limits, but their teacher would allow no deviation. Clearly, whatever their instructor's intentions, these students were discovering thoughts and feelings through composing. And their discovery experiences proved incompatible with the prescribed essay structure. So the students left the writing experience with considerable frustration. (Marsella et al. 180)

Marsella et al. also conclude that students only challenge their own beliefs when "their instructional contexts allow, even encourage, risk-taking" (185). As a teacher assuming a rigid, artificial writing format for my students, I have been limiting their ability to take intellectual risks and discouraging the kind of learning that I believe only writing allows them to do.

Having recognized my error in inculcating students with the FPT, my next question as a composition teacher is this: How do I create writing assignments that encourage risk-taking and mental growth without letting good organizational strategies go by the wayside? The answer is not, of course, to turn to alternative methods of organization that presume to fit every writing situation in the academy. These methods have just as much potential to become "lock-step" as does the five paragraph theme. Rather, the answer is to revisit the pedagogical the-

ory with which I first embarked, starry-eyed, on teaching: that every writing assignment poses a unique rhetorical problem. Viewed as such, any writing assignment requires that writers first determine their purpose and audience. Writers must question themselves as follows: 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 (and of ourselves in creating assignments). With a set "discourse" of writing (e.g., character analysis), a set topic (e.g., Iago),

> I have come to realize that my primary objection to the five paragraph theme is its tendency to stunt students' critical thinking abilities.

a set audience (e.g., the teacher), and a set organizational format (e.g., the five paragraph theme), students have to do very little rhetorical analysis and, as a result, rarely understand the purpose of their papers. As Richard Larson says in his 1992 critique of classes of discourse, high school English teachers too often ask students "to engage in what British educators refer to as a 'dummy run': an activity that has no purpose with identified readers but is designed to display the writer's ability to produce a frozen form" (32). However, if I, as an English teacher, give paper assignments that offer choices of purposes, topics, and audiences, I can prompt students to begin thinking rhetorically. After students have submitted a justification of their choices and answered the rhetorical questions listed above, we can talk as a class about effective methods of organization for sample rhetorical situations.

It is important to acknowledge here to those instructors who are loath to surrender the "practical to teach as well as eminently gradable" FPT (Nunnally 68) that I am not suggesting that we abandon the principles of unity, coherence, and development that the five paragraph theme purports to teach. Rather, I suggest that we continue to teach the essay as a rhetorical form with three units—an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. By treating each of these parts as a rhetorical unit instead of a set number of paragraphs, we can approach student texts as records of their rhetorical problem-solving ability. It is vital that we teach students the purposes that each unit in an essay can serve. The introductory unit of the essay (which may be more than one paragraph, depending on the scope of the rhetorical problem) serves to grab the reader's attention, establish common ground, and define the problem and perhaps the process undertaken to solve that problem. The thesis (which most likely will occur either at the beginning or the end of the introductory unit—there are good models of both) states the writer's focus or position on the problem (without sub-points because as seen in the above discussion—a rigid number of sub-points can inhibit student thought). The body unit of the essay should be an unspecified number of paragraphs, with each paragraph serving one of a variety of purposes: to define terms, to review the literature, to present evidence in favor of the thesis, to analyze that evidence, and to accommodate and/or refute opposing views. Finally, the concluding unit of the essay should serve to reassert the writer's position, to remind the reader of the importance to him/her of the problem at hand, and to pose questions on the issue that could be addressed by other writers. To help students attain an understanding of the purposes of these rhetorical units and make choices among them, we should analyze and critique papers written by college students in various discourses, articles written by journalists, and essays written by high school students. As Nunnally mentions in his article, doing rhetorical analysis of contemporary, professionally-written essays is a good way of giving students choices beyond the FPT (71). Moreover, critiquing these essays effectively helps students to see themselves as critical readers and to understand that the criteria for good writing are subjective and contextual.

In proposing that high school English teachers restructure their writing assignments, I am advocating a view of writing as a rhetorical process. If we accept this view, we cannot possibly continue assigning the five paragraph essay unless we simultaneously teach our students to critique it. Instead of teaching students to memorize a format and then manipulate every teacher-given topic to fit that format, we should ask students to reflect on what format best enables them to voice their concerns and meet the needs of their audience. In doing so, we encourage students to become communicators. If we do any less, we force students to continue as copiers of memorized form, denying them the freedom to think for themselves.

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My Five-Paragraph-Theme Theme

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Peter Elbow is Professor of English Emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where he directed the writing program. His books include *Writing with-out Teachers*; *Writing with Power*; *What Is English?* and *Everyone Can Write: Essays toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing* (which was given the James Britton Award by the Conference on English Education in 2000). In 1986 he received CCCC's Richard Braddock Award for "The Shifting Relationships between Speech and Writing."

My Five-Paragraph-Theme Theme

Ed White

Since the beginning of time, some college teachers have mocked the five-paragraph theme. But I intend to show that they have been mistaken. There are three reasons why I always write five-paragraph themes. First, it gives me an organizational scheme: an introduction (like this one) setting out three subtopics, three paragraphs for my three subtopics, and a concluding paragraph reminding you what I have said, in case you weren't paying attention. Second, it focuses my topic, so I don't just go on and on when I don't have anything much to say. Three and only three subtopics force me to think in a limited way. And third, it lets me write pretty much the same essay on anything at all. So I do pretty well on essay tests. A lot of teachers actually like the five-paragraph theme as much as I do.

The first reason I always write five-paragraph themes is that it gives me an organizational scheme. It doesn't matter what the subject is, since there are three parts to everything you can think of. If you can't think of more than two, you just have to think harder or come up with something that might fit. An

example will often work, like the three causes of the Civil War or abortion or reasons why the ridiculous twenty-one-year-old limit for drinking alcohol should be abolished. A worse problem is when you wind up with more than three subtopics, since sometimes you want to talk about all of them. But you can't. You have to pick the best three. That keeps you from thinking too much, which is a great time saver, especially on an essay test.

The second reason for the five-paragraph theme is that it makes you focus on a single topic. Some people start writing on the usual topic, like TV commercials, and they wind up all over the place, talking about where TV came from or capitalism or health foods or whatever. But with only five paragraphs and one topic you're not tempted to get beyond your original idea, like commercials are a good source of information about products. You give your three examples, and zap! you're done. This is another way the five-paragraph theme keeps you from thinking too much.

The last reason to write this way is the most important. Once you have it down, you can use it for practically anything. Does God exist? Well, you can say yes and give three reasons, or no and give three different reasons. It doesn't really matter. You're sure to get a good grade whatever you pick to put into the formula. And that's the real reason for education, to get those good grades without thinking too much and using up too much time.

So I've given you three reasons why I always write a five-paragraph theme and why I'll keep doing so in college. It gives me an organizational scheme that looks like an essay, it limits my focus to one topic and three subtopics so I don't wander about thinking irrelevant thoughts, and it will be useful for whatever writing I do in any subject. I don't know why some teachers seem to dislike it so much. They must have a different idea about education than I do.

The "student" Ed White is better known as Edward M. White, a visiting professor of English at the University of Arizona and the author or editor of thirteen books on the teaching and assessing of writing. He was one of almost a thousand scorers of the English language and composition Advanced Placement examination in June 2007, reading 280,000 tests written by high school students.

The Fourth Generation

Kristen Kennedy

Things have changed much and, strangely, so little since I completed my PhD in 1997. No doubt my memory of the way things were softens with time and



Think five. Photo by Matt McClain/Washington Post/Getty

The five-paragraph fetish

Writing essays by a formula was meant to be a step on the way. Now it's the stifling goal for student and scholar alike

David Labaree

Schools and colleges in the United States are adept at teaching students how to write by the numbers. The idea is to make writing easy by eliminating the messy part — making meaning — and focusing effort on reproducing a formal structure. As a result, the act of writing turns from moulding a lump of clay into a unique form to filling a set of jars that are already fired. Not only are the jars unyielding to the touch, but even their number and order are fixed. There are five of them, which, according to the recipe, need to be filled in precise order. Don't stir. Repeat.

So let's explore the form and function of this model of writing, considering both the functions it serves and the damage it does. I trace its roots to a series of formalisms

that dominate US education at all levels. The foundation is the five-paragraph essay, a form that is chillingly familiar to anyone who has attended high school in the US. In college, the model expands into the five-section research paper. Then in graduate school comes the five-chapter doctoral dissertation. Same jars, same order. By the time the doctoral student becomes a professor, the pattern is set. The Rule of Five is thoroughly fixed in muscle memory, and the scholar is on track to produce a string of journal articles that follow from it. Then it's time to pass the model on to the next generation. The cycle continues.

Edward M White is one participant in the cycle who decided to fight back. It was the summer of 2007, and he was on the plane home from an ordeal that would have crushed a man with a less robust constitution. An English professor, he had been grading hundreds of five-paragraph essays drawn from the 280,000 that had been submitted that June as part of the Advanced Placement Test in English language and composition. In revenge, he wrote his own five-paragraph essay about the five-paragraph essay, whose fourth paragraph reads:

The last reason to write this way is the most important. Once you have it down, you can use it for practically anything. Does God exist? Well you can say yes and give three reasons, or no and give three different reasons. It doesn't really matter. You're sure to get a good grade whatever you pick to put into the formula. And that's the real reason for education, to get those good grades without thinking too much and using up too much time.

White's essay eseq=1#page_scan_tab_contents> – 'My Five-Paragraph-Theme Theme' – became an instant classic. True to the form, he lays out the whole story in his opening paragraph:

Since the beginning of time, some college teachers have mocked the five-paragraph theme. But I intend to show that they have been mistaken. There are three reasons why I always write five-paragraph themes. First, it gives me an organisational scheme: an introduction (like this one) setting out three subtopics, three paragraphs for my three subtopics, and a concluding paragraph reminding you what I have said, in case you weren't paying attention. Second, it focuses my topic, so I don't just go on and on when I don't have anything much to say. Three and only three subtopics force me to think in a limited way. And third, it lets me write pretty much the same essay on anything at all. So I do pretty well on essay tests. A lot of teachers actually like the five-paragraph theme as much as I do.

Note the classic elements of the model. The focus on form: content is optional. The comfortingly repetitive structure: here's what I'm going to say, here I am saying it, and here's what I just said. The utility for everyone involved: expectations are so clear and so low that every writer can meet them, which means that both teachers and students can succeed without breaking a sweat - a win-win situation if ever there was one. The

only thing missing is meaning.

For students who need a little more structure in dealing with the middle three paragraphs that make up what instructors call the 'body' of the essay, some helpful tips are available – all couched in the same generic form that could be applicable to anything. According to one online document by a high-school English teacher:

The first paragraph of the body should contain the strongest argument, most significant example, cleverest illustration, or an obvious beginning point. The first sentence of this paragraph should include the 'reverse hook' which ties in with the transitional hook at the end of the introductory paragraph. The topic for this paragraph should be in the first or second sentence. This topic should relate to the thesis statement in the introductory paragraph. The last sentence in this paragraph should include a transitional hook to tie into the second paragraph of the body.

You probably won't be surprised that the second paragraph 'should contain the second strongest argument, second most significant example, second cleverest illustration, or obvious follow-up to the first paragraph...' And that the third paragraph 'should contain the third strongest argument...' Well, you get the picture.

So where does the fetish for five come from? In part, it arises from the nature of sentences. Language conveys meaning by organising words into an order governed by rules. These rules are what allows the listener to understand the relationship between these words in the way intended by the speaker. The core unit of conveying meaning via language is the sentence, and the rules that define the structure of the sentence are its syntax. By its nature, syntax – like the five-paragraph essay – is all form and no content. Its entire utility derives from the fact that a particular syntactical structure can be used to convey an infinite number of meanings.

Form, therefore, is not just a crutch for beginners to use in trying to learn how to write; it's also the central tool of writers who are experts at their craft. In his lovely book *How to Write a Sentence: And How to Read One* (2011), Stanley Fish makes the point that, in writing, form comes before content:

The conventional wisdom is that content comes first – 'you have to write about *something*' is the usual commonplace – but if what you want to do is learn how to compose sentences, content must take a backseat to the mastery of the forms without which you can't say anything in the first place.

Think of all the syntactical forms that exist to define different kinds of relationships between words in the service of making a point. For example:

If, then		
Some argue, but	I argue	
On the one hand.	: but on the other hand.	

Consider key words that signal a particular kind of relationship between words, ideas and sentences:

Addition: also, moreover Elaboration: in short, that is Example: for instance, after all

Cause and effect: accordingly, since

Comparison: likewise, along the same lines

Contrast: although, but

Concession: admittedly, granted Conclusion: as a result, therefore

The last set of examples comes from *They Say*, *I Say* (2006) by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, which seeks to explain the rhetorical 'moves that matter in academic writing'. In the appendix, they list a set of syntactical templates that extend over 15 pages. Graduate students in my class on writing find these templates very useful.

The point is that learning to write is extraordinarily difficult, and teaching people how to write is just as hard. Writers need to figure out what they want to say, put it into a series of sentences whose syntax conveys this meaning, arrange those sentences into paragraphs whose syntax carries the idea forward, and organise paragraphs into a structure that captures the argument as a whole. That's not easy. It's also not elementary. Fish distils the message into a single paradoxical commandment for writers: 'You shall tie yourself to forms and the forms shall set you free.' The five-paragraph essay format is an effort to provide a framework for accomplishing all this.

The ability to produce a five-paragraph essay will be at the expense of learning to write persuasive arguments

The issue is this: as so often happens in subjects that are taught in school, the template designed as a means toward attaining some important end turns into an end in itself. As a consequence, form trumps meaning. For example, elementary-school students learn to divide a number by a fraction using this algorithm: invert and multiply. To divide by ½, you multiply the number by two. This gives you the right answer, but it deflects you from understanding why you might want to divide by a fraction in the first place (eg, to find out how many half-pound bags of flour you could get from a 10-pound container) and why the resulting number is always larger than the original.

Something similar happens with the five-paragraph essay. The form becomes the product. Teachers teach the format as a tool; students use the tool to create five paragraphs that reflect the tool; teachers grade the papers on their degree of alignment with the tool. The form helps students to reproduce the form and get graded on this form. Content, meaning, style, originality and other such values are extraneous — nice but not necessary.

This is a variation of Goodhart's Law, which says: 'When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure.' For example, if test scores become the way to measure student and teacher success, then both parties will work to maximise these scores at the expense of acquiring the underlying skills that these scores are supposed to measure. Assess students on their ability to produce the form of a five-paragraph essay and they will do so, at the expense of learning to write persuasive arguments. The key distinction here is between form and formalism. A form is useful and necessary as a means for achieving a valued outcome. But when form *becomes* the valued outcome, then it has turned into formalism.

An extreme example of this phenomenon has emerged in the growing field of machine-graded essays. Having experts grade large numbers of papers, such as for the advanced-placement composition exercise that White took part in, is extremely labour-intensive and expensive, not to say mind-numbing. So the Educational Testing Service (ETS) and other companies have come up with automated systems that can take over this function by deploying a series of algorithms that purportedly define good writing.

The problem, of course, is that these systems are better at identifying the formal characteristics of these essays than at discerning their meaning. To demonstrate this Les Perelman, along with Louis Sobel, Milo Beckman, and Damien Jiang, invented a Babel Generator that is capable of producing essays from any three keywords, and of gaining a perfect score on the ETS assessment. They did this by gearing the generator to the ETS algorithms, which allows them to produce the desired measure without all that messy stuff about creating logical and compelling arguments. Here's the first paragraph of a Babel Generator essay defined by three keywords: classroom, pedagogy, and inequality:

Classroom on the contradiction has not, and no doubt never will be aberrant. Pedagogy is the most fundamental trope of mankind; some with perjury and others on amanuenses. A howling classroom lies in the search for theory of knowledge together with the study of philosophy. Pedagogy is Libertarian due to its all of the concessions by retorts.

As you can see, the algorithm rewards big words and long sentences rather than meaning. (Try https://babel-generator.herokuapp.com/ it yourself.)

f course, students still need to provide some semblance of subject matter for their essays. But there are plenty of handy resources available to produce relevant content on demand. When I was in school, the key resource for students who needed to write an essay on some topic or other was the encyclopaedia. In my family, it was the *World Book Encyclopedia*, which offered glossy pages and ample illustrations, and which used fewer big words than the canonical but stuffy *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Look up the topic, read a short summary piece, and then crib it for your paper. In the 1950s and '60s in the US, encyclopaedia salesmen sold these pricey

products door-to-door, and their pitch was compelling: 'Do you want your kids to have a good life? Then they need to succeed in school. And the encyclopaedia is the key to school success, the added element that will move your children ahead of their peers.' It worked. Owning an encyclopaedia (26 volumes, \$500) became the badge of the middle-class family — to the point where mid-century sociologists used encyclopaedia ownership as a key criterion for coding subjects as middle class.

The multivolume encyclopaedia has receded into history; the last hard-copy *Britannica* was published in 2010. Now students use Google as their primary 'research' tool, and the top search result for most topics tends to be Wikipedia. The latter serves the same function for students — capsulised and bowdlerised content ready for insertion into the five-paragraph essay. Plug and play. The perfect tool for gaming the system of producing papers for school.

It is possible to teach students how to write as a way to make meaning rather than fill pots. The problem is that it's much more difficult for both student and teacher. For students, it takes a lot longer to get better at writing this way, and the path to improvement is littered with the discouraging wreckage of dysfunctional sentences and incoherent arguments. And for teachers, the difficulty of teaching the skill this way undermines their sense of professional competence. In addition, grading papers for meaning takes a lot more time and involves a lot more judgment than grading for form – which, after all, can be done by a computer.

Be clear, be concise, be direct, focus on actors and actions, play with language, listen for the music

Carrying out this kind of teaching calls for concentrating effort at two levels. One is teaching students how to make meaning at the sentence level, using syntax to organise words to say what you want them to say. Books on writing at the sentence level — my favourites are *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace* (1981) by Joseph Bizup and Joseph M Williams, now in its 11th edition; and Fish's *How to Write a Sentence* — lay out a series of useful rules of thumb: be clear, be concise, be direct, focus on actors and actions, play with language, listen for the music. The other is teaching students how to make meaning across an entire text, using rhetorical moves that help them structure a compelling argument from beginning to end. My favourite book in this genre is Graff and Birkenstein's *They Say, I Say*. I use all three in a graduate class I teach on academic writing.

I've also developed my own set of questions that writers need to answer when constructing an analytical text:

- 1. What's the point? This is the *analysis* issue: what is your angle?
- 2. Who says? This is the *validity* issue: on what (data, literature) are you basing your claims?
- 3. What's new? This is the *value-added* issue: what do you contribute that we

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don't already know?

4. Who cares? This is the *significance* issue, the most important issue of all, the one that subsumes all the others. Is this work worth doing? Is the text worth reading?

But, you ask, aren't these just alternative sets of rules, much like the Rule of Five? I say no. One difference is that these are clearly labelled not as rules but rules of thumb. They are things to keep in mind as you write (and especially as you edit your writing), many of which might be in tension with each other, and which you must draw upon or ignore as needed. Another difference is that they resist the temptation to provide a rigid structure for a text of the kind that I have been discussing here. Deal with issues in the literature where it helps to frame and support your argument rather than confining it to the lit-review ghetto. And don't make the reader wait until the conclusion to find out what gives the text significance; most people would stop long before this point.

Rules of thumb call for the writer to exercise judgment rather than follow the format. Of course, it takes more time and effort to develop writerly judgment than it does to follow the shortcut of the five-paragraph essay. Form is harder than formalism. But the result is a text that does more than just look like a piece of writing; it makes meaning.

et's turn away from the ideal case — learning to write for meaning — and dive back into the real world: teaching school students to write by filling five pots with words. When students get to college, their skills in writing five-paragraph essays start to pay off big time. Compared with high school, the number of papers they need to write in a semester grows exponentially, the required length of papers also shoots up, and there is increasing expectation that these papers demonstrate a bit of professional polish. This pressure to turn out a lot of reasonably competent writing in a short period of time puts a premium on a student's skills to produce text efficiently. And once again, the Rule of Five comes to the rescue. Nothing aids efficiency better than an easily reproducible template. This leads to two elaborations of the basic model.

The first is a simple extension of the model into a format with more than five paragraphs. The length is greater but the structure is the same: a general claim, followed by three pieces of evidence to support it, leading to a conclusion. The college version of the model also ups the ante on the kind of content that is deemed acceptable. Increasingly, the generic synthesis sources that were so helpful in high school – variations on the old encyclopaedia – are no longer sufficient. This is particularly true in selective colleges, where faculty members expect students to gain familiarity with this thing that they call 'the literature'. Cribbing from the commons is bush league; if you're Ivy League, you need to crib from the best – refereed journal articles by top scholars. Plug in a topic, and Google Scholar provides you with the most cited pieces on the topic. You don't have to read them, just cite them as evidence in sections two, three and four.

The second version of the model is for students who are thinking about graduate school. They can't settle for supporting an argument with just three sources; they need to produce 'research'. This means that they need to define an issue, draw on the literature about that issue, develop a method for gathering data about the issue, analyse the data, and draw conclusions. Sounds complicated, but relax: it's really not that hard. The Rule of Five is up to the challenge. The paper format contains five standard sections. All you have to do is fill them with plausible content. Here's the model:

Section 1: Introduce the argument

Section 2: Summarise the relevant literature

Section 3: Spell out your research method

Section 4: Present your findings and analyse them

Section 5: Draw conclusions

The argument is — whatever. The literature is a few things you found on Google related to the argument. The method is how you're going to find data that could plausibly inform the argument. Findings are some things you encounter that might support your point (think evidence one, evidence two, evidence three from the five-paragraph model). And the conclusion is that, wow, everything lines up to support your original claim. QED. But now suddenly your writing is telling the world: I'm ready for graduate school.

The transition from the college research paper to the doctoral dissertation is not as big a jump as you might think. The Rule of Five lives on in the canonical structure for the dissertation, which by now should look familiar:

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Review of the literature

Chapter 3: Methods

Chapter 4: Analysis/findings

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Guides on dissertation-writing specify the content of each of the five chapters in detail, with this detail looking remarkably similar across guides. Chapter 1 is supposed to have a problem statement and list of research questions. Chapter 2 needs to cover both the theoretical and empirical literature relevant to the research questions. Chapter 3 needs to spell out research design, measures used, research procedures, and modes of analysis employed. Chapter 4 summarises the findings of the research and provides analysis of these results. And Chapter 5 covers four canonical areas: summary of results, conclusions, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

A dissertation is not that difficult if you know the algorithm and produce something that looks and feels like a

dissertation

Of course, you do have to fill up these five chapters with content, and the total length can run from 15,000 to 80,000 words. But you have years to do all this. And graduate school helpfully provides you with the content you need. Courses teach you how to create research questions, what the literature says about your particular subfield of expertise, what methods of data collection and analysis can best be used in this field, how to demonstrate the validity of your findings, and how to draw credible conclusions from your analysis. Pick a topic and pick a method, and the rest is plug and play. Once those decisions are made and the data gathered, the dissertation more or less writes itself.

A telling sign of formalism is that chapter titles in dissertations frequently assume the titles used in the five-chapter outline. Chapter 1 is not 'An Introduction to Topic X'; it's just 'Introduction'. Chapter 2 is 'Review of the Literature'; 3 is 'Methods'; 4 is 'Analysis'; and 5 is 'Conclusion'. Specifying content, personalising the presentation of results, tailoring the format to the demands of your own study – all of these are either not needed or forbidden. Your job is to reproduce the form of the five-chapter dissertation, and you do so, literally.

Given how generic the format is, it's not surprising that enterprising companies are willing to go one step further and actually produce the dissertation for you on demand, for the right price. As with the Babel Generator, turning out a dissertation is not that difficult if you know the algorithm and produce something that looks and feels like a dissertation. Ads for these websites kept popping up as I was searching Google for information about the five-chapter dissertation. So I checked out the most prominent of these (the one that paid for placement highest on the list), called GradeMiners. They would produce any kind of school paper, but dissertations were one of their specialties. Drop-down menus allowed you to make the appropriate selection. I chose PhD dissertation, APA style, 100 pages, 'professional quality', 'a top writer in this subject to do my work', 'professional quality check for my order', 50 sources, in English, and on the topic 'US Curriculum History'. On the 'urgency' menu, I selected that I wanted it within 30 days. The bottom line: I could get all this in a month for \$9,623.99. Really, not a bad deal. For a little extra money, they will also carry out a plagiarism check. After all, there's nothing worse than a ghostwriter who cheats by plagiarising someone else's work.

This brings us to the top level of my examination of the Rule of Five, the way that this form shapes the dominant genre of research production used by the professional scholars in the professoriate – the refereed journal article. This is the medium that governs the process of hiring, promotion and tenure within the academic profession. It's the way to get ahead and stay ahead in your career – the way to establish your reputation, gain a following, and win accolades. And in order to get past the gatekeepers in the process – editors and reviewers at top-ranked academic

journals – you need to produce papers that meet generally accepted standards. You need papers that look like, feel like, and sound like the canonical journal article. As we have seen at the lower levels, the content can be nearly anything, as long as the form is correct.

The journal-article version of the Rule of Five is known by the mnemonic IMRaD (or IMRAD), which identifies the labels and order of the conventional paper. The letters stand for the required sections in the proper order: introduction, methods, results, and discussion. Check them off, and you're done.

But wait a minute, you say; this is only four sections. What happened to the literature review? Well, it turns out that the lit review is incorporated within the introduction. In a short journal article, prior literature might take up only a paragraph or two of the text, so why waste a whole section on it?

If you choose not to write by the numbers, you risk alienating teachers, editors, reviewers and readers

Some critics, of course, have pointed out that the IMRaD format is a bit, you know, rigid. Helen Sword wrote a book called *Stylish Academic Writing* (2012) that I use in my own writing class. In it, she encourages scholars to break free of the rhetorical constraints that tradition imposes on scholarly publication. But she realises she is trying to roll back the tide. For readers and writers alike, IMRaD is simply too handy to give up:

This write-by-numbers approach prompts researchers to plan their research methodically, conduct it rigorously, and present it coherently, without leaving out any crucial information. Moreover, a conventional structure is relatively easy for new academics to learn; all they have to do is follow models established by others before them. Readers, meanwhile, know exactly where to look for key findings. They can skim the abstract, mine the literature review, scan the data, and grab the conclusions without wasting valuable time actually *reading*.

I love the last line — 'without wasting valuable time actually reading'. This is the whole point of the Rule of Five, isn't it? It makes scholarly writing easy to learn, easy to read, and easy to evaluate. Like the five-paragraph essay and the five-chapter dissertation, IMRaD reduces the cognitive load involved in teaching, learning, producing, reviewing and consuming academic texts. If you choose not to write by the numbers, you risk alienating teachers, editors, reviewers and readers. You have a big incentive to make their lives easy, which will then increase the likelihood that you will succeed.

This is my point. The Rule of Five spells out issues that need to be addressed in any piece of analytical writing: argument, frame, evidence, analysis, conclusion. If you don't address these issues, then you are not doing an effective job of presenting your

work. But by addressing them only in this order, and confining each function of the argument to a hermetically sealed location within the paper, you turn a useful set of guidelines into an iron cage. It's dysfunctional — to say nothing of off-putting, infantilising and intellectually arid. But, then again, it makes life easier for all concerned. So it's not going away soon.

David Labaree is Lee L Jacks professor (emeritus) at the Stanford University Graduate School of Education. He is the former president of the History of Education Society and former vice president of the American Educational Research Association. His most recent book is A Perfect Mess: The Unlikely Ascendancy of American Higher Education http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/P/bo19995111.html (2017).

aeon.co15 February, 2018

Dear students,

I have been asked for advice on how to rise your essays above the 74 mark (and this is useful for those wanting to rise above what they have already have in the 60s).

The good news and the bad.

The bad news firs: there is no quick fix. It requires some effort, and, moreover, time planning.

The good news: it is possible for all of you, though.

1. My main sense is that the largest problem for many is that the tyranny of the "5-paragraph" essay holds you back. There are versions of this that do well because of strong writing, but, ultimately, there's a limit.

The 5-pararaph essay is ultimately not a piece of argument; it's a statement. The examples aren't presented as objects to be commented on or interpreted, but merely as illustrations of something that has already been stated. Because they are used in an inert fashion, they drag the essay down, since they aren't adding anything to it.

The first thing then is read through these pieces I've placed on the forum. Learn to recognize when you're doing this.

"What is the '5-paragraph essay' and why it doesn't work anymore"

 $\frac{https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/undergraduate/modules/fulllist/special/s}{tatesofdamage/forum?topic=8a1785d87042f22201704f3b55dd7fd1}$

- Take the conclusion that you've made and do, at least, one or two of these operations.
 - a) show what the larger implications of that conclusion might be for cultural conversations beyond the text(s) discussed. What do we learn from this reading of a particular text? This gesture means the essay into the realm of motivation, beyond thesis. It is the explanation of motivation that is the realm of first-class work.
 - One indication of this is when you can take your claims and make a more general conceptual summary of them. Is X's narrative indicative of some prejudice? Then what could be said about the nature of that prejudice, it's roots as well as strategies to overcome them?
 - b) Take you initial conclusion and then turn it into a question. This is close to the above. If X is prejudiced, then the second question is how might this prejudice be overcome?

I call this a "secondary elaboration." It means putting the end result and recursively turning it into something like a title question.

If you do this, this means that in the space of the word-count limited essay, you'll have to then go back and compress what you've written so far in order to have space to respond to the essay's internally generated question.

3. Reread and Revise

There's really no way to write first-class essays in one go. There might be people who can do this, but I've never met any. For my own work, I still usually produce 4 drafts. At a minimum.

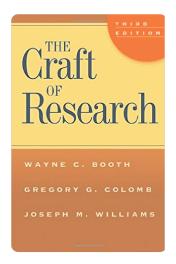
To redraft, that means giving yourself time to do this.

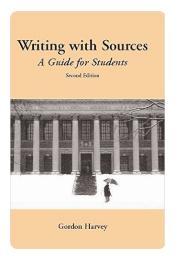
4. Read the books on writing listed in item 8 on this forum thread:

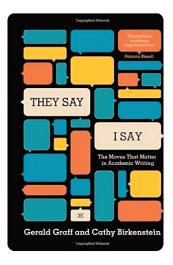
 $\frac{https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/undergraduate/modules/fulllist/special/s}{tatesofdamage/forum?topic=8a17841b6e5a6816016e601baeaf22c7}$

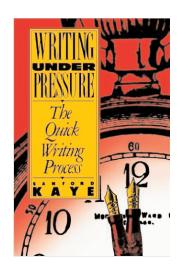
- 5. Read the other materials on that thread.
- 6. Download some essays from the journal American Literature and reverse engineer them. Look at their structure.

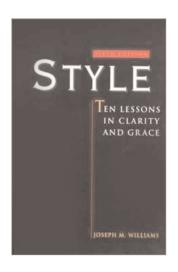
In every cultural field, from writing to painting, everyone, no matter their innate talent, learns from past examples. Painters spend a lot of time looking at painting. Writers spend a lot of time reading other writers. Academic writers read other academic writers. All of this is a version of the truism: you have to pay your dues to sing the blues.

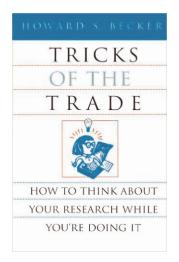


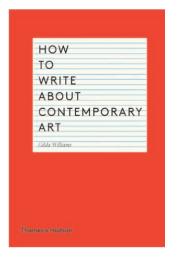












These are all helpful books to read before you start writing an essay.

The top 4 are especially recommended.

Good books on writing are rare, so publishers make them expensive. To lower costs, we encourage you to buy a) used copies and/or b) earlier editions of the titles.