

The handout was sent to me by a former student who received it in her freshman writing class in the honors program at USC (10/2000). I do not know who the professor is.

Welcome to College: Say Goodbye to the Five-Paragraph Essay

Many students learned in high school to write what is commonly known as the five-paragraph essay. The Five-Paragraph Essay consists of (surprise!) five paragraphs that follow a very structured format. The first paragraph contains a one sentence (or maybe a two sentence) thesis statement, which is followed by three sentences that briefly describe what will be discussed in the three body paragraphs. These three sentences are sometimes referred to as the pathway, since they show where the paper will go. There may be a transitional sentence to the next paragraph, which discusses the topic of the first pathway sentence. The next two body paragraphs develop and detail the next two pathway sentences. The conclusion, the fifth paragraph, restates and summarizes the arguments of the essay, sometimes beginning with the phrase, "In conclusion."

The strength of the five-paragraph essay is that it is highly structured, and fairly easy to teach. It provides a very formulaic style of writing that many students find helpful. However, once you reach the college level, the weaknesses outweigh the strengths. The five-paragraph essay encourages students to engage only on the surface level without attaining the level of cogency demanded by college writing. In its broad, overarching style, it has a tendency to encourage overly general thesis statements that lead to poorly developed and unfocused papers. And its formulaic nature makes it prone to produce papers with stilted organization. Not to mention that it is next to impossible to write five pages of one without repeating yourself. The only time the five-paragraph essay may be useful in college is when you are writing answers to brief essay questions on exams.

So, what are you supposed to write? The easiest thing to remember is that with a few sentence level changes, each pathway sentence from a traditional five paragraph essay would make a great working thesis for the kind of argumentative, thesis-driven paper that you are asked to write in college. Here's an example in answer to the prompt, "What fundamental change would improve high school education?"

High school education has several problems which must be solved to prepare America's youth for the challenges of the 21st century. Overcrowded classrooms mean that students do not receive the individualized attention that they need to succeed. Increasing rates of crime are making students afraid to come to school, and preventing students from concentrating while they are there. In addition, the lack of technological resources like state of the art computers is preventing students from being competitive in the workplace after graduation. These problems all mean that some students are falling behind.

When students fall behind, they need the attention of an instructor one on one to catch up. Because classrooms are so crowded, teachers are overworked. As a result...

OR

High schools across the country are bulging at the seams. As increasing numbers of Americans realize that education is necessary to attaining the American dream, our schools grow more crowded. At the same time, budget cuts have caused schools to cut back on the number of teachers. As the number of teachers has dropped, and classrooms have become more crowded, the quality of education in our public schools has declined. With a higher workload, burnout among even the best teachers has increased, and fewer people see teaching as the desirable profession they once did. Solving the problem of overcrowding by strictly limiting class size to 20 students would allow more students to get the instruction they need to become productive members of society, which is the most important goal of high school education in America today.

Let's look more closely at the differences between these two paragraphs. Let's start with the thesis.

5 Paragraph Essay

High school education has several problems which must be solved to prepare America's youth for the challenges of the 21st century.

This thesis states the obvious. It is so general that just about anything you threw into the essay could be used to support it—but you would end up with a very unfocused essay. Also, note the use of vague wording—"several problems." Finally, a college paper must take a position that a rational person would disagree with. What rational person would not agree with this sentence?

What else happen in an introductory paragraph? Once you've introduced your thesis, you want to include enough other information to flesh out the paragraph and give your reader some idea where you might go without simply listing the topic sentences for the rest of the paragraphs in the essay. Let's look at what the other paragraphs of these essays would cover.

5 Paragraph Essay

1. Overcrowding interferes with instruction
2. Increasing crime makes students afraid/ unable to work.
3. No tech resources means not prepared for work force.
4. Conclusion

Notice that none of these are connected to each other. You could switch the order, and nothing would happen. Also, one requirement of this assignment was to identify a primary goal of high school education. Where could you put that paragraph into this format?

College Essay

Solving the problem of overcrowding would allow more student to get the instruction they need to become productive members of society, which is the most important goal of high school education in America today.

This statement narrows the topic down to a specific problem: overcrowding. It also states why overcrowding is a problem. The sentence implies that overcrowding is preventing at least some students from getting the education they need to "become productive members of society," which the thesis itself identifies as a primary goal of high school education. There are lots of rational people who would choose another problem as the worst obstacle facing high school education. There are also lots of rational people who would argue for a different primary goal of high school education.

College Essay

Some topics this essay might cover are:

1. Primary goal of h.s. ed is to make all students, not just some, productive members of society.
2. More people need, and more people seek education.
3. Budget cuts cause lower number of teachers, which reduces quality of classroom instruction.
4. Teachers get burned out when classes are overcrowded.
5. In overcrowded classrooms, too many students get lost or slip through the cracks.
6. Conclusion suggesting what the result of solving the problems might be for society.

All of these points are connected to the thesis. Though their order can vary, some will make more sense if they come before other statements. Also note that some of these points are not directly listed in the introductory paragraph.

YOUR TURN

Looking at your Assignment 1, write an introductory paragraph for a five paragraph essay on the topic (the last one you'll EVER write for this class) and then write an introductory paragraph for an essay that will make its working thesis statement out of one of the three points presented in the five-paragraph essay example.

18 Detractors from Mature Academic Voice

1. **Use of first person.** Avoid "I think," "I believe," "To me this means..."
2. **Use of second person "you."** Avoid the use of the second person. No: "When you die..." Instead use: "When humans die..." No: "The slant rhyme makes you notice..." Instead use: "The slant rhyme makes the reader notice..."
3. **Colloquial speech and immature, excessively informal vocabulary.** Examples: "Your average Joe," "Joe College," "Back in the olden days," "Nowadays," "A bunch of... a ton of..." (Does the writer mean "a significant number of..."?); "I would have to say..." (Not really); "That would have to be..." (Again, not really); "He got off..." (Rather than the more elevated: "He escaped justice..."); "really hassled by" (Suggestion: "extremely agitated by").
4. **Use of psychobabble:** "Pap destroyed Huck's self-esteem." "The peer pressure on Hester Prynne," "Gatsby was depressed by..." "Huck and Jim's life-style on the raft..." "Ok, so Medea had an anger management issue..." "Virginia Woolf, herself a depressed person, writes a rather bi-polar essay."
5. **Use of absolutes:** "always" "never" "everybody" "I'll bet 99.99% of the people..."
6. **Excesses of tone:** hysterical, breathless, indignant, self-righteous, cute, breezy, etc. Example: "If a homeless man even talks he gets arrested." Purple prose is a special sub-genre of this category.
7. **Cheerleading,** a special kind of excess of tone when the student lavishes praise on an author or her work. Examples: "The greatest poet..." "Does an magnificent job of..." "...so awesome," "obviously a genius," "...will affect me for the rest of my life." (Note: this observation is not intended to squelch true passion or heart-felt response to literature.)
8. **Silly, weak, childish examples;** students' lack of discernment with regard to quality of examples or evidence; using cartoons, Disney movies, etc. as legitimate evidence.
9. **Rhetorical questions,** especially those with an indignant response, such as: "Do we Americans have to put up with this? I think not!"
10. **Clichés,** all of them. They're as old as the hills.
11. **Exclamation points,** especially lots of them!!!!
12. **Most adverbs,** such as basically, obviously, surely, certainly, very, really, incredibly, totally, etc. should be used sparingly!

13. Writing about the author and speaker or narrator as though they are the same. Weak: Dickinson greets death as a courtly suitor. Stronger: Dickinson's speaker greets Death as a courtly suitor.

14. Misspelling the author's name, although I am partial to "Whit Waltman."

15. Referring to authors by their first names. Please use "Whitman and Dickinson," never "Walt and Emily."

16. Writing about an author's life rather than his or her work or specific purpose in a text. Weak: "Whitman and Dickinson write about death differently due to their different life experiences." Better: "Dickinson's purpose in using this image is..." or "Whitman's imagery suggests..."

17. Using technical vocabulary incorrectly. Examples: "Green uses emotional syntax." "She uses dictional phrases like..." "His short fragments are all connected by commas and collaborated into a few run-on sentences."

18. Gobbledygook, usually some kind of combination of the characteristics listed above. It imitates pretentious writing but says little. Examples: "The author brilliantly uses a hyphen in order to emphasize and reinforce motivation and justice that God provides and installs in each and every man." "Meger (sic) imagery provided by the author commences to place a precidence (sic) of their style, a conventional rhetoric that gives the passage somewhat of a quixotic tone."

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WRITING FEEDBACK SYMBOLS

Symbol	Meaning	What to Do
+	★	Good point! Good idea! Nicely put!
		Delete, from punctuation mark to an entire section Delete the marked text. Ex: The the first one...
		Close up, no space Delete the space. Ex: The after math of the...
	^	Something is missing here Insert something, usually a space, punctuation mark or missing word. Ex: Send this Myrtle
	(of one)	Reverse order Reverse the order of the indicated text items.
	?	Unclear. What do you mean? Clarify. Explain.
	History	Incorrect capital Replace the capital letter with a lower case letter.
	homer	Needs capital Replace with an uppercase letter.
		Paragraphing problem Begin new paragraph. Or join paragraphs, no break here.
	agr	Agreement error Make a subject and verb, or an antecedent and pronoun, agree in number. Ex: 1. Each camper must put up his or her own tent. 2. Campers must put up their own tents.
	awk	Awkward sentence or passage. Rephrase sentence or section. Check word choice or word order.
	CDs	Concrete details Respond to comment in reference to CD. Often: "good concrete details" or "needs more concrete details."
	cliché	Overused expression, trite, truism Rewrite using your own words. Refresh the tired phrase!
	colloq.	Colloquial expression or slang, inappropriately informal. Use appropriate diction. Replace phrasing of everyday talk.
	frag	Sentence fragment Add subject or verb, or attach fragment to nearby sentence. Change to make a complete sentence.
	NA!	Never again! Be careful to never make this mistake again! Life is short!

Symbol	Meaning	What to Do
OE	Opportunity to Elaborate, Expand	Add CDs, commentary, reasoning, etc. Develop idea further to correct "thinness."
OS	Over simplification	Rewrite for precision, exactness, and clarity.
PV	Passive voice	Use active verbs. Example: Vivid descriptions are used by Twain to... (weak). Twain uses vivid descriptions to... (stronger).
punc	Punctuation error	Add, replace, or delete punctuation.
R-O	Run-on sentence	Correct with needed punctuation. This is more than one sentence run together.
See me	I'd like to tell you something!	I can't write what I want to say. Come see me. You'll be glad you did!
Sug:	A suggestion, not a correction	Consider a possible improvement or alternative. Always read these carefully.
Sp	Misspelled word	Correct spelling.
T	Wrong tense, shift in tense	Correct verb tense to make all past or present, etc. Use present tense when writing about literature. Ex: John Proctor betrays Elizabeth when he ...
Trans	Transition	Respond to comment in reference to transition. Usually: "good transition" or "needs transition."
Wordy	Too many words	Say in fewer words; combine sentences. Omit useless words, phrases.
WC	Word choice weak or questionable	Replace with more precise or livelier word.
WW	Wrong word	Correct the word you used in error.