

College Writing

What this handout is about

This handout will help you figure out what your college instructors expect when they give you a writing assignment. It will tell you how and why to move beyond the five-paragraph themes you learned to write in high school and start writing essays that are more analytical and more flexible.

What is a five-paragraph theme?

North Carolina public school teachers sometimes give a writing assignment called a “five-paragraph theme”; in other places, this kind of assignment is called a “keyhole essay.” Either way, it’s hourglass-shaped: it begins with something general, narrows down in the middle to discuss specifics, and then branches out to more general comments at the end. In a classic five-paragraph theme, the first paragraph starts with a general statement and ends with a thesis statement containing three “points”; each body paragraph discusses one of those “points” in turn; and the final paragraph sums up what the student has written.

Why do high schools teach the five-paragraph theme?

The five-paragraph theme is a good way to learn how to write an academic essay. It’s a simplified version of academic writing that requires you to state an idea and support it with evidence. Setting a limit of five paragraphs narrows your options and forces you to master the basics of organization. Furthermore—and for many high school teachers, this is the crucial issue—many state-mandated end-of-grade writing tests, AP exams, and the SAT II writing test reward writers who follow the five-paragraph theme format.

Writing a five-paragraph theme is like riding a bicycle with training wheels; it’s a device that helps you learn. That doesn’t mean you should use it forever. Once you can write well without it, you can cast it off and never look back.

Why don’t five-paragraph themes work well for college writing?

The way college instructors teach is probably different from what you experienced in high school, and so is what they expect from you.

While high school courses tend to focus on the who, what, when, and where of the things you study—“just the facts”—college courses ask you to think about the how and the why. You can do very well in high school by studying hard and memorizing a lot of facts. Although college instructors still expect you to know the facts, they really care about how you analyze and interpret those facts and why you think those facts matter. Once you know what college instructors are looking for, you can see some of the reasons why five-paragraph themes don’t work so well for college writing:

Five-paragraph themes often do a poor job of setting up a framework, or context, that helps the reader understand what the author is trying to say. Students learn in high school that their introduction should begin with something general. College instructors call these “dawn of time” introductions. For example, a student asked to discuss the causes of the Hundred Years War might begin, “Since the dawn of time, humankind has been plagued by war.” In a college course, the student would fare better with a more concrete sentence directly related to what he or she is going to say in the rest of the paper—for example, a sentence such as “In the early 14th century, a civil war broke out in Flanders that would soon threaten

Western Europe's balance of power." If you are accustomed to writing vague opening lines and need them to get started, go ahead and write them, but delete them before you turn in the final draft. For more on this subject, see the handout on [introductions](#).

Five-paragraph themes often lack an argument. Because college courses focus on analyzing and interpreting rather than on memorizing, college instructors expect writers not only to know the facts but also to make an argument about the facts. The best five-paragraph themes may do this. However, the typical five-paragraph theme has a "listing" thesis, for example, "I will show how the Romans lost their empire in Britain and Gaul by examining military technology, religion, and politics," rather than an argumentative one, for example, "The Romans lost their empire in Britain and Gaul because their opponents' military technology caught up with their own at the same time as religious upheaval and political conflict were weakening the sense of common purpose on the home front." For more on this subject, see our handout on [argument](#).

Five-paragraph themes are often repetitive. Writers who follow the five-paragraph model tend to repeat sentences or phrases from the introduction in topic sentences for paragraphs, rather than writing topic sentences that tie their three "points" together into a coherent argument. Repetitive writing doesn't help to move an argument along, and it's no fun to read.

Five-paragraph themes often lack "flow;" that is, they don't make smooth transitions from one thought to the next. The "listing" thesis statement encourages writers to treat each paragraph and its main idea as a separate entity, rather than to draw connections between paragraphs and ideas in order to develop an argument.

Five-paragraph themes often have weak conclusions that merely summarize what's gone before and don't say anything new or interesting. In our handout on [conclusions](#), we call these "that's my story and I'm sticking to it" conclusions: they do nothing to engage readers and make them glad they read the essay. Most of us can remember an introduction and three body paragraphs without a repetitive summary at the end to help us out.

Five-paragraph themes don't have any counterpart in the real world. Read your favorite newspaper or magazine; look through the readings your professors assign you; listen to political speeches or sermons. Can you find anything that looks or sounds like a five-paragraph theme? One of the important skills that college can teach you, above and beyond the subject matter of any particular course, is how to communicate persuasively in any situation that comes your way. The five-paragraph theme is too rigid and simplified to fit most real-world situations.

Perhaps most important of all: in a five-paragraph theme, form controls content, when it should be the other way around. Students begin with a plan for organization, and they force their ideas to fit it. Along the way, their perfectly good ideas get mangled or lost.

How do I break out of writing five-paragraph themes?

Let's take an example based on the handout on [thesis statements](#). Suppose you're taking a United States History class, and Professor College asks you to write a paper on this topic:

Compare and contrast the reasons why the North and South fought the Civil War.

Alex, preparing to write her first college history paper, decides to write a five-paragraph theme, just like she learned from Mr. Highschool. She begins by thinking, "What are three points I can talk about to compare the reasons the North and South fought the Civil War?" She does a little brainstorming, and she says, "Well, in class, Professor College talked about the economy, politics, and slavery. I guess I can do a paper about that." So she writes her introduction:

A civil war occurs when two sides in a single country become so angry at each other that they turn to violence. The Civil War between North and South was a major conflict that nearly tore apart the young

United States. The North and South fought the Civil War for many reasons. In some cases, these reasons were the same, but in other cases they were very different. In this paper, I will compare and contrast these reasons by examining the economy, politics, and slavery.

This is a classic five-paragraph theme introduction: it goes from the general to the specific, and it introduces the three points that will be the subjects of each of the three body paragraphs.

But Professor College doesn't like it, not one little bit. She underlines the first two sentences, and she writes, "This is too general. Get to the point." She underlines the third and fourth sentences, and she writes, "You're just restating the question I asked. What's your point?" She underlines the final sentence, and then writes in the margin, "What's your thesis?" because the last sentence in the paragraph only lists topics. It doesn't make an argument.

Is Professor College just a big old grouch? Well, no—she is trying to teach this student that college writing isn't about following a formula (the five-paragraph theme), it's about making an argument. Her first sentence is general, the way she learned a five-paragraph should start. But from Professor College's perspective, it's far too general—so general, in fact, that it's completely outside of the assignment: she didn't ask students to define civil war. The third and fourth sentences say, in so many words, "I am comparing and contrasting the reasons why the North and the South fought the Civil War"—as Professor College says, they just restate the prompt, without giving a single hint about where this student's paper is going. The final sentence, which should make an argument, only lists topics; it doesn't begin to explore how or why something happened.

If you've seen a lot of five-paragraph themes, you can guess what Alex will write next. Her first body paragraph will begin, "We can see some of the different reasons why the North and South fought the Civil War by looking at the economy." What will Professor College say about that? She might ask, "What differences can we see? What part of the economy are you talking about? Why do the differences exist? Why are they important?" After three such body paragraphs, the student might write a conclusion that says much the same thing as her introduction, in slightly different words. Professor College might respond, "You've already said this!"

What could Alex do differently? Let's start over. This time, Alex doesn't begin with a preconceived notion of how to organize her essay. Instead of three "points," she decides that she will brainstorm until she comes up with a main argument, or thesis, that answers the question "Why did the North and South fight the Civil War?" Then she will decide how to organize her draft by thinking about the argument's parts and how they fit together.

After doing some [brainstorming](#) and reading the handout on [thesis statements](#), Alex thinks of a main argument, or thesis statement:

Both Northerners and Southerners believed they fought against tyranny and oppression, but Northerners focused on the oppression of slaves while Southerners defended their rights to property and self-government.

Then Alex writes her introduction. But instead of beginning with a general statement about civil wars, she gives us the ideas we need to know in order to understand all the parts of her argument:

The United States broke away from England in response to British tyranny and oppression, so opposition to tyranny and a belief in individual freedom and liberty were important values in the young republic. But in the nineteenth century, slavery made Northerners and Southerners see these values in very different ways. By 1860, the conflict over these values broke out into a civil war that nearly tore the country apart. In that war, both Northerners and Southerners believed they fought against tyranny and oppression, but Northerners focused on the oppression of slaves while Southerners defended their rights to property and self-government.

You go, girl! Every sentence in Alex's new introduction leads the reader down the path to her thesis statement in an unbroken chain of ideas.

Now Alex turns to organization. You'll find more about the thinking process she goes through in the handout on [organization](#), but here are the basics: first, she decides, she'll write a paragraph that gives background; she'll explain how opposition to tyranny and a belief in individual liberty came to be such important values in the United States. Then she'll write another background paragraph in which she shows how the conflict over slavery developed over time. Then she'll have separate paragraphs about Northerners and Southerners, explaining in detail—and giving evidence for—her claims about each group's reasons for going to war.

Note that Alex now has four body paragraphs. She might have had three or two or seven; what's important is that she allowed her argument to tell her how many paragraphs she should have and how to fit them together. Furthermore, her body paragraphs don't all discuss "points," like "the economy" and "politics"—two of them give background, and the other two explain Northerners' and Southerners' views in detail.

Finally, having followed her sketch outline and written her paper, Alex turns to writing a conclusion. From the handout on [conclusions](#), she knows that a "that's my story and I'm sticking to it" conclusion doesn't move her ideas forward. Applying the strategies she finds in the handout, she decides that she can use her conclusion to explain why the paper she's just written really matters—perhaps by pointing out that the fissures in our society that the Civil War opened are, in many cases, still causing trouble today.

Is it ever OK to write a five-paragraph theme?

Yes. Have you ever found yourself in a situation where somebody expects you to make sense of a large body of information on the spot and write a well-organized, persuasive essay—in fifty minutes or less? Sounds like an essay exam situation, right? When time is short and the pressure is on, falling back on the good old five-paragraph theme can save you time and give you confidence. A five-paragraph theme might also work as the framework for a short speech. Try not to fall into the trap, however, of creating a "listing" thesis statement when your instructor expects an argument; when planning your body paragraphs, think about three components of an argument, rather than three "points" to discuss. On the other hand, most professors recognize the constraints of writing blue-book essays, and a "listing" thesis is probably better than no thesis at all.

Works consulted

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