

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.

5-paragraph theme

Most high school teachers will give a writing assignment called “five paragraph theme” or “keyhole essay”. It can be described as an hourglass shape: it begins as something in general, narrows down in the middle and branches out to something more general at the end. It tends to start out with a general statement, a thesis and three main points. Each body paragraph is discussing one of the three main points. The final paragraph dictates what was written throughout the essay.

Purpose of the 5-paragraph theme

The 5-paragraph essay shows how to write an academic essay. It is a broken down way of how to do an academic essay, though the limit of five paragraphs narrows your essay options and forces you to do a very basic organization. While taking writing tests or college admission exams, writers are rewarded for the five-paragraph theme.

The five paragraph theme is only used for training wheels; it is used to help you learn how to write. You should not resort back to it forever. As soon as you learn to write without it you will never need to use it again.

Why 5-paragraph theme does not work in college

College is structured differently than high school; the way professors teach is different, meaning what they expect from you is different as well.

- For high school, teachers tend to focus on who, what, when, and where, while college tends to focus on the how and why. High school students can do very well by memorizing and studying hard. College focuses on how to analyze and interpret what you have memorized and studied. After understanding the specifics college professors are looking for, you may be able to understand what the five-paragraph theme does not work in college. 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 our 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 to break the habit of writing 5-paragraph themes

Let’s take an example based on our 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 Writing Center's 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.

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 our 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 our 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.

Instances when it is okay to write a five-paragraph theme

When doing timed-exams or when you need to condense an essay, it is okay to use the five-paragraph theme. It can save time, as well as strengthen your arguments. An example of where a five-paragraph theme may work is on a short speech. Try to avoid creating a list as your thesis statement. Professors will most likely recognize the constraints of timed assignments, and if you absolutely need to, creating a list is better than no thesis at all.

Work Consulted

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