

The Five Paragraph Format: Reliable or Restrictive?

How does the five-paragraph essay format affect students' writing?

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Abstract

For my research paper, I figured out if the standardized essay structure is reliable or restrictive. In order to figure this out, the main question I will be answering is: how does the five-paragraph essay format affect students' writing? To answer this, I conducted a survey with a group of college students and thought about how my experiences with the format affected my writing skills. This topic interests me because I realized that almost everybody I meet has some experience with writing essays in five paragraphs, so I wanted to see if this universal method of writing was even effective enough to be so common.

Introduction and Background

As American students learn how to put together pieces of writing to form an essay, almost all students are taught the standard format: the five-paragraph essay. This standard format of an introduction paragraph, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion paragraph is the foundation taught to most middle school students to start off their writing careers. It allows students to break down their writing into smaller sections with a clear focus of what is expected in each paragraph. Following this specific structure may be beneficial for students in middle school and high school that are still developing their skill sets in writing, but once reaching higher level education, this format is too restrictive to solely rely on. Students going through most – if not all – of middle school and high school with only one style of writing under their belt prevents them from even having a chance to discover their fullest potential as a writer.

To a student in middle school and early high school, the five-paragraph essay structure is the only tool needed to write most of the essays they are assigned. But, once a student reaches the upperclassmen level of high school, it becomes far too restrictive to be so commonly utilized. Stated by Professor Kimberly Wesley of California State University, Northridge, as a result of the structure being so ingrained into students' minds, they feel the need to "fit the content of [their] paper into three neat little boxes" and ultimately end up "distorting the purpose of the essay," in order to write what they have been taught is a 'good' essay. Limiting students to a three-body paragraph essay means that students are not allowed to expand upon ideas during the writing process, because of the strict formula that restricts them to only be able to write about points made in their thesis statement. Noticing this effect of the format, Wesley analyzes some of her students' writing and despite some students being able to "touch on a more interesting train of thought at one point in their paper," she concludes that the five-paragraph structure has the "tendency to stunt students' critical thinking abilities" due to its constraining nature (Wesley, 2000, p.58).

Furthermore, once a student reaches upperclassmen courses in high school – especially honors and AP level courses – the level of complexity asked from their writing requires more than the basic five paragraphs used by underclassmen. Quoted from David M. Perry, current senior academic adviser to the Department of History at the University of Minnesota, "developing writers need help developing," so to continue instilling a "highly scripted structure that passes surface muster but has no depth" is doing no favor to young writers looking to their instructors for guidance in their writing career. Students having the five-paragraph format drilled into their minds prevents them from being able to practice the complex thought process of an advanced writer that digs deeper than the routine three-point essay structure.

For students in secondary level education, argumentative and analytical writing prompts are what they are mainly tasked with and are easily supported by the five-paragraph essay structure. However, once a student arrives at college, this format is no longer their best friend. Faced with more advanced expectations in higher level education, the five paragraphs are unable to satisfy college-level writing. In the book, *Why They Can't Write: Killing the Five-Paragraph Essay and Other Necessities*, author John Warner details an anecdote from his childhood about how he was one of the last children in his neighborhood to use training wheels on his bicycle, and when it came time to ride without them, he did not know how to. The author relates this childhood experience to the five-paragraph essay taught to most students in middle school: when students only practice using the five-paragraph structure, they are unable to write in any other style when the time comes. Much like how the author never practiced riding a bicycle without training wheels, when high school students are constantly writing with a safety net (five paragraph format), they become unprepared for more advanced writing expected of them in college.

Moreover, the limiting style of writing the five-paragraph essay is unfit for the various types of writing expected of college students. The expectation of students is to be able to write research papers and articles. California State University, Long Beach professor Elizabeth Guzik emphasizes how it would be “next to impossible to write five pages of one without repeating yourself,” due to its formulaic organization style. For college students to be asked to understand how to do various styles of writing, but not even be introduced to those styles in high school demonstrates the flaws of the five-paragraph essay method that continues to be taught to middle school and high school students. Coming to college without the necessary skill sets for higher level writing sets students up for failure, especially if they have a hard time learning how to write

the newly taught writing styles only introduced to them once they step foot into their college campus.

Methods

To further explain how limiting an essay to five paragraphs affects students' writing skills, I decided to directly ask those that have been affected by it. To do so, I conducted a survey among 13 college students and recollected about my personal experiences regarding the standardized writing format. My reasoning behind choosing a survey as my method of research is because I wanted to see if there were any commonalities between a group of college students.

For the survey I created, I sent it to my University Writing Program 1Y (UWP1Y) class to collect responses. The questions I included in it are: Were you taught the five-paragraph essay format in high school? Have you used the five-paragraph essay format in college? How were you initially taught to write an essay? What are other styles of writing you have learned? How do you feel about the five-paragraph essay format?

Findings

In my research, I was able to conclude that students believe the five-paragraph essay format is a strong foundation to start from but is far too limiting to adhere to in higher education. In response to how students were initially taught to write an essay, every respondent answered that they were taught the standard five paragraphs in high school and that was the only style they learned. They described being taught the structure as such: an introduction paragraph "starting with a hook, then context, and ending with a thesis statement," then following it up with "three body paragraphs with a lead in, quote, and analysis," and tying everything together with a "conclusion paragraph that recapped the entire essay."

Most students believed that the structure is a necessary tool for specific prompts that require quick formatting. When asked how they feel about the format, one student responded that it is “useful for short, timed essays and is easy to build off of,” along with another student agreeing and saying, “it can serve as a good base to build off of, especially if you are struggling.”

Students claimed that though the format is simple to use, it does not push writers to their fullest potential. Respondents described it as “limiting in style,” “very restrictive,” and not challenging enough, as they “don’t feel like it is particularly a push in [their] writing abilities.” Overall, out of the 13 students that answered my survey, most of them had the same feelings towards five paragraph essays: it is a format students should know how to do well but should not solely rely on it.

Discussion of Findings:

From the results of the survey I conducted, it is clear to me that I am not the only one that disagrees with the five-paragraph format being so commonly taught to students. Since this format not only hinders students from discovering their fullest potential as a writer, but also inadequately prepares them for college-level writing, it is not something that should be so habitual for high school students to use.

Based on my own personal experience with writing five paragraph essays, I also dealt with the downsides of this format. As I reached the eleventh grade, I enrolled into the AP Language and Composition class that was offered at my school. Coming from the previous honors level English classes I had taken, I expected to be prepared for this class. This was not the case. The first essay prompt the teacher assigned was a creative writing assignment that asked us to pick an object and turn it into a descriptive essay. Naturally, since I was only taught to

structure essays with five paragraphs, this is what I did. I somehow managed to write an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion for a prompt that required what was basically the opposite of the formatting I used. And to no surprise, I did terribly on the very first assignment of the class. Though I eventually learned different styles of writing throughout the class, I cannot help but wonder why I was not introduced to those styles in my previous honors English classes that I thought were supposed to prepare me for more advanced writing.

Advanced-level writing is not something that is quickly learned. It is a skill that is not easy to master and like any other skill, it takes an immense amount of practice to get it right. Writing can be compared to playing the guitar – another skill that is not easy to master. If someone wanted to learn how to play the guitar, they might come to an expert for lessons, but most of their learning comes from hours and hours of practice over a certain number of years (Warner, 2018, p.12). Similarly, to guitar-playing, teachers might introduce advanced-level writing to students and teach them the basics, but for students to feel comfortable with it, they need to be able to practice doing it. For students to go through most of high school only knowing how to write essays in five paragraphs means that they have mastered that specific structure, but not any other ones. Without years of practice in writing in different styles, students enter college with little to no experience in varying essay approaches, and by that time they are far behind on the necessary years of preparation needed to develop their skills in more sophisticated writing.

Solution

One solution to this issue is to introduce different approaches of essay writing in earlier high school years. Instead of waiting until upperclassmen grades, schools should expose students to different styles of writing in their sophomore year. Schools could make the first half of tenth grade English focused on continuing to master the five-paragraph structure, but also make the

second half about introducing more loose-structured writing prompts that promote a more creative format for students to use. This makes it so that students will still be able to practice the five-paragraph format but will now also understand how to write different types of essays. Schools could make it so that students focus on only one or two new types of writing styles each school year, so that they still have enough time to practice the previous formats they learn, while still being introduced to additional styles of writing. Students learning this earlier on in high school allows them to have the rest of high school to practice writing in different styles, so when they reach college, they will have already had a few years of practice to apply to the writing standards in college. With the additional years of practice in place, students will have a broader selection of writing styles to choose from, and ultimately a more well-developed set of writing skills to utilize in upper-level education.

References

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