

BEYOND THE
FIVE-PARAGRAPH
ESSAY

KIMBERLY HILL CAMPBELL
& KRISTI LATIMER

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COMBATING FORMULAIC WRITING

The stack of essays I hauled home on Friday sits on my desk, waiting to be read. It is now Sunday afternoon. As I grab my third cup of coffee and read the first essay, I groan. And groan. Essay after essay demonstrates that my students have mastered the five-paragraph formula. I can easily find the thesis at the end of the first paragraph. There are three supporting paragraphs with some quotes from the text. And the conclusion paragraph restates the thesis. Organization is evident but thinking is not. From conversations with my colleague Kristi, I know this reflects her experience when reading and responding to essays. Although we were comforted in knowing we shared this perennial frustration, we reached out to our other colleagues in search of an answer. How could we move students beyond the five-paragraph formula? How could we change the focus of essays about literature to developing an argument and defending it? Over and over again we heard and empathized with the challenges we face as language arts teachers: large class sizes, students with complex and diverse learning needs, and the pressure to prepare students to pass standardized tests, which may require formulaic responses. We also discussed the realities of classroom practice, where students often resist reading longer texts and are quick to latch on to the five-paragraph formula in writing about literature they may or may not have read.

In these conversations, the resistance of both colleagues and students surprised us when we pondered a different approach to writing about literature. Their defense of the five-paragraph essay was fierce. Over and over we heard about the critical importance of organization. We heard about how the formula was essential for students who were developing their analytical writing skills. We heard about how the formula was required to do well on standardized tests. Graduate students were vehement that the formula got them ready for college. And we heard from a number of teachers about how the use of the formula provided an objective standard that supported fair evaluation. Support for the five-paragraph formula was strong, if not compelling.

So we looked to the research and were stunned to find that research does not support literary essays taught in a five-paragraph formula: a thesis at the end of the

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first paragraph, followed by three paragraphs with examples from the text, and a conclusion that restates the thesis. While we did find articles touting the benefits of the formula, we noted that they were typically “opinion” pieces rather than research studies. And the number of both opinion and research articles challenging the five-paragraph formula was staggering. As high school English teacher and department chair Kimberly Wesley notes, “Teachers of the five paragraph theme . . . have become complacent in their acceptance of a tool that purports to nurture but, in fact, stunts the growth of human minds” (2000, 57).

How did this happen? Why would so many of us teach an approach to writing about literature that did not serve our students well?

Textbook publishers and the standardized testing establishment play a role in promoting the formula. But the five-paragraph formula exists because we, as language arts teachers, accept the myths that support it.

Members of the UNC Charlotte Writing Project challenge us to rethink our reliance on the formula:

Our concern is for *what* the five-paragraph essay teaches students and with *what* the five-paragraph essay does not teach them; our concern is with what students learn to do by writing in this format and with what students will not learn because of the continued presence of this mythic form. Our concern is for the students who are subjected to this form and spend their intellectual lives constrained by its insistence. (Brannon et al. 2008, 17)

THE MYTHS OF THE FIVE-PARAGRAPH FORMULA

Thirty years of research confirm the failure of the five-paragraph formula. (For examples of this research, see the archived occasional papers and technical reports of the National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy 2011, which are housed on the Web site of the National Writing Project: <http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/doc/resources/techreports.csp>.)

We have summarized this research in the following discussion of the myths that have been offered in defense of the five-paragraph formula. It is our hope that as middle school and high school teachers of writing we will dispel these myths and focus our attention on writing practices that serve our students well.

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Myth: The five-paragraph formula is an actual form.

Both of us have been hard-pressed to find essays written in the five-paragraph formula beyond the school walls. But within school walls it is pervasive; we have even seen posters in support of the formula: an inverted triangle representing an introduction paragraph that starts broad and narrows to a thesis, followed by three rectangles, representing three supporting paragraphs, and a final triangle, to show how the conclusion restates the thesis and builds out from it. And we have heard English teachers speak to the importance of the five-paragraph form. These teachers

speak a logic that is important to challenge precisely because this logic perpetuates the commonsense myth that the five-paragraph theme is an actual “form” and that “forming” in writing is simply slotting information into prefabricated formulas rather than a complex process of meaning-making and negotiation between a writer’s purposes and audiences’ needs. (Brannon et al. 2008, 16)

In an effort to make writing more accessible, the formulaic approach “forces premature closure on complicated interpretive issues and stifles ongoing exploration” (Wiley 2000, 61).

Myth: The formula is just a starting point; it’s a necessary first step that supports students in moving to more sophisticated writing.

The problem with this myth is that the focus of writing instruction becomes the formula, not the content of the essay. Teachers can efficiently focus on thesis statements followed by five-sentence supporting paragraphs and a conclusion that restates the thesis. But studies indicate that most students never move beyond this formula. “The FPT [five-paragraph theme] formula may assist students with proper formatting of papers, but it appears to fall short of helping them offer a *cogent discussion of their thoughts*. Worse, strict adherence to the FPT may actually limit students’ development of complex thinking” (Argys 2008, 99).

Kristi met with resistance from students when she began moving the seniors in her International Baccalaureate (IB) class beyond the five-paragraph formula. They had been successful with this formula in high school and did not want to let it go. Their comments also demonstrate that they had not been given the opportunity to think beyond the formula: “So I don’t have to have three sentences of analysis per quotation? Then how do I know I have a complete paragraph?” Another ranted, “I don’t even know how to write this now. My whole structure is shot.” And several students

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lamented, “Why have we been taught to do this for so many years?”

And Kristi’s IB students are not alone in their frustration with the five-paragraph formula. Jennifer Courtney’s (2008) study of first-year writing students at a large southeastern university found that students felt constrained by the five-paragraph formula. Rather than seeing it as a support for more sophisticated writing, they saw it as the definition of academic writing. In interviews, students reported that academic writing had to be a certain length (five paragraphs) and follow the rules.

Imposing an arbitrary format makes learning to write just that much harder, and for no good reason, like learning to play tennis in leg chains (Brannon et al. 2008, citing Knoblauch and Brannon 1984).

Myth: The formula is a helpful tool for students who struggle with writing.

“When students are considered lacking—lacking organization, lacking ideas to write about, lacking understanding—writing in an arbitrary formula merely sustains the deficit perception” (Brannon et al. 2008, 18). When asked to use the five-paragraph formula, students learn that writing is about sentence placement, not about discovery and ideas.

In her study of English language learners in a college remedial writing course, Elizabeth Rorschach was surprised to discover the negative impact of the five-paragraph formula. She writes, “I had initially set out to examine the three students’ sense of audience as they revised but found myself sidetracked by what actually impelled their revisions. Their choices as writers were based on satisfying structural requirements . . . These students ended up producing essays that were disjointed, disconnected, unexplored, and weak, with minimal revision between drafts, and yet the essays received praise and high grades from teachers who seemed to value only adherence to form” (2004, 17). The student example provided by Rorschach to illustrate her concerns follows the five-paragraph formula.

Struggling writers need support in developing their ideas and finding structures that allow their ideas to be understood by a reader. “[B]ut repetitively following the same direction for writing every essay will not help these writers advance beyond a kind of ‘successful’ codependence on teachers who have agreed in advance that this sort of formulaic essay will be what they reward” (Wiley 2000, 65).

All students should have the opportunity to discover that their ideas matter and are worthy of exploration and shaping to meet the needs of readers—not a formula.