

The Five-Paragraph Essay on the Five-Paragraph Essay: A Detailed Overview of the Instructional Unit

Introduction

Something many instructors grapple with in first-year composition is this: How do we help our students understand how writing for college is different from writing in high school? How do we help them make that transition? Complicating this challenge is the fact that each college has its own specific institutional culture and attitudes, reflected in the design of first-year writing courses, their programmatic goals, and so on; still further, the fact that each student comes to us with his or her own individual background as a learner, complete with unique and sometimes (ahem) surprising “rules” for writing, some of which must be untangled and unlearned for the college context.

One of the “rules” which many instructors find has been embedded in their students’ minds is that an essay is a thing which is five paragraphs, containing an introduction that summarizes the issue at hand, ending in a thesis which lists the three main points to be argued by the author, which will then be developed in the three subsequent body paragraphs, capped off with a conclusion which does no more and no less than to summarize what has already been said. This template for essay writing, frequently referred to as the five-paragraph essay or the five-paragraph theme, has been the subject of contentious debate (as documented in Johnson, Thompson, Smagorinsky, & Fry, 2003); some celebrate it for its usefulness as a stepping-stone to more complex writing (Smith, 2006; Seo, 2007), some criticize or even excoriate it for its tendency to stifle students’ critical thinking abilities (Wesley, 2000; White, 2008; Brannon, et al., 2008), and others more or less give it a good hard look and stamp it “handle with care” (Nunnally, 1991).

My purpose here is not to argue which of these perspectives is the correct one, mind you, although I find the debate itself both interesting and entertaining. Instead, my intent is to share how I’ve found this debate useful in making the high school to college writing transition more explicit for students – how I’ve used the debate on the five-paragraph essay in my first-year writing classroom to provide students a space in which to reflect on themselves as writers, their own educational history, their triumphs and frustrations, and their own writing process. In the “five-paragraph essay” unit in my classroom, students perform a kind of autopsy on both the FPE as a method for teaching writing, and on their own writing.

FPE on the FPE: The Instructional Unit

Essentially, the unit is themed around the “five-paragraph essay” – students read a selection of articles arguing the merits and demerits of this common assignment, and then write their own essay, using five-paragraph essay structure, to argue whether or not they believe teaching five-paragraph essay is an effective way to prepare students for college-level writing. Students also must write a cover letter, addressed to me, in which they reflect on their writing process; specifically, they are asked to reflect on how using five-paragraph essay structure helped or hindered them in the process of writing the essay.

For the past few years, I’ve begun both my yearlong and semester-long first-year composition courses with this unit, themed around an examination of the five-paragraph essay. In this unit, we’re working towards several of the university and departmental goals for the course. In the chart below, I’ve quoted the course goal, and in the opposite column have indicated how this unit is designed to work towards that goal.

Students should be able to...	In this unit...
Read actively and effectively and use information acquired from readings, research, and other sources critically in their own writing.	Students are assigned several texts in this unit (described in the “Texts” section below) that they are expected to draw upon in constructing and supporting their arguments in this essay.
Reflect on their reading and writing processes as an avenue to achieving greater control of these processes and increased effectiveness as readers and writers.	Not only does the unit theme ask students to reflect on their writing processes, the assignment itself includes a reflective cover letter. (The informal writing assignments in this unit also include a reflective component, as do the freewrites with which we often begin the class session.)
Use evidence and analysis to successfully support the central purpose of their writing; demonstrate ethical conduct in their writing and the appropriate use and citation of the works of others.	In this unit, we discuss how to appropriately cite the readings, which students are expected to use as sources in their essays. The “Annotate/Connect” informal writing assignment (which I describe in further detail in the “Context” section below) also includes practice in citation.
Develop knowledge of genre conventions ranging from structure and paragraphing to tone and mechanics; control such surface features as	The unit, of course, focuses overtly on structure; the unit also focuses heavily on paragraph development.

syntax, grammar, punctuation and spelling.	
Gain and use knowledge of the academic community to support their development as learners, readers, and writers.	Again, this unit includes readings taken from academic journals, which introduces students to a key aspect of what it means to be part of the academic community. Also, I take the opportunity at this, the beginning of the class, to introduce students to other aspects of the campus academic community, such as tutoring centers and my own office hours. Finally, this assignment is graded in a thirty-minute, one-on-one, "writing conference" with each student.

The Texts

Although I've experimented with additional readings (sometimes assigned, sometimes optional) I've consistently used three readings as the core texts for the unit: "Breaking the Five-Paragraph Theme Barrier" by Thomas Nunnally, "The Ill Effects of the Five-Paragraph Theme" by Kimberly Wesley, and "In Defense of the Five-Paragraph Essay" by Kerri Smith. All three of these articles were published in *English Journal*; Nunnally's in 1991, Wesley's in 2000, and Smith's in 2006 – my students always read them in chronological order. All three authors, who are all teachers, use details from personal experience to support their arguments (Smith's is labeled clearly as an opinion piece, part of the "Speaking my Mind" series in *English Journal*.)

I've chosen these texts because together, they encapsulate much of the range of opinion on the five-paragraph essay; I've also chosen them because they offer, for FYC students who may be reading a text from an academic journal for the first time, an example of how scholars carry on conversations and arguments with one another across space and time through this medium. Although the texts pose some degree of challenge for the majority of my students, they're not so long or obtuse as to prevent accessibility – students at least grasp the gist of each one, creating space for us to then practice better understanding nuance.

The Context

Let me provide some additional context for this assignment in terms of what we do at the beginning of the semester, within the unit, and in the course as a whole. In the last couple

of years, I've begun the semester by having students read Anne Lamott's essay, "Shitty First Drafts," and then write a 1-2 page reflection on their own writing process and how it is similar to or different from the one Lamott describes. This ungraded assignment is a useful diagnostic. It's also an eye-opening reading for many students, many of whom have never thought of "exploring" their ideas in drafts in the way Lamott describes, because that simply wasn't the way the writing process was deconstructed in their prior education.

During the unit itself, students are assigned informal writing assignments on the assigned readings; I used to begin with a simpler "summary/response" assignment, which is fairly self-explanatory, but last year I developed a variation I liked better which I call the "annotate/connect" assignment. For this assignment, students put together a bibliographic citation for the assigned text and a one-paragraph summary – much as they'd do for an annotated bibliography – and in the "connect" section, they write 1 ½ pages or more connecting the assigned text to at least one other text they've read in the class. The idea is that as the semester goes on, students are able to make connections not just between texts from within the same unit, but to texts from prior units as well. In this first unit, though, students are making connections between the other five-paragraph essay readings and/or the Lamott essay, all of which can help them develop their stance for their essay.

Within the unit, students also practice developing their ideas through regular, informal freewrites. Freewrites often lead to class discussion. One form of class discussion I find particularly effective is "conversacolor" discussion, in which students are given a set of colored index cards which they use to signal the type of rhetorical move they wish to make when participating in the conversation. This is one of the ways in which students develop their meta-cognitive awareness in the course. (For more information on conversacolor, see <http://cte.udel.edu/sites/udel.edu.cte/files/ntlf/v12n6/carnegie.htm>.) Students are also required to produce multiple essay drafts, and in this unit begin developing their peer-review skills.

In my mind, the five-paragraph essay on the five-paragraph essay wouldn't be a very effective assignment for helping students make the high school to college transition if it were followed up in the next unit with a formal writing assignment that was basically yet another five-paragraph essay, so the second unit of the class involves a very different type of writing assignment: the "difficulty paper." If you've read *The Elements (and Pleasures) of Difficulty* by Mariolina Salvatori and Patricia Donahue, you've encountered the basic principles of the difficulty paper. The assignment as I employ it was developed by Jen Levinson, a professor at City College of San Francisco, and further adapted by some of my other colleagues at San Francisco State University, most notably Patricia Baldwin. Levinson and Baldwin are both reading specialists as well as writing instructors, so the difficulty paper, as you'll see, is an excellent means of helping students develop their academic reading skills as well as writing skills.

Briefly, the difficulty paper is a four-part writing assignment. For Part 1, students read a difficult or challenging text (or two texts, in some cases) and write about what interested and/or confused them in the text, sharing their experience as a reader. Next, in Part 2, the

student develops a central question about the text, or a question that can be answered using both texts, if two texts are being used, and a strategy or set of strategies for answering the question and thus improving their understanding of the text. These strategies could include, for example, an annotation or note-taking strategy, outside research, careful corroboration of how two or more texts explore an issue, and so on. The student has to identify the steps the strategy will involve, and explain why they think it's an appropriate strategy for the situation – in other words, they have to have some sort of rationale for what they're doing. This section can be thought of as similar to the “methodology” section of an academic research article. Then they go and reread, using their strategy or set of strategies. In Part 3, the student shares their new insight. What did they learn, after going back to the text and applying their strategy? How has their understanding or their perspective shifted? This section is a bit like the “findings” section of an academic research article. Finally, in Part 4, the student evaluates his or her strategies: were they good reading strategies? Were they helpful? Do they seem like they'd be helpful in future encounters difficult readings?

From that brief description, I'm sure you can see how the difficulty paper, in terms of both structure and purpose, is vastly different from the typical five-paragraph essay as encountered by most high school students. Students often find this transition very refreshing, and students who have never thought of themselves as “good writers” because they struggled with the five-paragraph essay format in the past often really start to shine here. They find that when they get to explore what interests them and acknowledge what confuses them (without having to BS about it) they're capable of asking interesting questions and coming up with some really fascinating insights. In short, they find themselves capable of producing something really does look like college-level academic writing.

Like the five-paragraph essay unit, the course as a whole takes on education as a theme; for example, this fall, my second unit was themed around issues of plagiarism and authorship, so students wrote their first difficulty paper on texts by authors such as Susan D. Blum (author of *My Word! Plagiarism and College Culture*), Rebecca Moore Howard, and Diane Pecorari. In previous years I've done units themed around the debate over standardized testing, or a unit in which students prepare application materials for the study abroad program, or a unit of “book clubs” using books relevant to various aspects of the student experience as our texts. I usually include a mix of essay, difficulty paper, and other assignments – for example, in the study abroad unit, students essentially wrote a statement of purpose for a study abroad application, so they'd have practice doing that if they choose to apply for study abroad as sophomores (which many of them have gone on to do.)

Common themes in reflective cover letters

I've selected a variety of student quotes to share with you below. These are not findings from a rigorous formal analysis; these are simply the general trends and themes I've noticed emerging from the cover letters every time I've collected this assignment.

In their cover letters, most students, whether or not they argued in favor of teaching the FPE, report struggling with the limitations of the format. This suggests students are developing an awareness of the relationship between structure and content.

“I was unable to say certain things...Another thing I don’t like about the structure is that I can only use 3 reasons to support my argument”

“I thought the FPT was going to be helpful...However it was not...because I wanted to include both sides in my essay. In other words, my stance was too complex for a simple five paragraph essay...I felt that if this assignment had not been a five paragraph essay, I would have had the chance to explain and make my stance clear to the reader.”

“The area that had its limitations were its body paragraphs, how to use only three ideas instead of more.”

“The five paragraph essay limited my writing when I was trying to fit each of my ideas into the corresponding paragraph. Although the FPT requires only five paragraphs, I believe I’d of been able to write more. I also believe that I’d expanded my ideas and analysis if it wasn’t a certain number of paragraphs that I needed to fulfill.”

“I believe there are plenty more arguments I could have used to support my claim but due to the ‘three body paragraphs’ rule, I was forced to narrow down my options to just three.”

“I had some difficulty creating my three body paragraphs because I was limited with certain ideas. When I approached this essay, I was only able to come up with two arguments”

“It was really hard for me to come up with three strong points...Writing in FPT format is something that I am used to; however, I believe its known constraints contributed to the difficulty I had in this case.”

“Because I needed to have three main ideas, writing my essay in the five paragraph format was a challenge.”

“Yes, I admit that I took the easy way out of this essay [and simplified my stance] because I didn’t want to make things more complicated than they already are.”

“Little did I realize before writing the essay, that it’s difficult to take both sides in the FPT format...As I started writing, I realized that my three main points were different, but in a way they were somewhat saying the same thing.”

“The format constrained me into not writing what I really had on my mind...I kept on getting writer’s block.”

“The limiting factor I felt when writing the FPE was just knowing you are only allowed to have three supporting points...I wished I was able to talk about more points but because I was constrained to only three main points it was hard to write”

“Because of the five paragraph essay’s limitation of space, I could not get all of my ideas down and had to change my whole essay...I did this because after I wrote my essay, I realized that writing a five-paragraph essay really restricts me from expressing all the thoughts and questions I have about the topic.”

“While writing this essay, it was hard for me to stay loyal to my argument and not stray from it.”

“Even though the format was helpful in a couple of ways, it also turned out to be limiting and constraining...because it deterred me from thinking of more reasons that would support my stance.”

“When it came to actually putting my thoughts in the format, I thought of it as constraining because no matter how many topics I would want to talk about, I’m limited to just three...When crafting my argument, the format of the FPE was only helpful in one way: It helped me realized that it is a limiting and constraining format, which became one of my main points in the essay. Other than that, I did not find the FPE helpful in constructing any of my other main points.”

Many students explicitly reflect on the high school to college transition in their cover letters, and how this assignment has led them to rethink the “rules” for writing.

“I never really asked why I had been writing the five-paragraph essay for many years. It was just there.”

“I want to learn something different...to broaden my writing skills. Another downside of the five paragraph essay is that I don’t like how it makes students too reliant on the structure.”

“I haven’t improved my writing since I haven’t been introduced to any other writing format. I do wish I could expand my writing as much as I can and the FPT is just teaching me the basic [format] for an essay.”

“All in all, this assignment made me more aware on what I need to improve as I begin college level writing assignments.”

“After repeatedly using the five-paragraph theme in high school, at some point I eventually just got bored of it. I feel like it is the same thing every single time I sit down

to write an essay of any sort. Regardless of the purpose of the writing task, I always go right to using the five-paragraph theme because that is what I have been told is ‘correct.’”

“It [the five-paragraph essay] does not challenge me as a writer”

“The perception (from high school) that I had of an FPT essay...played into my idea that my argument had to be either ‘pro’ or ‘con.’ Without really thinking about it, I had assumed that a one-sided argument either in support or against the FPT would be what the format calls for.”

“I know that I want to be able to learn more sophisticated writing styles so I can apply them to college classes and...jobs in the future.”

“I had always been taught that the FPT should be written in the order the structure was presented.”

“The five-paragraph essay was all I was ever taught, so I thought that was the only way to write an essay. After transitioning from high school to college, I now understand that it isn’t the only writing style and there is more to writing essays.”

“I believed I was a good writer because I was an expert at writing five paragraph essays, but when I came and started my first semester of college I realized that even though I became an expert at writing high school papers, I wasn’t even close to being an expert at writing college papers.”

“It would be helpful [if] more high school teachers talked to college professors, so they can explain to the students what they need to know about writing papers in college... Writing [FPEs] are easy for me to do, but in college writing I know that students are expected to write more and extend their writing by including examples, and more information to support what they are writing about.”

“I hope in the future that I will be able to show readers my ideas in a way that will make them understand what I’m trying to say, otherwise the last couple of years writing essays has been a waste. Entering college is a whole new chapter...I hope to gain more skills when writing papers and see the progress I’ve made compared to before.”

“The FPT has been a huge part of my writing experience, but now that I am in college I feel as if there are better ways of writing which I have not used, but should have.”

Many students mention their engagement with the assignment in their cover letters; they find it engaging and relatable, and enjoy being able to draw upon personal experience. However, I think the main reason this is true is because so many of my students have been "stuck" writing five-paragraph essays for most of high school, and disliked the experience: students who have long since "moved beyond" the FPE would probably find this assignment less engaging.

"I must say I had an interesting and fun time writing this essay."

"Overall, this experience has been eye opening. Until this assignment, I didn't really think or [pay] much attention to the effects the FPT had on students like myself."

"When I was assigned this essay, I thought it was pretty cool."

"The process of writing a five paragraph essay about the five paragraph theme was fun...it became a topic in which you can really [argue] both sides."

"My favorite part of this whole thing was venting my feelings, and dislike of the FPT. It was a difficulty task to write this essay because I have many mixed feelings on the subject, and it's hard to say that the FPT is entirely bad. I have a lot of bias against the FPT which I finally got to express without being punished by my teacher for criticism."

"Overall this was a paper I enjoyed writing, honestly I have not said this in a long time...I really enjoyed writing about my writing background because I never had the chance to do that before, and the peer edits, being able to work with our classmates was so fun. I did not know a college class would be this way."

"Writing a five paragraph essay about the five paragraph essay was not as easy as I thought it would be, though I did find it interesting and fun."

"My personal thought of the FPT is that it isn't enough for the college level. This is why I believe you had given us this first big assignment, to open our eyes that the FPT isn't enough, and we need to go beyond high school writing."

"At first learning about the FPT and having to explain why we chose the argument we selected seemed like a drag, because it was like all essays previously written. But this was about the FPT, so it was also a proper way of complaining."

"My experience was very interesting with this writing assignment. This is because I had never thought about this format in this way and I had never once heard it referred to as a five-paragraph essay. I just learned that it's an essay and was never really given any name for how I was writing...Personally I felt like it was needed to write in the format we were discussing."

“I actually really enjoyed writing this essay. Even though I made an argument against the five paragraph theme, I am really good at writing five paragraph essays since it’s all I did in high school...I had a lot of fun with this assignment. It brought me back to high school and it showed me that I have grown as a writer.”

“This was an interesting topic to write about for our first essay. My own view of the FPE entirely changed. It was interesting mostly because throughout high school I never thought about any of these problems and I realize now that I was clueless on what I was getting out of the FPE. I also liked the irony of writing an essay that is against the FPE in FPE format.”

“My friends thought [this assignment] was really lame, my parents thought you were crazy. What I did not tell them was the reason why we were doing the paper...I realized we were learning the basics because the majority of things I learned in high school are lies about writing...I was sliding my ideas into boxes and tying it all together with a related thesis on top. I can imagine you opening up every single document as a piece of candy; they all look the same, sound the same and you get one of two flavors: pro FPT or con FPT.”

Why This Unit Works for the Instructor

I believe a skilled instructor can teach writing skillfully while having their students write “about” virtually anything. That said, it’s an interesting feature of college writing courses that instructors often find themselves “teaching” everything from political science to nutrition to history, simply because the writing tasks they’ve assigned their students call for knowledge from other fields and disciplines. This unit circumvents that potential problem, and instead allows the writing instructor to draw from his or her own area of expertise. In teaching this unit and units like it, I’m using articles and other texts from journals and books in my own and closely related fields. The discussions I have with my students are discussions that professionals in my field are having. Given that composition studies are often given short shift in academia, I think it’s worth exposing students to the idea that this is a field of study that, a) exists, and b) holds relevance for their own lives.

Along similar lines, I feel that this unit is valuable to me as an instructor because it reminds me to be reflective in my teaching practice. Because I’m teaching my students, more or less, to examine *why* they’re being taught what they’re taught, I’m held accountable for having a good rationale for everything I do in the course. I have to be willing to be questioned about my methods.

Although it’s impossible to perfectly tailor a course for every individual student in the course, I also like this unit for the amount of insight it gives me about the students in my course, which in turn helps me give each student better feedback and guidance. One of the most effective aspects of the unit, and one that I didn’t discuss much previously, is

that I am able to grade these assignments in conference with students. That certainly isn't an option available to every instructor, but when it is, it's an ideal end (well, almost – more on that later) to the unit. Since high school instructors are essentially prevented from providing this kind of high quality feedback to students, due to the nature of the system within which they work, ending the unit with a half-hour long one-on-one writing conference further highlights the difference between high school and college for students. (It also guarantees that students actually know where my office is located, not to mention providing a demonstration of how useful visiting a professor's office can be!)

This practice guarantees that the student acknowledges and understands the feedback, and provides an unambiguous demonstration that the feedback is far more important than the grade – which, as we all know, is not necessarily the case when a student receives written feedback on an essay assignment. (It's also far more enjoyable for me as an instructor than sitting down and writing comments on a stack of assignments.) To further ensure that students have understood the feedback they received during the conference, I do also ask that students write a reflective letter or similar reflective writing assignment after the conference, in which they explain what about the feedback was clear, what was “fuzzy,” and what they plan to do to revise their essay. Students are able to revise their writing assignments for a better grade, and in the revised version of the essay, they are free to abandon the “five-paragraph essay” structure to any degree they like; at that point, the goal is simply to produce the best argument they can on the topic.

Of course, as I said, I realize that spending this much time conferencing with students is not an option for every instructor. I suspect that an instructor providing traditional written feedback might see fewer benefits to the unit than one who is able to provide feedback in conference, but I think that is true of any writing assignment.

Why this Unit Works for (Some) Students

First-year composition courses are, generally speaking, where the transition from high school to college-level writing is expected to take place. Again, although I believe that an effective and experienced writing teacher can help students make this transition using virtually *any* pretext for writing, I also think there's something to be said for addressing this transition head-on. That's what I like about this unit: students are examining their own past, present, and future in writing. In doing so, they are developing their metacognitive skills in a way that emerges organically from the context and content of the course; this development would likely be less organic and less obvious to students if they were writing about, say, gun control or graffiti or the obesity epidemic.

As a unit theme, and as an assignment, the “five-paragraph essay on the five-paragraph essay” surprises students. I'm not sure what kind of assignment students expect when they enter a FYC class, but this clearly isn't it. It's certainly different from the cycle of “read work of literature, listen to teacher lecture about work of literature, write five-paragraph essay at last minute based on half-remembered lecture and a few Wikipedia articles” that many of my students seem accustomed to. I find that this surprise is helpful

in getting students engaged; once they realize that they have relevant expertise, the class is off and running. The fact that students have relevant expertise also helps cut down on the amount of “bullshitting” in student essays: since students are encouraged to draw upon their own personal experience to develop and support their arguments, and since students come to the topic with a genuine understanding of the problem posed, there simply isn’t much call for it. The cover letter portion of the assignment places a further premium on honesty and genuine reflection.

Although I’ve found this unit very effective, I don’t think it would work as well for some student populations as it has for the students at the large public university at which I teach. My students, particularly those who place into the yearlong first-year writing class, are virtually all coming to our university from high schools within the state – a state which often does not rank high on measures of education quality. Many report that their high schools strongly emphasized preparation for standardized tests (such as district benchmark tests, state-mandated assessments, the high school exit exam, AP tests, and SATs). In this milieu, the five-paragraph essay, and its paragraph-level cousins such as the Schaffer paragraph, are apparently quite common. If I were teaching at a highly competitive top-tier university, I don’t think this unit and this assignment would be nearly as effective; students who manage to get accepted to those institutions are far more likely to have in many cases moved far beyond the five-paragraph essay in high school, and therefore the assignment simply wouldn’t have the same relevance. Likewise, this assignment might be a struggle for students in “basic writing” classes at many community colleges; if a student has simply never encountered the five-paragraph essay, it’s harder for that student to make a productive connection with the assignment.

For the students I teach, though, a common problem is that they are unable at the beginning of the unit to imagine anything *but* the status quo. The five-paragraph essay is what they know, and although the occasional student has encountered something at least slightly different, they have difficulty articulating what other types of writing might look like. To me, one of the biggest benefits of this unit is that it pushes students to the point where they can and do begin to imagine something different – a different world, even, with different ways of thinking, teaching, and learning.

About the Author

Sarah Fama is an instructor at San Francisco State University, where she has been teaching first- and second-year composition since completing her MA in English Composition in 2010. For her MA thesis, she studied instructor perceptions of students on the autism spectrum, and the experiences of students on the autism spectrum in the college writing classroom. Her other research interests include plagiarism, standardized testing, and writing-about-writing curriculum. In addition to teaching, she dabbles in knitwear design, and has had her work published in a number of popular knitting publications, including *Knitscene* and *Interweave Knits*.

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