

## //////////////////// Introduction

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**At the 2017 TESOL Convention,** Nigel, as chair of the Second Language Writing Interest Section, organized a panel for which Ann was a respondent to address the underlying myths that we believe lead to the persistence of the five-paragraph essay in both first (L1) and second language (L2) writing classrooms. The room was packed, which was both flattering and alarming: At the largest annual gathering of ESL/EFL teachers and in this day and age, the five-paragraph essay still needs debunking.

This volume grew out of that conference presentation and includes chapters by all the original speakers as well as other writing specialists. The goal in expanding those brief talks into a book is to make the case for changes in L2 writing practices away from the five-paragraph essay toward purposeful, meaningful writing instruction. If you have already rejected the five-paragraph essay, we offer validation and classroom-tested alternatives. If you are new to teaching L2 writing, we introduce critical issues you will need to consider as you plan your lessons and as you read the textbooks and handbooks that continue to promote the teaching of the five-paragraph essay. If you need ammunition to present to colleagues and administrators, we present theory, research, and pedagogy that will benefit students from elementary to graduate school. If you are skeptical about our claims, we invite you to review the research presented here and consider what your students could do beyond writing a five-paragraph essay if you enacted these changes in practice.

First, though, we need to establish a definition of the five-paragraph essay. We want to be clear from the outset that the number of paragraphs is unimportant: What defines the five-paragraph essay is not the magical trinity of body paragraphs but rather an approach to writing that is insensitive to context, rhetorical situation, audience, or communicative purpose. Instead, the “five-paragraph essay” presents a single, prescriptive, and specific form for all student writing. Underlying this approach is the mistaken belief that any writing task is a problem that can be solved by applying the same formula—that simply by putting prefabricated chunks together, a satisfactory product will automatically emerge.

In the canonical five-paragraph essay, the first paragraph is an inverted-triangular introduction starting with a “hook” and ending with a “thesis statement” that lists two or three ideas. The next two or three paragraphs are the “body” paragraphs that each expand on one of those ideas and may begin with a transition word (*first, next, finally*) followed by a “topic sentence,” a fixed number of “supporting sentences,” and usually a “concluding sentence.” The last paragraph is a conclusion that repeats everything the reader already knows from the previous paragraphs. While five-paragraph essays are often mistakenly applied to all types of student writing (narratives, descriptions, expositions, and so on), they are always thesis-driven arguments at heart, even though not everything is really an argument, in education or anywhere else (see, for example, de Oliveira & Smith’s discussion of the U.S. Common Core State Standards, Chapter 4). The defining feature of the five-paragraph essay is thus its inflexible predictability of form. Sure, it can be contracted to three or four paragraphs, expanded to six or seven paragraphs, or even encapsulated in a single paragraph, but it cannot adapt, evolve, or create. It can only limit, narrow, and simplify.

We argue, therefore, that the central limitation of the five-paragraph essay is that it is a formulaic template for school writing; thus, a number of the authors here use the term **formulaic writing** or **writing template** synonymously with the “five-paragraph essay.” This is not to deny that good writing in many contexts follows patterns of organization, which some scholars call **moves** (e.g., Feak,

Chapter 9) or **stages** (e.g., de Oliveira & Smith, Pessoa & Mitchell, Chapters 4 and 8). Clearly, it is easy to find sets of texts that are highly predictable in structure and language, such as committee resolutions, proclamations, fairy tales, and wedding invitations (although see Tardy, 2016, and Johns, 1997, for some variations). However, it is more accurate to say that these genres have strict **conventions**. As Tardy (Chapter 2) explains, these conventions are tied to the rhetorical situation. What we call formulaic writing, by contrast, applies the same template regardless of purpose, genre, or context, giving rise to the frustratingly resilient five-paragraph essay. We note in passing here that by criticizing formulaic writing, we are in no way dismissing the importance of lexical bundles, micro-level formulae, or multi-word phrases, which are ubiquitous in academic writing and valuable to learners at all levels (see, for example, Biber, Conrad, & Cortes, 2004; Hyland, 2008).

Appropriately enough, this volume consists of an introduction, three body sections, and a conclusion. In Part 1, three chapters discuss what the five-paragraph essay is **not**: it is not a very old, established form of writing (Caplan); it is not a genre (Tardy); and it is not universal (Connor & Ene). Once these common myths have been dispelled, it is easier to see the five-paragraph essay for what it is: a recent and often contested expediency that emerged in North America as a reductive way to simplify the task of teaching and producing pedagogical writing. The reality, as these chapters argue, is that writing is complex, a “thinking tool” (Tardy, p. 30) that responds flexibly to rhetorical situations. By pretending that academic writing is as simple as a five-paragraph formula, even with the best of intentions, teachers deny students access to the writing skills they will actually need.

Part 2 looks at writing across the educational spectrum, from schools to universities to graduate degrees. The five-paragraph essay is often justified as preparation for the next stage in a student’s education, but in fact, the five-paragraph essay is inadequate for effective writing in elementary schools (de Oliveira & Smith), secondary schools (Ortmeier-Hooper), first-year college writing classes (Johns), university writing courses (Ferris & Hayes),

undergraduate classes across the disciplines (Pessoa & Mitchell), and graduate school (Feak). Two themes connect these chapters: (1) the five-paragraph essay is not a support or scaffold for future writing, and (2) the lessons learned from writing five-paragraph essays will not transfer to “real” writing in the future. In response, we show that clinging to the five-paragraph essay is actually an obstacle to students’ progress, especially that of English learners, because it forces writing into a structure that is not, in fact, useful.

Part 3 looks beyond the classroom as Crusan and Ruecker explore the use of the five-paragraph essay in assessment. We recognize, of course, that the five-paragraph essay has spread around the world largely because of perceived requirements of standardized tests. However, the major tests do not all explicitly require five-paragraph essays, and they assess skills that must be demonstrated in other ways. As Crusan and Ruecker point out, perceptions of the test as favoring the five-paragraph essay should not “wash back” into curriculum design.

The volume’s Conclusion takes up this question of curriculum design by stepping back and asking some of the big questions that the volume raises: What is good writing? What do good writers do? What should writing teachers be doing in the classroom if they are not teaching the five-paragraph essay? We also discuss questions we cannot fully answer, citing other works about genre theory, curriculum and lesson design, textbooks, and teacher training.

At the end of each chapter, the authors suggest changes to teaching practices they recommend based on their theoretical approach and classroom experience. Broadly, we all advocate teaching writing through genres or as responses to specific disciplinary prompts rather than as modes crammed into the five-paragraph form of an “essay” (descriptive essay, compare/contrast essay, analytic essay, etc.). Several chapters present assignment sequences that follow similar progressions of text and prompt analysis, modeling and collaborative writing, and meaningful independent writing. Some chapters recommend a rhetorical approach to genres, while others take a more linguistic line, but we all agree that students at all ages and levels need a deep toolbox, a wide repertoire, and a high level of genre awareness.

While we do not all define the problem in the same ways or agree on the same solutions, one theme runs throughout the book: The five-paragraph essay does a disservice to students and teachers. Teaching the five-paragraph essay leads students in the wrong directions, severely limiting their understanding of what writing is—or should be. We believe our students deserve better.

## REFERENCES

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