

# In Defense of the Five-Paragraph Essay

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Last spring, at the same time that English professors across the country were suffering the every-semester hell of grading final papers, high school juniors were receiving scores for the first SAT writing section essay. Immediately, there were complaints: No one can write well in twenty-five minutes! The scorers reward length! What kind of message does this send kids about good writing? At the height of the furor, on May 7, I heard MIT's Les Perelman on NPR's *Weekend Edition* join the chorus against the SAT essay, intimating that since the College Board readers favor the style of the five-paragraph essay, high schoolers are going to have to learn to write five-paragraph essays for the test and for few other good reasons. He claimed that most college professors want to "deprogram" the five-paragraph essay out of students. This is a myth. In fact, many professors would like nothing more than to help students *build* on this foundational form. As a professor of first-year composition, I would be thrilled if, every September, more students could put their ideas together in the coherent fashion demanded by this underappreciated form because, almost without exception, students who know the five-paragraph essay intimately are more prepared to take on the challenge of college-level writing. The tragedy happens when students can't organize their thoughts at all, and I applaud the efforts of the University of California system (whose complaints about the irrelevance of the old verbal section are behind the new SAT writing section) for trying to force high school teachers back to teaching the basics of essay writing.

What is the five-paragraph essay, anyway? It is a way of organizing ideas into an introduction with a main argument, three body paragraphs that develop

that argument, and a conclusion that advances the argument a step further by way of application or tantalizing suggestion. Every piece of great expository writing I have read, from the best of my students' research essays to the essays of Oliver Sacks and Virginia Woolf, adheres to that essential structure. It's no coincidence that the scientific method demands a similar process: hypothesize, test, conclude. High school students should not be allowed to graduate, let alone get a high score on a standardized test, unless they can demonstrate those skills in an essay. Besides, the three body paragraphs are just a guideline, as any good teacher knows—it's that introduce-develop-conclude structure that gives the form its integrity, not the three "example" paragraphs in the middle. But one paragraph would be insufficient for developing the kind of idea a high school graduate should be able to come up with, even in the twenty-five minutes allowed for the SAT essay. So, insofar as length is almost always an expression of complexity and thoroughness (remember, we're talking about students here, not Anne Carson), length is a legitimate criterion for excellence in writing. The College Board simply needs to employ readers who can spot the difference between a flabby essay and a lean, mean, thinking machine. Give it a little time. The essay has only just been introduced; we need to see what develops before we draw our conclusions.

Don't get me wrong. No one should hold up the SAT essay as the gold standard for writing ability—it's far from it, as Perelman pointed out. Students must learn much more than how to write a twenty-five-minute essay; they must learn to engage critically with challenging texts, revise their work, and develop multifaceted ideas over

many more than five paragraphs. They should even try their hands at more creative forms, if for no other reason than that they appreciate what all written texts, even the most avant-garde, have in common. I myself started writing novels and stories in the fifth grade, a passion fostered by teachers who also required me to structure, structure, structure. Let me describe three of these teachers and present them as models of what writing teachers at the secondary levels are supposed to be doing: Mrs. Price, my middle school English teacher, read my stories and my three-paragraph essays, supporting one while teaching the other; Mr. Sheet, my junior year American history teacher and newspaper moderator (I was the editor), taught me not just the facts but also how to think about them, then put them and my own ideas into an amazingly flexible form called the five-paragraph essay; Mr. Cardoza, my high school speech coach, taught me how to revise my work, how to use the five-paragraph essay to write convincing oratories, and how to think of those five paragraphs simply as a mode of organization, which in turn helped me organize my fiction.

Armed with little else in my writing toolbox than fire and the five-paragraph essay, I fulfilled what George Lucas would surely call my “destiny”: I became an English major at UC Berkeley. I thought the people who raised their eyebrows at my choice of major insane: A degree in English not useful? I’ll be able to write and talk circles around the business majors, if business is what I want to do later. And I was right. At least in principle. My dad teaches college business courses, and he would be as thrilled as the companies that are spending untold sums on *remedial writing* classes for their employees if his students were double-majoring in English, being inculcated in the rigors of a discipline founded on excellence in writing. (Or haven’t you heard that obtuse writing isn’t the academic norm? Clarity is groovy, Baby!) At Berkeley, the five-paragraph form got me pretty far, all the way to a seminar taught by Professor Sharon Marcus (now at Columbia), who gave me the first B- I ever received on a writing assignment. It might as well have been an F. That

was the same horrific moment most first-year college students experience when they get back their first graded paper by the new breed of tough composition instructors. After sucking back the tears and talking with Professor Marcus about the essay, I realized that I was just being asked to push my writing to the next level. It was hard work, but it was the beginning of my thinking about writing as an arduous and rewarding process of examining and creating new forms. And I learned this lesson at the appropriate time in my education—after I had already mastered the basics. One great mistake of modern education is the assumption that students can jump to the “fun” stuff before they have learned the “boring” stuff, which is like forgetting that Picasso was a marvelous figurative artist before he invented cubism.

High school teachers shouldn’t worry too much about the SAT essay. Unless, of course, they are not currently teaching the five-paragraph essay as the flexible, functional form that it is, teaching it as a building block to other, more sophisticated forms. The four- to six-paragraph essay students should write for the SAT is just that: a building block everyone should have. Of course, there is a legitimate concern here: Some students are taught that the five-paragraph essay is an inviolable form, an unstormable castle that, as first-year college students, they feel they must die defending. That is the kind of attitude college professors fret over and may feel they need to “deprogram” out of students. But, really, we’d just be glad if they could write well. By the way, have you noticed the form of this essay? It has just five paragraphs; it contains an introduction, a conclusion, and three body paragraphs, each of which develops my main argument. At about 1,250 words, it’s also the length I have to coax out of first-year students after a three-month hiatus from school. Plus, I’ve said just about everything I’d like to say. Not bad for this much-maligned form.

#### Work Cited

“MIT Professor Finds Fault with SAT Essay.” *Weekend Edition*. National Public Radio. 7 May 2005. 20 Sept. 2005 <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4634566>>.

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