

Moving Beyond the Five-Paragraph Essay



The five-paragraph essay follows the standard format: one paragraph for the introduction (usually ending with a three-part thesis), followed by three body paragraphs (each tackling one part of the thesis), and ending with one paragraph for the conclusion (equaling five total). While this format is useful for essay exams, grad-level tests, and brief papers, it doesn't fit well with many of the writing formats you come across in college. So, below are five reasons to move beyond the five-paragraph format as well as suggestions on how to do this work.

- 1) The three-part thesis often is too limiting in college-level writing.
 - Often in college writing, thesis statements will end up being more than one sentence. When you limit yourself to one sentence with three parts, you also limit your analysis and inhibit your ability to find a larger scope.
 - Instead of focusing on a three-part thesis statement, we recommend being specific and to-the-point about what you will examine. This type of thesis can take many forms.
 - You might, for example, in an argumentative paper indicate where your argument differs from those of others.
 - In an analysis, however, you might share what type of examination you're going to offer.
- 2) The five-paragraph essay doesn't allow for deeper analysis.
 - When you are only able to look at 3 points (one per body paragraph) to support your thesis—generally a three-part-thesis—you can only craft a brief analysis or argument.
 - However, when you allow yourself to write beyond the 3 body paragraphs, you can explore more ideas, more sources, and more points of view. To do this fully, we recommend using the MEAL plan.
 - M: Main idea of your body paragraph that connects to your thesis.
 - E: Evidence that supports your main idea.
 - A: Analysis of the evidence.
 - L: Link (transition) to the next idea or back to your Main Idea.
- 3) The flow of a 5-paragraph essay no longer works when you are writing 5-to-10-page papers.
 - If you only have 3 body paragraphs in your essay, they are going to end up 1 to 2 pages long as your page count increases and your ideas will be hard to follow along with or focus on as your readers look at your paper.
 - Instead, we recommend that every time you move to a new idea, you move to a new paragraph. Look at transition words and phrases (examples below) if you feel stuck about how to move to a new idea and use the MEAL plan to make your new paragraph as strong as your previous one.

- For a differing point of view or idea: On the other hand, However, At the same time, Alternatively
 - For continuing with the same theme: Furthermore, Additionally, Moreover, In addition
- 4) It makes your writing predictable.
- The longer you're in college, the more you'll want to explore. But if you limit yourself to only examining three points on any issue—be it in writing or in your free time—you make yourself and your arguments and analysis predictable.
- 5) It doesn't meet the assignment requirements of many types of collegiate-level writing.
- For example, if you're studying in the sciences, you will end up writing lab reports. These cannot be in the five-paragraph format because they require their own format, often referred to as the IMRAD structure.
 - i. Introduction, Methods, Results, Analysis, Discussion (or some form thereof)
 - Alternatively, if you're looking to expand your creative writing capabilities, you'll find that poetry, short stories, and art reviews do not meet the five paragraph requirements.
 - Finally, assignments like annotated bibliographies, literature reviews, close readings, and ethnographies each have their own genre-specific conventions that require you to explore your materials further than three paragraphs of writing.

But never fear, there are resources to help you with moving past the 5-paragraph style:

- Your Gateway instructor, the writing center tutors (both online and in-person), and the Writing Center (WC) Director
- The *Student Resources* section of the IWU WC website and our social media platforms
- Texts including *They Say; I Say*, *Writing Analytically*, and *The Allyn Bacon Guide to Writing* (all available for your use in the writing center and Ames Library)
- Articles including “Kill the 5 Paragraph Essay” in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, “Welcome to College: Say Goodbye to the Five-Paragraph Essay” from California State University Long Beach, and “The Ill Effects of the Five Paragraph Theme” available from the database *JSTOR* on campus.