

## Introduction to College Writing

College professors most often have a different set of expectations for student writing than high school teachers do. In order to meet this challenging transition, students must be willing to move beyond traditional high school templates, such as the five-paragraph theme, and accept the greater freedom and responsibility associated with the next level of learning.

**The five-paragraph theme:** Chances are, you're familiar with the five-paragraph theme already. The form is commonly prescribed by high school teachers because it helps less experienced learners get a feel for writing academic essays. Sticking to the form cuts out organizational problems, as the essay must include an introductory paragraph that ends with a thesis, followed by three body paragraphs that back up the thesis with relevant evidence, followed by a conclusion that sums up the essay. The five-paragraph theme has an hourglass shape, shifting in focus from general to specific and then back to general.

**Why you should avoid it in college:** While high school teachers often focus on memorization and retention of information, college instructors ask students to take this knowledge a step further and to be able to argue, analyze, and interpret what it all really means. Here are some of the shortcomings associated with the five-paragraph form:

- **Lack of context:** In high school essays, using generalities to start a paper is commonly accepted; however, college professors are looking for specifics that put more complicated topics into the proper perspective.
- **Lack of argument:** With the five-paragraph theme, there is a temptation to use the thesis statement to simply list what is to follow in the rest of the paper. It should be evident that the main points that come later are an essential part of the main argument with the connection clearly illustrated in the thesis.
- **Lack of flow:** Students are used to seeing their papers succeed as long as they stick to the clearly defined five-paragraph theme. However, this plug-and-play approach doesn't require transition and connections between paragraphs, which college professors look for.
- **Repetition:** Because of the format, it's not uncommon to see the same three points expressed in the exact same language three different times (in the introduction, corresponding body paragraph, and conclusion) in a five-paragraph theme. In college writing, arguments should build and expand as the paper wears on.
- **Lack of usage in the real world:** Nothing that people commonly read, whether newspapers, magazines, blogs, or even interoffice memos, is written in the five-paragraph form. In order to function in the professional world, you must be able to express yourself beyond the basic form.
- **Form controls content:** In five-paragraph themes, the argument must be shoehorned into the format, which often requires students to eliminate perfectly good ideas that don't have a well-defined fit. In college essays, these are the insights that should be explored.