The five-paragraph essay (5PE) doesn’t have many vocal defenders in Departments of English in higher education, but for some instructors, the 5PE remains a useful tool in the pedagogical kit. Most college writing instructors have eschewed the 5PE, contending that it limits what writing can be, constricts writers’ roles, and even arbitrarily shapes writers’ thoughts. Yet, defenders of the 5PE counter that beginning writers need the guidance and structure that it affords. It works, they say, and it gives writers a place from which to start.

The 5PE may sound familiar. In its most basic form, it is an introduction, three points, and a conclusion. Students are often given a topic to discuss, a passage to respond to, or a question to answer. The introduction and body paragraphs typically follow prescribed conventions regardless of content. For instance, the introduction has an attention-getter and explains what others have said about the topic, and the thesis usually comes close to the end of the paragraph. Each of the body paragraphs has a topic sentence that makes a claim that can be backed up with evidence and that refers back to the thesis. Each topic sentence is followed by sentences that provide evidence and reinforce the thesis. The body paragraphs end with a wrap-up sentence. The conclusion reminds the reader of the main idea, summarizes the main points, and might even leave the reader with one lasting impression.

If all that sounds familiar, then it might be because you were taught the 5PE. Defenders of the 5PE can sometimes be found in high schools or two-year colleges, where they might work with students who struggle with writing or are learning English as a second language. One such teacher, David Gugin, writes about how
the five-paragraph model benefits students learning English as a second language. Like many proponents of the 5PE, he assumes that the main impediment to expressing an idea is knowing how to organize it. As he puts it, “Once they have the vessel, so to speak, they can start thinking more about what to fill it with.”

This type of metaphor abounds. Byung-In Seo compares writing to building a house: One builds a basic structure and the individual spark comes from personalizing the details, either decorating the house or the content of the essay. She refers particularly to her experience with at-risk students, usually meaning students who come into college without the writing skills needed to immediately dive into college-level work. Similarly, Susanna L. Benko describes the 5PE as scaffolding that can either enhance or hinder student learning. A scaffold can be useful as construction workers move about when working on a building, but it should be removed when the building can stand on its own; the problem, as Benko observes, is when neither teacher nor student tears down the scaffold.

Here is the thing, though: When writers (and critics) talk about the 5PE, they’re not really talking about five paragraphs any more than critics or proponents of fast-food restaurants are talking about McDonald’s. Most defenders of the 5PE will either explicitly or implicitly see the sentence, the paragraph, and the essay as reflections of each other. Just as an essay has a thesis, a paragraph has a topic sentence; just as a paper has evidence to support it, a paragraph has detail. An essay has a beginning, middle, and end; so does a paragraph. To quote a line from William Blake, to be a defender of the 5PE is “To see a World in a Grain of Sand.” There are circles within circles within circles from this perspective. If you take this approach to writing, form is paramount. Once you understand the form, you can say anything within it.

This focus on form first (and on the use of the 5PE) is a hallmark of what composition scholars call the current-traditional approach to writing instruction. The current-traditional approach is traceable to the late 19th century, but still persists today in the 5PE and in writing assignments and textbooks organized around a priori modes of writing (the modes being definition, argument, exposition, and narrative). Current-traditional rhetoric valorizes form, structure, and arrangement over discovering and developing ideas. In current-traditional pedagogy, knowledge does not need to be interpreted or analyzed, but merely apprehended. Writing processes are mostly about narrowing and defining ideas and about applying style as external dressing to a finished idea.
Detractors of the 5PE claim that it all but guarantees that writing will be a chore. What fun is it to write when you have no choices, when the shape of your words and thoughts are controlled by an impersonal model that everyone uses, but only in school? Teaching the 5PE is like turning students into Charlie Chaplin’s character from *Modern Times*, stuck in the gears of writing. The 5PE allegedly dehumanizes people. A number of writing specialists from University of North Carolina–Charlotte wrote an article called, “The Five-Paragraph Essay and the Deficit Model of Education.” One of their critiques is that this model means that students aren’t taught to think and feel fully; rather they’re taught to learn their place as future workers in an assembly line economy: topic sentence, support, transition, repeat. Finally, as several writing instructors have observed, the 5PE doesn’t comport with reality. Who actually writes this way? Who actually reads this way? Does anyone care if an essay in *The Atlantic* or David Sedaris’s non-fiction collection *Me Talk Pretty One Day* doesn’t follow some prescriptive model? If the model doesn’t connect to how people actually write when given a choice, then how useful can it be?

Well, as it happens, formulaic writing has some support. Two such people who support it are Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, coauthors of one of a celebrated writing textbook, *They Say/I Say*. Graff and Birkenstein’s book rests on the assumption that all writers—especially skilled writers—use templates, which they’ve learned over time. For instance, there are templates for thesis sentences, templates for counterarguments, templates for rebuttals, templates for introducing quotes, and templates for explaining what quotations mean. One example from their book is this: “While they rarely admit as much, ________ often take for granted that ________,” which is a template students might use to begin writing their paper. Students are supposed to plug their own thoughts into the blanks to help them express their thoughts. Graff and Birkenstein tackle the issue of whether templates inhibit creativity. They make several of the same arguments that proponents of the 5PE make: Skilled writers use templates all the time; they actually enhance creativity; and they’re meant to guide and inspire rather than limit. This doesn’t mean Graff and Birkenstein love the 5PE, though. In an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, they contend that templates are an accurate reflection of how people write because templates are dialogic, but the 5PE is not.

Formulas, including templates, can be effective, and arbitrary formulas can be useful under the right circumstances too. They can
be useful if they are used as a point-of-inquiry, meaning if writers use them as a starting place rather than a destination when writing. In what ways does the five-paragraph model work for this particular assignment? How should I deviate from it? Should I have an implied thesis rather than an explicit one?

Now, you might be thinking, that’s well and good for beginning students, but what about advanced students or professionals? They never use formulas. Well, when my proposal for this piece was accepted, the two editors sent me explicit instructions about how to organize the essay. They divided their instructions into “first paragraph,” “middle paragraphs,” and “later paragraphs,” and then instructions about what comes after the essay. Within each part, they gave specific directions; everything was spelled out. I had a problem; I planned to argue in favor of the five-paragraph essay, so I couldn’t use their formula, which presupposed I would argue against the bad idea.

Hmm. That conundrum required me to ask myself questions, to inquire. How should I innovate from the model? How should I not? Their prescriptive advice was a point-of-inquiry for me that forced me to think rhetorically and creatively. Maybe the five-paragraph model can be a point-of-inquiry—a way to start asking questions about rhetoric and writing. When I wrote this piece, I asked myself, “Why do the editors want me to write using a specific format?” And I then asked, “In what ways does this format prevent or enable me from making my point?” Finally, I asked, “In what ways can I exploit the tension between what they want me to do and what I feel I must do?” Asking these questions forced me to think about audience and purpose. But, perhaps more crucially, I was forced to think of the editors’ purpose, not just my own. By understanding their purpose, the format was more than an arbitrary requirement but an artifact indicating a dynamic rhetorical context that I, too, played a role in.

Once I understood the purpose behind the format for this essay, I could restructure it in purposeful and creative ways. The 5PE follows the same logic. Teachers often, mistakenly, think of it as an arbitrary format, but it’s only arbitrary if students and teachers don’t converse and reflect on its purpose. Once students consider their teacher’s purpose in assigning it, then the format becomes contextualized in consideration of audience, purpose, and context, and students are able to negotiate the expectations of the model with their own authorial wishes.
Further Reading

For more information about the connection between the five-paragraph essay and current-traditional rhetoric, you might read Michelle Tremmel’s “What to Make of the Five-Paragraph Theme: History of the Genre and Implications.” For a critique of the 5PE, you might read Lil Brannon et al.’s “The Five-Paragraph Essay and the Deficit Model of Education.”

If you’re interested in reading defenses for the 5PE, you might start with Byung-In Seo’s “Defending the Five-Paragraph Essay.” A longer more formal argument in favor of the 5PE can be found in David Gugin’s “A Paragraph-First Approach to the Teaching of Academic Writing.” In the essay, “In Teaching Composition, ‘Formulaic’ Is Not a 4-Letter Word,” Cathy Birkenstein and Gerald Graff criticize the 5PE but defend writing formulas done in more rhetorically effective ways.

Defenses of the five-paragraph theme often frame the genre as a scaffolding device. Susanna Benko’s essay, “Scaffolding: An Ongoing Process to Support Adolescent Writing Development,” explains the importance of scaffolding and how that technique can be misapplied. Though her essay only partially addresses the 5PE, her argument can be applied to the genre’s potential advantages and disadvantages.

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Author Bio

Quentin Vieregge is a faculty member in the Department of English at the University of Wisconsin–Barron County, a two-year liberal arts college. He teaches first-year composition, advanced composition, business writing, literature, and film courses. He can be followed on Twitter at @Vieregge. His website is quentin-vieregge.com.