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My Five-Paragraph-Theme Theme

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Since the beginning of time, some college teachers have mocked the five-paragraph theme. But I intend to show that they have been mistaken. There are three reasons why I always write five-paragraph themes. First, it gives me an organizational scheme: an introduction (like this one) setting out three subtopics, three paragraphs for my three subtopics, and a concluding paragraph reminding you what I have said, in case you weren't paying attention. Second, it focuses my topic, so I don't just go on and on when I don't have anything much to say. Three and only three subtopics force me to think in a limited way. And third, it lets me write pretty much the same essay on anything at all. So I do pretty well on essay tests. A lot of teachers actually like the five-paragraph theme as much as I do.

The first reason I always write five-paragraph themes is that it gives me an organizational scheme. It doesn't matter what the subject is, since there are three parts to everything you can think of. If you can't think of more than two, you just have to think harder or come up with something that might fit. An example will often work, like the three causes of the Civil War or abortion or

reasons why the ridiculous 21 year limit for drinking alcohol should be abolished. A worse problem is when you wind up with more than three subtopics, since sometimes you want to talk about all of them. But you can't. You have to pick the best three. That keeps you from thinking too much, which is a great time saver, especially on an essay test.

The second reason for the five-paragraph theme is that it makes you focus on a single topic. Some people start writing on the usual topic, like TV commercials, and they wind up all over the place, talking about where TV came from or capitalism or health foods or whatever. But with only five paragraphs and one topic you're not tempted to get beyond your original idea, like commercials are a good source of information about products. You give your three examples and zap! you're done. This is another way the five-paragraph theme keeps you from thinking too much.

The last reason to write this way is the most important. Once you have it down, you can use it for practically anything. Does God exist? Well, you can say yes and give three reasons or no and give three different reasons. It doesn't really matter. You're sure to get a good grade whatever you pick to put into the formula. And that's the real reason for education, to get those good grades without thinking too much and using up too much time.

So I've given you three reasons why I always write a five-paragraph theme and why I'll keep doing so in college. It gives me an organizational scheme that looks like an essay, it limits my focus to one topic and three subtopics so I don't wander about thinking irrelevant thoughts, and it will be useful for whatever

writing I do in any subject. I don't know why some teachers seem to dislike it so much. They must have a different idea about education than I do.

I wrote this little jeu d'esprit while flying back to Arizona from Florida after serving as a Table Leader for the 2007 Advanced Placement English test. I had been part of an army of readers scoring about 280,000 exams (in 2008 the number jumped to about 315,000), each containing three impromptu essays, written by high school students--many of them trained to write five-paragraph essays in order to pass writing tests. I had been disheartened by how many good writers I saw writing badly. It was clear that this training in producing five-paragraph essays often had little to do with writing as a form of discovery and reflection, not to speak of developed argument. But what else can we expect of high school seniors writing an impromptu essay in 45 minutes? Many of these 280,000 students had obviously been trained to write 5-paragraph themes, and who can blame either the teachers or the students for that? Still, I was troubled: Why did so many of the AP essays show so little of what we teach in first-year writing courses, despite the obvious competence of the students in the techniques of essay production?

I know that there is much to be said for teaching the five-paragraph theme, from the teacher's as well as the student's perspective, and I tried to have my theme theme enumerate them. Though a formula, it is an organizational scheme and it is better to have some organization than none at all. We know that an essay needs to be built around assertions and that some kind of evidence for these assertions is necessary. The writer of this five-paragraph theme doesn't appear to have any sense that writing could encourage

reflection or discovery; the formula doesn't exactly prohibit it, though this writer appears to be among the many who feel it renders such matters unnecessary. Above all, this writer appears to know that the five-paragraph theme allows every student to turn out something "that looks like an essay," and this important fact meets our obligation as teachers to get as many of our students as possible through the incessant testing of writing. It is even possible, as a few AP students demonstrated, to use that formula to turn out some real writing and I'm sure some very good English teachers have used the five-paragraph formula to help students get started. But by and large, formulas don't much engender thinking; indeed they actively discourage it. Finally, what troubled me most as I wrote this five-paragraph theme was what happened to me as a writer when I knew the only purpose I was writing was to pass a test. I organized my thoughts, such as they were, edited my work carefully, even imagined the teachers who would be grading my work. Would I have passed the test? Probably. And yet most of what I value about writing is missing here: reflection, understanding of the issues, awareness of other perspectives on the topic, and an understanding of the relation of writing to thinking.

We see plenty of students like this in our first-year composition classes, whether the college is a "selective" one or not. Our job is to make sure students like this have "a different idea about education" by the time they leave our class. That is not only a pedagogical problem embedded in the curriculum of most such courses but an issue that rhetoricians for the last two thousand years have wrestled with. How can we teach the rudiments of an organized argument without trapping our students in a limited formula? The five-paragraph theme is the most recent version of writing from models, learning through copying formats, developing templates—a concept with a long pedagogical

history. Used well, this form of rote learning teaches important skills that students learn to use in many different ways; used badly, it dries up the imagination, substitutes form for substance, and teaches that writing is not a matter of discovery or thought but just a matter of filling in the blanks.

If we choose to use the five-paragraph theme to teach the concept of organization and development of ideas, we need to be sure that competing heuristics with the same goals are also part of what we teach. Thus, we should also spend some time with narrative structures that respond to assignments calling for telling about a personal experience and what it means to the writer—and, possibly, the reader. The first draft of such a paper will have a simple chronological structure, detailing the experience. But revisions will find ways to open with the reasons the experience mattered, include those ideas throughout the narrative, and conclude with some suggestion that readers should be interested in the writer's reflections, which are not merely personal.

Or we could present, as another alternative, the structure required by a comparison/contrast assignment, derived from two readings: in what respects do these writers differ or agree, and what conclusions on the topic do you draw from that comparison? Now we need a structure that allows the writer to discuss each reading in some detail, then moves to another section describing their agreement, another on their differences, and finally a developed argument about what matters about the two positions and where the writer has come to stand on the topic.

Such an expanded idea of organization needs to deal with the exigency that calls forth the writing, that is, some reason besides getting a grade for producing a text. Only then can we approach formats and formulas that might help with organizing ideas. I was

lucky enough to find such a teacher in first-year composition, and he turned me into a writer—and changed my life. I'd like to think that college-level writing will continue to offer such challenges and opportunities to all the students passing through our classes.

Powerful formulas help students get going and often help them to pass tests--but at the cost of creativity or really thinking about what they say. I would like to argue here that formulas--and especially the five-paragraph essay formula--should be regarded by teachers as a way-station on the path to more real writing. This formula should only be used to meet short-term goals. Unfortunately, I think most students are happy to stop with the formula, so teachers should avoid it whenever possible.

Note: Edward M. White has written or edited 13 books and more than 100 articles or book chapters on writing, writing instruction, and writing assessment. In 2007, he co-edited (with a former student) his fifth textbook for college writing students, *The Promise of America*, and fully revised the fourth edition of his book for teachers, *Assigning, Responding, Evaluating*. His best-known books are *Teaching and Assessing Writing*, which won a Shaughnessey award from the Modern Language Association in 1994, and *Assessment of Writing*, an MLA research volume, in 1996. After taking early retirement in 1997 as an emeritus professor of English at the CSU San Bernardino campus, where he was named "Outstanding Professor" in 1994, he joined the University of Arizona English department, where he continues to teach graduate courses in writing assessment, writing

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research, and writing program administration. Now in his 51st year of teaching, he is also rewriting *Teaching and Assessing Writing* for a third edition, working on another writing textbook, and—that supreme indulgence of the elderly—writing a memoir.

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