

The handout was sent to me by a former student who received it in her freshman writing class in the honors program at USC (10/2000). I do not know who the professor is.\*

## Welcome to College: Say Goodbye to the Five-Paragraph Essay

Many students learned in high school to write what is commonly known as the five-paragraph essay. The Five-Paragraph Essay consists of (surprise!) five paragraphs that follow a very structured format. The first paragraph contains a one sentence (or maybe a two sentence) thesis statement, which is followed by three sentences that briefly describe what will be discussed in the three body paragraphs. These three sentences are sometimes referred to as the pathway, since they show where the paper will go. There may be a transitional sentence to the next paragraph, which discusses the topic of the first pathway sentence. The next two body paragraphs develop and detail the next two pathway sentences. The conclusion, the fifth paragraph, restates and summarizes the arguments of the essay, sometimes beginning with the phrase, "In conclusion."

The strength of the five-paragraph essay is that it is highly structured, and fairly easy to teach. It provides a very formulaic style of writing that many students find helpful. However, once you reach the college level, the weaknesses outweigh the strengths. The five-paragraph essay encourages students to engage only on the surface level without attaining the level of cogency demanded by college writing. In its broad, overarching style, it has a tendency to encourage overly general thesis statements that lead to poorly developed and unfocused papers. And its formulaic nature makes it prone to produce papers with stilted organization. Not to mention that it is next to impossible to write five pages of one without repeating yourself. The only time the five-paragraph essay may be useful in college is when you are writing answers to brief essay questions on exams.

So, what are you supposed to write? The easiest thing to remember is that with a few sentence level changes, each pathway sentence from a traditional five paragraph essay would make a great working thesis for the kind of argumentative, thesis-driven paper that you are asked to write in college. Here's an example in answer to the prompt, "What fundamental change would improve high school education?"

*High school education has several problems which must be solved to prepare America's youth for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Overcrowded classrooms mean that students do not receive the individualized attention that they need to succeed. Increasing rates of crime are making students afraid to come to school, and preventing students from concentrating while they are there. In addition, the lack of technological resources like state of the art computers is preventing students from being competitive in the workplace after graduation. These problems all mean that some students are falling behind.*

*When students fall behind, they need the attention of an instructor one on one to catch up. Because classrooms are so crowded, teachers are overworked. As a result...*

OR

*High schools across the country are bulging at the seams. As increasing numbers of Americans realize that education is necessary to attaining the American dream, our schools grow more crowded. At the same time, budget cuts have caused schools to cut back on the number of teachers. As the number of teachers has dropped, and classrooms have become more crowded, the quality of education in our public schools has declined. With a higher workload, burnout among even the best teachers has increased, and fewer people see teaching as the desirable profession they once did. Solving the problem of overcrowding by strictly limiting class size to 20 students would allow more students to get the instruction they need to become productive members of society, which is the most important goal of high school education in America today.*

\* Source: Elizabeth Guzik, CSULB?

Let's look more closely at the differences between these two paragraphs. Let's start with the thesis.

### 5 Paragraph Essay

High school education has several problems which must be solved to prepare America's youth for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This thesis states the obvious. It is so general that just about anything you threw into the essay could be used to support it—but you would end up with a very unfocused essay. Also, note the use of vague wording—"several problems." Finally, a college paper must take a position that a rational person would disagree with. What rational person would not agree with this sentence?

### College Essay

Solving the problem of overcrowding would allow more student to get the instruction they need to become productive members of society, which is the most important goal of high school education in America today.

This statement narrows the topic down to a specific problem: overcrowding. It also states why overcrowding is a problem. The sentence implies that overcrowding is preventing at least some students from getting the education they need to "become productive members of society," which the thesis itself identifies as a primary goal of high school education. There are lots of rational people who would choose another problem as the worst obstacle facing high school education. There are also lots of rational people who would argue for a different primary goal of high school education.

What else happen in an introductory paragraph? Once you've introduced your thesis, you want to include enough other information to flesh out the paragraph and give your reader some idea where you might go without simply listing the topic sentences for the rest of the paragraphs in the essay. Let's look at what the other paragraphs of these essays would cover.

### 5 Paragraph Essay

1. Overcrowding interferes with instruction
2. Increasing crime makes students afraid/ unable to work.
3. No tech resources means not prepared for work force.
4. Conclusion

Notice that none of these are connected to each other. You could switch the order, and nothing would happen. Also, one requirement of this assignment was to identify a primary goal of high school education. Where could you put that paragraph into this format?

### College Essay

Some topics this essay might cover are:

1. Primary goal of h.s. ed is to make all students, not just some, productive members of society.
2. More people need, and more people seek education.
3. Budget cuts cause lower number of teachers, which reduces quality of classroom instruction.
4. Teachers get burned out when classes are overcrowded.
5. In overcrowded classrooms, too many students get lost or slip through the cracks.
6. Conclusion suggesting what the result of solving the problems might be for society.

All of these points are connected to the thesis. Though their order can vary, some will make more sense if they come before other statements. Also note that some of these points are not directly listed in the introductory paragraph.

## YOUR TURN

Looking at your Assignment 1, write an introductory paragraph for a five paragraph essay on the topic (the last one you'll EVER write for this class) and then write an introductory paragraph for an essay that will make its working thesis statement out of one of the three points presented in the five-paragraph essay example.