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# The Five-Paragraph Essay: An In-Depth Exploration of the Genre and its Limitations in Writing Pedagogy

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The Five-Paragraph Essay:  
An In-Depth Exploration of the Genre and its Limitations in Writing Pedagogy  
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### **What is the Five-Paragraph Essay?**

On a cold January morning, my twelfth graders at Edsel Ford High School, where I completed my student teaching, were just finishing up their projects and putting their things away before the bell rang. I surveyed the classroom, approached a particular group of my students, and asked them all collectively “What is your earliest memory of essay writing in school?” I received responses like “filling out the hamburger,” “an essay about my top three vacation spots,” and “an essay about what I want to be when I grow up.” One student contemplated for a minute before he responded “the five-paragraph essay” to which all the students nodded in agreement and made comments on how they all remember the five-paragraph essay. What the students did not realize is that all their responses included the five-paragraph essay in one way or another. The commonly assigned “vacation spots” and “future career” essays are usually written using the five-paragraph method, and the hamburger graphic organizer is used to model this very method as well at the elementary school level. Looking back, I too can trace my essay writing experiences back to the five-paragraph essay. It is quite a prevalent practice in writing instruction.

The five-paragraph essay is a specific format of writing an essay that is commonly utilized in schools when teaching students how to write a proper essay. It is considered its own genre of writing with specific conventions. As the name suggests, it is comprised of five paragraphs at its most basic level: one introductory paragraph, three body paragraphs, and one concluding paragraph. The thesis of the essay is introduced in the introduction paragraph, then followed up with a topic sentence and supporting sentences in each body paragraph proving the thesis, and then restated in the concluding paragraph with a summary of the topic

sentences (Nunes, 2013). At a more advanced level, the number of body paragraphs usually increases, and this structure is applied to other writing strategies such as compare and contrast, problem/solution, or cause and effect, but the overall format is still the same. This format is designed to help students keep their writing organized and structured and help them keep their writing centered around their thesis, which is a skill that many students have difficulty mastering.

### **An Overview of the Debate**

In today's education world, the five-paragraph essay is considered a staple in school writing curricula, but is under great scrutiny by educators. In fact, this writing genre has been a topic of ongoing, passionate debate among educators for the past few decades. Countless opinionated articles and commentaries regarding this genre have been published in this time period. Supporters of the five-paragraph essay claim it's a helpful tool to teach students how to structure their writing and organize their ideas. They view it as a set of training wheels for beginner writers as they improve their writing skills. Some teachers also like this method because it is easy to teach and easy to grade; it makes their already tough job easier. On the other hand, the opponents argue that this format stifles creativity and is very formulaic and restrictive, which defies what writing is truly all about. They reason that we shouldn't be teaching kids that there is only one standard or proper way to write a strong, structured, and clear essay. Instead of being taught as *a* way of organizing an essay, it is portrayed as *the* way of organizing as essay. This thesis will further explore the ongoing debate on the five-paragraph essay, as well as delve deeper into the genre itself.

### The Origins and Evolution of the Genre

The first step to better understanding the genre of the five-paragraph essay is looking at the history behind it. Majority of scholars believe that the origins of the five-paragraph essay can be traced back to current-traditional rhetoric in which theme writing is embedded (Tremmel, 2011). Current-traditionalism is a specific approach to writing instruction that “emphasizes product over process and emerged during the mid-nineteenth century in response to the new scientific curriculum of the modern American university” (Tremmel, 2011). However, in 2013, Dr. Matthew J. Nunes of Ohio University published a journal article in which he traces the origins of the five-paragraph essay to long before the current-traditional period. He claims that its origins lie in a form of theme-writing that is deeply rooted in English education and classical rhetoric (Nunes, 2013). Since the form of the five-paragraph essay aligns with the current-traditional form of formulaic, structured writing, Nunes claims that this is why it is assumed that the five-paragraph essay was born in the current-traditional period. Interestingly enough, he goes on to say that there is no clear answer to when this genre of writing originated. “Although the creation of the five-paragraph essay cannot be clearly attributed to a particular year, place, or group, its origins are much deeper than current-traditionalism” (Nunes, 2013). He also addresses another theory behind the five-paragraph essay’s origins. Some believe that this writing genre was “an entirely new invention of the English grammar schools of the sixteenth century” (Nunes, 2013). However, Nunes says this theory is inaccurate.

Michelle Tremmel, on the other hand, writes about the school theme, an invention of Barret Wendell at Harvard in 1884. This theme emphasized strict style and grammatical

correction in line with current-traditional practices, and was commonly used for writing practices and examination at the college-level due to its regulated form (Tremmel, 2011). This school theme then evolved over the next fifty years into the “reified five-paragraph template circa 1959 when Victor Pudlowski articulated its components in the English Journal article "Compositions-Write 'Em Right" (Tremmel, 2011). This so-called right way of writing fit into the current-traditional pedagogy of the time that was moving towards using essays as the standard method to assess student knowledge. It still fits into our standardized test driven pedagogy today as well as a “uniquely "North American species" of "pseudogenre," a formula that puzzles those who teach writing elsewhere in the world” (Tremmel, 2011). The focus today in education is on using five-paragraph essays mainly as an assessment of writing skills, rather than using it solely as an assessment of content knowledge as it was traditionally done in the past.

### **Theories of Writing**

I was interested in studying the theories of writing that inform the five-paragraph essay in an effort to broaden my understanding of the genre itself. Research on these theories is quite limited; however, I came across two main ones, in addition to current-traditionalism. One of these theories is called traditional formalism. This theory embodies the idea that writing is like filling out a template, rather than being a creative process. As Mark Wiley, a university professor says, teaching writing as a formula is “easy to teach, easy for students to grasp and apply, easy to produce prompt results in raising students’ standardized test scores” (Wiley, 2000). Traditional formalism focuses on making writing accessible because the format is strictly regulated and grounded in purpose, but there are some drawbacks to this writing theory. For

example, it hinders students from exploring their own ideas, reactions, and interpretations, and it does not allow for growth in writing ability (Wiley, 2000). Kurt Schick, a professor at James Madison University, summarizes this theory as “good old-fashioned, teacher-centered, product-oriented instruction” (Schick, 2008). Proponents of traditional formalism oppose the newly founded process pedagogy of writing, which focuses on the process of writing over the finished product. Schick states that traditional formalism allows educators to actually measure student learning better than any other approach, due to its consistency (Schick, 2008). This consistency is the main reason that the five-paragraph essay is so commonly taught and assigned to students.

Another theory of writing inherent in the five-paragraph essay is the transparent transmission theory of writing. According to Way Albert Jeng of Washington State University the idea behind this theory is that “by having students write in set, organized patterns, the students will presumably begin to think in organized ways” (Jeng, 2015). This theory emphasizes cognitive processes in addition to the writing process. Writing is seen as merely performative. Jeng goes on to say that “the purpose of the writer is not to produce or negotiate the formation of knowledge per se, but rather to reproduce and transmit what is known and agreed upon” (Jeng, 2015). Generally speaking, five-paragraph essays also entail having students transmit known information; they are not used in inquiry-based assignments or dissertations. These two theories of writing- traditional formalism and the transparent transmission theory of writing- are clearly evident in the format and purpose of the five-paragraph essay.

### **How the Five-Paragraph Essay is Used in Today's Classrooms**

I attempted to find research regarding when and why the five-paragraph essay became the standard way of teaching writing in classrooms, but was unable to locate any credible sources. However, there is abundant research regarding how it is used in classrooms. Nowadays, teachers rely on this specific way of composing and writing essays because it is a “logical, orderly, efficient, and systematic approach that fits neatly into writing-lesson compartments” (Tremmel, 2011) Teachers also use five-paragraph essays for various purposes, and various audiences. One example is using it for at-risk students in need of structure when initially learning to write. Byung-In Seo, a professor at Saginaw Valley State University, wrote an article for the National Council of Teachers of English in which she defends the five-paragraph essay, specifically for at-risk students. When she was a teacher in a secondary classroom, she taught writing skills to at-risk students in a standard format. Her philosophy on writing instruction is that the format, or structure, needs to be established first, then students can add their creative touches (Seo, 2007).

Seo emphasizes how at-risk students have trouble using words to express their ideas, hence they need to be given the five-paragraph essay structure to follow because they are clear and easy to follow for inexperienced writers and students with learning disabilities. She uses the five-paragraph essay as a first step in scaffolding more complex writing assignments. Teaching it also enables students to identify topic sentences, supporting sentences, and concluding sentences in other works such as magazine articles, textbooks, and newspapers, because most expository texts are organized similarly (Seo, 2007). Many other educators also use the five-paragraph essay as a scaffold for more complex and challenging writing



assignments. Burks believes the five-paragraph essay has a lot of potential as a scaffolding tool. “We as teachers offer the student a guide which they can themselves modify as they become more proficient writers” (Burks, 2010). However, many students rarely move beyond this genre when asked to produce a piece of writing, as they mistakenly believe that this is the standard method, and any other structure of writing will not satisfy the requirements. To add to the problem, many teachers as well seem to be “at a loss when determining how to move beyond this format” (Burks, 2010). I will delve deeper into this when discussing the persistence of the five-paragraph essay later in this thesis.

Possibly the most common reason the five-paragraph essay is taught to students is to prepare them for standardized tests. The SAT in particular favors this writing format. “Les Perelman who directed the undergraduate writing program at Massachusetts Institute of Technology criticized the SAT’s essay portion, attacking its scoring practices that seem to push the (five-paragraph essay)” (Wertheimer, 2005). The push in education today is on preparation for the standardized tests, and the SAT is one of the most significant exams. Hence, ELA educators choose to teach the five-paragraph essay, as that is the standardized formula that students are expected to write in on the tests in order to earn a proficient score.

### **Delving Deeper into the Debate**

The five-paragraph essay has been a highly debated topic within the education world for many years. A google search for “five-paragraph essay debate” yields almost two million results, with results dating back to the 1990s. Everyone from secondary educators to curriculum experts to university professors has an opinion on this debate. Some are strongly in favor, while some strongly oppose it. Jan Haluska, chair of the English Department at Southern Adventist

University quips that “Anyone wanting to start an argument among a group of English teachers has only to ask: “How do you feel about teaching five-paragraph essays?” (Haluska, 2012). You would receive responses like “They are very structured,” “They’re artificial and lifeless,” or “They suppress individual expression” (Haluska, 2012).

First, I am going to discuss the experts’ opinions in this five-paragraph essay debate. The opposing side’s main argument is that writing is all about creativity and expressing yourself, but the five-paragraph’s rigid structure and conventions does not allow for the writer to be creative. In the 1970s, Ken MacRorie published a book titled *Uptaught*, which is considered the most influential writing-theory book of that decade. He argues that five-paragraph essays and other similar formula-style essays force students “to write mechanically instead of self-expressively” (Haluska, 2012). Kay Halasek, the Director of Ohio State University’s Institute for Teaching and Learning, provides an interesting argument regarding the ideologies behind the five-paragraph essays, which she labels as a repressive practice. She states there is a “dangerous paternalism surrounding this pedagogical practice, which stems from objectivist rather than constructivist notions of language and discourse” (Brannon, 2008). Hence, students are compelled to believe that they must attain mastery with this one form of writing. The supporters of this writing genre claim that the five-paragraph essay is a foundational genre of writing, or a one-size-fits-all approach to writing, but Halasek claims otherwise. This ideology is false because it “ignores the generative nature of forming and “disregards the intimate relationship among audience, social context, subject, and author” (Brannon, 2008). Writing is highly influenced by these various factors.

The supporting side in this debate see a lot of potential in the five-paragraph essay genre. They argue that a general formula which allows writers to produce clear, objective writing will do them a great service (Haluska, 2007). One aspect of the five-paragraph essay that they find highly useful for the purposes of writing instruction is the rigid structure and guidelines. For example, Thomas Nunnally, Associate Professor of English at Auburn University, believes that “this highly structured format for essay writing provides for effective inculcation of concepts such as unity, coherence, and development” (Nunnally, 1991). In addition, they see it as a useful teaching tool for breaking down the writing process, especially when initially introducing students to essay writing. “Students learn to do one thing at a time, such as form a thesis statement, before putting all the parts together, and their progress can be monitored and evaluated piecemeal” (Nunnally, 1991). The supporters also see merit in the five-paragraph essay for specific purposes and audiences, like Seo’s focus on at-risk students. Haluska also claims that an intelligible five-paragraph essay is flexible enough to accommodate any persuasive need (Haluska, 2007). Hence, the supporters disregard the argument that the five-paragraph essay does not take purpose or audience into consideration.

### **The Opposing Side and their Rationale**

Since majority of the literature about the five-paragraph essay focuses on the opposing side, I would like to more closely examine their rationale and why they think this writing genre is ineffective. The main reason some are opposed to the five-paragraph essay, besides the presumed stunting of creativity, is because they do not see it as realistic, or applicable in real life. They believe it does not allow students to develop necessary writing skills that they need to be successful- both in academic writing and writing for the real world (Burks, 2010). Ironically,

this genre that is touted as “The Instant Essay Success Formula” does not generate long-term successful writers. The problem starts right after students finish high school. Professors believe that the five-paragraph essay does not let students achieve college readiness. In fact, many professors have to spend time “un-teaching” what high school teachers have taught to students regarding effective writing (Burks, 2010). Some even say that students are never taught “real” writing in high school, rather their time is spent learning longhand test-taking. “In Beil and Knight’s (2007) survey of first-year students at George Washington University, they learned that many students had not been required to write lengthy papers in high school. Instead, they had mainly been relegated to the five-paragraph essay” (Burks, 2010).

Another survey of the perceptions of secondary educators and professors on students’ college readiness also reveals their disappointment at the mediocre writing length required of students at the high school level. Some even consider it to be a complete lack of length. “According to Sanoff (2006), 25% of high school English teachers —never assign longer papers” (Burks, 2010). By focusing strictly on the five-paragraph essay in high school, the opposing side believes students are not able to develop writing skills that they will actually need in the future, like longer length of writing. Consequently, they will not be ready for the intensive writing required at the college level, and eventually in their professional lives.

### **The Persistence of the Five-Paragraph Essay**

If a large number of educators and scholars are opposed to the five-paragraph essay, then why does it still persist to this day? This is an important question to address as it provides insight into a deeper problem within education. There are various opinions on this persistence, besides the popular one that standardized testing pushes for this genre. Some educators

suggest that the answer to this question does not have to do with the genre itself, it is more a matter of convenience. “The teachers do not have the time to read more than five paragraphs from each student, and in some cases, the teachers do not know any alternatives” (Burks, 2010). Hence, they resort to teaching writing with this easily gradable essay format. Some argue teachers have no choice but to take this shortcut due to the poor working conditions in schools: “too many students, too little planning time, too few resources, too much bureaucracy” and so on (Johnson, Thompson, Smagorinsky & Fry, 2003). From this, it becomes evident that it is not the teachers that are willingly teaching this model, it is the product of oppressive teaching environments that compel vacuous instruction. Jeanetta Miller, English department chair at Newtown High School in Sandy Hook, Connecticut, provides a unique response regarding this genre’s persistence. She states that it’s easy to blame teachers, but what is really keeping the five-paragraph essay alive is the students themselves:

To an overloaded and anxious student who is focused on surviving high school, the five-paragraph essay must seem predictable and safe. Students may not be joyful or even engaged in writing the five-paragraph essay, but they can feel the all too adult satisfaction of checking an item off that long To Do list. The five-paragraph essay relieves students of responsibility to make decisions about form and organization, relief that may be shared by equally overloaded and anxious teachers (Miller, 2010).

Therefore, even while the debate continues, the five-paragraph essay still manages to thrive and maintain its popularity among teachers and students. However, all these reasons regarding the persistence suggest that it is mainly the teachers who are heavily relying on this genre, and

thus perpetuating its usage among students. It is to the point where writing becomes like math or science. Students do not even allow themselves to experience the creative freedom that writing allows; their main focus is on writing a standard piece of writing that will check off all the boxes on the rubric.

### **Teachers' Rationale for Relying on the Genre**

So even though the five-paragraph is under scrutiny for its perceived lack of effectiveness, why do teachers today heavily rely on this writing genre when teaching writing? Surprisingly, a major reason is because of their own personal experiences as students, which is what teachers have to rely on due to the inadequate writing pedagogy in teacher education programs. This reason was derived from a teacher resource project exploring the following question: Where do beginning teachers get their ideas about writing and writing instruction? A case-study used in this project indicated how some teachers draw from their own schooling. This is because of certain limitations of teacher education programs. Tremmel writes that it is not uncommon for beginning teachers (despite their best intentions) to progress through a complete field experience without ever becoming fully involved in writing instruction or thinking of themselves as writing teachers (Tremmel, 2001). This is due to the emphasis on literature instruction in teacher education programs, which results in teachers drawing from their experiences and teaching in an old-fashioned manner.

One of the teacher's in the case study indicated how her pre-service experiences focused on literature, not writing, and she thus did not have a strong conceptual framework to critique the five-paragraph essay, or develop an understanding of how to teach writing in other ways (Zuidema & Fredricksen, 2016). This teacher then turned to her own school experiences to

inform her teaching. Since this way of writing worked well for her as a student, she decided to teach it. “Their experiences as students enculturate them to view particular educational traditions and practices as normative and important to perpetuate” (Tara et al., 2003).

However, this does not indicate that this way of writing is effective. This predicament is not exclusive to one teacher. The case study found that overall when it comes to writing, educators seem to rely more on intuition than empirical evidence (Zuidema & Fredricksen, 2016). When teaching writing, empirical evidence is of more importance than personal experience, because what may have worked for one person may not work for a classroom full of students.

Therefore, it is imperative that ELA teachers are exposed to a variety of writing opportunities in their pre-service teaching and teacher education programs in order to expand their teaching methods in writing. Only then, can they move away from traditions which they were exposed to as students, like the five-paragraph essay.

### **Qualitative Studies Regarding the Five-Paragraph Essay**

In order to better understand and evaluate the five-paragraph essay and its efficacy, I sought out qualitative studies regarding the genre in various contexts. What does the research say about this genre? Not many studies have been conducted regarding the five-paragraph essay itself; most of the focus is on pre-service teachers’ experiences in teaching writing. However, I was able to locate a few studies which examine the effectiveness of this genre (or lack thereof) and provide concrete evidence. One study I located is about the five-paragraph essay’s efficacy for the purpose of obtaining higher scores on standardized writing assessments. One of the main reasons the five-paragraph essay is so popular is because standardized testing seems to push formulaic writing styles like it, and it is a well-known fact that assessments drive

classroom instruction. In this study, the researchers analyzed over 1000 essays from eighth and tenth graders in Delaware; the essays were written for a state-mandated direct-writing assessment (Albertson, 2007). This assessment is based on Delaware's ELA composing standard that states "students will use written and oral English for various purposes and audiences" (Albertson, 2007). The variables of interest in this study were the organizational pattern chosen by the writer and the essay's level of development.

Interestingly enough, the researchers concluded that while the five-paragraph essay format was the most commonly used organizational style in the essays they analyzed, students were just as likely to obtain high scores using a different, non-formulaic organizational style (Albertson, 2007). More specifically, they found that essays with no organization earned low scores, essays that followed the five-paragraph essay form earned middle range scores (scores of 6 on a 2-10 scale), but every essay that earned a high score (8 or better) wrote in an organizational scheme that was not the five-paragraph essay (Albertson, 2007). This demonstrates how students who utilized varied strategies to elaborate their ideas achieved higher scores on their assessments. In fact, one of the trends among the top-scoring essays was that the main idea was subtly and gradually introduced in body paragraphs. This is a sharp contrast to the direct statement of the thesis in the introduction paragraph that is taught as a convention of five-paragraph essays. From this study, we can conclude that the five-paragraph essay is in no way the sole formula to success on a standardized writing assessment. Rather, an essay that dismantles formulaic writing and showcases the writer's unique voice and creativity is more likely to achieve success. Hence, writing instruction with the goal of preparing students for standardized tests needs to be reevaluated. Instead, the goal should be teaching students



how to balance both form and content while making stylistic choices of their own as emerging writers.

Another study I located focuses on analyzing a first-year teacher's thinking and decisions about teaching writing, particularly her instruction on the five-paragraph essay. The data was derived from observations and interviews with Leigh, the teacher, about her teaching decisions. The main focus was on her instruction and the decisions driving her instruction. Leigh's preservice education emphasized literature rather than writing, like Tremmel wrote about in her research. In addition, her own teachers focused exclusively on the five-paragraph essay as well. She found this format to be helpful when it came to organizing her writing. Hence, she thought formulaic writing would be helpful for her students as well.

Going into her first job, Leigh was encouraged by her administration to "teach in noisy, open-ended, and experimental ways while also recognizing the mandate for preparing students for the state writing test" (Johnson et al., 2003). The writing assessment emphasized the five-paragraph essay. Hence, this was the main mode of writing instruction she used in her first teaching job. One of her main values as a teacher was making learning relevant, and this informed her instruction as well. She utilized cognitive process pedagogy to help students make those connections between their personal worlds and the reading and writing they did in school (Johnson et al., 2003). Thus, while her instruction centered around learning a fixed form of writing, she made connections in the class by referring to previous instruction with the five-paragraph essay, and attempted to make the material relatable to her students. This was done with the expected outcome that students would be able to build on their previous lessons and experiences to improve their writing performance. She also "foregrounded the form of the five-

paragraph essay, but not at the expense of the students' ideas about their topics" (Johnson et al., 2003). Content and form were both addressed as important parts of writing.

Leigh was provided with formal mentorship during her first year of teaching. One of her mentors did not discourage her from teaching the five-paragraph essay, as Leigh was anxious about the state writing test. Rather, she encouraged her to see beyond its limitations and teach "the organizational principles of the five-paragraph (essay) without dedicating excessive time or attention to the actual writing" (Johnson et al., 2003). According to her mentor, as long as students are comfortable with the language, teachers are able to vary their instruction from different angles. However, other colleagues encouraged Leigh to adhere to the instructional norms already established by them, and teach the format as well as have students write in the format. She eventually decided to provide students with multiple opportunities to write essays on topics related to what might be on the assessment. She also incorporated dialogic social action into her general process model.

As the state assessment approached and the pressure to prepare students increased, the "five-paragraph fervor" overshadowed other aspects of Leigh's instruction (Johnson et al., 2003). One colleague telling her that the test scores reflect her teaching ability, as well as the fear of not upholding the community's high standards, played a role in this overshadowing. In addition, her own personal belief of the five-paragraph essay being a useful genre for teaching writing was a driving force in her instruction. However, Leigh was still able to be successful because her teaching was "driven by form, yet amenable to the expression of original ideas" (Johnson et al., 2003). She used a formulaic writing style, but did not overemphasize the form. Rather, she extended upon it through experimentation to push students' learning potential,

allowing her to effectively utilize the five-paragraph essay as an instructional tool. This study provides deeper insight into the various factors that play a role in influencing teacher's instructional styles and methods. With respect to the five-paragraph essay, it has already been built into many school's curricula, preventing teachers from fully experimenting with unique writing styles. Many teachers have to rely on extending the established format in order to use the genre to its fullest potential, as was the case with Leigh.

### **Finding Common Ground through Alternatives**

Both the supporters and opposers of the five-paragraph essay bring up valid points in their arguments regarding the five-paragraph essay. While there are some aspects of the format that are beneficial, such as the overall structure it provides and its potential as a scaffold, there are some aspects that are not quite effective, such as the rigidity of its conventions and the stifling of creativity that writing is supposed to provide. Hence, it is important to find common ground in this ongoing debate. This can be done by examining alternatives that have been proposed by educators who have learned to see beyond the form's limitations. Deborah Dean of Brigham Young University urges educators to view the five-paragraph essay from the lens of genre theory. She argues that "only when we understand genres as both constraint and choice, both regularity and chaos, both inhibiting and enabling, will we be able to help students use the power of genres critically and effectively" (Johnson et al., 2003). Genres embody social action, and the issue with the five-paragraph essay is that it lacks that necessary dialogue and social interaction. By overemphasizing form, the ideas and how they are expressed is usually undermined. Hence, the five-paragraph should be taught as an unrestricted genre that is a means for dialogic expression (Dean, 2000). Students should be

taught that it is ok to mix genres and push their boundaries. They can use existing forms but add and take away as they see fit in order to engage in dialogic expression. They will need to consider the social context in which they write even more because they have choices to make as writers and agents of social change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Marie Foley, a Dean and Professor at Seton Hall University, provides another alternative to the five-paragraph essay. She suggests that students be introduced to organizational patterns as an alternative. "Using these patterns (e.g. chronological order, spatial order, emphatic order, etc.) is not formulaic. Instead, it is a means of organizing one's essay and each pattern can be woven into another. It is not a rigid box that students simply fill with facts" (Burks, 2010). She argues that students should be learning how to recognize and write in certain patterns rather than structures, and that in itself will allow students to effectively organize their writing without needing to conform to the rigid structure of the five-paragraph essay.

Foley also proposes what she calls a journey metaphor to wean students away from the five-paragraph essay. Instead of focusing on a formula, this metaphor functions as a discourse convention because it correlates with natural thinking processes (Foley, 1989). The static quality of the five-paragraph essay is the main problem, so this metaphor gives students the sense of writing as movement. She starts out with a freely written first draft, then has them map out the route, or outline, as they revise. During revisions, she emphasizes thinking about relationships and has them grapple with the complexities of writing. The key conventions are that the essay progresses in a purposeful way, not in a pre-determined structural way. The introduction is framed as an invitation to a journey, rather than an account of what the reader

will read in the essay. The conclusion is the destination of the journey, rather than a summary of key points. There should be a logical start and end point, and the sequence of steps along the route of the journey should be rational (Foley, 1989). When students are made conscious of these types of patterns and metaphors, they are able to develop a deeper understanding of writing as a process. They are also able to develop an awareness of form that will serve them well as they progress through the stages of the writing process.

### **The Call to Renew Writing Pedagogy**

Currently, the direction of the debate on writing instruction has slightly turned. Educators are now calling for a renewal of writing pedagogy overall to meet the demands of 21<sup>st</sup> century communication. Given the skills that are needed to be fully capable in today's advanced world, educators are pushing for multigenre assignments that encourage and value creativity and collaboration (Miller, 2010). This is in no way another "add-on" for teachers, rather it is something that should be integrated into the preexisting curriculum so students can engage in work that is personally meaningful for them. Our job as English teachers is not to ensure our students can write an essay that meets the criteria of a formula. Rather, our job is to challenge and encourage our students to "read and write to understand themselves and to develop the tools to communicate what they know in a variety of authentic ways" (Miller, 2010). The key here is that identity and literacy go hand in hand; hence, students should be using reading and writing skills to engage in meaningful learning, and construction of knowledge and their own identities.

During my student teaching internship, I did not assign a single traditional essay. Instead, I engaged my students in project-based, student-centric learning in which they not only

acquired the skills they would gain from writing an essay, they also gained important skills to be functional and successful citizens in today's evolving society. In no way did I disregard writing; I incorporated daily writing for a range of tasks and purposes for creative assignments like creating your own podcast, creating your own blog, writing past and future personal narratives, and completing an independent research and action project on a social issue. My students not only had structured autonomy and exposure to multiple digital literacies, they became more refined readers and writers and created work that was meaningful to them. My point of sharing my student teaching experiences is that meeting the demands of 21<sup>st</sup> century communication can be done in many ways that do not involve a five-paragraph essay.

### **Conclusion**

Academic writing is quite linear; it follows a patriarchal way of presenting knowledge. The five-paragraph essay is one way of writing and knowing the world, but it privileges certain ways of knowing and learning. How we write is influenced by power relations and the norms set out by those in power. More specifically, it is an intersection of both power and privilege. We need to make efforts to decolonize this patriarchal way of presenting knowledge. The five-paragraph essay has many benefits, especially in our current education system. This is why it is still debated to this day; it is hard to leave behind a practice that has been in place for so long and is considered a staple in writing pedagogy. However, times are changing, and it is now time that we move beyond these formulas of writing and teach writing how it is supposed to be taught. Writing is a journey, a creative process, a medium of communication. Writers should be able to adapt themselves for the various purposes and audiences they will encounter in their lives, and this is not a skill that the five-paragraph essay effectively instills. Teaching practices in

writing instruction should embody this ideology of writing as a process, and it should prepare students to meet the demands of 21<sup>st</sup> century communication.

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