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# The College Essay

## GETTING BEYOND THE FIVE PARAGRAPH MINDSET

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If you're like me, when you first started to write essays in high school you were taught the one-stop shop magic of the Five Paragraph Essay. You know what I'm talking about: intro paragraph; body paragraphs A, B, and C; wrap it up in a conclusion. Presto! You've got yourself an essay. So simple and elegant, this beauty can work for everything. Got a book report? Write a five paragraph essay. Compare and Contrast Essay? Five Paragraphs. Poem analysis? Guess how many paragraphs that paper's going to have...what couldn't this essay do?

But what happens when you go from writing 3-page papers to 8 pages? 12 pages? Now analyze 5 sources. Where's your counterargument?

Easy, just add Body Paragraphs D and E, right? Maybe not.

As you get further into your academic career, the five paragraph essay mindset proves increasingly inadequate. While it might have worked flawlessly in high school, a lot more is expected of you and your writing now. Prompts no longer ask you simply to answer a question, compare/contrast, or analyze a single poem. Instead, you have to put your work into conversation with others', compare pieces in the context of a class theme, use lenses and theories for analysis. College writing assignments are more complex, designed to test your understanding of a subject through the expression of your own views. You must demonstrate you've mastered a topic through conversation and, most importantly, argument. For a more complex writing situation, a more complex form is needed: the "college essay."

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**THE "COLLEGE ESSAY" STYLE** is the solution to the complexities of collegiate assignments. Unlike the boring, linear, check-the-box five paragraph paper, there's no single format for the college essay.

College essays empower you to showcase your maturity, express creativity, converse with the reader, solidify your argument, and *write like you actually mean it...*

## The first rule to writing a college essay is that there are no (true, hard-and-fast) rules.

Unlike the five paragraph essay, there is no specific format you follow. Anything goes as long as you can provide a *logical* argument. Think of it less as answering a question and more as having a purposeful conversation. You want the reader to understand why what you're arguing for is right. To do this you must engage the audience, offer and refute counterarguments, avoid rambling, show some style, and above all, be convincing. While there are no concrete rules to this type of writing, **here are three guidelines that will help you start writing like you mean it in your college essays:**

### *The Five Paragraph Essay versus The College Essay:*

The five paragraph essay is typically a linear, list-like type of thinking where the author is trying to answer a question as simply as possible (A=B=C).

This may come in handy when you're pressed for time (like in a TEE or in-class writing), but it doesn't allow you to make complex arguments.

**A college essay should be well thought-out, have a logical and conversational flow, and elaborate a complex argument in a cohesive, realistic way.** College essays show careful consideration for each aspect of the subject and elaborate each point individually, not in chunks. Ultimately, the writer connects each point to the next rather than simply listing them off.

### 1. Thesis is key.

The thesis is the foundation of your argument. It lays the groundwork for the rest of your paper. The most important thing about your thesis is that it offers your personal take on the subject, not just an answer to a prompt. For example, if the prompt asks "Can Kantian Philosophy be applied to natural disaster relief?" your thesis should not be "Kantian philosophy can be applied to natural disaster relief." Instead, say that can be expanded on and use ***distinct terms*** that foreshadow further analysis. For example: "According to Kant's ***categorical imperative***, ***relieving the pain and suffering*** caused by a natural disaster *is/is not* morally obligated because \_\_\_\_." This thesis takes a stance with a *rationale*, can be argued for or against, and provides plenty of stepping off points for you to expand.

### 2. Short paragraphs say more than long ones.

Every paragraph in your essay should have one unique point that can be traced back to your thesis. If you wanted to talk about, say, different aspects of *pain and suffering* and argue that some suffering is constructive, don't throw that in with how the UN can end world hunger. Combining those different points under one paragraph (as in a 5-paragraph mindset) would weaken the argument—if we can end hunger, why can't we end all suffering?—and come off as random. Instead, be patient and concise. If your paragraph rambles on for a whole page with no breaks and tries to make four different claims, even if you make a logical argument you will lose the interest of the reader and they won't remember half your points. Give your reader time to process what you write.

### 3. Have a realistic conversation.

Again, the difference between college and high school level writing is the engagement with the reader and the logical formation of an argument. Your paper might reflect how you would really talk about the topic in an everyday conversation. If I wanted to tell you why my favorite sport is football, I wouldn't just declare, "football is the best sport ever because of the players' abilities coaching techniques, and time management" then explain piece by piece. That would be boring.

Instead our conversation would be a real dialogue: we'd talk about how a coach has to decide how to best use his players based off their abilities to manage the last two minutes of a game, for instance. We'd define what we mean by some key terms like 'abilities' and 'management.' We'd debate the strengths and weaknesses of alternative choices.

**Bottom line: in your college writing there should be a flow from topic to topic that allows the reader to logically and passionately work out your argument along with you.**