

Dismantling the Five-Paragraph Essay

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In good writing, CONTENT DETERMINES FORM

- pre-set structures must be used with care and altered in order to better fit content/argument
- the progymnasmata exercises, book reports, 5 paragraph essays, lab reports, and the six parts of discourse are all tools that we are giving our students to prepare them for writing and speaking academically in the future. But they are NOT the end goal.
- in order to develop “the faculty of discovering all the available means of persuasion in any given situation whatever” (Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric), students must be able to recognize which *structures* will best suit their arguments

The Problem

- most students receive the form and then try to fit their content into that form
- these structures often do not require students to engage directly with a text, or to rely on that text for evidence of their statements (specifically, using quotes or data)
- students believe that if they share their opinion or make a universalizing statement, they are writing academically
- forms often encourage repetitiveness and/or fragmented arguments
- students have no idea how to tackle the lengthy, vague paper topics assigned in college

What *IS* academic writing?

- analytical writing that synthesizes information in order to make a coherent argument about a particular topic or text
- can either be research (thesis) or topic (one book/theme) based
- published in journals; required of undergrad students
- Elements of a good academic paper:
 1. Contains a clear, logical, sophisticated, and specific **thesis/argument**
 2. Has a consistent, clear, and appropriate **structure**
 3. Incorporates extensive **evidence** (from text, sources, or examples) that supports the thesis
 4. Contains sound **logic** and addresses counterarguments
 5. Precise diction and varied, focused sentences contribute to **style**
 6. **Mechanics** are free of spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors
 7. Properly **cites** sources using both in-text citations and a bibliography
 8. **Format** conforms to teacher specifications (generally 12 pt Times New Roman font, double-spaced, with 1” margins on every side)

What can we do to better prepare our students?

1. Give assignments that begin to cultivate these attributes in earlier grades:
 - unstructured writing assignments or assignments that require students to invent a structure themselves (this isn't limited to writing only!)
 - ◆ journal entries?
 - ◆ projects where students choose a topic and a format on their own
 - ◆ creative writing assignments
 - ◆ assignments or examples that twist a known form in a productive way
 - assignments that require students to engage *directly* with a text or source for examples and evidence
 - ◆ for younger students, this could be as simple as asking them to give character traits for a character and then *support* their adjective of choice with a quote from the book
 - ◆ analyze historical documents directly
 - ◆ four steps I teach for incorporating quotes/evidence: 1) Incorporation; 2) Quotation; 3) Citation; 4) Interpretation (1:2 ratio of quote : interpretation)
2. Practice correct formatting for citations and typed assignments in lower grades
3. Help students understand how to organize ideas in different ways: chronologically, spatially, sequentially, compare/contrast, cause/effect, problem/solution, etc.
4. Help students understand what various forms are *for*, so they understand which tool to choose from their tool