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Reflection

In my revision, I shifted the focus of my essay to more clearly address a specific writing construct, as my original draft lacked a central focus and relied too heavily on personal reflection. I chose to analyze the five-paragraph essay because it is a dominant and familiar structure used in writing instruction, yet it often restricts the development of complex ideas. To improve the paper, I removed personal commentary about vocabulary and confidence, and replaced it with research-based analysis that explains why the construct exists, how it functions, and why it becomes limiting. I believe this revision strengthens the essay because it directly addresses the assignment objective and presents a clearer academic argument supported by credible sources.

Unlearning the Pattern: The Limits of the Five-Paragraph Essay

Writing instruction in schools is often shaped by standardized expectations that determine how students should organize and present their ideas. One of the most dominant of these expectations is the five-paragraph essay, a structure consisting of an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion. Because it is taught repeatedly throughout elementary and secondary education, the five-paragraph essay is often perceived as the correct or natural way to write.

However, this format is not an inherent component of strong writing. It is a constructed method designed to teach organization. While the structure can be valuable for helping beginning writers develop clarity, treating it as the primary model for all writing can reduce complexity and limit the development of original thought. The five-paragraph essay should be reconsidered so that writing instruction supports clarity while also encouraging depth and flexibility.

The five-paragraph essay serves an initial purpose in writing instruction. Students who are learning how to express ideas in academic settings often need clear guidance about how to identify main ideas and support them with specific details. Instruction commonly emphasizes how to locate topic sentences, understand main ideas, and organize supporting information. Williams and Stevens explain that writing instruction traditionally teaches students to recognize structural patterns so that they can follow and construct logical written arguments (514). The five-paragraph essay supplies a predictable format that allows novice writers to practice arranging information. It offers a foundation for developing coherence, and it helps students understand how paragraphs relate to one another to form a unified piece of writing.

However, once students gain greater proficiency, the limitations of the five-paragraph essay become apparent. The formula requires ideas to be separated into preset sections, which can restrict the development of complex argumentation.¹ Laurie Endicott Thomas notes that effective writing depends on the meaningful flow of ideas, not on strict adherence to a predetermined formula (56). When students focus more on meeting structural requirements than on communicating complex thought, writing becomes mechanical. Research by Koen, Becker, and Young demonstrates that paragraph organization is not natural but learned, meaning writers are capable of adapting structure

¹ AI assistance used to clarify phrasing and sentence flow.

according to the needs of the content rather than following fixed patterns (50). If writers are encouraged to rely exclusively on the five-paragraph essay, they may internalize the belief that all arguments must follow the same mold, which can limit intellectual exploration.

A flexible approach to structure allows writing to reflect the complexity of ideas rather than constraining ideas to fit structure. Instead of requiring every essay to conform to the five-paragraph format, writing instruction should teach students how to make structural decisions based on the needs of their argument. Paragraphs should expand or contract depending on the depth of the point being made, and the organization of the essay should follow the development of its ideas. Encouraging students to adjust structure based on purpose promotes the ability to think critically and write with intention. When students are taught to shape structure around meaning, rather than meaning around structure, their writing becomes clearer, stronger, and more authentic.

In conclusion, the five-paragraph essay is a useful introductory tool for teaching basic organizational skills. However, it should not be treated as the essential or superior model of academic writing. When applied rigidly, it limits complexity, restricts critical thinking, and discourages writers from developing original expression. Revising this construct to emphasize flexibility would allow students to produce writing that is both coherent and intellectually engaging.² Effective writing grows from the needs of the ideas themselves, not from a formula.

² AI assistance used to strengthen the tone and clarity of the conclusion.

Works Cited

Koen, Frank, Alton Becker, and Richard Young. "The Psychological Reality of the Paragraph." *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, vol. 8, 1969, pp. 49-53.

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