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De-confusing Essays

By Andrew Pudewa

“Essay” is perhaps the one word most feared by students, wielded by teachers, and misunderstood by many. But what is it actually, and how important is it? And if it is important, how do we teach it?—an especially hard thing to do if we ourselves are fuzzy on what it really is.

Just for mischievous fun, I occasionally ask teenage students this exact question, “What is an essay?” Answers range from “Something you don’t want to do,” to “A really long paper,” and even to the blatantly honest, “I have no idea.” Occasionally I hear a moderately confident answer: “It’s a composition with an introduction, a body, and a conclusion”—a response which might please a parent or teacher.

However, we can’t blame students for being unsure, as the actual definition is quite vague. According to one dictionary, an essay is: “1. a short piece of writing on a particular subject; 2. an attempt or effort.” By the first definition, any sentence about anything might qualify as an essay (an idea that would undoubtedly please some youngsters). But since that terse explanation might cause problems, teachers generally include a few more guidelines, including an approximate length (2-3 pages; 800-1000 words; etc.) and a requirement to have a “thesis statement” and to support it with “reasoning and examples.” Sadly, even these specifics can leave a student hanging—confused as how to start and uncertain about what the end product should look like.

Currently there seem to be two dominant but somewhat conflicting opinions on how to teach essays—a traditional view and a modern one. While some have taught for years very specific ways to organize an argument or presentation—even down to the number of paragraphs, modernists seem to reject that as being “too structured,” citing effective examples of modern prose that don’t conform to traditional patterns. On one end of the spectrum, Lucille Payne’s book *The Lively Art of Writing* devotes a majority of its nearly two hundred pages to a detailed explanation of the five-paragraph essay, and on the other extreme are the college teachers who say they will assign an “automatic F” to any five-paragraph essay

turned in. You can imagine how such conflicting views could cause mild student schizophrenia.

The argument in favor of the traditional essay generally asserts that concrete organization—overused as it may be—gives students a starting plan, a model, a skeleton upon which they can hang their thesis and proofs. Arguing against the five-paragraph essay, some claim that it’s “format writing” which is “too formulaic,” “requires little creativity,” and actually becomes a “crutch” which inhibits critical thinking. Both perspectives are perhaps true to some degree, but the confusion doesn’t help with the typical homeschooling parent’s question: “How do I prepare my son or daughter for college writing?”

Probably the simple answer is, “Don’t worry too much.” Each class, each teacher, each discipline may define “essay” in a different way, from the short “essay question” answer to the “analytical essay” in humanities or social sciences. Because of this disparity, the successful student must learn to be flexible, responding to the various demands of different instructors in an appropriate way. Pay attention to the basics. For success at the university level, a student needs to be able to formulate sensible, perceptive ideas and express them with appropriate vocabulary while using correct syntax and mechanics. In other words: grammar, logic and rhetoric.

So, is it a good thing to learn the five-paragraph model and its variations? The answer is “yes”, even though some teachers are allergic to it. By learning and practicing one basic essay format, a student will begin to understand the idea of structure in composition; by practicing variations on that structure, he will gradually build a repertoire of ways to organize ideas. With enough variation and practice, a trained student will have internalized a sense of structure and be able to devise ways to organize any kind of content. But disagreement abounds.

Recently a well-circulated blog post by English teacher Ray Salazar entitled “If You Teach or Write 5-Paragraph Essays—Stop It!” came to the attention of many homeschoolers. Mr. Salazar’s argument can be summarized in his own words: “The five-paragraph essay is rudimentary, unengaging, and useless.” He continues his criticism of the “watered-down” Aristotelian format, claiming that it does not teach “thoughtful persuasion.” Following a classical rhetorical model himself, he effectively discredits the clichéd five-paragraph essay as something that should not be used, but fails to sufficiently answer the question what should be taught in its place. The teaching ideas he outlines in his article, while intellectually attractive to adult readers and possibly useful with advanced students, would be perilously vague to a middle school student trying to figure out how to organize a paper.

Furthermore, Mr. Salazar notes that the National Writing Project goals, many state writing standards, and the new national Common Core standards would not be met by the teaching of a five-paragraph essay. The unnoticed irony, however, is that the writing skills of high school graduates have been in steady decline over the last thirty years—the same period during which NWP’s “writing process” and state

“writing standards” grew in influence and eclipsed previous, more traditional structures and methods.

Additionally, I will point out a clear comparison, one which many modernists do not want to acknowledge: In any discipline requiring specific skills development such as sports, dance, or music, much of what must be learned is not that which is performed. Dribbling drills for basketball players, endless plies for the dancer, and scales and etudes for the violinist are all activities which could be considered “rudimentary, unengaging, and useless” in and of themselves. However, by practicing such basic activities, especially early in training, a foundation for advanced skills is established. What are the foundational exercises for writing? Couldn't a bare-bones five-paragraph essay be one of them?

While I can agree with Mr. Salazar and others that the simple, overused, five-paragraph model could be limiting were it the only thing students did (although if that were the only thing learned it might be better than nothing), I cannot agree that there is no merit in learning and practicing it. Over the past seventeen years, I have taught a basic essay model, either in person or by video to many thousands of students, and the success stories stacked up would be taller than I am: homeschool students heading off to college and doing very well—commended by their teachers, rewarded with excellent grades, even teaching their peers how to write an essay for their first year college classes. Many dozens of my students have scored 10's, 11's, and perfect 12's on their SAT essays, using a modified basic essay structure.

One cannot have variations without a theme; one cannot have an essay without a structure any more than one can have an elephant without a skeleton. So don't be afraid to teach various essay models, but likewise, don't be afraid to set the student free to play with the thing and see how they will adapt it in various ways as they grow in maturity and write to different audiences. It's good to essay the essay!