

The Death of the Five-Paragraph Theme

One common exercise in many elementary schools and high schools is the "five-paragraph theme." This exercise is a simple format that students can use to write a one-page paper with three main points and five paragraphs: introduction, point A, point B, point C, and conclusion. What many students fail to realize is that this organization technique is merely an exercise, a way to show students how organization works. It is not a guide for writing every essay in the world. What happens when an assigned essay is fifteen or twenty pages long? The paragraphing will look a bit odd if the writer tries to use only five paragraphs. What happens when the student doesn't have three points--but only one point? Or thirty points? Some students, strongly influenced by the five-paragraph theme, will simply end up using their thesis as an awkward catalog that lists every single point they wish to cover. The result looks something like this monstrous and awkward example taken from an actual student essay:

The United States should withdraw from the U. N. due to rising terrorist threats, increasing oil prices, the need for deregulated industries, maintaining national sovereignty, concern for avoiding conflict of interest with enemy nations that are part of the organization, avoiding international conformity in policy, the drop in manufactured goods, the inefficiency of the organization at dealing with global disputes, to maintain a separate military, to sharpen distinctions between unique cultures, to slow down a tendency toward globalized and commercialized culture, to discourage nominal alliances with hostile member-states, and encourage a focus on regional leadership rather than international decision-making.

That is an incredibly complicated and awkward thesis. While it perhaps helps the student organize the essay, it makes it hard for the reader to follow--and authors should always write for the reader's convenience, not their own. Many of the former points perhaps should be "sub-points," and organized under a larger and more general heading.

To avoid economic, political, military, and cultural risks, the United States should withdraw from the United Nations.

Then, in the first quarter of the essay (the "economic" section), the student might discuss all the economic arguments: increasing oil prices, deregulated industries, and the drop in manufactured goods. In the second quarter of the essay (the "political" section), the student might discuss the political dangers of U.N. involvement: the risk of losing national sovereignty, the need to avoid international conformity in policy, and the inefficiency of the organization when it comes to resolving disputes. In the third quarter of the essay, the student could proceed to discuss those points that fit under military topics. In the last quarter, the student could discuss those points that fit under culture, and so on. Each section might be three or four pages long, and each subject might require one or three or five paragraphs offering examples, evidence, and dealing with counter-arguments.

NB: No organization technique covers every possible arrangement for an essay. The student must simply learn to set the five-paragraph theme aside and try other techniques. Be flexible!