What to Make of the Five-Paragraph Theme: History of the Genre and Implications

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New Voice

This article traces the history of the five-paragraph theme and the views about it, along with arguing for its elimination in writing instruction in favor of problem-based, "rich-task" writing experiences for students.

"How do *you* feel about the five-paragraph theme?" I have posed this question as a conversation starter on the topic of theme writing over the past two years to first-year college writers, along with elementary and secondary English teachers, two-year and four-year college instructors, and others interested in literacy instruction who have attended conferences sponsored by the Conference on College Composition and Communication and the Iowa Council of Teachers of English. Using a circular or star-shaped sticker, 127 respondents have recorded their feelings on a Likert-type continuum drawn on a blue, five-foot poster and decorated with three familiar depictions of the template.

What the continuum reveals is a lack of consensus about this uniquely "North American species" of "pseudogenre," a formula that puzzles those who teach writing elsewhere in the world (Pirie 75): Assessments range from "very positive" on the left side to "very negative" on the right, and at least one sticker occupies almost every point on the continuum, creating a balanced range of responses from strong approval to strong disapproval. Moreover, the diverse views represented in this informal poll mirror the opinions and feelings about theme writing published by more than thirty different journals across nearly 300 articles over the last one hundred years —including 253 focused specifically on the five-paragraph theme. Since about 1907 with the *Atlantic Monthly's* publication of "The Daily Theme Eye" (about essayist Walter Prichard Eaton's theme-writing experience at Harvard), the professional literature has repeatedly taken up the topic of daily themes, weekly themes, biweekly themes; 50-, 250-, 500-, or 1,000-word themes; themes in all manner of subject; and, by the late 1950s, the five-paragraph theme.

My analysis of this professional conversation indicates that a majority have argued by a ratio of about five to one against theme writing, in general, and by about three to one against the five-paragraph theme, in particular, as sound approaches to teaching composition, while at the same time teachers have consistently assigned

(five-paragraph) themes to their students. In light of such tension between opinion and practice, I intend in this article to bring together various voices on theme writing across time along with some key bits of the history of current-traditional rhetoric (in which theme writing is embedded) so that already overburdened teachers of writing have, in one place, information that might help them make choices about how they prepare writers to meet the demands of twenty-first century communication. I see this article as a conduit to historical research that, though not new, remains unknown to many practitioners, as well as a call for a serious shake-up in the way writing gets taught. History teaches that such a shake-up is difficult because education "breeds conservatism . . . a preference for stability, and a cautious attitude toward change (Cuban 18); the structure of schooling at all levels (with myriad external pressures, including intense standardized testing) helps perpetuate the traditional; and the systemic status quo of educational practice consistently attempts to use logic to cut up complex processes into the manageable chunks thought to be easily disseminated to novices. In particular, this problematic thinking applied to composition teaching over the last 120 years has led many to believe that applying "a merely cognitive grasp of the principles of writing" will cause significant improvement in student writing (Stewart, "Advanced" 199) and that the five-paragraph theme is the perfect vehicle.

From a twenty-first-century perspective, however, continuing to emphasize the five-paragraph theme (now spread even into upper elementary school) seems completely misguided, and teachers would do well to abandon its teaching, a decision predicted almost thirty years ago (Withey 24) that has yet to happen. In so arguing, I recognize that others might say the genre's staying power must mean that it works. Isn't that why it persists? Even though teachers have opposed the use of themes to teach writing since the early twentieth century (see, for example, H. Davis 328) and even though since the early 1970s many have consistently denigrated the five-paragraph theme specifically (see, for example, Williamson 132; Hairston 52; Sitler 24; Hillocks, "Fighting" 70; Miller 99)[1], doesn't its continued presence in our writing classrooms signify effectiveness? The literature on theme writing and the experience of many teachers and students suggests the answer to this question is "No, the five-paragraph theme hurts more than it helps."

For those who teach college composition courses (including me), an even more important consideration than whether they believe the five-paragraph theme's persistence in precollege writing instruction equals effectiveness is what to do when students come ready to deploy it. The decision is not whether it belongs in writing pedagogy or whether instructors should introduce it—that horse is already out of the barn—but whether they should disrupt or reinforce it. Of course, this quandary assumes that those who teach college writing recognize the genre's limitations—an assumption, I need to acknowledge, that has limitations in light of conversations I have had with first-year-writing instructors who vehemently defend their teaching of the five-paragraph theme. Before I talk further about this decision and the qualities of better approaches teachers might take to help students develop as writers, I want, first, to examine how the profession has been "wedded

intellectually to" the five-paragraph theme (Stewart, "Some History" 136) through "current-traditionalism," an approach to writing instruction, based on positivism, that emerged during the mid-nineteenth century "in response to the new scientific curriculum of the modern American university" (Berlin 9). This connection between current-traditionalism (C-T) and the five-paragraph theme is important because it suggests that teachers cannot move away from the latter without radically rethinking the former, something that has proven difficult.

Current-Traditionalism and Why the Five-Paragraph Theme Seems Sensible

A number of influences—well documented by others (see, for example, Berlin; Crowley; Kitzhaber)—helped shape and have sustained current-traditional rhetoric over the last 125 years. Of these, Petrus Ramus's early contribution plays a particularly important role in the evolution of the five-paragraph theme (Crowley 135). During the sixteenth century, Ramus took a common approach to philosophical inquiry, used for *generating* knowledge, and restricted its use to *arranging* knowledge (36). This advent of "methodical memory," as Sharon Crowley names it, shifted the use of structured heuristics for *inventing* material for discourse (long a staple of rhetoric) to a drafting approach that conflated invention and arrangement. Three centuries after Ramus, his conflated "method" informed the "nested" composing that current-traditional writing instruction adopted (134). Its bottom-up approach, which moves from words, to sentences, to paragraphs, to multiparagraph compositions—as though the structures of one translate to the structures of those up the food chain—contributed to C-T's focus on "patterns of arrangement and superficial correctness [as] the main ends of writing instruction" (Berlin 9). This thinking first took hold as universities reworked traditional rhetoric programs (based primarily on oral declamation) into written composition designed to accommodate large numbers of "nontraditional" students (women and Civil War veterans, for instance).

Such was the general context in which Barrett Wendell "invented" the daily theme at Harvard in 1884 (Kitzhaber 210) to give students focused, sustained (some might say unrelenting) practice in the sacred current-traditional trinity of "unity," "mass," and "coherence" (Wendell 96). Wendell's daily theme and other loosely conceived versions of the "school theme," used primarily for writing practice and examination (and consistent with C-T's emphasis on stylistic and grammatical correction), evolved over the next fifty years into the reified five-paragraph template circa 1959 when Victor Pudlowski articulated its components in the *English Journal* article "Compositions—Write 'Em Right." This "right" way of writing fit perfectly into the C-T pedagogy of the time and continues to do so fifty years later in many programs that rely on "nested" practices of composing and the five-paragraph theme because their apparently logical, orderly, efficient, and systematic approach fits neatly into writing-lesson compartments. And even if college writing instructors eschew C-T pedagogy, including the five-paragraph theme, it has a negative impact on their teaching when students come to them with views about how writing works

and how to organize ideas in writing gleaned from programs that find C-T such "a compelling paradigm" that it is "impossible for them to conceive [of writing instruction] in any other way" (Berlin 9).

Within a neat C-T writing system, the five-paragraph theme has been appealing, championed in professional journals as a widely applicable organizational "building plan," "building block," or "map" (Wiseman 9; Smith 17; Parker 82)—or even, paradoxically, as a promoter of creativity that gives "student writers a set of conventions to break away from" (Perrin 312). For struggling writers (for example, second-language learners or special needs students), in particular, proponents of the five-paragraph theme have characterized it positively as a "stepstool" (Brown 60), "training wheels" (Nunnally 70), or "scaffolding" (Carignan-Bellville 57-58), claiming its benefit as a default structure to "g[et] started" (Knutson 53), pass a curricular checkpoint, or achieve a proficient "cut score" on a high-stakes test, a major reason for the genre's intensified emphasis in the era of "No Child Left Behind."[2]

In the "objective" scope of C-T thinking, the five-paragraph theme seems inherently sensible to teachers and students alike and fits seamlessly into a tidy, sequential approach that appeals to a certain Western love of orderliness and efficiency. And for students it feels safe. Let me give an example. Several years ago, I taught a very logical thinker, whom I will call Becky, in an honors section of what many colleges call Composition II. As a high school student, Becky had attended a small academy within her district, which, on the one hand, offered intellectually stimulating courses, such as Advanced Placement courses, but on the other, leaned heavily on the five-paragraph theme in its writing program. Becky had mastered the genre, and that mastery had served her well. There was just one problem: her adherence to it was crippling her writing in college, making it perfunctory if mechanically perfect. Until Becky could abandon the seeming logic of the five-paragraph theme, she could not cultivate the two habits of mind Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz identify as crucial to growth over time in college writers: an acceptance of "themselves as novices in a world that demands 'something more and deeper' from their writing than high school" (134) and the adoption of an attitude toward writing assignments in which they "begin to see writing as a transaction, an exchange in which they can 'get and give'" and in which they see "a larger purpose" (139).

Why the Five-Paragraph Theme Doesn't Work

The kind of intense drilling and emphasis on correctness promoted by the five-paragraph theme that stunted the quality of Becky's writing also stunts the "interest *for* writing" that novices at all levels need in order to care enough to "set effective goals, make use of helpful strategies, and seek feedback as they work with writing tasks" (Lipstein and Reininger 79). My students' experiences with the five-paragraph theme bear this out; they consistently report that it demoralizes them and turns them off to writing, telling me that it blocks idea invention and makes them give up because they never seem to get it right. And they often complain more harshly about the formula than I ever would (even putting me in the position of defending

their overworked teachers, who, I know, as a former secondary teacher myself, try hard to teach writing of any kind under the burden of too many students and too much grading and testing).

To illustrate, I offer two examples of what my students tell me (with the qualifier that I have not conducted a rigorous human-subjects study of contemporary student voices on the five-paragraph theme). First, several of them, when asked what they found less than helpful in their precollege writing experiences, have indicated that training in the genre unproductively forces attention away from the ideas of their writing onto the formula. One student's comment is representative:

> Much of my junior year was spent writing 5 paragraph essays. . . . No matter what we wrote about, whether it was a research evaluation or a minor reflection, everything was to consist of 5 paragraphs. This was not helpful because it didn't allow ideas to flow together. It added more structure than was necessary . . . which greatly inhibited the creativity of my writing.

A second, particularly passionate student summed up the sentiment in a plea to high school teachers: "Can we please stop teaching the 5-paragraph paper? It's so confusing to get used to [and] worse [in college] than using Wikepedia." What such student comments indicate, along with the bulk of the literature I reviewed, is that instruction in the five-paragraph theme builds neither interest in the *act* of writing nor strategies that help students develop ideas in writing. Instead, the rigid structure becomes the point and focus of writing, creating a barrier to growth.

As opponents of the formula have analogized, the genre is an uninspired and uninspiring "neurotic activity" (Emig 99) or "army-camp" approach to teaching composition (Strenski 139), which offers a "cookie-cutter" (as one of my students characterized it); a "jug" to "fill up" (Naff and Schnaufer 103); a "Procrustean formula" (Anderson 302; Bamberg 426); or other crutches like "water wings" (qtd. in Rex et al. 777) or a "paint-by-number" set (Nelson 58) that teaches "nothing about real painting" (Pirie 77). Such metaphors, along with my students' comments, suggest that the strictly controlled practice of the five-paragraph theme has problems in that, like the props to which it has been compared, mastering the formula causes novices to over-rely on it, slowing writing progress (Pirie 77). Like too-comfortable training wheels, the formula is so seductive that students struggle to unlearn it when increasingly sophisticated writing tasks require increasingly sophisticated organizational strategies. As one of my students said, "I wanted to write with this style [the five-paragraph theme] every time I sat down to write a paper. I had to constantly think about not [doing that,] and I think that made me focus less on the content of the papers." For him and other writers, knowing the template too well stunts rather than supports development as they struggle to deal with difficult and complex composing processes. Its persistence, despite a general turn in the last forty or so years to other approaches that promise *more* for writing (process, rhetorical, social-constructivist, collaborative, and so on), is particularly troublesome when, in an inappropriate hybridizing of the five-paragraph theme with incompatible approaches, the genre "straightjackets" those pedagogies,

subsuming them *within* the current-traditional paradigm, which can harmfully truncate idea-discovery and result in a quick race to a central thesis and a tightly structured but often illogically "elaborated" piece of writing (Hillocks, "Focus" 245–46). What is involved here is not a choice is between "product" and "process." In fact, that false dichotomy has been a major distraction in debates about writing pedagogy. Instead, the *product* of the five-paragraph theme is really a *process* all its own that clashes with and subverts other processes, countermanding richer and more educative ones that can serve our students better when, as John Trimbur puts it, they answer the "call to write" in situations beyond composition courses. Lessons in the five-paragraph theme and accompanying C-T principles twist those other approaches and rob teachers of precious time needed to create experiences in which students can wrestle with the messiness of composing. They prevent writers from moving around organically and recursively between idea invention and idea arrangement in shaping their thoughts into discourse for particular and changing rhetorical genres and contexts.

As much as teachers and students might *want* the five-paragraph theme to provide a rich composing experience, it simply cannot. Rather than form following function, the formula of the five-paragraph theme precedes function—and is often a-rhetorically and inappropriately grafted onto function—in ways that derail composing. Further, I do not think we can blame students or teachers for this, as though the template were perfect, like a Platonic ideal, degraded and vulgarized in novices' or ineffective instructors' hands—nor do I think that changing the number of body paragraphs makes any positive difference. Instead, the formula itself precludes *meaningful* thinking and organizing, as Edward White's well-known satire of the genre demonstrates (524–25).[3]

What Decisions Writing Teachers Have to Make about the Five-Paragraph Theme

If all of this brings increased clarity to the issue of the five-paragraph theme, what needs to happen next, I think, is for writing teachers to consider carefully the conflicts and tensions with which the field of composition has struggled for a hundred years and to thoughtfully examine both the intellectual and emotional relationships they have with current-traditionalism and the five-paragraph theme. To begin, they could interrogate their teaching decisions in light of their own histories and, potentially, uncover how both the current-traditional approaches they saw their teachers use (Cuban 254) and the "pragmatic and experience-based structure" of five-paragraph-theme teaching "lore" (North 24) have shaped their attitudes and approaches. When I do the kind of examination I am suggesting, two conflicting feelings give me pause. On the one hand, my teacher-self is convinced intellectually and experientially that the five-paragraph theme harms student writers. On the other hand, my former-student-self fondly associates the formula with a favorite English teacher whom I highly admired and who firmly believed that the way to prepare me to write for college in the 1970s was via the five-paragraph theme.

Reflecting on my ambivalent feelings has enlightened my understanding of the relationship I have with the five-paragraph theme and its effect on my teaching. In such reflection I have asked myself, "What part did the genre play in the way I learned to write and think about writing?" "Was it safe and automatic once I mastered it?" "Did I please my teacher and have grade success by performing the five-paragraph theme?" "Did I reach a high score or rank on a writing assessment by using it?" "What effect did following the formula have on risk-taking, messiness, and hard thinking for me?" "What problems has it caused or resolved for me *as a writer*?" "How does my experience with the genre relate to my students' experiences?" "What problems has it caused or resolved for me *as a teacher of writing*?" And so on. Answering such questions and talking with others about similar self-analyses can be useful in dispassionately examining the costs and benefits of the five-paragraph theme in a time when intense pressure to improve student writing immediately often causes programs to turn to it as a quick fix.

If teachers resist succumbing to that pressure, what should they do instead? I could offer some stopgap measures ("fix-it" strategies, as a reviewer of an earlier version of this article called them) on how to "un-teach" the five-paragraph theme or how to teach organization in writing differently than by that container genre. I do have ideas about that from my own teaching and from the more than sixty suggestions published by others who have written about theme writing and the five-paragraph theme over the past ninety years. However, doing so really is beside the point. Those who avoid current-traditionalism and the five-paragraph theme already know them, and those who do not can feel free to contact me if they want to start small in abandoning C-T practices. Not providing them here will probably bother some readers, like the conference attendee who, after hearing the history of the genre and my arguments for letting it go, pressed me for concrete replacements, or the *English Journal* author who counseled those who tell teachers to abandon the five-paragraph theme, "If you're going to take away what some of us believe in, please offer something else in its place. And be specific" (Lockward 34).

"Fix-it" approaches can work in limited ways, but both the articles in my historical study and the disparate responses on my five-paragraph-theme poster suggest that the profession has not managed to rid itself of the genre and other vestiges of current-traditional rhetoric by distracting itself with stopgap measures. What both teachers and students of writing need more is a resolve to fight for whole-scale change that rejects current-traditionalism, to cultivate a trust in productive uncertainty that includes both a tolerance for and belief in orderly chaos in writing processes, and finally to invest the time that less "efficient" approaches, nurtured within a community of writers, require to show results.

Young writers "want to write" when they enter their first classrooms, Donald Graves argues in his groundbreaking study *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*: "They want to write the first day they attend school. This is no accident. Before they went to school, they marked up walls, pavements, newspapers, with crayons, chalk, pens or pencils . . . anything that makes a mark. The child's marks say, 'I am'"

(3). Children do not need a formula. They do not come to school needing or loving the five-paragraph theme. What Graves's seminal research illuminates, instead, is "that children need time to process their thoughts and 'rehearse' before writing, and that their best writing flows from their deepest interests'" (Slover). And student writers are not well served by teachers who attempt to motivate by telling them, as I recently heard a teacher say (true to current-traditional thinking), that they will earn two points for an opening sentence and four points for two body paragraphs—or to cajole them into writing by promising they *have* to write *only* two hundred words.

Instead, what writers of all ages need in order to gain increasingly sophisticated skills and grow in their writing is to stay interested in the pursuit of writing. That interest for engaging in the writing act is a key issue of motivation that needs more attention. Even though I am quite certain that most of my students will not become professional basketball players, those who have a strong interest in basketball think nothing of standing at a free throw line and honing their skills by shooting a thousand free throws a day. Conversely, when it comes to writing, these same students want to get that act over with as soon as possible and be efficient about it. The C-T approach and the five-paragraph theme, because these avoid—seemingly at all cost—the messiness of composing, have taught students to think differently about writing than they do about basketball or other activities in which they are invested. It is school that conditions students to an avoidance and efficiency view of writing, but it does not have to. As an administrator recently said about local school reform, "We need to find a different way. We need to go back and look at the system itself" (Dooley 4B). So, too, those who teach writing, including me, need to challenge the educational systems in which they operate to build programs that help students care enough about writing (even though many will not become professional writers) to want to develop "critical thinking skills" and twenty-first-century communication strategies.

Where We Should Go from Here: "Renewal" Rather than "Reform"

To give American society these competencies it purports to value, writing programs must give up a systemic addiction to formulas like the five-paragraph theme and the rigid composing steps of current-traditionalism and instead offer students authentic composing *problems* to solve. However, teachers can only move forward in an expansive and meaningful way if they take the first step of every successful recovery program: acknowledging and accepting the counterproductive and, indeed, detrimental effects of clinging to C-T thinking. Different paths exist, but teachers will not get far in overcoming a current-traditional addiction if they try to forge these paths in isolation. Many have tried this from at least as early as 1917, when William Davis argued a simple idea that the profession has yet to accomplish in any whole-scale way: "We need to "mak[e] the study [of composition] seem valuable and important" to students, to offer a genuinely "impelling motive," and to "make sure of [their] desire to communicate something" (293) to someone for a rhetorical purpose besides earning a grade or passing a test.

Working together, writing teachers need to embrace a "mission" not of "reform" but of "renewal" and to "take a long view" of intellectual growth, as Ann Foster, executive director of the National Network for Education Renewal, recently argued about educational change. They need *new* "formal structures" for "reciprocal partnerships" (among, for example, schools, colleges, and communities) in order to have an impact on long-entrenched formal structures of schooling. Thinking about "renewal" in terms of writing programs suggests that even if educators can make the case that C-T rhetoric and the five-paragraph theme work for a range of students in the short term, deploying that pedagogy undercuts essential long-term goals that programs should have for encouraging novice writers to care enough about what they write, how they write, and for whom they need and want to write to develop the skills they need to do so.

For renewing writing pedagogy, educators should embrace some key practices:

- Put curricular formation in the hands of practitioners, along the lines of Japanese Lesson Study (Stigler and Hiebert), which trusts the knowledge and professionalism of teachers;
- Reject efficiency and deficiency models of education;
- Give learner-writers more control over their own writing and learning;
- Pay as much attention, in pedagogical decision making, to building a continuing interest in the act of writing as to building skills;
- Connect writing classes and authentic rhetorical situations beyond school; and, most important and integral to the others,
- Postpone writing tests and grading long enough to allow students to grapple with the complexity and confusion that is writing as they work toward competency and beyond (via, for example, a locally appropriate portfolio assessment program).

Getting down to particulars, a litmus test for a program (or, to start small, an assignment) that exemplifies these qualities of renewal is what the Australian New Basics Project calls a "rich task," defined as a "transdiciplinary," "problem-based," "integrated intellectual, linguistic, social, and cultural practice . . . represent[ing] an education outcome of demonstrable and substantive intellectual substance and educational value" and "connect[ing] to the world beyond the classroom" (Queensland 7).

To embrace the qualities of renewal and "rich tasks," teachers need only look around at the many places where they already exist. For instance, James Moffett offers an early and detailed vision of these in *The Universal Schoolhouse*, a vision that others have actualized in a wide variety of interpretations: at Nancie Atwell's twenty-year-old Center of Teaching and Learning ("About"), in the forty-four-year-old "Foxfire Approach to Teaching and Learning" ("What"), at National Writing Project sites, and in community-based literacy programs like "TEEN Group: Writing as Social Action" (Schaafsma). In first-year composition and other college-level writing courses, rich tasks are going on, as well. These occur in stand-alone assignments like

long-term multigenre composing projects (Davis and Schadel; Mack; Romano). They also happen in specialized thematic or learning-community sections of composition courses, linked to students' academic interests and programs (for example, the English 250 sections "Speaking in Place," "Design Exchange," and "Newspaper Physics" that Iowa State University offers).

Specifically at the community college, "new literacy" projects like "Life Stories" also exist. Integrated into a five-credit college writing course (English 120), this academic and service-learning project pairs local senior citizens with Kirkwood Community College students in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in a semester-long collaboration that involves students interviewing their partners, researching topics related to seniors' lives, and writing in a variety of genres. As the culmination of this "life stories" work, students create multimedia presentations, including digital audio recordings, which they publish beyond the classroom on a CD they present to their partner for sharing with family and friends (Myers-Verhage).

What all these approaches have in common—and what is important about them—is that their "rich tasks" leave no room for the five-paragraph theme but, instead, foster process recursivity and skill building in meaningful contexts. Further, they offer models of "renewed" (rather than "reformed") writing pedagogy for dissemination efforts that the profession should pursue to make such work not special but the norm.

No doubt, educators are experiencing increasing pressure to break up complex educational processes, like writing instruction, into smaller, more discrete bits that they must frequently test in order, ostensibly, to achieve a better quality whole. In the history of American education this is not new, and writing teachers who have felt the frustration of trying to pound the square peg of current-traditional rhetoric into the round hole of real writing know this approach is not up to the task. In a 180-degree reversal on educational reform, former assistant secretary of education Diane Ravitch points out that "[o]ur educational problems [despite at least one hundred years of reform cycles] are a function of our lack of educational vision" (225), and those reforms "are diminishing [public education's] quality and endangering its very survival" (242). That lack of vision is also complicit in the perpetuation of the current-traditional approach to teaching writing, pioneered by Barrett Wendell and evolving into instruction in the five-paragraph theme. However, even Wendell himself, a hundred years ago, rejected current-traditionalism after devoting his whole professional life to it (Kitzhaber 69). I believe writing programs can serve student writers better if they also commit themselves to a widespread abandonment of current-traditional methods and the five-paragraph theme, embracing instead approaches shaped by a vision of "renewal" and embodying the characteristics of "rich-tasks." Will writing instruction in the United States take that more fruitful path and not continue to doom itself to repeating its history? If so, the profession will have learned from its long relationship with theme writing, and I can put my poster aside because its question, "How do you feel about the five-paragraph theme?" will cease to matter.

Notes

1. Of the 127 articles I found in which writers come out clearly against the five-paragraph theme, these are representative and show the persistence of opposition across five decades.

2. Even though, according to Nancy Glazer of Educational Testing Services, the five-paragraph theme is a "neutral" aspect of writing in large-scale assessments like the SAT and scorers are told, "Do not reward or penalize for the five-paragraph essay," many teachers *perceive* the genre is required and thus drill their students in it.

3. In a 2010 *Chronicle of Higher Education* "Point of View" piece, Rob Jenkins launches a defense of the five-paragraph theme, suggesting, like other proponents since at least 1966 (see Nichols 908), that its value lies in its flexibility (like an "accordion") and its practice potential for apprentice organizers, who, like medical students, should not be allowed to dissect human cadavers (deal with real organizing problems) before working on "frogs" (mastering the five-paragraph theme). Jenkins and I agree that choosing the five-paragraph-theme does not hinge on the product vs. process duality; however, we differ in our view of the harms vs. benefits of choosing the genre to teach the basic writing concepts of beginning-middle-end, rather than using richer approaches like reading-as-a-writer text analysis.

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Help Shape NCTE Positions by Submitting a Resolution

If you have concerns about issues that affect your teaching or if you'd like to see NCTE take a stand on a position you support, you have an opportunity to be heard! Propose a resolution that may be voted upon and passed at NCTE's Annual Convention.

For further details on submitting a resolution, to see resolutions already passed by Council members, or to learn about proposing position statements or guidelines other than resolutions, visit the NCTE website (http://www.ncte.org/positions/call_for_resolutions) or contact Lori Bianchini at NCTE Headquarters (800-369-6283, ext. 3644; lbianchini@ncte.org). Resolutions must be postmarked by **October 15, 2011.**
