

Beyond the Five-paragraph Essay

You have probably been writing five-paragraph essays for most of your academic career. This simple yet effective model has gotten you pretty far, right? You need to be aware, though, that there are many other ways to write essays that are longer than 5 paragraphs.

While the length and the scope of the essay may be different, the basic format is the same:

1. Your essay must still contain an intro, a body, and a conclusion
2. Your essay must still include a strong thesis statement
3. Your essay must still give examples to illustrate what you are trying to prove
4. Your essay must still use transitions to show that you are moving from one idea to the next
5. Your essay must still have a conclusion to bring the parts of the paper back together

However, there are some key differences between the two types of writing:

1. Your thesis may be longer than a sentence or two and may not be at the end of the introduction

2. Your introduction may be longer than one paragraph
3. Your essay may not have topic sentences that explicitly state what each paragraph is about
4. Your essay may not be organized by paragraphs; it may be organized by sections

How do you make the transition?

Suppose you're taking a United States History class, and your professor asks you to compare and contrast the reasons why the North and South fought the Civil War. Here are two sample introductions. The first is for a traditional five-paragraph essay, and the second is for a paper for a history class. Can you see the difference?

Sample 1.

A civil war occurs when two sides in a single country become so angry at each other that they turn to violence. The Civil War between North and South was a major conflict that nearly tore apart the young United States. The North and South fought the Civil War for many reasons. In some cases, these reasons were the same, but in other cases they were very different. In this paper, I will compare and contrast these reasons by examining the economy, politics, and slavery.

Sample 2.

The United States broke away from England in response to British tyranny and oppression, so opposition to tyranny and a belief in individual freedom and liberty were important values in the young republic. But in the nineteenth century, slavery made Northerners and Southerners see these values in very different ways. By 1860, the conflict over these values broke out into a civil war that nearly tore the country apart. In that war, both Northerners and Southerners believed they fought against tyranny and oppression, but Northerners focused on the oppression of slaves while Southerners defended their rights to property and self-government.

The first example shows the five-paragraph model, using brainstorming to find three points that the author can develop into a thesis that she can then build an essay about. It goes from the general to the specific, and it introduces the points that will be the subjects of each of the body paragraphs.

However, the prompt has asked you to compare and contrast the reasons why, which calls for argument. The thesis in this essay does not argue why these topics are the causes. In other words, it lists reasons but does not argue why those reasons are important. It doesn't make an argument. The third and fourth sentences say, in es-

sence, "I am comparing and contrasting the reasons why the North and the South fought the Civil War"—they just restate the prompt, without giving a single hint about where this student's paper is going. The final sentence, which should make an argument, only lists topics; it doesn't begin to explore how or why something happened. In the second example, the author takes a different approach. Instead of three "points," the author has brainstormed to come up with a main argument, or thesis, that answers the question "Why did the North and South fight the Civil War?" She decides how to organize the draft by thinking about the argument's parts and how they fit together. After some brainstorming, this is a revised main argument, or thesis statement:

Both Northerners and Southerners believed they fought against tyranny and oppression, but Northerners focused on the oppression of slaves while Southerners defended their rights to property and self-government.

As for the rest of the introduction, instead of beginning with a general statement about civil wars, the author gives us the ideas we need to know in order to understand all the parts of her argument. Every sentence in the new introduction leads the reader to the thesis statement in a continuous thread.

In the second example, the author takes a different approach. Instead of three "points," the author has brainstormed to come up with a main argument, or thesis, that answers the question "Why did the North and South fight the Civil War?"

As for the organization of the essay, the first paragraph might give background. It can explain how opposition to tyranny and a belief in individual liberty came to be such important values in the United States. Then there could be another background paragraph which explains how the conflict over slavery developed over time. Then there can be separate paragraphs about Northerners and Southerners, explaining in detail—and giving evidence for—the claims about each group’s reasons for going to war. The body paragraphs don’t necessarily all discuss “points,” like “the economy” and “politics”—two of them give background, and the other two explain Northerners’ and Southerners’ views in detail.

Finally, use the conclusion to explain why the paper really matters—perhaps by pointing out that the cracks in our society that the Civil War exposed are, in many cases, still open.

QUICK REVIEW

- Basic format is the same as the 5-paragraph essay: still contain an intro, body, and conclusion.
- Still includes strong thesis statement along with examples to illustrate what you are trying to prove, with transitions moving from one idea to the next.
- Key differences include: thesis may be longer than a sentence and may not be at the end of the introduction, introduction may be longer than one paragraph, and the essay may not have topic sentences that explicitly state what each paragraph is.
- Essay may not be organized by paragraphs; it may be organized by sections.

(Sample essay courtesy of The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)