

Organization: The Five Paragraph Theme

Sometimes the **easiest way to organize** short essays, reviews, letters, and essay test answers is to use the five paragraph theme format. In a five-paragraph theme, there is an introductory paragraph, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion. The **advantage** to this format is that three points can be made quickly and clearly. The **disadvantage** is that there is no room to develop more complex arguments in depth. Your teacher will tell you if this is an acceptable essay format.

A Five Paragraph Theme on the Five Paragraph Theme

The introductory paragraph begins with a **hook** to get the reader interested. Here it is the author's explanation and examples of his prior five-paragraph themes.

The introductory paragraph nearly always ends with the **thesis** sentence, which explains the topic. In this thesis, the author tells his reader that the essay will be organized according to *advantages, disadvantages, and overall value* – in that order.

The first body paragraph gives some advantages, just as the author agreed to do in the thesis when he identified advantages first. He has put in three examples of advantages, adding appropriate description. Note that the **focus** in body paragraphs is nearly always **explained in the first** sentence, usually **the topic sentence**.

Now come the disadvantages. The problem of complex topics is covered by the nuclear power **example**, and the problem of focused **description** is described as an outgrowth of the complex topic problem.

The **third body paragraph** looks to overall value, playing up advantages in the first body paragraph while downplaying problems discussed in the second body paragraph.

The **conclusion reaffirms** the overall value of the five-paragraph theme as argued in the thesis. It then **reminds** the reader of the **hook** – the uses of the theme – before ending with a little **twist** that to keep readers involved.

I used to write five-paragraph themes all the time. I could find three clear points to make about any topic imaginable. Dogs were always better than cats because they were playful, loyal, and friendly. *Jaws* is a classic film because of its acting, cinematography, and musical score. The three branches of government are called the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Of course, as I grew older, I discovered that there are many other ways to write a paper – there are rhetorical modes to organize thoughts, and there are technical, business, and other document conventions as well. Besides, it's tough to make five paragraphs run for ten or twenty pages. Despite the fact that the five-paragraph theme has both advantages and disadvantages, it is still an overall valuable tool for many different real-world writing situations.

One advantage of the five-paragraph theme is that it limits the length of the paper. A good, well-developed paragraph is generally somewhere between half to three quarters of a page, so a good five-paragraph theme essay can take 2.5 to 3.75 pages. Another advantage of the five-paragraph theme is that it can be used to help remember important points. Three points – one per paragraph – is easy enough to remember for any kind of extemporaneous writing or speaking situation. One final advantage to the five-paragraph theme is that it's pretty easy for a teacher or peer to find the subject and the organization, making it easy to read, and concise enough to read in a hurry, if necessary.

Unfortunately, the five-paragraph theme has disadvantages as well. Imagine trying to provide a detailed explanation of how a nuclear power station works in five paragraphs! The format would get lost somewhere between fission, light water, heavy water, turbines, generators, and cooling towers. It could simply not be done well. In addition, when writing a five-paragraph theme, in-depth explanations and examples have to be very focused on only the three specific points in the thesis, so there's little room to wander off topic. When it happens, it's an obvious problem.

Despite the drawbacks of extended topics and high-level details, the five-paragraph theme has some practical uses in everyday life. Short essay exams can often be done using a five-paragraph format. Book, movie, and CD reviews can be written with this format as well. More importantly, both business letters for job searches and applications and responses to course readings can be done using the five-paragraph theme.

It's true that everything has a proper time and place. And it seems that as I've matured as a writer, I've learned the proper time and place for the five-paragraph theme. Even better, I've learned to pay attention to my syllabus and to my instructor, so she or he can inform me of the proper time and place for the five-paragraph theme. I'll always be able to identify the three reasons why Political Science is my favorite course, or the three qualities that make *Pulp Fiction* better than *Forrest Gump*, but now, having read both this essay and the notes in the left hand margin, I understand the when, where, why, and *how* of the five-paragraph theme.