

## **Chapter 1: The scourge of the five-paragraph essay (and TEEL)**

**O**ur success in life depends a great deal on how we frame issues, tasks, challenges and creative endeavours. If you frame an issue well in your mind, you set yourself up to perceptively find answers or to create things of value. The way we frame things is often the difference between being a problem solver and achiever, or being one of those unfortunate individuals who is perplexed, troubled and trapped by limiting beliefs. People who are self-reliant, or leaders, can frame issues well. That is why they can look after themselves and help others. Education should be about making people more effective. Education should make people into clear thinkers and problem solvers who can help themselves and others.

Essay-writing, when taught properly, serves that noble purpose. It is a way of problem solving, expounding and arguing based on logical reasoning (usually inductive) and it is also an art form. Put simply, essays are usually shorter pieces of writing than what is considered book length. Or, put another way, many books can be seen as long essays. Most articles in journals or chapters in books can be seen as essays by another name. In primary school, essays are also sometimes called ‘compositions’. At the other end of the spectrum, at the postgraduate level, an extended essay is called a ‘thesis’. Academic essays are expected to meet the formal requirements of scholarship, such as by providing footnotes to supporting references and a bibliography. Essays express a belief or beliefs (often referred to as a contention or thesis) that are supported by reason and evidence. It is writing with a meaning and a message. When you teach students to

produce essays you are teaching them to be both thinkers and writers. You are giving them the tools of argument and expression to join the great conversation about life and existence in which we all participate. And this writing ability will also help them become better speakers and more confident communicators in general.

Essays are everywhere and can take several forms. They can be non-fiction pieces that argue a case or analyse or explain something, or do all of these at different times in the essay. They can be deeply personal or academically distant from their subject matter, being either subjective or objective or switching between both perspectives. They can also be creative fictional pieces that differ from non-fiction essays by making their points about the nature of the world or the human condition indirectly, by creating characters, situations and settings, and by using language to infer or imply the points the writer wishes to make rather than stating them directly. We employ literary analysis to enrich our understanding of essays. Essays are an extremely versatile form of argument and expression, where writers can express a great deal of their personality and imagination to evoke, emote, imply or infer with all the rhetorical eloquence and rationality they can muster. Essay writing can be powerful or expressive or uplifting or informative or enlightening or it can simply be entertaining. The gift of the ability to write essays is one of the greatest gifts an educator can provide to the young. Schools should be providing it.

That is why the current fashion of teaching students what can be termed as the ‘five paragraph essay’ (with TEEL paragraphing) is a scourge. This mutated, counter-intuitive and irrational approach to essay writing, which is currently imposed on high school students (and on many of the teachers who have to teach it) corrupts clear thinking and creativity. It is toxic mind pollution. Previously treated as an option, it has in recent years become compulsory. Its rigid formula cannot be escaped. Consequently, it has damaged the education system more severely than any other recent development.

### **The formula of the five paragraph essay and TEEL**

The five paragraph essay was originally developed in the United States in 1966 by Duane C. Nichol as a guide to help teachers assist the least able students to write at least something in response to an essay question by setting out a detailed formula for an argumentative or expository/explanatory essay that included what each sentence should say and in what order. Despite his good intentions, this micromanaging was never a good option, not even for the struggling students. It was always conceptually flawed in its rigid focus on a formulaic structure that seemed to miss the point of the purpose of an essay, which is to make a coherent, logical argument. It should be noted that the formula was originally meant to be treated by teachers as a framework that could accommodate some variation as essay tasks became more demanding and student answers had to become more elaborate. However, it codified into a rigidly enforced and limiting prescription of micromanaged steps that are strictly enforced. Never a liberating doctrine, its rigid interpretation in practice by many teachers made it stifling for students at all ability levels, at the lower, the middle and the higher end. While students may, with practice, become more proficient at meeting the narrowly-conceived requirements of the five paragraph essay, this should not be equated with real educational benefit, since this rigid formula limits nearly all improvements in clear thinking and creativity. The students merely become better at the task rather than better thinkers or writers.

For those who are unfamiliar with the five paragraph essay, here is the formula. The five paragraph essay is restricted to a one paragraph introduction, then three consecutive paragraphs that each make a point on a topic related to the contention, and then a one paragraph conclusion.

The one paragraph introduction must state the contention of the essay in the first sentence, and the subsequent sentences articulate the topics covered in each of the three paragraphs in the order in

which they follow. That usually amounts to an introduction of four sentences.

The three of what they call ‘body paragraphs’ are written in the same way. The first sentence must be what they call the ‘topic sentence’, which expresses the topic and main point of the paragraph. According to the original formula articulated by Nichols, three minor points (usually expressed in separate sentences) are made in support of that ‘topic sentence’. However, in Australian high schools the original model of the paragraph has become even more micromanaged. The content of each of the three ‘body paragraphs’ must be organised according to the acronym TEEL: Topic, Elaboration, Evidence, and Link. According to the TEEL paragraphing system imposed in Australian schools, these paragraphs must begin with a ‘topic sentence’ and then present an ‘elaboration’ of that topic sentence followed by ‘evidence’ and then what they call a ‘link’, which is a sentence that links back to the point of the paragraph or back to the contention or back to the question or onto the next point. In an English essay on a text, such as a novel, the elaboration and evidence is expected to include two (or more) abbreviated quotations from the text studied.

The conclusion is the final paragraph. It summarises the points made and restates the contention as a conclusion. There is no bibliography.

This formula is usually presented by teachers to students as a model, often illustrated as a sequence of empty linked boxes that must all be filled in by the students to thereby meet the requirements of writing an essay. At this point you are probably thinking that this convoluted, micromanaged formula has no resemblance to the way real writers write. You are right. It has morphed the structure of an essay into a bizarre abstraction that makes essay writing a rarefied task pertaining only to the microcosm of the high school, which has little relation to preparing students for the writing demands of the wider world they will soon inhabit, nor does it develop (as a school should)

those students possessing a talent for writing. If anything, it crushes it. The five paragraph essay is to writing what the colouring-in book is to fine art.

Something that I have found concerning is that not one of the teachers of my students appears to have shown the perceptiveness to recognise that there are no examples of the five paragraph essay in the real world. I'm sure there are commendable teachers out there who have noticed this, but I have not encountered one. Outside of a few examples presented in textbooks intended to teach students to write five paragraph essays, you will not find them anywhere else in the world of literature. Meanwhile, examples of proper essay writing can be found everywhere, filling book shops, newsagencies and libraries across the world. This should be seen as a clue as to the irrelevance of this odd form of writing. It is completely useless outside of completing the tasks set in the high schools that demand it. Indeed, the teachers who impose this rigid and limiting formula on their unsuspecting students do not even use it themselves when writing for their own professional journals, such as *English in Australia* and *Idiom*, nor do they use this form of writing when explaining how to write a five paragraph essay in the textbooks or handouts they produce for students. This could be seen as an inadvertent confession of the limited utility and value of the five paragraph essay. This odd five paragraph format has alienated the high school 'essay' from the real world of writing, reason and expression.

### **What essay writing can and should be (but no longer is)**

To fully understand why the current trend of imposing the five paragraph essay on students is so off track and educationally destructive, we first have to appreciate what essay writing can be and should be. Unfortunately, essay writing is commonly imperfectly understood, or misunderstood, by many people, including (unfortunately) by many

teachers, a factor that has probably contributed to the takeover by the toxic five paragraph essay format. This misunderstanding seems to come from the tendency of too many people seeking to understand what an essay is by focusing narrowly on its distinctive structure (introduction, body, conclusion, and bibliography) rather than its purpose. However, when you appreciate its purpose its structure makes perfect sense. This is because its purpose explains its structure. We will focus on both. To understand the nature of essays we will take as our archetype the standard ‘argumentative’ essay.

Argumentative essays (and all essays) are as much about quality thinking as they are about quality writing. Producing an essay involves a disciplined process of problem solving that is followed by a rationally organised expression of one’s considered answer to the problem posed. That is why traditionally most essays set for students, by an educator or examiner, take the form of an ‘essay question’ for which the students are expected to provide an ‘answer’ in the form of an essay. Ideally, the repeated practice of essay writing disciplines the mind to make it more effective in answering questions and solving problems. Consequently, a disciplined mind produces better essays, which provide more convincing or valuable answers. Essay writing is therefore an extremely important dimension of a quality education.

I have chosen the argumentative essay as an archetype for a reason. In a sense, it should be appreciated that all essays are argumentative essays in that they all present arguments. The term ‘argument’ needs to be understood in the philosophical sense rather than in its commonly used meaning as a disagreement, debate or altercation. An argument is a contention (or thesis or belief) that is supported by reason and evidence. There is a logical connection or flow of ideas to support that contention. Unfortunately, a great many teachers appear to have confused the argumentative essay with being argumentative, which refers to a disagreement and dispute, sometimes heated, so they insist that their students take dogmatic positions on an issue,

thinking (incorrectly) that this is what is required. It isn't. Arguments can be modest, cautious, subtle, nuanced, or ambivalent, as well as bold. The great many teachers whom I have observed who criticise or penalise students for not taking an unequivocal stand on the issue that is the topic of their essay may be inadvertently revealing that they do not appreciate the philosophical meaning of the term argument. Alternatively, many of the others, who suspect that something is not quite right about this, may have simply been told that they have to teach essays this way so they are going along with what is expected of them.

In addition, many teachers refer to argumentative essays and expository/explanatory essays and analytical essays as if they are distinctly different types. That is misleading. They are variations on a theme. An expository/explanatory essay presents a contention just as an argumentative or any other essay does. This time the contention is an explanation. The expository/explanatory essay seeks to justify that explanation by providing reason and evidence for it. So, in effect, it is making an argument. It is the same with an analytical essay. It will present an analysis, and then seek to justify that analysis by providing reason and evidence for it. So, in effect, it is making an argument. It is even the same with the creative essay. To be literature, it has to have something to say about the nature of the world or the human condition. In other words, it will express a contention. But instead of supporting that contention directly, as an argumentative essay does, it will support it indirectly, by presenting characters, situations and settings, as well as language that imply the points made to support that contention. When we analyse creative texts like novels, short stories, plays, poems, or films, we are seeking to determine the underlying argument, and when we have done so accurately, we have determined the meaning of the text. In addition, this form of literary analysis greatly benefits essay writing. The more we analyse the underlying arguments in literature (especially in quality

literature) the better we can become at producing quality literature ourselves in our own essays.

As mentioned earlier, there are several parts to an (argumentative) essay:

- the introduction
- the body
- the conclusion
- and the bibliography.

To understand why the essay has this particular structure you need to temporarily take away the introduction and the bibliography, important though they are, and examine the relationship between what is left, the body and conclusion. In an essay, the body consists of paragraphs that make points that lead logically to the conclusion. As I mentioned earlier, an essay is an argument. Keep that in mind. In philosophy, an argument is when you make points, known as premises, which lead logically to a conclusion. The premises support the conclusion. The conclusion stems from the premises. Can you see the similarity in the structure between the body and conclusion of an essay and the premises and conclusion of an argument in philosophy? They are the same. The reason why an essay has its particular structure is because it is making an argument and so it takes the structure of an argument. The reason behind the structure of an essay is as simple as that. It is an argument. That is why the structure and purpose of the essay are one and the same. An essay is an argument so it takes the structure of an argument. It makes points that lead logically to a conclusion. The appreciation that an essay is an argument should be at the foundation of any education in the art of essay writing.

An essay can take any argument form (inductive or deductive) but it often takes the form of a kind of inductive argument known as ‘an argument to the best explanation’. The premises or points of these arguments present or describe facts or regularities that lead logically



to a conclusion that represents the best possible explanation for this preceding evidence. A valid conclusion of an essay like this usually represents the closest fit for the available evidence. That is why in well-composed scholarly essays the conclusions are often cautious, subtle, nuanced or even ambivalent because you can only conclude what the available evidence allows you to conclude, nothing more and nothing less.

As mentioned earlier, the students who present cautious, subtle, nuanced or ambivalent contentions and conclusions are often being logically precise, and the many teachers whom I have observed who criticise students for doing this in their essays are often at fault for doing so. I suspect that many of the teachers who insist on dogmatic contentions and conclusions from their students are going with a trend regarding what other teachers are doing and what they believe the chief assessors want to see in the final exam. But did they go with this trend critically or uncritically? If it was mostly uncritically then another issue is raised. It suggests that they were probably badly taught by their educators when they were at high school. It is a cycle that continues. Teachers who were badly taught now teach others. It is a sad situation resulting from a broken education system. With so many teachers lacking this appreciation of the logic underlying essay writing this probably made them vulnerable to falling for the simplistic lure of the five paragraph essay as a viable format to teach students when it lacks an explicit sense of the logical reasoning that is fundamental to an essay. If more teachers had had this vital appreciation of logic, then more of them would have had the confidence to resist the introduction of the five paragraph essay for being the irrational mutation that it is. A widespread appreciation of logic was the vaccine that could have stopped the spread of the five paragraph essay virus. But that did not happen.

Having analysed the logical relationship between the body and conclusion we can see that the purpose of an essay is to support

the conclusion. Consequently, the introduction of the essay can be seen as an extra part attached to the front of the essay that serves to orient the audience to go with the flow of the argument (in the body) so the readers reach the conclusion in the most agreeable way. All the components that comprise the introduction serve that purpose: the statement of the contention, the definition of key terms, and the outline of what is to follow in the body of the essay.

The statement of the contention in the introduction is really a statement of the conclusion in advance. Logically, it cannot be anything else. This preview to the conclusion (in the form of the contention) serves to assist the readers to better appreciate the conclusion when they eventually reach it after reading through the evidence. Understandably, the statement of the contention usually simultaneously performs another role; it implicitly or explicitly states the problem the essay seeks to solve. That is because the contention is really the answer to the essay question. By stating the answer you inevitably refer to the question.

The most important dimension of the introduction is what can be described as the definition of the key terms evident in the essay question and/or used in the essay. This part of the introduction defines and clarifies the specifics of the topic. It also sets out the interpretation of the question and the parameters of the answer. The clarification of the meaning of the key terms used in the essay is vital regarding words that may have multiple meanings. This is so the readers can recognise the specific meaning used in the essay. This is so the readers' thinking does not go off on a tangent by assuming that the writer meant one meaning of a key term when he or she meant another. For example, in an essay question that asked: 'Was justice served by the fates of the main characters of the play *Macbeth*?' the term 'justice' would have to be defined, since it has many meanings. They include justice referring to what is defined by the letter of the law, or the term justice may refer to a broader moral concept of

justice. Such a term would need to be clarified in the introduction so the argument in the essay can be constructively followed and appreciated. In addition, by defining the meaning of the question and the parameters of the answer, the scope and limitations of the student's response is clarified. This is an important dimension of scholarship. It involves, for example, confining the parameters of an essay question that asks something about the 'main characters' of the play *Macbeth*, to a discussion of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth rather than, for example, also including Duncan, Banquo and Macduff, if that contingent definition of 'main characters' is considered by the student to be sufficient to provide a convincing answer to the essay question. This dimension of an introduction also serves to place a realistic limitation on the essay due to the word-length or time limit allowed for it.

Sometimes a definition is so fundamental that the essay's argument stems primarily from it, so it has to be stated in the introduction. Take for example the following essay question: 'Macbeth's downfall is of his own making. Discuss'. The response to this question necessitates that the following definition be stated in the essay's introduction:

The play *Macbeth* is a tragedy. A tragedy is a form of literature where a great man or hero falls from grace due to a flaw, or flaws, in his character. This in turn provides a lesson to the audience to guard against similar flaws in their character. In this case, the tragic hero Macbeth is brought down by the fatal flaw of his ambition.

You would have noticed that the statement of this definition virtually resolves the question. The essay's argument would be that the play is a tragedy and it conforms to the requirements of that genre, so the tragic hero Macbeth must be seen as the cause of his own downfall since the message of the play depends on that appreciation of the main character. Teachers who appreciate these scholarly values would

be positioned to recognise and reward students for defining this key term in this manner. However, there is something concerning that should be noted at this point. More than half of the teachers I have encountered through my students have not known what the term tragedy means in literature. They thought that a tragedy is a sad or calamitous event or a story with an unhappy ending. (These are commonly understood meanings of the word tragedy that differ from its technical meaning as a literary term.) While it is the case that a tragedy in literature is also a sad story with an unhappy ending, that limited understanding is insufficient for the literary analysis required in high school. Their lack of this elementary knowledge would lead them to a different conceptualisation of an answer, one that may be flawed. As well as being sound scholarly practice to define the key terms of an essay in its introduction, it is also a vital measure taken to avoid being misinterpreted by a teacher lacking basic knowledge. For a student's correct argument to be appreciated, the term tragedy would need to be defined up front, as soon as possible, in the introduction. Tragically, the constrained format of the introduction to the five paragraph essay does not allow for these definitions.

The definition of key terms is the most vital and most scholarly dimension of an introduction. It is where a perceptive student can challenge the assumptions underlying the essay question, to correct or clarify or contest them. This can lay the foundation for a student to demonstrate not only sound scholarly practice and analytical precision, but also lay the groundwork for his examiners to appreciate the student's innovative thinking or originality. Narrow-minded teachers just like to see their own ideas reflected back in their students' essays. But broad-minded competent teachers appreciate this outstanding quality in student essays. However, to be convincing, a student must use the introduction to set the examiners up to appreciate the student's distinctive or critical approach. Unfortunately, this vital component of an introduction is completely left out of the format of the five

paragraph essay that is imposed on high schools. This is intellectually extremely constraining. It shuts off the possibility for expressing the most sophisticated answers. I have observed that students are even punished in deducted grades by teachers for attempting to include these intellectually challenging explanatory elements in their introduction. This makes it extremely difficult if not impossible for them to provide a sophisticated response to a demanding essay question that may, for example, invite a student to look at the question from several relevant theoretical perspectives. It also prevents perceptive students from challenging an ill-conceived essay question (and there are many of them) by offering a correction that will serve as the basis for a distinctive, insightful answer that is still demonstratively relevant to the question asked. There is no room allowed for this in the introduction to a five paragraph essay. The kind of intellectual sophistication that should be cultivated in students is stifled.

It is also sound scholarly practice for students answering essay questions about English texts (like novels, short stories, plays, poems and films) to include a succinct clarification of the meaning of the text as part of their definition of key terms. This practice serves to anchor the analysis that follows to thereby enhance its credibility. In terms of assessment, this can greatly assist examiners to appreciate the merits of this analysis. It could never be assumed that the examiners, especially unseen external examiners assessing final exams, would be fully conversant with the meaning of the text presented by the student and be positioned to appreciate the student's essay response that stemmed from this understanding. This is an important consideration. The meaning of the text needs to be clarified up front to position the examiner to appreciate the merits of the argument.

It is especially important in a high school system where (regrettably) too many teachers misunderstand the texts that they teach, sometimes by being way off the mark, but more often by being vague, imprecise or confused, and often without realising this, so this

clarification of the meaning of the text in the introduction is vital for fair assessment. This means that students who know the text better than their teacher does could greatly increase their chances of being rewarded rather than penalised for differing from the teacher's opinion. This approach works well except with the most narrow-minded and dogmatic teachers who just want to see their own ideas reflected back in their students' work, no matter how problematic or flawed those ideas may be. For example, there were some teachers who mistook George Orwell's anti-Stalinist novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to be an anti-Nazi text, while some others saw it as a prediction of the technology and lifestyles of the future rather than as a warning from history. So a succinct definition of the meaning of the text is vital to an introduction of an essay to be assessed by one of these teachers. It could be something like the following:

George Orwell was a democratic socialist who was vehemently opposed to Stalinism. He wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) as an essay on political morality that served as a penetrating critique of totalitarianism. It provided a humanistic warning of the threats posed by totalitarianism to intellectual liberty, reason, historical truth, as well as to human dignity, individuality, the pursuit of happiness and the expression of sexuality.

With the key term '*Nineteen Eighty-Four*' defined in this fashion, and the direction of the essay grounded, the essay stands much more of a chance of being appropriately rewarded. In addition, sound scholarship like this is helpful to those teachers who were somewhat confused about the meaning of the text. They can be secretly grateful to the student for offering clarification and be more disposed to reward the student for being helpful in this fashion. In this way, everyone can benefit.

However, there is no room for that essential definitional material

in the constrained format of the introduction to the five paragraph essay. This leaves clever students vulnerable to being misunderstood, underappreciated and unfairly graded. It is currently much safer for them to just echo their teacher's ideas in the essay. This stripping of the introduction of vital scholarly components is one of the major ways that the imposition of the five paragraph essay format has inadvertently compromised sound scholarship and student originality and thereby degraded the quality of education.

A dimension of an introduction that is especially useful for longer essays is a brief outline of what is to follow. An essay's argument can fall into several sections. It can assist the readers if these sections are forecast in the introduction so the weave and flow of the essay from section to section is anticipated. This can help the readers' journey through each of the stages of the argument. As I said earlier, the purpose of an introduction is to set the audience up so they go through the essay to reach the conclusion in the most agreeable way. An example of an essay structure may be the following: open with a definition of the theory to be analysed, then present and assess several perspectives used to assess the theory, then weigh up evidence that casts light on the value of the theory, and then finally present a recommendation on the best use of that theory. This sequence can be forecast in the introduction.

Interestingly, before the takeover of the five paragraph essay, many teachers were hostile to this dimension of an introduction, crossing it out when students included it, sometimes aggressively. 'You don't need this!' they would unappreciatively scrawl in red pen. Now it is the only dimension of an introduction that is allowed in the five paragraph essay format apart from the statement of the contention. Absurdly, in the five paragraph essay this part of the introduction forecasts not sections of the essay but every paragraph, all three of them. This is overkill. Currently, it is the definition of key terms that is not permitted in the introduction. Admittedly, the outline of what

is to follow is often less useful in the short essays common to high school tests and assignments. So, it can be considered an option. However, the unscholarly manner in which many teachers used to reject this part of an introduction has now been replaced by an even more unscholarly insistence on including it, which now takes the absurd form of forecasting the message in every paragraph.

The basic components of an introduction are a statement of the contention, the definition of key terms and an outline of what is to follow. However, more advanced academic essays at senior high school and in university may also include in the introduction one or more of the following components. The introduction may state and justify the choice of the methodology used for the research that produced the essay, such as outlining a survey questionnaire that was presented to a randomly selected but representative sample of respondents to gauge popular opinion on an issue. There is no room for that articulation in the introduction to a five paragraph essay. More advanced essays may also outline the theoretical framework used to guide the research, which also entails identifying the scholarly tradition in which the essay can be situated and best appreciated, like feminist theory or Freudian psychoanalysis, which are frameworks very much loved by the politically correct Left, including by many English teachers. There is no room for that articulation in the introduction to a five paragraph essay. Nor can students present a brief survey of the salient secondary literature or primary sources used in the research, with the purpose of using this to justify how their essay attempts to offer something valuable or pertinent or thorough or new. There is no room for that either in the introduction to a five paragraph essay. It is just not allowed. The potential for expressing these advanced dimensions of scholarship is arbitrarily shut off. This also abruptly shuts off the opportunity for teachers to teach them and for students to learn how to use them. Keep in mind that the five paragraph essay is all that students are being taught about essay writing. As far as most



students are concerned, the word ‘essay’ means the five paragraph essay. It is all they know. If several important or advanced elements of an introduction are not included in the five paragraph essay format then for most of these students they do not exist.

You have probably noticed from this discussion that there can be much to do in an introduction to an essay. There is often too much to say in just one paragraph, so essays usually have an introductory section that may consist of one, two, three or more paragraphs, as many as required. But one paragraph is all that is allowed in the introduction according to the five paragraph essay format. In addition, it has long been the case (even before the five paragraph essay became mandatory in high school) that if an introduction in an essay extended to two paragraphs, the teacher assessing it could become utterly confused. I would see this in the red pen ‘corrections’ on the student’s paper. ‘This is not a proper paragraph’ the bewildered and mistaken teacher would write on the second paragraph of the introduction. I think that this error stems from many teachers’ mistaken belief that there are distinct types of paragraphs for different parts of an essay: introductory paragraphs and body paragraphs and conclusion paragraphs, and a parallel belief that there can only be one introductory paragraph or conclusion paragraph. That is wrong. In reality there are not different types, just different purposes for paragraphs and the paragraphs in different parts of the essay reflect those purposes. Consequently, from long ago, to avoid that kind of unjust reprimand from confused teachers, I have advised my students to cram everything they had to say in their introduction into one paragraph, no matter how long the paragraph became and how ungrammatical it was. That tactic always worked. Again, it is probably the case that these confused teachers were badly taught and now they are passing on their faulty understanding to their students. Such is the sorry state of the education system.

A well-written introduction can virtually stand on its own, clear in

its intention and meaning. Writing an effective introduction is one of the foundations of quality scholarship that should be established in high school and later developed in university. This training has been weak in high schools for a long time and it needed improvement. But the draconian imposition of the five paragraph essay has made any chance of improvement in this area impossible. It has not fixed anything but has instead imposed a rigid anti-rational formula that constrains anything approaching quality scholarship.

English in high school is an academically degraded subject, and it has been for a long time. Many scholarly standards have been quietly dropped. This is evident in the fact that students are not taught about the use of a bibliography in English classes that should teach the art of essay writing fully and properly. Along with teaching good grammar, which is another casualty of English being an academically degraded subject, the conventions of good scholarship are difficult to find in English classrooms. Bibliographies can be found in essays in subjects that are academically in marginally better shape, such as History. Bibliographies are not relevant to every essay to be written in English assignments but they are relevant to some, and if essay writing is to be taught then the art of writing a bibliography should be taught with it. It can be an important part of an essay.

The bibliography is an additional part of the essay attached to the end. It therefore follows the conclusion of the essay's argument. It states the sources consulted in the research. In addition to this being a scholarly convention that enables the research conducted for the essay to be better scrutinised by readers, the bibliography provides some additional support for the argument of the essay. If the bibliography covers fundamental known secondary and primary sources, or includes new ones, it strengthens the positive way the essay is perceived. There is no mention of a bibliography in the formula for a five paragraph essay, which implies to both teachers and students that it is not relevant. Yet, scholarly conventions such

as this are relevant to all subjects and they must be taught in all these subjects.

While on the topic of scholarly conventions, footnoting is not taught in English classes either. Footnoting is the process of noting the sources from which evidence was derived or the sources that inspired the relevant reasoning for the point made in the essay. Footnoting provides additional backing to the point made, and it also conveys something very important: academic honesty. It represents an acknowledgment of other relevant scholarship. It is part of an honour code that is vital to the integrity of a scholarly community, and students should be taught how to participate in this practice. In footnoting a tiny sign or number is put above the end of a point that corresponds to a source listed at the bottom of the page. With English being an academically degraded subject, there is often no mention of this scholarly convention when essay writing is taught. With scholarly conventions, like the bibliography and footnoting, being absent from the five paragraph essay, it is therefore overlooked by English teachers so they remain mysterious, confusing or are seen as unimportant by students. The five paragraph essay falls well short of preparing students for scholarship at higher tertiary levels. It is not surprising that so many bewildered first year students drop out of university. A broken education system in high school costs our society dearly.

**Writing an essay: defining, thinking, researching, writing, editing, and how the five paragraph essay corrupts that process**

Essay writing is a process of problem solving that combines analysis, argument and expression. Essay writing therefore involves thinking and writing. The imposition of the five paragraph essay has corrupted every dimension of this process: addressing the essay question, brainstorming and researching to derive an answer and the evidence to support it, planning to organise the presentation of the evidence into

a coherent sequence, executing the essay according to the plan, and editing. It also has corrupted the assessment process by the examiner. To appreciate this, we need to look at the process of writing an essay to see the toxic impact that the five paragraph essay has had and the way it has debased scholarship.

The first task for students is to address the essay question to determine precisely what it is asking. This is crucial so their thinking is focused on what is required and does not go off on a tangent. The student should clarify the meaning of the key terms and determine the demands and parameters of the question. From there the student can decide the kind of resources he or she will research or, if the student already has them, the sections of their notes on the topic that will be most helpful.

Researching and analysing to produce notes that determine the meaning, messages and themes of a text, such as a novel, is an educationally valuable task. This is because the ability to read, hear or view something and to be able to determine its meaning and express it succinctly and comprehensively to others is one of the hallmarks of an educated person and this exercise should be used as an opportunity to cultivate this widely applicable skill. In addition, the use of well-prepared notes to insightfully answer questions is also a valuable scholarly ability that should be cultivated and practised.

But the way students consider their responses to essay questions and the way they conduct the important scholarly practice of producing notes have both become corrupted by the imposition of the five paragraph essay. Currently, students still look at an essay question about, for example, a novel, to acquire an understanding of what the question means and a sense of what it is asking of them. Generally, most students do quite well in interpreting the meaning of the question. So far, so good. But then something unfortunate happens, as they ask themselves:

What are my three points and my two (or more) quotes per paragraph?

All answers are seen to come in threes. This is irrational and unscholarly. In terms of educational outcomes, it is appalling. In rational academic terms, it is equivalent to superstition.

### **The absurdity of threes**

The imposition of the five paragraph essay on student writing has resulted in a disturbing shift away from quality thinking and research to find meaningful or profound answers derived from evidence, to instead encourage students to meet a quota of making three relevant points that are then embellished with evidence. This conceptualisation of what is required of them has oriented them away from feeling obliged to thoroughly investigate a topic to instead seeing the challenge in terms of undertaking some preliminary note-taking to prepare the groundwork to provide limited formulaic responses (all of which come in threes). It is all about filling the quota of three points, each to be expressed in the designated three paragraphs that have to be filled. And, of course, the answer cannot involve more than three points. It cannot involve four or five or six or more points. It cannot involve one or two points either. It has to be three. If you think that this is profoundly irrational, you are right. It is. And this is the way that students are being conditioned to think through repetitive behaviour involving doing five paragraph essays (the more often that essays that are approached this way the more ingrained this behaviour becomes) and the subsequent provision of rewards (grades) for meeting the quota also serves to reinforce this flawed thinking. By the time most students have finished high school they have been behaving in this irrational way for six years. As far as the five paragraph essay is concerned, it is as if the Age of Enlightenment never happened.

As the five paragraph essay took hold in recent years and became compulsory, I noticed a shift in the emphasis in the thinking of students about what is most important, and a corresponding shift in the approach of the teachers who teach and assess them. This is not a complete realignment in thinking, but a substantial shift nevertheless. In the study of English texts there seems to have been a shift in students from primarily seeking expertise regarding the meaning, messages or themes of a novel studied (in the expectation of being highly rewarded for that expertise) to merely achieving a workable familiarity with the novel's content, which is a lower order of thinking. It also involves students compiling lists of brief quotations to use in their three paragraphs, which involves an even lower order of thinking. Many teachers are guiding and assisting in this process. Teachers' lessons seem to be focusing far more on the content of the novel and far less on the meaning, messages or themes and historical context than they did previously. This content can, when the class test or exam comes, be plundered to produce the necessary three points and two (or more) quotes per paragraph. An understanding of the meaning of a text may still be appreciated by many teachers and students (for example, it can be used to fill one or perhaps two of the three required paragraphs) but it seems to be regarded as having less utility in preparing essay responses than it previously did. A typical lesson reflecting this kind of thinking can involve the teacher going through the novel telling the students the lines to highlight in the text. Meaning is not completely ignored; but frequently it is treated as far less significant than it was previously treated and should be treated.

However, if you check the official assessment criteria (*Performance Descriptors VCE English 2017–2020*) you will see reassuring references to the need for the student to demonstrate an appreciation of the text's complexity to achieve high grades. These criteria include: 'Sophisticated understanding of the world of the text through an insightful analysis of the explicit and implied values it expresses, and

how the author has responded to different contexts, audiences and purposes’.

The criteria also include: ‘Sustained and insightful interpretation of textual meaning through a complex analysis of features of the text. Considered and accurate use of textual evidence to justify the interpretation’.

These criteria are fine, even impressive, but the five paragraph essay is not conditioning students to think in the appropriate way to achieve the outcome defined by these criteria, in fact, it works against it by conditioning students to see answers in terms of meeting a quota of finding three points to fill three paragraphs.

In addition, although an appreciation of the ‘meaning’ of the text is clearly stated in the assessment criteria, the references to ‘understanding of the world of the text’ and to the ‘use of textual evidence’ may have captured the imagination of teachers more than other terms in the assessment criteria. Combined with the corrupting influence of the three paragraph quota, these criteria could have also contributed to justifying a shift in emphasis from meaning to content, and to the obsessive collecting of quotations, rather than focusing on achieving a deeper understanding of the text that is supported by many relevant forms of evidence, with quotations being just one form of evidence.

In the educational world shaped by the five paragraph essay, the greatest cause of panic in students is no longer a fear that they are not expert enough on the text they are expected to write about to produce a meaningful answer; the new fear is that they could only think of two points for their essay and they have to find another to meet the expected quota of three. It does not matter how profoundly and successfully those two points answered the question; the students are anxious until they can come up with something (anything) to meet the quota. Those students who came up with, for example, four

relevant points feel less stressed than those with two points, but they are not at ease until they can devise a way to amalgamate the fourth point into another of the points so the essay appears to conform to the quota of three points, each in their own paragraph, plus an introductory paragraph and a concluding paragraph. The essay must have the appearance of being in five blocks of text. How educational is this? Not very. Forcing students to jump through hoops in this fashion is the opposite of what education should be. With the recent making of the five paragraph essay compulsory, the collapse of the education system into this farce took only a few years.

As a private tutor, I have to deal with these distressed students who are expected to play these silly games in order to achieve the grades they require to qualify to enter their desired course at university. My compassion for them is matched only by my distaste for the system that makes them do this. The farcical nature of this exercise and the damaging impact it has on the way students have been conditioned to answer essay questions is most evident when brainstorming multiple questions to prepare for the end-of-year exams. On so many occasions, the most intelligent and rational possible response based on a sound, scholarly understanding of the meaning and content of the text does not produce an answer that meets the three point quota. As I work with students, for example in practising essay responses for a class test or exam, I see their expressions of delight, as we work together to produce a scholarly response, turn to panic if that response does not immediately seem convertible into threes.

Here is an example. The classical Greek play by Euripides, *Medea* (431 BC), has been rotated on and off the curriculum over the decades. I have taught it several times. Many teachers see it as a proto-feminist text, a warning to oppressive patriarchal, misogynistic and sexist husbands about the consequences of mistreating their wife, even though that interpretation differs significantly from its probable original meaning as a warning against underestimating the



volatile and violent passion of barbarians and the threat they pose to Greek civilisation. However, most teachers see the text in terms of a jumbled mix of ideas from both approaches. I taught my students to look at the text from both a classical Greek perspective and from a postmodern feminist perspective. The introduction of the essay was used to set up a sophisticated answer that was, in a sense, two consecutive answers, each from different theoretical perspectives. The introduction would define this approach by briefly defining the perspectives and the answers that derive from these perspectives, before outlining that the essay would present an answer based on the probable classical Greek interpretation followed by an answer based on a postmodern feminist interpretation. Each section of the essay would, of course, involve several paragraphs.

These essay responses usually worked splendidly and my students were often well rewarded in grades. Plus, my students also learnt how to interpret texts from different theoretical perspectives. It was both a highly educational experience and one that produced high grades, an ideal situation. But all this changed under the tyranny of the five paragraph essay. With the severely constrained introduction in this compulsory format my students could no longer set up this sophisticated double-barrelled answer. And if they sought to present a classical Greek response followed by a postmodern feminist response in the body of their essay, they faced a problem. In the intellectually deformed world created by the five paragraph essay, that answer only amounts to two paragraphs. So, my students were stuck. That was until I found a way out. I invented for them a third paragraph. It involved expressing an appreciation of Euripides' grasp of the complexity of human nature. Of course, in a sensible education system based on encouraging good scholarship, that appreciation would simply be incorporated into both dimensions of the two-perspectives response. What my students have to do now is prepare to produce a classical Greek paragraph, a postmodern feminist paragraph, and Euripides'

appreciation of the complexity of human nature paragraph. If you think that's crazy, it is. But it has to be done. The scholarship that worked before no longer works in this crazy new world of education.

### **The tyranny of mediocrity**

The toxic five paragraph essay format had been lurking around for decades. Initially, I thought only the most ill-informed, least-experienced and least-skilled teachers were teaching it, while the most experienced and perceptive teachers respected the traditional essay. It had been avoidable. So, I confess, when it became universal and compulsory it took me by surprise. I remember when the nature of this shift first became apparent. A fairly new student of mine showed me a practice essay done to prepare for an upcoming assessment. To best help him, first, I carefully read the essay question, then thought about the ways one could answer it, and then I carefully read my student's essay. He was off to a fine start, having made several strong, relevant points and then, suddenly, his argument stopped. There was more he needed to say. His contention was not yet properly supported. I asked him why he had not developed his essay further to include the several additional points that needed to be made. 'I had made my three points', he confidently told me. It was his confidence that struck me. I was concerned. Did the mistake stem from the student (a problem that is easily fixed) or was his mistake the result of something else, having something to do with the education system itself?

I kept that query to myself, to instead tactfully explain to him that it is irrational to think that answers come in threes. It is an arbitrary choice. Why not two or four or five points? I told him. I also tactfully explained that the three point answer is a limiting belief. I explained that limiting beliefs are ways that we limit ourselves, or even self-sabotage, by the way we frame questions and responses. Limiting

beliefs produce mediocrity and fully effective people are those who manage to transcend limiting beliefs. Soon after this, other similar examples emerged. After reading the draft of another new student's essay, I asked her why she had not discussed several other relevant points in her answer. 'I did not have the room', she replied. She was not talking about exceeding the set word limit for the essay. She was telling me she had made her three required points. There was a pattern emerging. To my great concern, I recognised that these limiting beliefs were becoming integral to the education system.

Initially, in the face of the rise of the five paragraph essay format, I advised my students to continue to write essays properly, just as I had taught them. I instructed them to produce rational answers that included as many points as were required, and then to just make sure the essay appeared in five blocks of text to imitate the appearance of the five paragraph essay. As long as the work appealed to the teachers' biases and was of a good quality, the teachers will reward you, I advised them. This worked well for a while, and then the situation suddenly worsened.

A universal obsession emerged among teachers to strictly enforce adherence to the micromanaged structure of the five paragraph essay. For example, you could not include the vitally important definition of key terms in the introduction of an essay anymore. This dramatically reduced the quality of student essay responses. Clever material, no matter how pertinent to the student's argument, and no matter how well the student argued, was often criticised, rejected and penalised. Just having a sentence in what the teachers perceived as the wrong place was penalised. Often the best parts of paragraphs were crossed out by teachers because they did not conform to TEEL. It seemed that student essays were being policed rather than read. Conformity to structure became the unofficial dominant assessment code. Many teachers had a strict checklist of elements they insisted should be present in paragraphs. This meant

that other important elements were blacklisted and often rejected. I confess that on several occasions the teacher's corrections on a student's work were so irrational and unfair that my first reaction was to just hold my face in my hands in despair. My heart sank as more and more of these anti-intellectual, unscholarly situations emerged until they became the norm. Eventually, the trend reached the point where one of my students told me: 'If I don't write my answer as a five paragraph essay my teacher will fail me'. The tyranny of the five paragraph essay and TEEL had been established.

I have another confession to make. I have always seen great fault in the education system, for good reason, but I did not believe that anything as stupid and intellectually destructive as this could take hold and do so this quickly, in just a few years. To someone who loves knowledge, learning and education as much as I do, this was a nightmare. It seemed like cleverness was being systematically squeezed out of the education system.

I became deeply worried for my students and also for myself; just having toxic limiting beliefs like the five paragraph essay and TEEL in my mind was a threat to the vitality of my own intellect and creativity. These toxic limiting beliefs are as poisonous for educators and creative people as they are for students. (In addition, I also pitied those teachers who realised something had gone wrong but felt trapped in a system where they saw no opportunity for dissent.) When requested, I still taught students how to write an essay properly, so they knew what an essay should be, but, unfortunately, they no longer got the opportunity to practise that skill, not at high school anyway. It had to wait until university. But at least these students would know what a proper essay was and could appreciate the logic behind its construction. That is educationally vitally important. In addition, for my students' benefit (and my own) we reframe the appropriate terminology to minimise contamination by these limiting beliefs. For example,

instead of referring to the five paragraph essay as an ‘essay’ we reconceptualise it as a ‘task’ that has a number of requirements. For example, we treat the three required points as three related short answer questions made in response to the same question. We also deliberately avoid terms like ‘body paragraphs’. In that way, my students are inoculated against some of the toxicity of these limiting beliefs, and they can still get the ‘As’ they require to qualify to enter their chosen course at university. If there is an opportunity at their schools (which I suspect is unlikely) perhaps some teachers could consider something like this approach, for their own benefit as much as for their students.

### **The deformation of the paragraph**

One of the most disturbingly un-educational dimensions of the tyranny of the five paragraph essay and TEEL is the confusion it spreads about the nature of paragraphs. Firstly, the term ‘body paragraph’ referred to in the formula for the five paragraph essay is worrying. It should be dismissed. There is no such thing as a body paragraph. Instead, there are paragraphs that appear in the body of the essay. Similarly, there is no such thing as an introduction paragraph or a conclusion paragraph. Instead, there are paragraphs that appear in the introduction or conclusion of the essay and there can be more than one used for each, in fact, there can be as many as required.

Paragraphs are not complex or mysterious. A paragraph is simply a point that is supported. A series of these points make an argument or tell a story. It is very easy to teach students to write paragraphs and then show them how to produce arguments or stories. Much of it is common sense. It can also be fun. You just ask students to brainstorm on a topic they know. Then you help them to put the ideas into a coherent sequence. You tell them what a paragraph is.

If they are still confused, you write a paragraph for them to show them how it is done. Then you ask them to write their material as paragraphs. Then you correct them, and, as you do, you refine their understanding of what they are doing. You ask them to repeat the exercise and very soon they have the idea and are writing paragraphs well. It is that simple. Paragraphs are easy to understand and a delight to use, yet the education system has managed to make a mess of it. This is profoundly disturbing because English is the only compulsory subject in high school for a reason; it is because of the need for everyone to know fundamental skills like how to write a paragraph.

In Victoria, and throughout Australia, students are taught a very constraining formula for writing paragraphs known as TEEL (Topic, Elaboration, Evidence, Link). With so few paragraphs in the real world written that way, it is curious as to why it is universally imposed in high schools as a formula. It would be hard to come up with a more flawed, misleading and counter-productive concept that undermines not only logical reasoning but creativity in the art of writing. So, let's look at it closely.

### **In the beginning ... or, perhaps not**

According to TEEL, the paragraph is supposed to begin with a 'topic sentence'. This is often defined as the main point or idea of the paragraph. That is fine. But the use of the term 'topic' is my first cause for concern. It is potentially misleading. For that reason, I avoid it and prefer to use the term 'point' or 'main point' of the paragraph. A 'topic' can usually be understood as referring to a larger category than the terms 'point', 'main point' or 'idea'. A topic can therefore legitimately contain many points or ideas, a great many of them. And there lies the problem. A topic in an essay can contain a few or many points that could be expressed in a few or many paragraphs.

Consequently, it is conceptually more precise and creatively far more beneficial to see a paragraph as making a point, or a main point, that is supported.

The confusion generated among most teachers by the term ‘topic’ in the term ‘topic sentence’ has been grammatically and educationally disastrous. Because they think that paragraphs are about topics rather than points they have taught young, unsuspecting and trusting students to cram everything they want to say about a particular topic into one paragraph, no matter how many points the student sought to make about that topic.

Suppose the essay was about zoo animals. In the contemporary classroom, if the student thought of ten things to say about lions, and two things to say about zebras, and one thing to say about giraffes, what would be produced is a giant long paragraph about lions, a much smaller paragraph about zebras and an even smaller paragraph about giraffes. Outside of the classroom, in the real world, there would be something like the following: ten paragraphs about lions, two paragraphs about zebras and one paragraph about giraffes. What happens in the real world should also happen in classrooms, but not anymore. By any definition, this is bad education.

My second cause for concern is the insistence that the so-called ‘topic sentence’ (which I prefer to call the point or main point) has to be the first sentence of the paragraph. Not only is this demand logically unsound, it unnecessarily restricts creativity. In reality, the main point can be made at the beginning, somewhere in the middle, or at the end of the paragraph. The recommendation that the main point has to be the first sentence is faulty. Or, put more precisely, it is one third correct and two thirds wrong.

Let us examine this more closely. There is a logical coherence to a well-written paragraph and it is our appreciation of this that will help us understand that the main point of a paragraph can be

anywhere in it. A paragraph consists of a main point that is then supported by minor points. True. But let me put that in reverse; a paragraph can consist of minor points that lead to and support the main point. This is equally true. Alternatively, the paragraph may make minor points that lead to the main point and then add additional supporting points. This is also equally true. If we accept this, then TEEL is problematic. To fully appreciate this we need to look at some logical reasoning. Let's use as our model a formal deductive argument:

Premise 1: All men are mortal.

Premise 2: Socrates is a man.

Conclusion: Therefore Socrates is mortal.

If you remove the terms 'Premise 1' and 'Premise 2' and 'Conclusion' we can observe more clearly that, structurally, it resembles a three sentence paragraph that makes its main point in its closing sentence:

All men are mortal.

Socrates is a man.

Therefore Socrates is mortal.

In this case, this model of a paragraph makes two minor points that support a main point, which is made in the last sentence, not the first sentence as demanded by TEEL. However, it is logically permissible to rearrange the order of the premises and the conclusion. You could arrange the elements so the model paragraph begins with the main point and is followed by the two supporting minor points. This would correspond with the demands of TEEL. But you could also begin with a minor point, then make the main point and then follow that with another supporting minor point. Again, this does not correspond with the demands of TEEL.

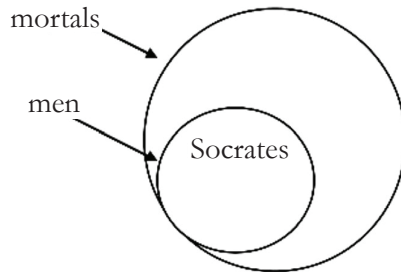
Logically, it is possible to rearrange these elements because the soundness of the argument does not require these components



to always be expressed as a sequence of premises leading to the conclusion. Instead, you may place the conclusion first, or in the middle of the premises, as well as at the end of the sequence.

This means that, for example, within a paragraph you can have the main point of the paragraph followed by several supporting sentences. Alternatively, you could have several supporting sentences that lead to the main point. Or, you can have several supporting sentences that lead to the main point and then follow that with several additional supporting sentences. Paragraphs are versatile. This means we can be creative and still be logical. The TEEL formula does not reflect the versatility of this logic.

To make this even clearer, let us use an illustration. The versatility of the logical structure of the argument can be even better appreciated by the fact that we can reduce the premises and conclusion to a diagram:



Just as was stated in the logical sequence of sentences, we can see in the diagram that, according to the first premise, everything in the set of men is also in the set of mortals. We can see that, according to the second premise, Socrates is in the set of men. Consequently, we can also see the conclusion illustrated in the diagram. If everything in the set of men is in the set of mortals, and Socrates is in the set of men, then he must also be in the set of mortals. Therefore, he must be mortal.

The diagram helps to illustrate the fact that each of the premises

and the conclusion make sense regardless of the order in which you read them. You do not read the diagram in any particular order, but it is just as logically coherent as the logical sequence of the formal argument that proceeds from the first premise to the second premise and then to the conclusion.

As you can see from this reasoning, it is a mistake to insist that students write paragraphs that begin with the main point of the paragraph. It should only be taught as an option. To do otherwise is misleading. It is unnecessarily stifling, both intellectually and creatively, to impose on students the sequence demanded by TEEL.

### **Filling paragraphs according to a checklist**

It is also unnecessary to follow the prescribed TEEL sequencing for the rest of the paragraph, by presenting an Elaboration of the ‘topic sentence’ (main point) and then providing Evidence, which usually involves presenting about two (or more) abbreviated quotations from the text being studied. This counter-intuitive and excessively formulaic approach often produces paragraphs that are, put bluntly, awkward. Not only those paragraphs produced by students who are forced to write them but also those written by teachers who provide examples of TEEL paragraphs for the students to emulate. You can sense in the efforts of these teachers a determined attempt to make what is virtually unworkable seem workable. It is kind of sad to watch. However, I feel especially sorry for those teachers who have recognised the problems with TEEL but are obliged to teach it.

Paragraphs are far more versatile than allowed by TEEL. They can elaborate and provide evidence, or they can do something else entirely, like, for example, analyse or question or assert or challenge. Paragraphs can say or do many things. A paragraph does not need to follow the set TEEL sequence, and it is arguably best for writers that

they not do so. Importantly, a paragraph should be logically coherent. Yet, the rigid sequencing of the TEEL formula can easily get in the way of that by forcing students to fill the paragraph according to a checklist: Elaboration then Evidence. In addition, a paragraph can also be as rhetorically eloquent as the writer can make it. Yet the rigid sequencing of TEEL can get in the way of that also. The rigid formula of TEEL is an obstacle to rationality, creativity and imagination, as well as to style. And, TEEL paragraphs are often dull. That is probably why there are so few TEEL paragraphs written outside of the education system. TEEL is the enemy of versatility. However, writing can be done with great versatility. Students need to be taught that, not TEEL.

### **The missing 'Link'**

And, as for the last part of the TEEL paragraph, the 'Link' back to the main point of the paragraph or back to the contention or back to the question or onto the next paragraph, this is unnecessary. At best, it is a stylistic or cosmetic element that should be treated as an option not a requirement. It is not required by logic. If it is included, it is for cosmetic, stylistic reasons only, to enhance a sense of relevance or coherence between the parts of the essay or to enhance the sense of flow that readers find appealing. However, because an essay is a logically constructed sequence of points that leads to the conclusion, there is already an underlying logic that drives the essay forward and provides a sense of flow. It is similar with a paragraph. The flow comes from the structure. The coherence also comes primarily from the underlying structure. If a writer seeks to enhance this quality with some stylistic elements, then that is fine. But it is a stylistic option, not a structural requirement. It should not be treated as a structural requirement as it currently is according to TEEL. If more teachers appreciated the logic underlying essays, then this would be apparent. The 'Link' should not be imposed on students by teachers. But, sadly, too often it is.

Here is a telling example. I was asked by one of my students to help her prepare for what is called ‘the GAT’, which is the General Achievement Test that is completed mid-year under test conditions. It tests general aptitude, including in English, and it requires skill in reasoning. I believe that, arguably, there is more educational value in the GAT than in the English course, so I am very happy to help students learn how to complete it successfully.

This student was very clever and ambitious. She was keen to qualify to study Medicine at university, which requires achieving the highest grades at high school. And she had what it takes. Furthermore, her parents were very supportive, and bringing her to me to be tutored was part of that support. Her caring father sat in on the lessons.

I helped her practise the part of the test where students are invited to select the most important information from a page of pictorial, graphic and written material related to a common theme. In this part of the GAT, students are asked the following:

Develop a piece of writing presenting the main information in the material. You should not present an argument. Your piece will be judged on:

- how well you organise and present your understanding of the material
- your ability to communicate the information effectively
- how clearly you express yourself.

By requesting that students ‘not present an argument’ the examiners are asking that students not make a case for or against an opinion. The task tests the logical reasoning required in comprehension and research, involving judgement in making connections, and in selection and presentation.

My student did a splendid job. It was a brilliant extraction and articulation of the main evidence in the display, easily worth 10/10. Soon afterwards, when she handed it to her English teacher for her assessment, she was given only 7/10. Why? What was going on? This was splendid work by the student. But the teacher had complained that the student had not put 'linking sentences' at the end of her paragraphs. But this is an aptitude test. And the student showed aptitude. And notice how many grades the teacher deducted, a whopping thirty per cent! This is the anti-intellectual tyranny of the five-paragraph essay and TEEL and the obsession with structure over analytical content it has fostered. This is an example of what is happening in classrooms when the parents are not watching.

This was only practice, not the real test. But this misguided teacher, with her all-too-common attitude to assessment, does assess student work that determines students' futures. Remember, my student was clever and doing her best to qualify to enter Medicine at university. In this much sought after course, only students with the very highest grades are accepted. This means that even the slightest loss of grades can thwart a deserving student's ambition. This student had the ability to get into Medicine on the basis of merit. But what if she was later treated as foolishly in the assessment of her year 12 class-assessed coursework as she was by this teacher who took off thirty per cent of the grades for not including linking sentences in her paragraphs? That is something to think about regarding the legitimacy of the system and the outcomes it produces.

However, to make sure of no future injustice in assessment, my student made sure she added the token linking sentences. She got into Medicine, partly by managing to sidestep the anti-intellectual traps built into the current system.

Interestingly, the medical faculties imposed on those year 12 high school students, hopeful of entering their courses, an additional test of their own: the UMAT (Undergraduate Medicine and Health Sciences

Admission Test) which in 2019 was recast as the UCAT (University Clinical Aptitude Test). The UMAT was essentially a test in logical reasoning. But why did they feel the need to do this? Did they believe that the high schools are failing to teach logical reasoning?

### **Planning paragraphs: the demise of fluency and the inadvertent training of students for low-productivity writing**

When it gets to the stage when teachers are instructing senior high school students to plan their paragraphs both sequentially and internally, firstly paragraph by paragraph and then internally, almost sentence by sentence, then alarm bells should be ringing, since this is a clue that something has gone amiss. If anyone feels the need to plan their paragraphs, then they have not been taught how to write effectively. Professional writers and academics often plan their articles, section by section, but they do not plan paragraphs. They just write them, one after another, as they complete each section and endeavour to convey the ideas they intended to communicate in each of those sections. Professional writers and academics may later edit their paragraphs to refine them, or add or remove paragraphs, but they do not plan each of them or plan each part of a paragraph. Students should be taught to ultimately aspire to this standard rather than be burdened with concepts that may prevent them from achieving it.

The micromanaged format of the five paragraph essay and TEEL paragraphing is so counter-intuitive and illogical that this form of writing does not flow naturally from the writer. Therefore it does not engender fluency, which is a valuable quality that the education system should be seeking to bestow upon its students.

If you are planning a paragraph virtually sentence by sentence, you may as well be writing it. You plan to save time writing, not increase it. You plan for efficiency not inefficiency. You should be planning to improve the coherence of an argument rather than to conform to a

rigid and unnatural writing formula. Planning at this level of detail is the equivalent of doubling the workload or doubling the time taken to complete a writing task. Students are currently being taught how to model inefficiency and low productivity.

Efficiency involves producing something of value with the least waste of time and effort. It is an extremely beneficial quality to have. Scholars and teachers need it as much as everyone else. Productivity refers to the rate of output per unit of input. It relies on improving production from the input of time, energy and resources. Our standard of living depends on high productivity and it increases by improving it. Teachers used to encourage students to plan essays to improve their quality and to save time writing them. But times have changed. By encouraging the planning of paragraphs, our education system is training students for low productivity in tasks that involve writing.

However, it should be noted that young students, new to writing, do need detailed and considered guidance and assistance in learning how to compose coherent meaningful paragraphs. They also need to learn about brainstorming and then organising their ideas into a coherent sequence or plan from which they can produce a piece of writing. Yes, this involves planning, but not down to the level of each sentence in a paragraph. If you think that the planning of paragraphs was only meant to be a training phase in high schools, think again. I wish that were the case. With some struggling students, that may be beneficial as an initial and transitional strategy. But it should be about showing them how to write proper paragraphs, like those found in the real world, not according to TEEL. Planning paragraphs is not solely conceptualised as a remedial strategy in the education system. It is advocated for junior and senior students, and for students at all ability levels. It is a dimension of a new era of education, a most unfortunate one.

It should be acknowledged that planning is often the key to success in essay writing for both junior and senior high school students. It is often the key to turning a stream of consciousness produced by

brainstorming, and/or a body of material produced by research, into a coherent argument. Planning will improve the quality of the writing and reduce the time taken to execute the essay. If it adds unrealistically to the time taken to produce an essay, then planning has not been taught properly, and the practice of directing students to plan paragraphs could be seen as a clue that this is happening.

This relatively new classroom task of planning paragraphs seems to derive from the conceptual flaws in the five paragraph essay and TEEL. The reference to the word 'topic' in 'topic sentence' leads too many teachers to see paragraphs as about topics rather than about making a point that is supported. It is sensible to plan how you shall deal with a topic (by identifying the points you intend to make and the evidence you will use to support them) but by conceptualising paragraphs as about topics rather than as about making points leads to the problematic tendency to see this planning as about planning paragraphs.

In addition, the micromanaged, counter-intuitive and somewhat irrational nature of the TEEL paragraph does not lend itself to fluent thought and writing. I am yet to hear someone speaking in TEEL as they explain or argue something. That is because it is unnatural. But I do hear articulate people speaking in paragraphs. I hear that all the time. The unnatural, somewhat confusing nature of TEEL paragraphs therefore obliges both students and teachers to plan to write them. In the topsy-turvy *Through the Looking Glass* world that the education system has become, planning paragraphs (unfortunately) can be presented as making sense.

### **We have ways of making you talk**

Not only is the toxic five paragraph essay (and TEEL) spreading to contaminate an aptitude test (the General Achievement Test or GAT) it is spreading to another part of the English course: the 'oral presentation', which is an exercise in public speaking. This part of the English course has never been well managed, but it is getting worse,



not better, thanks to the spread of the five paragraph essay format. Currently, about half of the teachers I encounter through my students demand that the written draft of the students' oral presentation follow the constraining, micromanaged, inelegant, rhetorically ungraceful structure of the five paragraph essay. I am grateful that there are still teachers who have not done this, but I fear that the percentage of teachers imposing this formula will increase not decrease.

From what I have observed over the years, students have rarely, if ever, been taught the art of public speaking in high school. The traditional approach was usually just to throw them into the deep end and expect them to swim. This seemed to be because even though most teachers regularly speak in front of their classes, they seem to know little about the art of oratory. Many teachers merely learn to cope with their public speaking duties through experience. Some teachers cope well, others excel, yet often they do not appear to fully understand what is involved in their success. Some teachers give their classes some pointers on how to cope, but many do not.

Although teachers are provided with official criteria to guide their assessment, to a significant degree most of them are likely to respond to the speaker's performance like anyone else in the audience. Most people appreciate good public speaking, and the teachers who are assessing their students are no different. This usually meant that if a student chose a topic that appealed to his or her teacher, and spoke well, the student was usually rewarded with high grades.

This is why the imposition of the inflexible and constraining five paragraph essay format into public speaking is a worry. It stifles the opportunity for students to establish rapport with their audience and convey humour or emotion as well as insight. It is an obstacle in the way of success rather than a facilitator of excellence. It is inappropriate for essay writing and even more inappropriate for public speaking.

As a private tutor, helping students draft their talks used to be a

richly educational experience for them and a joy for me. Now it is a far greater challenge for the students than it should be, especially for those who are anxious about public speaking. So often, my students come up with great ideas that they cannot use because of the constraints of the format, or, by the time they refashion their idea to fit the format, it has become awkward and artificial. This compulsory format can have the effect of making the horse lose the race before it gets to the starting gate. Teachers cannot reward what they do not see. The imposition of the five paragraph essay format on young public speakers often crushes their potential. What could have been a fine or impressive presentation becomes a mediocre or disappointing experience, with the teacher never getting the opportunity to see these students at their best.

However, some students do well at this exercise, despite the constraints, which may give the misleading impression that all is OK. It isn't. But far more students could do well if the constraints of the format were removed. This format is harmful to both the struggling students and the talented ones. For many students the imposition of the five paragraph essay format on them is tortuous and unfair.

But this bad situation can be even worse, especially if the student has one of the many teachers who insist on the inclusion of the obligatory 'rebuttal paragraph'.

### **The strangeness of the obligatory 'rebuttal paragraph'**

Just as there are no such things as introduction paragraphs, or body paragraphs, or conclusion paragraphs, but rather paragraphs that are in the introduction, body or conclusion of an essay, there is no such thing as a 'rebuttal paragraph', but rather there are paragraphs that make rebuttals. A rebuttal is a refutation, denial, or counter-argument. It can be expressed in one paragraph or in many, as many as it takes to make a case. An entire essay or talk may be a rebuttal. Teaching students about the nature of argument, flaws in arguments,

and how to mount counter-arguments, is a worthy educational endeavour, but that does not happen in high schools, as far as I have seen. Instead, some teachers insist on the obligatory inclusion of a 'rebuttal paragraph' as one of the three permitted paragraphs in an argumentative essay or oral presentation.

This arbitrary instance on its inclusion, and its arbitrary restriction to only one paragraph, is rather strange since a rebuttal, if there is to be any rebuttal at all, should stem from the nature of the issue and the student's chosen approach to addressing it. A rebuttal may be explicit or implicit, or there may be no need for a rebuttal at all in making a convincing argument. This dogged insistence by many teachers upon including it is irrational and unscholarly. Many fine drafts of student argumentative essays or oral presentations can suddenly have a teacher impose on it a 'rebuttal paragraph', which has to be wedged into what was already a well-balanced and well-expressed piece of work exhibiting fine literary qualities. This can cause considerable stress to students whose teachers have threatened the integrity of their work in that insensitive fashion.

Fortunately, to the relief of my students, I can show them that any positive statement can easily be turned into a rebuttal. Therefore, my student can humour the teacher who demands one and minimise the damage to the integrity of his or her work. A positive statement, such as 'x equals y', can easily be turned into a rebuttal in the following fashion: 'Despite what my opponent says, x equals y'. Of course, in a real essay, or draft of an oral presentation, the student would make the change in more sophisticated language. But the principle is the same. Rather than mess up an argumentative essay, or draft of an oral presentation, that was fine as it was, this simple change to the point made in one paragraph will do the trick. Again, it is silly (if not cruel) to make students jump through hoops in this manner to be rewarded in grades. And the educational value of having to include an obligatory 'rebuttal paragraph' is minimal, non-existent or counter-productive,

but this is the kind of defensive measure that students have to make to succeed in a crazy education system that has so profoundly lost its way from the promotion of excellence.

### **The need to teach, and to impart knowledge**

Defenders of the five paragraph essay argue that the detailed formula helps students at the lower end of ability to write at least something rather than stare at a blank page after receiving an essay question. But the five paragraph essay does not really help them. No one is helped by being taught incorrectly about essay writing. Besides, I have another explanation for the blank-page stare. The student has nothing to say because he or she has not been given enough, or even any, knowledge on the topic by the teacher. When asked about topics they know, these students can often converse freely. By contrast, when asked a question about a novel that they know barely anything about, they just stare at the blank page. It is in that contrast where we find the answer to this dilemma.

As a private tutor, I have parents come to me because they thought their child had an essay-writing problem. What I quickly realised is that they did not so much have an essay writing problem as a knowledge problem. Yes, some improvement in essay writing technique was necessary, but that was not the real issue. The problem stemmed from the fact that in class the student had been taught almost nothing of value. This is usually due to the impact of modern teaching techniques derived from the theory of constructivism, where teachers are supposed to turn all lessons into ‘activities’, which usually waste time and teach little or nothing. This disadvantage is felt most by the students in the class who knew the least.

When I give students an intensive series of lessons on the meaning and messages of the novel they are studying at school, they soon have much to say. I can recall that when I was at university, and I looked

in advance at the essay questions to be answered later in the course, I too was bewildered. But after I had received lectures and tutorials and read about the topics, many ideas came to mind when I again looked at the questions. It is the same principle with students at high school. You cannot teach students to write an essay unless they have some knowledge to give them something to say in response to a question. Teachers need to teach more. They need to impart perceptive analysis and relevant information. Once students know something, they can formulate a response. When I impart knowledge to students about the novel, I can see their confidence rise enormously. It is beautiful to watch. Then, when we look at an essay question, I help them to fashion their knowledge into a rational coherent answer that corresponds to the requirements of an essay. The counter-productive five paragraph essay format only gets in the way of the student's progress. It is probably the case that bad classroom teaching techniques helped create the perceived need for the five paragraph essay, which is itself yet another bad teaching technique.

[Oh, and another thing. Did you notice it? Consider the above to be my (obligatory) 'rebuttal paragraph'. Oops! Three paragraphs.]

### **The curious disappearance of clear thinking**

Skills in clear thinking are vital for argument assessment and to making your own arguments. And because these skills are vital to arguments, they are vital to essay writing since essays are arguments.

Clear thinking was once a fundamental dimension of high school English, but it has faded away as the left-wing progressive education movement took hold of the education system. Its tenure was already precarious when I was in senior high school. I remember that my parents, like the other parents, dutifully bought all the textbooks on the school book list, including the one on clear thinking. However, my English teacher only used it in class once in the whole year. It seemed

like a waste of my parents' money, a book that they were told to buy that was almost unused. It ended up on a book shelf, forgotten. Then, years later, while I was at university, I noticed it sitting there. Mildly curious, I opened it and started reading. To my surprise, I was intrigued. I immediately recognised it to be educationally extremely valuable. I learned about, for example, the importance of definitions in argument and analysis, cause and effect, and some elements of logical reasoning. This knowledge has benefited me greatly to this day. Later, of course, I expanded on it.

The fact that clear thinking was in a prescribed textbook showed that it was still considered part of an education in English, but the disinterest of my English teacher in clear thinking was, from the perspective of hindsight, possibly an indication that this part of the course was on the way out.

When I began private tutoring in the early 1990s, very little clear thinking had survived. What was there was in a radical modification of that part of the course that had been significantly transformed to mostly look at the use of language in newspaper articles. Therefore the few elements of clear thinking that remained were mostly to do with rhetoric (like the use of the inclusive pronouns 'we', 'us' and 'our' by an author to give the impression of speaking for everyone rather than just for himself or herself). The dimensions of clear thinking that I valued most were gone. There was no logical reasoning. The elements that were left, and there was not much, had been renamed 'persuasive devices'.

Recognising the enormous educational value of clear thinking and the study of rhetoric, I massively expanded my material for the part of the English course where I teach students to perform what is commonly referred to as 'language analysis'. It takes many weeks to teach this. I refer to it as 'everything you should learn in high school but do not get the opportunity to learn'. They learn logic and rhetoric. They get what I missed out on when I was in senior

high school and what they too would miss out on if I did not teach it to them.

The recent change to this part of the course in 2017 to include an analysis of the use of ‘argument and language’ instead of just the use of ‘language’, probably will not usher in a return of clear thinking. Most of the current teachers were also victims of a progressive education, and many of them seem confused and uneasy about the inclusion of argument in this part of the course. I observed this among teachers at the professional development day I attended that introduced this modification to the subject. Some teachers in the audience were outspoken in expressing their distress. So far, the official inclusion of ‘argument’ has made only a marginal difference to the way analysis is taught and assessed. That may improve. But I doubt it.

But what is important to note is that the decline of clear thinking in the English course helped open the door to the unclear thinking of the five paragraph essay. Its natural predator had been removed.

### **No longer taught: the different forms of writing found in the real world**

A vital link between the kinds of writing found in the real world and the way writing is taught and assessed in high school English was severed in 2008 with the dropping from the course of the creative writing folio. The creative writing folio asked students to produce three different forms of writing intended for different purposes and audiences. They could be allowed to produce up to five pieces, but they would be assessed on only three. Students often had considerable freedom in their choice of the form in which they wrote and the topics they chose to write about. For example, they could choose to do three of the following: a personal/reflective piece, or an imaginative/creative piece, or an argumentative piece, or a submission to a government

inquiry, or an instructional piece conveying technical information, or a memorandum, or a journalistic report, or a film review.

Unfortunately, the dropping of the creative writing folio served to help pave the way for the takeover by the rarefied, strange and educationally counter-productive five paragraph essay and TEEL, which have almost no relationship to writing done in the real world. The five paragraph essay and TEEL were always lurking in the background, but it seems that the presence of a dimension of the course that connected to writing in the real world may have served as a protective buffer of common sense. This is because this part of the course invited teachers and students to look at examples of these forms of writing in the real world to learn how to do them. For example, a student would look at examples of film reviews and study their structure and style to determine how to write one. Then they would write one themselves. This was very educational. The most competent teachers would assist students in this process, while the others would just leave it up to the students and wait to see what they could devise. My students found this dimension of the course extremely beneficial, and it was a delight to tutor them in it. We even enjoyed psychologically profiling their teachers so that we could determine their tastes and ideological biases to ensure that everything in the essay was calculated to pay a dividend in grades.

The creative writing folio was a valued opportunity to practise different forms of writing that are found in the real world and to develop writing skills useful in the real world. Even if it was poorly taught by teachers who found it confusing, the fact that it was on the English course provided the potential for valuable learning opportunities. This meant that expressive students with a gift for writing could cultivate their talent. Other students could choose writing tasks that were more utilitarian or technical. But this all ended. There is no longer a part of the course where gifted students can develop their talent or where practical students can develop useful



skills. Much of the educational value of the English course had been lost. But the situation worsened. Eventually, the five paragraph essay, which is incompatible with the learning of any of these useful forms of writing, took over. The light went out. The nightmare began.

**Who benefits most from the five paragraph essay? A hint: it's not the students**

The five paragraph essay does not serve the interests of students, so whose interests does it serve?

When considering this question, it is important to recognise that the education system currently puts an emphasis on teachers detailing the steps of the educational process in lesson plans that often involve the provision of formal 'scaffolding' models that outline the steps students are supposed to follow, rather than encouraging teachers to master the core knowledge and essential skills intrinsic to their subject. The five paragraph essay and TEEL format fits this scenario perfectly, and helps teachers by providing them with a model and plan. With such a clear formula to use, it saves them the burden of devising educational techniques to teach essay writing properly. This short cut is very attractive to many teachers. For some, it is so attractive that the contemplation of the unfortunate educational consequences of this Faustian bargain is something that is best avoided. Even though the takeover of the five paragraph essay is a relatively recent development, if it were dropped, then many teachers would find themselves asking, now what do I do?

Most teachers find assessment a chore. When asked, it is often mentioned as the least satisfying dimension of their duties. Assessing students as to whether they meet the structural requirements of the format of the five paragraph essay makes their job simpler. It also significantly saves time. They can check the introduction very quickly and then look at the 'topic sentences' at the top of each paragraph. Essays can also be assessed on whether a paragraph lacks the prescribed

elements or is in the ‘wrong’ order. The academic or rational qualities of the argument become secondary to enforcing a set structure and prescribed content, such as the first sentence being the main point of the paragraph and that the contents of the paragraph must include at least two abbreviated quotations from the text. If there are too many paragraphs, a teacher can penalise that too. The need for them to make complex judgements is reduced. Those teachers who were most anxious about assessment, and who demanded clearer guidelines, now have them. The five paragraph essay provides them. They will be reluctant to give this up. Unfortunately, they are the wrong guidelines.

For those teachers who have the least grasp of what essay writing really is and therefore have the most difficulty teaching it, the emergence of the simple five paragraph essay formula appeared like a life preserver to a splashing passenger overboard. If they let go of this life preserver, they will find they have to learn to swim. This is a daunting prospect, perhaps too daunting to contemplate. To these teachers the five paragraph essay may be seen as a rescuer, but it also traps these teachers in their limitations. In the end, no one really benefits, not the under-performing teachers or the under-performing students. Both of them need a long-term solution to their predicament, and it is not to be found in the five paragraph essay.

Other teachers are content to follow orders from those senior to them. Imposing the five paragraph essay (and TEEL and the ‘rebuttal paragraph’) on their students is what they have been told to do. Or, it is what they see all the other teachers doing, so they follow the trend. This means that there is enormous inertia behind the five paragraph essay. Everywhere teachers look inside the high school system, the imposition of the five paragraph essay is validated and normalised. Many teachers have become comfortable with it. Consequently, it would be difficult to remove. It is a pity that these teachers are following the wrong orders and following the wrong trend.

## SCOURGE OF THE FIVE PARAGRAPH ESSAY

Furthermore, the five paragraph essay seems to offer teachers an approach to deal with the students at the bottom end of the ability range, those who cannot produce anything when presented with an essay question. For some teachers, these students seem to frustrate them the most, and dealing with them has a greater impact on the quality of their work experience than dealing with the middle range and high performing students. A format where the writing of virtually every sentence is guided for the student can appear to these teachers as the way out of this teaching dilemma. But, as I explained earlier, the stuck students need knowledge most of all in order to express themselves. They are not served by being taught a bad technique. And the middle and upper range students have much of their capacity to pursue excellence stifled by a structure that is imposed uniformly on all the students in the class.

There have for a long time been complaints from the universities and employers that high school graduates had inadequate skills in essay writing and expression. This can generate some discomfiting headlines about falling standards. With the imposition of the five paragraph essay, the powers that be can claim they are addressing the problem. They aren't. They are making it worse. But they can claim that they are taking all the necessary steps to do the right thing.

Of course, there would be teachers, education bureaucrats and academics who have not seen the flaws in the five paragraph essay and who actually believe in it. If it was removed, they would probably be embarrassed and they would not want that. Let us hope that there are many others who secretly have strong reservations about the five paragraph essay. If there are enough of them, there is hope for change.

As you can see, there are powerful vested interests that have formed around the preservation of the five paragraph essay. It has many supporters in the system. To those of you who value quality education as much as I do, this is deeply concerning.

## **Teaching irrationality and instilling limiting beliefs instead of modelling excellence**

To outsiders, such as parents, who are not aware of what is really happening in high schools, not much seems to have changed. The education system appears to continue as it has always done: students complete tasks, as they have always done, and teachers provide assessments, as they have always done. But the problem is that the tasks and the assessment have been drained of much of their educational value. If you look closely, you will see that the situation has changed. It has changed dramatically. It has changed for the worse.

Since our success in life depends a great deal on how we frame and approach issues, tasks, challenges and creative endeavours, the imposition of the five paragraph essay (and TEEL paragraphing) has been a major obstacle to success and is therefore one of the worst developments in education. Answers do not always come in threes. It is wrong to train students to think that way. In addition, because our success in life also depends on how well we solve problems, by analysing, gathering the necessary resources, planning, and then getting the job done in a manner that produces an effective outcome, then the five paragraph essay represents a setback. Since the five paragraph essay, with its rigid micromanaged format, stifles creativity, it fails in this dimension of education as well. The five paragraph essay is a rarefied and deformed form of writing that produces answers that usually have little or no rational value. Rather than preparing students for the challenges of university and the world outside of school, or laying the groundwork for literary creativity, this format produces little or no benefit, or it sets students back by limiting their capacity for clear thinking.

The five paragraph essay (and TEEL) obstructs rationality, imagination, fluency, and inhibits the development of skills in expression. Pause for a moment and let the meaning of what I just said resonate. How much worse could an approach to essay writing be? It

is a colossal failure of the education system. Bad education methods limit rather than liberate. The five paragraph essay (and TEEL) has no practical benefit for studying at university or in producing the kinds of writing that are valued in the world of employment and business. In regards to those students who pass through high school and can write well, it would be in spite of the imposition of the five paragraph essay (and TEEL), not because of it.

The fact that some students produce impressive work despite the obstacles cannot be relied upon as proof that the system is working. This is because most of the damage is done outside of the education bureaucrats and teachers' awareness. The cost is in the clever ideas that do not get thought, the clever ideas that do not get written, and the clever ideas that do not get seen and rewarded. I get to witness this depressing scenario in my work, behind the scenes, as a private tutor. I witness how the limiting, micromanaged essay-writing format denies many students the opportunity to cultivate insight, rationality, creativity and originality. I witness their frustration and their inevitable conformity to a limited format. Sometimes, their best ideas never get on paper. What teachers do not see, they cannot reward.

It is wrong and even cruel to impose this format on young trusting students who expect their educators to have their best interests at heart. The five paragraph essay (and TEEL) should not be imposed on teachers either. Regrettably, there have always been bad teachers in the system, too many of them, but by imposing this approach to teaching essay writing on all teachers it turns the good teachers into bad teachers. The better that a good teacher is at teaching the five paragraph essay (and TEEL), the more they contribute to bad educational outcomes. It is a heartbreaking scenario.

The answer to the problems created by the imposition of the five paragraph essay (and TEEL) is simple, and it doesn't come in threes, it is to abolish its use in schools. The five paragraph essay is toxic. It should be buried deep underground, forever, as we do with nuclear

waste, so it can never contaminate another impressionable young mind again.

Students will always struggle to master their school work. But they should be struggling to master skills that are worthwhile, not formulas for writing that are irrational and counter-productive. They should be trained to be clear thinkers, not five paragraph essay writers.

Instead of teaching the five paragraph essay (and TEEL), the high schools should teach students about the rationality that underlies the argument in an essay. All lessons on essay writing should stem from there. High schools should teach students that a paragraph makes a point that is supported. Essay writing should be about effective problem solving and cultivating creativity and expression.

Above all, the teaching of essay writing should be about what education itself should be about: modelling excellence. You learn best from those who have done the best. The five paragraph essay (and TEEL) bears no resemblance to the works of the great men and women of literature. If examples of their writing cannot be used to teach the five paragraph essay (and TEEL) then something is seriously wrong with this writing formula. That, itself, should be seen as a sign that the education system has lost its way. You succeed by modelling excellence. Great writers should be our guide. By studying how they wrote essays and paragraphs, you are off to a good start.

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Unfortunately, the five paragraph essay (and TEEL) is not the only problem in the education system. There are many more. Now it is opportune to look in more detail at a dimension of the craziness I have already briefly mentioned on several occasions. It is what I call the 'quotes fetish'. We will look at how this, and other unscholarly practices imposed on students, undermine the empiricism and rationality that were foundational to the success of Western civilisation.