

# How To Teach The Five-Paragraph Essay

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# Introduction

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There are many ways to write a five-paragraph essay. Consider this: There are four domains of writing. Also, within these four domains of writing there are sub-domains such as problem/solution, persuasive, letter writing, personal narrative, biography, autobiography, cause and effect... I could go on and on. In addition to this, every person has his or her own distinct style of writing. With all of these factors to consider, it's no wonder that so many students struggle with essay writing.

Don't let all of this intimidate you. This book is going to show you how to teach the five-paragraph essay using one simple essay format. From this basic format, you will discover that adjusting it to fit the different domains of writing is very simple. More importantly, your students will feel confident in their ability to write in any situation.

## ONE SIMPLE FORMAT

This book is going to take you by the hand and show you how to teach the basic five-paragraph essay using one standard format. Following these easy steps, your students will achieve mastery of the five-paragraph essay and be prepared for ANY timed test you, your district, your state, or college throws at them.



## BELLS AND WHISTLES



Everyone likes the machine with extra bells and whistles. This book will also show your students how to add the “bells and whistles” to their five paragraph essays. Once they've mastered the basic format of the five-paragraph essay, they will learn important ideas such as Interesting Introductions, Smooth Transitions from paragraph to paragraph, Classy Conclusions, and much more. If you are teaching fourth graders, only a few bells and whistles will be needed. However, if you are teaching middle or high school, you will have all the resources you need to help your students write sophisticated essays. Once again, they will do this by adding these “bells and whistles” to a basic, easy to use five-paragraph essay format.

## THE NEXT LEVEL

Before discussing the next level, let me tell you about a common mistake used with essay writing. Many teachers will write a five-paragraph essay, such as a persuasive argument, with their class. Next, they will write a narrative with their class. Next, they will write a problem-solution, cause and effect, or compare-and-contrast essay with their class. At the end of the year, their students have wonderful, finished essays to show parents, administrators and the district. What

they DON'T have is a class full of students who know how to write the five-paragraph essay all on their own.

Isn't our goal to help students achieve mastery of the five-paragraph essay? If the students are relying on the teacher to walk them through the process, have they really mastered it?

So what is the next level? The next level is the ability of the students to take the basic format of the five-paragraph essay and "tweak" it to fit any domain of writing. By "tweaking", I mean simply adding an extra step or two to meet the requirements of the assignment. For example, essays are not generally stories. However, by "tweaking" the outlining/prewriting procedure for the five-paragraph essay, they can change the body of the essay into the beginning, middle, and end of their story. As you will see, this is a very easy thing to do.

## THE FORMAT OF THIS BOOK

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1. **List of Steps** – First you will receive a list a steps to follow when teaching the five-paragraph essay. This will serve as an overview as you get comfortable teaching this process. Also, you can use this as a guide while actually teaching the five-paragraph essay.
2. **Sample Pacing Chart** – From Day 1 to Day 20, what will your daily lessons look like? Obviously it will vary from grade and ability level. However, it is nice to have a model to use as a starting point. Using this pacing chart you will find that speeding up or slowing down is easy. Simply take more time to complete each step or jump to the next step when you feel your students have understood each lesson.
3. **Detailed Lesson Plan** – Next, each step will be explained in greater detail. You will see pictures and receive a detailed explanation of each step.
4. **Plan for Total Mastery** – The goal is to have every student master the five-paragraph essay. This lesson plan will show you what to do with the students who have mastered the skill, and how to find time to work in small groups for those who continue to need support.
5. **Bells and Whistles** – Now you will learn to teach your students how to make more exciting introductions, classy conclusions, smooth transitions, and more...
6. **The Next Level** – Show your students how to use the basic format of the five-paragraph essay to create any domain of writing. Does your district give your students a timed test on persuasive letters? Are your students required to take a state writing test on problem-solution? Not a problem. In minutes your students will know exactly what to do to create any genre of writing.



# THE FIVE PARAGRAPH ESSAY

## I. The Steps

1. Review “What is a Paragraph?” Make sure the students understand that a paragraph is about ONE MAIN IDEA.
2. Teach the Three-Paragraph Essay in 60 seconds. Start your watch! Ready...Set...Go!
3. Prewriting Practice for the Three-Paragraph Essay. Creating your Three Main Ideas and listing your supporting details for each.
4. Introduction Paragraph – Make a thesis statement and give your three main ideas.
5. Conclusion Paragraph – Summarize your thesis statement, review your three main ideas, and say goodbye.
6. Putting it All Together
7. Timed Prompt Writing
8. Assess and Re-Teach as needed. Put the expert essay writers into “writer’s workshop” activities while working with those who need a little more help.

## Bells and Whistles

1. Teach Interesting Introductions
2. Teach Classy Conclusions
3. Teach Terrific Transitions

## The Next Level – Tweaking the Essay to Fit All Domains and Genres

1. Narratives
2. Persuasive Essay
3. Problem-Solution Essay
4. Cause and Effect Essay
5. Research Reports

## Pacing Chart – Cont.

### Day 4 – Paragraph Test

1. Prewrite and write a paragraph.  
Topic: A Funny Character in a Story
2. On the back of their paragraph tests, have them list the five parts of a paragraph.



\*Note: Do NOT go on until most of your students have mastered the paragraph and CLEARLY understand that a paragraph is about ONE MAIN IDEA.

### Day 5 – The Three-Paragraph Essay in 60 Seconds.

1. Teach the concept of a three-paragraph essay in 60 Seconds.
2. Practice prewriting the three/five paragraph essay. Students set up their paper to include the topic on the top and the three main ideas on the left margin. Train them to do this automatically whenever they hear that they will be required to write an essay.
3. Begin prewriting the three-paragraph essay. Find three main ideas and list supporting details for the topic: Your Favorite Day of the Week

### Day 6 – Prewriting Practice

1. Review the three-paragraph essay in 60 seconds lesson.
2. Practice finding three main ideas for four other topics from Appendix I.
3. Begin learning to list 5 to 7 supporting details for each main idea.
4. H.W. Find three main ideas for sixth topic.

### Day 7 – Prewriting Practice

1. Practice listing supporting details for all six topics.  
Focus on keeping details short.
2. H.W. Finish prewriting for all six topics.



\*Note: Do NOT go on until most of your students have mastered prewriting the essay. Give more topics if needed. Practice setting up the paper, finding three main ideas, and listing supporting details until most of your class can do it.

### Day 8 – The “Boring” (but well-organized) Introduction Paragraph

1. Memorize the parts of an introduction paragraph.
2. Practice writing thesis statements with your six topics.
3. H.W. Give students three topics. Have them write a thesis statement for each.

## Pacing Chart – Cont.

### Day 9 – The “Boring” (but well-organized) Introduction Paragraph

1. Review the parts of an introduction paragraph.
2. Write a “boring” introduction together as a class using the six topics that have already been prewritten. Reinforce that the outline (3 main ideas) is the prewriting for your introduction.
3. Students write two introduction paragraphs.
4. Include closing sentences in these paragraphs.
5. H.W. Write two more introduction paragraphs.



### Day 10 – Interesting Introductions

1. Review introduction paragraphs. Have the students write the introduction paragraph to the sixth topic.
2. Review Types of Introductions. (See Appendix 5)
3. Complete Interesting Introductions worksheets. (See Appendix 6)
4. H.W. Finish Worksheets

### Day 11 – Interesting Introductions: Comma, Comma, And... Thesis Statement

1. Review Types of Introductions. (See Appendix 5)
2. Begin the Comma, Comma, And... worksheet. (See Appendix 7)
3. H.W. Finish the Comma, Comma, And... worksheet.

### Day 12 – Interesting Introductions

1. Students will attempt to change their six “boring” paragraphs into interesting introductions using the Comma, Comma, And... strategy.
2. H.W. Continue to work on changing boring introductions into interesting introductions.

### Day 13 – “Boring” (but well-organized) Conclusion Paragraphs

1. Memorize the parts of a conclusion paragraph.
2. Write a conclusion paragraph together using Conclusion Starters.
3. Students write conclusion paragraphs for the six essay outlines.
4. H.W. Continue to work on conclusion paragraphs for the six essay outlines.



## Pacing Chart – Cont.

### Day 14 – Interesting Conclusions

1. Review the parts of a conclusion paragraph.
2. Review the Comma, Comma, And... Introduction Paragraph.
3. Have the students rewrite their boring conclusions using the Comma, Comma, And... strategy.

### Day 15 – Timed Five-Paragraph Essay Test

1. Write a Five-Paragraph Essay. To help students move through the essay, put pacing chart on the board.
2. Write finish times on their rubrics. Use the rubric to score their essays.
3. H.W. Write an essay. It is due in one week.



### Day 16–20 Review of Five-Paragraph Essay

1. Students who passed the five-paragraph essay can work on “Bells and Whistles” activities, Writer’s Workshop type activities, or other projects assigned by teacher.
2. Review the steps of the five-paragraph essay.
3. Second timed test. Use rubrics to score their essays.

### Day 21+ Plan for Total Mastery







## THE FIVE PARAGRAPH ESSAY

### III. Detailed Lesson Plan for Each Step

#### Step I – Review the Paragraph (Approx. 1 Week to 3 Months)

Make no mistake, the ability to write a strong paragraph is the very backbone of all writing. If your students cannot write a good paragraph, trying to write an essay will be futile. On the other hand, if your students can produce a well-organized paragraph, the battle is nearly over. Writing a five-paragraph essay simply requires a few extra steps.

For a more detailed lesson plan on paragraph writing, go to [CreateBetterWriters.com](http://CreateBetterWriters.com). You can download the paragraph lesson plan from the “Past Newsletters” section of this site. Below you will see an abridged version of what you will find in [How To Write a Paragraph](#).

There is one all-important, vital, key, pivotal main idea that your students must have on their minds at all times when writing the paragraph (and consequently, the five-paragraph essay). That one main idea is this:

**A Paragraph is about ONE MAIN IDEA!**

This point could not be stressed strongly enough. Pound it into your students’ minds every chance you get. To not do this is to make your job teaching the five-paragraph essay infinitely more difficult. Here are the steps for teaching the paragraph:

#### **I. Pretest: Let the students try to guess the five parts of a good paragraph.**

Write numbers 1 – 5 on the board. Have the students number 1 – 5 on their papers. Let the students try to guess the five parts of the paragraph. Make a game out of it. Offer five raffle tickets or a small prize to the student who can name the #1 part of a paragraph. (List is in order of importance.)

Offer four raffle tickets for the student who guesses the second item and so on. The class will have fun, and it will get them thinking about everything they’ve ever been taught about writing. This is a great time of review, even if they don’t discover all five. For the classes that aren’t coming close, I’ll give as many hints as I can until they get it.

#### **A GOOD PARAGRAPH**

1. One Main Idea
2. Topic Sentence
3. 5–7 Sentences
4. Closing Sentence
5. Indent; Spelling and Punctuation

When finished, now is the time to start pounding into your students' brains that a paragraph is about ONE MAIN IDEA. I'll do "call-and-response" over and over: "What is a paragraph about?" The class will respond, "ONE MAIN IDEA". Look each student in the eyes and ask, "What is a paragraph about?" The student responds, "ONE MAIN IDEA". Ask them during math, on the way to lunch, and when you see them on the playground. It should become a reflex, like when a doctor taps your knee with that little hammer. A paragraph is about ONE MAIN IDEA!



## 2. Memorize the five parts of the paragraph.

Make your students commit the five parts of the paragraph to memory.

## 3. Prewrite and Write a Paragraph Together

Select an easy topic such as "A Good Book". Review with the students that there are hundreds of MAIN IDEAS from which to choose. However, they can only select one main idea. Once they have chosen their main idea, think of five supporting main ideas for that one main idea. Have them set up their paper this way:

Before Prewriting	After Prewriting
<p style="text-align: center;">Topic</p> <p>One Main Idea:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> <li>4.</li> <li>5.</li> </ol> <p style="text-align: center;">Write the Paragraph Here</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">A Good Book</p> <p><b>One Main Idea:</b> Cat in the Hat</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A bored boy and girl home alone.</li> <li>2. The Cat comes to play</li> <li>3. They have a lot of fun</li> <li>4. They destroy the house</li> <li>5. They clean the house just before mom comes home.</li> </ol> <p style="text-align: center;">Write the Paragraph Here</p>

Use this prewriting format to write your paragraph. Now that you have selected your one main idea and you've listed your supporting details, writing the paragraph is easy. Be sure to work on topic and closing sentences as you write the paragraph together.

Depending on the age and ability level of your students, the time needed to teach the paragraph will vary. Do not shortchange this step. Spend as much time on it as you need to make sure it is mastered. Create a list of topics for your students to practice. Use topics from social studies, science, and your literature series to help practice the paragraph. Once the paragraph is mastered, you're ready for the next step.

## Step II – Teach the Three-Paragraph Essay in 60 seconds. Start your watch!

Ready...Set...Go! (Approx. 5 min.)

When your students can organize a paragraph by writing their one main idea, listing their supporting details, and writing it using topic and closing sentences, they are ready for the three-paragraph essay.



This is my favorite part of the entire process. It's fun, and it builds their confidence. They know how long it took to learn the paragraph. Telling them that they are going to learn the three-paragraph essay in just one minute, will make them very eager to learn.

1. Begin by telling your students how good a teacher you are. You are so good that you are going to teach them the three-paragraph essay in 60 seconds. You can even set your watch to it.
2. Three-Paragraph Essay in 60 seconds. Start your watch! Ready...Set...Go!

Teach the three-paragraph essay by asking a series of questions:

- A. Ask your students: "What is a paragraph?" (By now you should have drilled it into their brains that it is about ONE MAIN IDEA!) Remind them if necessary.
- B. If I ask you to write a ONE-MILLION Paragraph Essay, how many main ideas will you need? (Answer: One Million)
- C. If I ask you to write a ONE-THOUSAND Paragraph Essay, how many main ideas will you need? (Answer: One Thousand)
- D. If I ask you to write a ONE-HUNDRED Paragraph Essay, how many main ideas will you need? (Answer: One Hundred)
- E. If I ask you to write a TEN-PARAGRAPH Essay, how many main ideas will you need? (Answer: Ten)

### **The Grand Prize Question:**

If I ask you to write a Three-Paragraph Essay,  
how many main ideas will you need?

The Answer: THREE!!!

Congratulations, you just learned how to write the Three-Paragraph Essay.

A three-paragraph essay is just three paragraphs about a topic. Therefore, simply think of three main ideas about the topic, write the paragraphs, and you're done.



### Step III – Prewriting Practice for the Three-Paragraph Essay. (Approx. One Week)

Tell your students that, from now on, forever and ever, when a teacher asks them to write an essay, they need to format their paper doing the following\*:

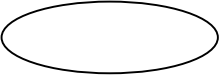
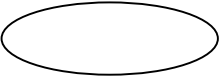
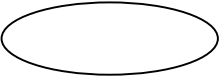
- A. Write your topic on the top!
- B. List your three main ideas!
- C. List your supporting details for each of the three main ideas.

\*This is just like the paragraph.

If your students learn to set their paper up just like this, even before they hear the topic, they will automatically be reminded of the steps involved in writing a five-paragraph essay.

Notice, in the top circle, they will write their first main idea. In the second circle, they will write their second main idea, and in the third circle, they will write their third main idea.

Their 5–7 supporting details will be listed around each circle. \*Once mastered, the average fifth grader should complete this prewriting in about fifteen minutes. By timing your students, you train them not to drag their feet throughout this process.

Topic
3 Main Ideas:
1.
2.
3.




#### **Prewriting Practice – Listing the Three Main Ideas:**

See the list of Five Paragraph Essay Topics in the appendix of this book. Give the students a topic. As a class, think of three main ideas for that topic. List the three main ideas on the paper.

Example:

My Favorite Day of the Week Saturday
3 Main Ideas:
1. No School
2. Play with Friends
3. Our family has “Family Night”

## Prewriting Practice – Listing the Three Main Ideas: (Cont.)

Believe it or not, this will be the hardest step for many students. Coming up with three main ideas for a topic can be extremely difficult. Take your time and make sure they feel comfortable with this step.

- A. Have students cut three sheets of paper in half. Choose six topics from the appendix or on your own. On the first half page, have them format their paper. Tell them, “You are going to write an essay...” Pause... Wait to see if anyone formats their paper correctly. Tell them, “I’m waiting to see if you remember how to format your paper...” A few will clue in that you are waiting for them to write:

3 Main Ideas:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Once they figure out that you are waiting for them to format their paper, they will begin to do it automatically each time you write.

- B. Have the students come up with three main ideas.

Issues to discuss while working on this step:

- Select three main ideas that are related. Don’t select three main ideas that have nothing to do with each other. For example, if the topic is “My Favorite Day of the Week”, you could use Saturday: 1. No School; 2. Play with my friends; 3. I was born on Saturday.

Which one of the three main ideas does NOT belong? #3 I was born on Saturday. The first two are about activities, but the third is about something else.

- Do NOT list the topic as one of the three main ideas. This is a very common mistake. The students need to be trained to put the topic at the top of their paper immediately when they hear it. The three main ideas explain the topic.
- Each main idea should be something that would make a good paragraph. If they cannot think of 5–7 things to say about it, have them select a different main idea.

- C. Repeat steps A and B with five more topics. Have the students use half sheets to save paper. They can practice formatting on the front and back of each paper.

## Prewriting Practice – Supporting Details

Your students have six topics, and you've found three main ideas for each. Now, practice listing supporting details for each main idea. Out of the six topics you've already done, practice listing supporting details for two of the topics as a class. Use the other four topics for independent practice. Below is a sample for Favorite Day of the Week. See the appendix for several samples of actual prewriting outlines written by students.

