At First Glance

One thing you will notice about Spencer Schaffner’s essay “The Five-Paragraph Essay: Friend or Foe?” is his running outline in superscripted text which indicates what part of the essay each sentence and paragraph is. In many ways Schaffner’s use of the superscripted indicators helps define the five-paragraph essay and the formula for writing one. In many ways, too, the superscripted guidelines serve as a metacommunication about the five-paragraph essay. As you read this interestingly crafted essay, consider why Schaffner decided to use these tags and what effect they have on your reading of the essay. Consider also how creativity can emerge from working within even the most regimented constraints.

The Five-Paragraph Essay: Friend or Foe?

Intro #:Thesis In this five-paragraph essay about the five-paragraph essay, I will argue (aided/constrained by one of the stricter forms for the five-paragraph essay—five paragraphs made up of five sentences each) that the five-paragraph essay is a writing appliance that is at once useful for writers and readers and mind-numbing to fill with words. Intro #: Point A But by now you’re probably already saying ‘yawn’—people who pay attention to such things know that the five-paragraph essay is outdated, which is why it has been more or less dispersed with already (though versions of its former self still creep around American high schools)—so why I am returning to the site of the five-paragrapher will be my first topic paragraph: This will include some personal moments about my relationship with the five-paragraph essay, but I also want to say that the five-paragraph essay could be given a sort of makeover (much like what happened in the recent Volkswagen Bug restyling) to benefit some writers and writing occasions. Intro #: Point B I’m willing to admit that one of the more unfortunate things about the five-paragraph essay is its inherent inflexibility—but this need not be the case! So after I discuss my own personal relationship with the five-paragraph essay (and engage in ensuing proclamations about recycling this old beast), I’ll illustrate the potential for flexibility within the five-paragraph essay by dedicating a five-sentence paragraph to reflecting on the writing of the five-paragraph essay that you’re reading and I’m writing right now: What is it like writing a five-paragraph essay? Intro #: Point C Because you know, the thing is, even if you get away from the regimentation of one formally delineated five-by-five stylistic apparatus, most written discourse (and a good deal of our speech) is as laid out for us in advance as a TV dinner. Intro #: Conclusion Why all this matters will be

got at in my conclusion, where I also hope to touch on how the five-paragraph essay is a sort of Parthenon in the polytheistic world of essay writing; an icon to one of the many gods of composition, it can be a place to revisit and explore what can be learned from writing by numbers.

3. Intro To return to this Parthenon that is the five-paragraph essay, and then to explore its inner workings, is to return to a monument to our ongoing cultural regime of Mandated Scholastic Composition, a learning culture in which the five-paragraph is but one example of a container for student ideas—only with the five-paragraph essay, of course, it is always the same container each time, a container equipped with Plexiglas walls that are as easy for the assessor (read: overworked, underpaid language arts instructor) to see into as they are for the student to fill up with language. 2. Point A Inasmuch as this is a fair characterization of the five-paragraph essay, the fact that it has generally been scrapped (along with the type-writer; these are rigid, outmoded writing technologies) can be seen, generally, as a good thing for students of writing everywhere: The clunky old technology has been dispensed with and replaced by word processing and flexible essays that allow students to express their ideas in ways that respond to and are appropriately constituted by the ideas themselves—I mean, this essay is a perfect example of how difficult it is to write in the old way: My prose (if you can call it that) is being made exceedingly wacky as I grammatically contort and dislocate and squeeze my ill-fitting thoughts into this form—and as I cobble and slice together ideas that become increasingly hard to follow, there's a great deal I want to say that's left out. 2. Point B However, what I really want to relate in this paragraph is what happened to me when, thanks to Ms. Mitchell (my high school composition teacher and Staunch Advocate of the five-by-five five-paragraph essay), I was schooled, nay, drilled, in the practices of five-paragraphing. 2. Point C Once a blank slate without the slightest idea of what an essay was or how to write one, I learned the five-paragraph essay well, and then took my new knowledge with me to college (“you tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em, tell 'em, then tell 'em what you told 'em,” Ms. Mitchell used to repeat)—where “my writing” was received with resounding cheers of adoration from my professors; I mean, they ate the stuff up; it was that easy for them to figure out what I was saying. 2. Conclusion/Transition So I suppose my point is that while in many ways the five-paragraph essay is a cantankerous beast that no writer should be forced to grapple with (reminder: in case you hadn't noticed, I really am struggling here to make this thing work!), it can serve as both a pair of training wheels for starting writers and as a way to, at least in my own experience, help keep the red pens at bay in college.

4. Intro Though rigid by nature, the five-paragraph essay can be tweaked and modified to serve various writers’ specific needs; I mean come on, in a very real sense, most published academic journal articles (the ones written by those professors of mine who wrote “good” and “well put” and “nicely said” in the margins of my papers in college) are merely modified, tricked-out versions of the five-paragraph essay I learned to write in high school: For an academic article in the humanities, start by establishing the relevant academic conversation the essay will be concerned with (introduction), then establish the place the article has within that conversation...
(introduction antechamber), then, having told ‘em what you’re going to tell ‘em, say what you’re going to say (body paragraphs), and finish with a conclusion. *3: Point A My first reflection, then, on the composition of this essay you’re reading right now is twofold: first of all, in the writing of it, I’ve had to make a lot of sentences (like this one) two- and three- and even fourfold in order to fit everything I want to say into this size-two essay; but at the same time, because of the five-paragraph mandate of the form, it’s been both fun and wonderfully straightforward to plug away at the keyboard since, on this multiply semicolonized and em-dashed-to-the-max journey, the good old introduction (read: road map) tells me where to go every step of the way. *3: Point B The challenge, of course, is making my thoughts about the five-paragraph essay fit into itself, and having only written three paragraphs so far, I’m starting to understand why all those dopey topics—“Should Uniforms Be Worn in School?” or “Handguns: Friend or Foe?”—coexist alongside the five-paragraph essay in American secondary education; they practically require one another, *3: Point C But some writers and teachers of writing live by the old adage that “you’ve gotta start somewhere,” and for a lot of starting writers (this was the case for me), the five-paragraph essay can work as an instrument. *3: Conclusion/Transition Not only that, but inasmuch as the five-paragraph essay is a form (like sonnets, villanelles, and academic journal articles), there can be something gained from using and manipulating and mastering a form that has as much cultural currency as this one does: struggling over how to carefully construct a mere five paragraphs consisting of a mere five sentences each, and then making that coalesce into a word structure that coherently means something—all this can amount to an ecstatic set of mental calisthenics . . . yielding even better results when the form, the training wheels, the scaffolding—whatever you want to call it—is finally abandoned.

*4: Intro But is this possible? *4: Point A First of all, it’s important to remember how rule-governed language and discourse are already (though linguists and discourse analysts fight like mad about how much this is true), so when students start becoming indoctrinated into container-based models specifying how to write (like the five-paragraph essay), residues from these writing practices are merely added to an already substantial accretion of rules. *4: Point B As productive as being an able practitioner of the five-paragraph essay was for me in college, it was a disaster when I got to graduate school: big whomping essays running 30 pages and employing multiple theoretical models required innovative structures to support all that fluff-weight. *4: Point C At some point (for me it was in grad school; for others it might come sooner), five paragraphs fail to help anymore, becoming a hindrance not only to the way an essay can work, but to the thinking that goes on during the actual writing. *4: Conclusion/Transition So what I’m arguing for is that in some applications, or at the very least as a model to help show the formal structures underlying even the highly celebrated fare of academic journals, the five-paragraph essay should not be forgotten: Let’s not throw it out; it might teach us something.

Concluding *5: Thesis The you-tell–‘em-what-you’re-going-to-tell–‘em model of writing might not encourage innovation, it might not address all the needs of struggling writers, but inasmuch as the five-paragraph essay (1) represents the structure and form implicit in most writing (even the very-super-most innovative, wacky,
totally out-there essays), and (2) can be a relatively easy, democratic way for students to get writing and thinking work done—it’s not that bad. **Conclusion Point A** As I said in the second paragraph of this essay (sentences 3–4; isn’t this nifty?), revisiting the relic of the five-paragraph essay is to return to a piece of writing equipment that made a lot of struggling writers and graders of writing feel safe. **Conclusion Point B** Are non-five-paragraph essayists, from the fledgling to the skilled professional, really less constrained by formal, stylistic, and genre requirements? **Conclusion Point C** Sure, **Conclusion Point D** But inasmuch as the five-paragraph essay loudly advertises the rigid formality of its structure, and inasmuch as a fledgling writer can exist within that structure (and indeed, for some of us at one time or another, thrive!), learning to perform the five-paragrapher can be an important exercise in adapting to the varying and sometimes absurd-seeming constraints of all writing, an exercise that can serve all writers who move on to navigate the various other forms and requirements embedded in the writing we do.

**Double Take**

1. Chances are, you too have had some training in the five-paragraph essay. If so, describe your experiences. To what extent has the five-paragraph essay served you as a writer? To what extent has it hindered you?
2. In the conclusion to “The Five-Paragraph Essay: Friend or Foe?” Spencer Schaffner claims that the five-paragraph essay can be democratic. What do you think he means by that? How could something so constraining be democratic?
3. Even though this is a formally constructed five-paragraph essay about the five-paragraph essay, Schaffner is able to make a number of creative choices within these constraints. Describe some of these creative choices. What makes them creative? And what can we learn about creativity as a result?