

Using Hegel's Dialectic in Argumentative Essays

Adapted from John Wetzel's article, "The MCAT Writing Assignment"

Introduction

Almost every American high school student learns how to write five-paragraph themes. In secondary school we learn that the basic short essay should be organized in the following five-paragraph structure:

1. Introduction
2. Body Paragraph
3. Body Paragraph
4. Body Paragraph
5. Conclusion

The five-paragraph theme is a rudimentary tool for beginning writers to master, but it's often difficult for college students to break out of the five-paragraph mode. Essays should deliver *critical* writing, not the "say what you're going to say; say it; then, say what you said" structure of a typical five-paragraph essay. In critical writing, the ideas need to develop organically, but the five-paragraph theme discourages strong connections between ideas. Almost invariably, students write some version of "We can see [thesis] through Example A, Example B, Example C" with the paragraphs about A, B, and C connected to each other with a string of "Also's" or "Moreover's".

Another problem with the five-paragraph theme is that it encourages students to write the dullest, most formulaic conclusions ever. Students have been taught repeatedly to begin their last paragraphs with "In conclusion, this essay has shown that [insert slightly reshuffled sentences from the introduction]." Why bother to go through the process of writing if you end up at the same place you began?

Writing a True Critical Essay

Instead of the five-paragraph essay, we suggest that the essays you write at the college level should follow the basic rhetorical structure of Hegel's Dialectic, namely

- An intellectual proposition (**thesis**)
- A critical perspective on the thesis (**antithesis**)
- A resolution of the tension between the thesis and antithesis by reconciling their common truths and forming a new proposition (**synthesis**)

Hegel's Dialectic represents a compact way of expressing the process of critical thinking and will help you create a unified essay that has a compelling argument and is intellectually satisfying for your reader.

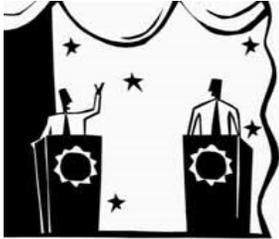
Imagine a Debate to Help You Brainstorm

One thing veteran writers learn is the value of a "generative device" to get ideas flowing. After receiving your essay prompt, take five minutes to imagine that you are witnessing a "debate night" at the local auditorium with your essay prompt being the topic of debate. The first speaker argues for the thesis; the second speaker argues for the antithesis; and the third speaker, the wisest of all, represents the synthesis. The third speaker is like the chorus in a Greek tragedy, who arrives at the end to explain the deeper truth.

Let's see how this five-minute process works with a typical essay prompt:

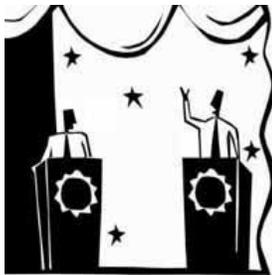
It is a miracle if curiosity can survive a formal education.

Write a unified essay in which you perform the following tasks. Explain what you think the above statement means. Describe a specific situation in which formal education might promote intellectual curiosity. Discuss what educational institutions can do to promote a love of learning without sacrificing educational standards.



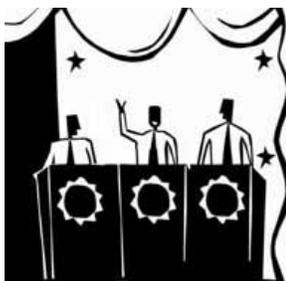
Thesis

Education isn't filling a bucket but lighting a fire. By too great a reliance on competition, testing, and rote learning educational institutions often thwart the natural love of learning in students.



Antithesis

Very few people ever learned long division because they enjoyed it, and few children would volunteer to practice spelling. Sometimes education means suffering years of work after which students can realize an understanding of the world that education has given them.



Synthesis

Although education in the United States seems to be evolving in a direction which may hurt the natural desire to learn in children, with too much emphasis on testing and rote learning, there is no denying that at the university level, our system combines the best of freedom of inquiry with the need for professional training.

After five minutes of brainstorming, you now have a sentence or two for each of the three rhetorical tasks. The art of composition is to balance the structure of the overall form with the creativity of the moment itself. Too much structure, and the essay is stultified, dull, and formulaic. With too much freedom, the essay is a formless stream-of-consciousness. If you practice intellectual balance, however, you will eventually become a writer who can respect opposing viewpoints while still arguing persuasively for your own perspective, a rhetorical skill that will produce strong, compelling arguments that will be of lasting value throughout your life.