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## Peter Elbow

Peter Elbow is Professor of English Emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where he directed the writing program. His books include *Writing without Teachers*; *Writing with Power*; *What Is English?* and *Everyone Can Write: Essays toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing* (which was given the James Britton Award by the Conference on English Education in 2000). In 1986 he received CCC's Richard Braddock Award for "The Shifting Relationships between Speech and Writing."

## My Five-Paragraph-Theme Theme

*Ed White*

Since the beginning of time, some college teachers have mocked the five-paragraph theme. But I intend to show that they have been mistaken. There are three reasons why I always write five-paragraph themes. First, it gives me an organizational scheme: an introduction (like this one) setting out three subtopics, three paragraphs for my three subtopics, and a concluding paragraph reminding you what I have said, in case you weren't paying attention. Second, it focuses my topic, so I don't just go on and on when I don't have anything much to say. Three and only three subtopics force me to think in a limited way. And third, it lets me write pretty much the same essay on anything at all. So I do pretty well on essay tests. A lot of teachers actually like the five-paragraph theme as much as I do.

The first reason I always write five-paragraph themes is that it gives me an organizational scheme. It doesn't matter what the subject is, since there are three parts to everything you can think of. If you can't think of more than two, you just have to think harder or come up with something that might fit. An

example will often work, like the three causes of the Civil War or abortion or reasons why the ridiculous twenty-one-year-old limit for drinking alcohol should be abolished. A worse problem is when you wind up with more than three subtopics, since sometimes you want to talk about all of them. But you can't. You have to pick the best three. That keeps you from thinking too much, which is a great time saver, especially on an essay test.

The second reason for the five-paragraph theme is that it makes you focus on a single topic. Some people start writing on the usual topic, like TV commercials, and they wind up all over the place, talking about where TV came from or capitalism or health foods or whatever. But with only five paragraphs and one topic you're not tempted to get beyond your original idea, like commercials are a good source of information about products. You give your three examples, and zap! you're done. This is another way the five-paragraph theme keeps you from thinking too much.

The last reason to write this way is the most important. Once you have it down, you can use it for practically anything. Does God exist? Well, you can say yes and give three reasons, or no and give three different reasons. It doesn't really matter. You're sure to get a good grade whatever you pick to put into the formula. And that's the real reason for education, to get those good grades without thinking too much and using up too much time.

So I've given you three reasons why I always write a five-paragraph theme and why I'll keep doing so in college. It gives me an organizational scheme that looks like an essay, it limits my focus to one topic and three subtopics so I don't wander about thinking irrelevant thoughts, and it will be useful for whatever writing I do in any subject. I don't know why some teachers seem to dislike it so much. They must have a different idea about education than I do.

*The "student" Ed White is better known as Edward M. White, a visiting professor of English at the University of Arizona and the author or editor of thirteen books on the teaching and assessing of writing. He was one of almost a thousand scorers of the English language and composition Advanced Placement examination in June 2007, reading 280,000 tests written by high school students.*

### The Fourth Generation

*Kristen Kennedy*

Things have changed much and, strangely, so little since I completed my PhD in 1997. No doubt my memory of the way things were softens with time and