B. DEVELOPING A THESIS IS MORE THAN REPEATING AN IDEA ("1 ON 10")

When the time comes to compose a formal paper with a thesis, it is very common for writers to abandon the wealth of data and ideas they have accumulated in the exploratory writing stage, panic, and revert to old habits: "Now I better have my one idea and be able to prove to everybody that I'm right." Out goes careful attention to detail. Out goes any evidence that doesn't fit. Instead of analysis, they substitute the kind of paper we call a demonstration. That is, they cite evidence to prove that a generalization is generally true. The problem with the demonstration lies with its too limited notions of what a thesis and evidence can do in a piece of analytical thinking.

Demonstrations are the result of two primary mistaken assumptions about what an analytical paper is—that the thesis doesn't change and that evidence exists solely to confirm the general validity of the thesis. For these notions we'd like to substitute the following two:

- A strong thesis *evolves:* it changes as a paper progresses. The changes in the thesis are galvanized by its repeated encounters with evidence.
- Evidence has a second function beyond corroborating claims: to test and develop and evolve the thesis, making the thesis account more accurately for the evidence.

The absence of change is the primary trait of a weak thesis. Like an *inert* (unreactive) material, a weak thesis neither affects nor is affected by the evidence that surrounds it. A paper produced by repeating a single idea generally follows the form we call 1 on 10: the writer makes a single and usually very general claim ("History repeats itself," "Exercise is good for you," and so forth) and then proceeds to affix it to ten examples. (See Figure 5.2 "Doing 1 on 10.") As we discuss in Chapter 1 under "Narrow Your Scope by Doing 10 on 1," a writer who reasserts the same idea about each example is going to produce a list, not a piece of developed thinking. By contrast, in nearly all good writing the thesis evolves by *gaining in complexity* and, thus, in accuracy as the paper progresses.

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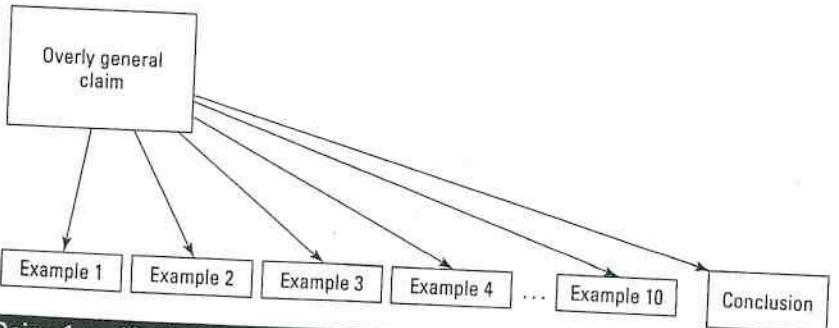
Where do writers get the idea in the first place that a thesis should be static? In most cases they learned it early in their writing careers as part of a stubbornly inflexible organizational scheme known as five-paragraph form.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH FIVE-PARAGRAPH FORM?

Perhaps the best introduction to what's wrong with five-paragraph form can be found in Greek mythology. On his way to Athens, the hero Theseus encounters a

FIGURE 5.2



Doing 1 on 10. The horizontal pattern of 1 on 10 (in which "10" stands arbitrarily for any number of examples) repeatedly makes the same point about every example. Its analysis of evidence is superficial.

particularly surly host, Procrustes, who offers wayfarers a bed for the night but with a catch. If they do not fit his bed exactly, he either stretches them or lops off their extremities until they do. This story has given us the word "procrustean," which the dictionary defines as "tending to produce conformity by violent or arbitrary means." Five-paragraph form is a procrustean formula that most students learn in high school. Although it has the advantage of providing a mechanical format that will give virtually any subject the appearance of order, it usually lops off a writer's ideas before they have the chance to form or stretches a single idea to the breaking point. In other words, this simplistic scheme blocks writers' abilities to think deeply or logically, restricting rather than encouraging the development of complex ideas.

A complex idea is one that has many sides. To treat such ideas intelligently, writers need a form that will not require them to cut off all of those sides except the one that most easily fits the bed. Most of you will find the basic five-paragraph form familiar:

1. An introduction that announces the writer's main idea, about which he or she will make three points
2. Three paragraphs, each on one of the three points
3. A conclusion beginning "Thus, we see" or "In conclusion" that essentially repeats the introduction.

Here is an example in outline form:

Introduction: The food in the school cafeteria is bad. It lacks variety, it's unhealthy, and it is always overcooked. In this essay I will discuss these three characteristics.

Paragraph 2: The first reason cafeteria food is bad is that there is no variety. (Plus one or two examples—no salad bar, mostly fried food, and so forth)

Paragraph 3: Another reason cafeteria food is bad is that it is not healthy. (Plus a few reasons—high cholesterol, too many hot dogs, too much sugar, and so forth)

Paragraph 4: In addition, the food is always overcooked. (Plus some examples—the vegetables are mushy, the "mystery" meat is tough to recognize, and so forth)

Conclusion: Thus, we see . . . (Plus a restatement of the introductory paragraph)

Most high school students write dozens of themes using this basic formula. They are taught to use five-paragraph form because it seems to provide the greatest good—a certain minimal clarity—for the greatest number of students. But the form does not promote logically tight and intellectually aggressive writing. It is a meat grinder that can turn any content into sausage.

At the root of the problem with five-paragraph form is its most distinctive characteristic—the classic tripartite (three-part) thesis, which generates the organizational format ("The economy of Bolivia is characterized by *x*, *y*, *z*"). The problem with this thesis shape is that it is not really a thesis. It offers a list in

place of an idea. It tells the writer that he or she will have to write a paragraph on each of the items in the list, but it doesn't let the reader (or the writer) know why this might be worth doing.

When you are in a pinch, as, for example, when you are trying to write the essay section of the new SAT exam where five-paragraph form *seemingly* still reigns, the form's partitioning aspect can be useful. Partitioning your subject into sections will at least split your thinking tasks into three or more smaller portions. But you need to try to make the thesis and its supporting body paragraphs do more than listing.

As we make clear at various points in the book, a good thesis must have tension in it, the pressure of one possible idea against another. Simply saying that the economy today has three problems, and then listing them, isn't really a thesis. Such a statement might get you by in a standardized essay exam (even though it shouldn't), but in the rest of your writing you want to do more than make lists of broad generalizations. A thesis that says, "There are three reasons for our being bogged down in the war with Iraq today" will direct you to an orderly development of your points, but not to much analysis of them. Good analysis requires narrower scope; its products are more carefully defined idea.

WHAT FIVE-PARAGRAPH FORM LOOKS LIKE

If you have been taught to write in five-paragraph form, you have come to expect your thinking to be tidily packaged. The thesis of a paper in five-paragraph form lists three elements of some kind at the end of the first paragraph: three reasons, three causes, three effects, three characteristics, and so forth. The paper then follows like a paint-by-number picture with a paragraph devoted to each of the three elements in the thesis. Then the paper comes to rest, wearily, with restatement (often exact repetition) of the three-part thesis in the first sentence of the concluding paragraph.

The problem with this orderly scheme is that it doesn't leave much room for thinking. In fact, it actually discourages thinking because it makes writers afraid to look closely at the evidence. If they look too closely, they might find something that doesn't fit. But it is precisely the something that doesn't seem to fit, the thing writers call a *complication*, that triggers good ideas. The tidy packaging of five-paragraph form keeps complications at a safe distance. When complications do force their way onto the scene, five-paragraph form swiftly seeks to dismiss them. It tends to locate them as concessions and refutations—things to be gotten through in an obligatory way so that the writer can return to the main business at hand: reciting his or her idea as if the complication had never been.

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The three elements get marched through the paper with no questions asked, and the paper ends the way it began—with a list. This is all quite comforting to

some writers, because five-paragraph form papers virtually write themselves. Just come up with a list of three things, preferably things that can be stated in single words, as in "*Dr. Faustus* is a play about lust, greed, and ambition," and then produce an example or two of each in your three body paragraphs. Nothing to it.

The fact that there is almost "nothing to it" is the problem. Ideas that come too easily, that seem to write themselves, are sometimes the worthwhile products of inspiration. More often they are unexamined first responses, exercises in the exposition of the obvious, prefabricated and unreflective recitations of conventional ideas. If one definition of analysis is that it locates significant parts in order to arrive at a better understanding of the whole, then five-paragraph form is a too-mechanical form of analysis.

Here is a short list of the bad mental habits taught by five-paragraph form:

1. that papers need only repeat (rather than develop) their main ideas
2. that an introduction is a conclusion, and thus that nothing need happen to the thesis on the way from the beginning of the paper to the end
3. that a thesis is essentially inert, unaffected by what it passes through
4. that a paper need only provide evidence in support of its thesis, rather than using evidence to test and evolve the main idea; complicating evidence may get acknowledged in the form of concessions and refutations, but such evidence remains too inert to have any effect on the writer's thinking
5. that all body paragraphs are essentially the same—a single claim at the beginning (one of the three elements of the thesis turned into a sentence, as in "We also see that *Dr. Faustus* is a play about greed.") followed by a short list of reasons or examples
6. that a thesis consists of generalities and broadly stated themes, usually ones that no one would be likely to disagree with

Try this 5.2: Identifying Five-Paragraph Form

Take a minute to examine the introductory paragraph below. What evidence do you find there to suggest that it is setting up a five-paragraph form essay?

> Throughout the film *The Tempest*, a version of Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, there were a total of nine characters. These characters were Calibano, Alonso, Antonio, Aretha, Freddy, the doctor, and Dolores. Each character in the film represented a person in Shakespeare's play, but there were four people who were greatly similar to those in Shakespeare, and who played a role in symbolizing aspects of forgiveness, love, and power.

Predict the organization of this essay, paragraph by paragraph. Can you discern any possible openings where the writer might locate and develop an idea? (There are some.)

Here are two *quick checks* to see whether a paper of yours has closed down your thinking through a scheme such as five-paragraph form:

1. *Look at the paragraph openings.* If these read like a list, each beginning with an additive transition such as *another* followed by repetition of your central point ("Once again we see . . . " or "Yet another example is . . ."), you are probably not developing your ideas sufficiently.
2. *Compare the wording in the last statement of the paper's thesis (in the conclusion) with the first statement of it in the introduction.* If the wording at these two locations is virtually the same, you'll know that your thesis has not responded adequately to your evidence.

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