

Review of Writing Principles

PARAGRAPHS

The fundamental organizational unit of a piece of writing is the paragraph. It works to present your major ideas, and it provides you with the structure within which you can add specific details to give your major ideas validity and meaning. The three ingredients in an effective paragraph are **unity**, **coherence**, and **transitions**.

Paragraphs were first developed simply as a way of breaking the monotony of page after page of solid text. From that very practical beginning, they developed into structural units in a piece of writing: each paragraph is devoted to one main idea. The relationship between the visual and the Structural function of paragraphing is a natural one. When you see one thing set off from another thing, you assume that there must be a logic behind the separation. A row of houses suggests that a distinct group of people resides within each. Similarly, a series of paragraphs implies that each is concerned with one central idea.

If a paragraph violates this sense of internal unity, the reader feels as though he had walked into a residence and found two families living where he had every reason to expect to find only one. He would probably be confused and uncomfortable and perhaps make a hasty exit. As a writer, you will probably want to treat your reader more hospitably, and the way to do so is to make sure that your paragraphs are unified.

Topic Sentence. The way to **unity** is the topic sentence or idea. A topic sentence expresses the main idea which a paragraph develops. Like a thesis statement which controls the entire structure of a theme, a topic sentence oversees the material in a paragraph: it is the generalization which the specific details of a paragraph support. Its importance is, first, to the writer so that you will know what you want to say in your paragraph, and, secondly, to the reader so that he will be able to follow your developing thoughts. Although conventionally the topic sentence is often the first sentence of the paragraph, you may choose to place it elsewhere. Depending on your stylistic emphasis, you can put the topic sentence at the end of a paragraph if you want to build up to your idea, or you can even leave it unstated if you wish to achieve a more flowing or informal effect. But no matter where you place it on the paper, it most certainly should be in your head before you begin constructing your paragraph. The paragraph below lacks a clear topic sentence, and therefore it wanders:

The novel *Brave New World* takes place in London and a Savage Reservation during the year of Our Ford. It is a utopian society with the motto "Community, Identity and Stability." The society is headed by ten world controllers. Babies are produced in test tubes. The people are divided into castes, each happy to be in the caste he is in. This is done by Pavlovian conditioning. Some tranquilizers and gas are used to calm people and make them feel good. The Savage Reservation is where children are born of natural birth, get old, and die. Love and emotions are feelings on the reservation.

The following statements all can be extracted from this paragraph.

1. The novel takes place in London and the Savage Reservation.
2. The society in London is utopian.
3. But the utopia results from complete control from birth to death.
4. There are no emotions in the utopian society.
5. There are emotions on the Savage Reservation.

The paragraph as it stands simply contains too much. The reader's mind is forced to shift rapidly among a series of loosely related ideas, only to find at the conclusion of the paragraph that he is not much more enlightened than he was before reading it. The paragraph could be considerably improved by selecting one central idea as a topic sentence and then developing that idea. For example, you might decide to center your attention on the various "utopian" elements. A topic sentence for that idea might be, "Brave New World presents a picture of a completely controlled utopia." That topic sentence could generate the following paragraph:

Brave New World presents a picture of a completely controlled utopia. The motto of this utopia is "Community, Identity and Stability." The society is headed by ten world controllers. Babies are produced in test tubes. The people are divided into castes, each happy to be in the caste he is in. This is done by Pavlovian conditioning. Some tranquilizers and gas are used to calm people and make them feel good.

Notice that the development of this paragraph now is accomplished through examples. The types of organization available to you in writing paragraphs are the same as those you would utilize in organizing an entire essays. A different topic sentence such as "Emotions are only really felt on the Savage Reservation" would yield a paragraph which would most effectively be developed through comparison and contrast. Other topic sentences might lend themselves to development through chronology and classification.

Coherence. The second major area of paragraph construction is coherence and transition. Each detail of the paragraph should seem to fit. The reconstructed paragraph on Brave New World includes the following details:

1. The motto
2. The ten world controllers
3. The "test tube" babies
4. The caste system
5. The Pavlovian conditioning
6. The tranquilizers.

All of these, in one way or another, relate to the topic sentence, "Brave New World presents a picture of a completely controlled utopia." To this degree, the paragraph is coherent, but the details still seem somewhat jumbled. The details deal with three areas, which need to be clearly indicated. The motto and the world controllers are general features of the utopia. The babies, the caste system, and the conditioning result from the attempt to realize the goals of the motto. The tranquilizers are a little different: they indicate that even in utopia, tension and anxiety cannot be completely eliminated.

Keeping all of this in mind, you would revise the paragraph by attempting to show the relationships among the details which develop the topic sentence. Stylistically, this revision would consist of phrases attached to the basic sentences of the paragraph and the reduction of some sentences to qualifying phrases:

Brave New World presents a picture of a completely controlled utopia under the motto "Community, Identity and Stability." Under the supervision of ten world controllers, babies are produced in test tubes and divided into castes. Pavlovian conditioning assures that everybody is happy with his position in life. For those who still feel some stress or strain, there is the "soma" tranquilizer which produces mindless contentment.

The addition of phrases such as "under the supervision of" and "for those who still feel some stress or strain," and the compression of some of the original sentences, work to make the ideas of the paragraph read smoothly (transition) and logically (coherence). The ideas are still basically the same, but the revision has created a coherence which links idea to idea and the body of the paragraph to the topic sentence.

Transition. A solid paragraph contains phrases which provide internal transition from one idea to another. If the paragraph is successful, the reader will be carried smoothly through a series of closely related details which develop the central idea of the paragraph. Having done this much for your reader, you cannot leave him to fend for himself as he approaches the next paragraph. The end of a paragraph forms a natural break in the flow of your material; the beginning of the next paragraph should indicate the direction you intend to take the reader. This indication constitutes an external transition which leads the reader from one paragraph to another.

There are two simple means of providing external transitions. The first is to use a transitional word or phrase such as "however," "for example," "moreover," "in addition," "on the other hand," "before," or "after." The second is to repeat an important idea from the previous paragraph in the first sentence. The paragraph you are now reading repeats "external transition" from the last sentence of the previous paragraph. It could have begun with a transitional phrase: "For example, a phrase can move the reader to the next paragraph." Either method is effective.

If you were to write a paragraph about the Savage Reservation (in *Brave New World*) to follow the description of the utopian society, you would have to lead your reader smoothly into this new area of investigation. Since this new area involves ideas which contrast sharply with the utopia, you might begin your new paragraph with a phrase such as "On the other hand." Or you might echo an idea from the first paragraph, modifying it slightly to introduce the new material: "Soma tranquilizers are not needed on the Savage Reservation." Complete topic sentences for a proposed second paragraph might read like the following:

Transitional Phrase: On the other hand, people living on the Savage Reservation are not at all controlled.

Echoing of a Key Idea: Soma tranquilizers are not needed on the Savage Reservation, where stress and strain are part of day-to-day living.

Both devices will smooth the way for your reader; both will introduce him to the new material while showing him its relationship to what you said before.

REVISION

If you have organized your thoughts carefully, and presented them in unified and coherent paragraphs, you will have produced a solid piece of writing. It will not be, however, the best that you can do.

Writing is a craft, a creative process which transforms the electrical impulses of the brain into black and white linguistic symbols. Organizing and writing a first draft are essential to the craft of writing, but you should not stop there. You should want to polish, to refine your writing so that it is the best possible expression of your thoughts. To do this, you must revise.

In some ways, revision is the most difficult part of writing. Human psychology works against it; the pressures of time often prevent it. Once you have completed the draft of a paper, you like to think of it as part of yourself. Those are your words staring up at you from the paper. You have arranged them with great care. To tamper with them once they have been given this special existence on the paper seems almost sacrilegious. And even if you have the inclination to revise, you might find that you have not allowed sufficient time for the task.

Time is extremely important. Revision simply cannot be very effective directly after you complete your writing. At that point, it is impossible for you to be objective. Anything you have written will look good. The psychological pressures to revere your own work

are insurmountable. If you read your work right after you finish it, your mind will fill in all the gaps, and it will polish all the rough edges. Your revisions will be superficial and half-hearted.

You must allow yourself enough time to permit your writing to sit for at least several hours, preferably a day or so. If you can do that, you can then begin to look at your writing objectively, because other thoughts and activities will have intervened. Your mind will not be so willing to compensate for any deficiencies in your writing. Rather, such weaknesses will stand out in glaring relief; they will demand your attention. You will be able to see and cure problems of awkward sentences and imprecise vocabulary; you will observe if your paragraphs truly hold together well and if each follows the other in some discernible pattern; you will be willing at this point to simply edit out any deadwood which does not contribute to your paper. Your revision will be meaningful and helpful, for it will enable you to produce the best writing you can.

When revising, check the following: Is your thesis well defined? Does it set workable limits for your paper? Do you have a clear organization? Does each paragraph relate directly to the thesis? Do your paragraphs develop one central idea? Have you provided transitions from one paragraph to another? Are your sentences clear and efficient? Are there any vague phrases which can be eliminated? Is your vocabulary precise?