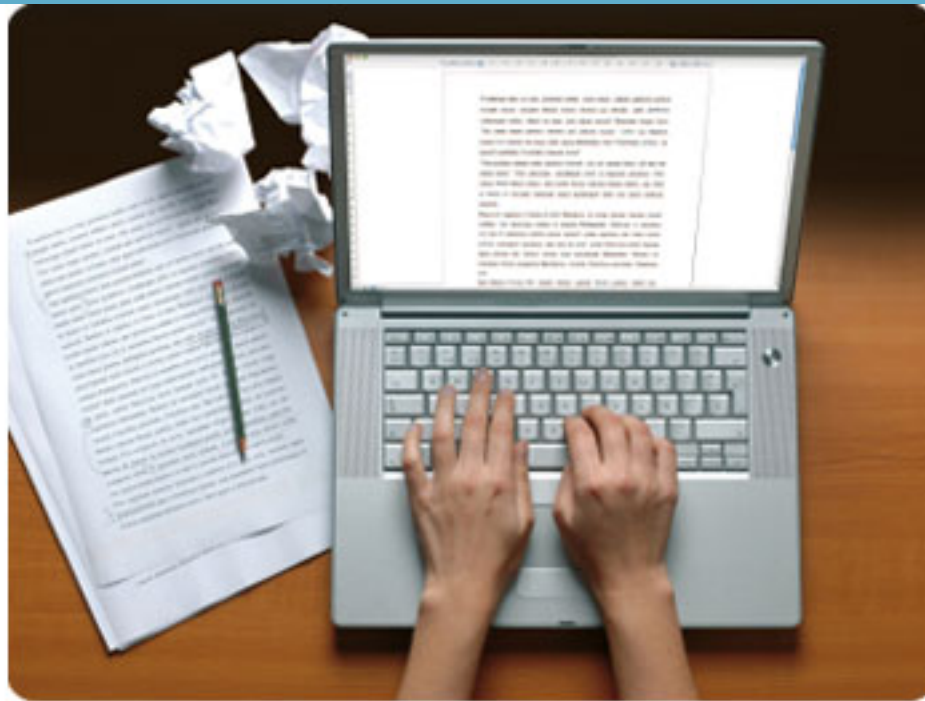


Writing Good Paragraphs



Some Paragraph Problems

- Sprawling or jumbled paragraphs
 - Paragraphs that seem to have no design or point.
 - Usually result from a writer jotting down several ideas as they occur rather than thinking in terms of developing one idea at a time.

Example 1

- The Mexican War, slavery, and majority rule are reasons why Thoreau does not pay his taxes. He feels he should not support what he does not agree with. Thoreau was thrown into jail as punishment for not paying his taxes. Jail was the only just place at that time. Although Thoreau was in jail he did not feel confined. Jail only confines your body, not your mind. Thoreau is very strongly against taxes.

Commitment/Response Pattern

- How do you solve the problem of the sprawling paragraph?
 - Use a commitment and response pattern.
 - Involves making a promise to your reader and then keeping it.
 - Look back at Example 1. What does the paragraph promise? What does it actually do?

Example 2

- *There would seem to be four stages in the composition of a story.* First comes the germ of the story, then a period of more or less conscious meditation, then the first draft, and finally the revision, which may simply be "pencil work" as John O'Hara calls it--that is, minor changes in wording--or may lead to writing several drafts and what amounts to a new work.

--Malcolm Cowley, Introduction to *How Writers Work*

Example 3

- *A young man might go into military flight training believing that he was entering some sort of technical school in which he was simply going to acquire a certain set of skills. Instead he found himself all at once enclosed in a fraternity. And in this fraternity, even though it was military, men were not rated by their outward rank as ensigns, lieutenant commanders, or whatever. No, herein the world was divided into those who had it and those who did not. This quality, this *it* was never named, however, nor was it talked about in any way.*

--Tom Wolfe, *The Right Stuff*

Some Paragraph Problems

- Overly general paragraphs
 - Several sentences all on a high level of generality
 - Instead of making one general statement, then developing it with specific details or examples, the student strings together a series of generalizations
 - Even if all the statements discuss the same main idea, they don't really **develop** that idea.

Example 4

- Everyone is interested in preserving the quality of our environment and natural habitats. The beauty of nature is something almost everyone responds to. Respect for nature comes from a feeling we all share that the environment is something important to our own well-being today and to that of our children and grandchildren tomorrow. Without a healthy environment, we will all find ourselves ravaged by disease and deprived of the beauties of nature. Unless we do something about the environmental crisis in our society today, we soon won't have a society to worry about.

Downshifting

- How do you solve the problem of the overly general paragraph?
 - Try downshifting.
 - Develop a paragraph by writing sentences that move from a high level of generality down to lower levels.
 - Writer makes a broad statement or assertion in the first sentence and in the following sentences enriches and expands that statement by giving more specific and concrete details.
 - Such paragraphs can move through several levels.
 - The process is like subdividing a topic into smaller and smaller details.

Example 5

10. There are signs that girls are finding their way into the world of computing, despite its male bias.
9. A large proportion of the current enrollment in college computing classes is female.
 8. For example, at Mount Holyoke, a women's college, 50 percent of this year's graduates have used computers in their courses--up from 15 percent seven years ago.
 7. According to John Durso, professor of computer studies, the number of terminals available to Mount Holyoke students has increased from one to 40 over the same period.
 7. "The basic course in computing, taught twice a year, has quadrupled in enrollment from 30 students seven years ago to 120 today."

--Sara Kiesler, Lee Spoull, and Jacquelynne S. Eccles, "Second Class Citizens?" in *Psychology Today*, March, 1983, p. 47.

Practice Paragraphs

- Practice plotting the levels of generality in sample paragraphs (handout)

Opening Paragraphs

Good opening paragraphs should:

- Get your readers' attention and interest them in reading more
- Announce or suggest your main idea without delay
- Give your readers a signal about the direction you intend to take
- Set the tone of your essay

Examples

Boring

There are many topics of importance in the news these days. One of the many important topics the importance of child care.

Better

Every major industrial country in the Western world except the United States has an extensive system of subsidized child care that assures working women their children will be adequately taken care of by qualified people. In Sweden, for example, every city and town has government-sponsored daycare centers; in other countries, factories and corporations provide on-site care that allows women to visit their children during the day. Studies have found that on-site care significantly lowers the rate of absenteeism among both male and female employees. Yet despite these encouraging statistics, most businesses in America are still in the Stone Age when it comes to child care.

Examples

Not Bad

One of the most exciting parts of football is the perfectly executed two-minute drill. Nothing thrusts the crowd into the action and keeps them on the edges of their seats more than the perfectly executed drive ending in a game-winning touchdown.

Better

It was a bone-chilling day in Cleveland Municipal Stadium as thousands of anxious fans watched the American Football Conference championship game between the Cleveland Browns and the Denver Broncos. The score stayed close for the first fifty-nine minutes. Then with fifty-eight seconds left in the game, the Broncos took over inside their own ten-yard line, with virtually no chance of winning. But then the Bronco offense, led by quarterback John Elway, began what would later be known as "The Drive." Using short passes and controlling the clock, Denver drove down the field and scored on a nine-yard touchdown pass from Elway to receiver Vance Johnson. This is just one example of one of the most exciting plays in football: the two-minute drill.

Examples

Not Bad

How common is dishonesty in the antique business? I recently interviewed three antique dealers who admitted to dishonesty in their business. These three dealers have good reputations within the business, and they minimized the importance of the dishonest practices they admitted to, saying the business as a whole is mostly honest.

Better

American writer Wilson Mizner, along with his brother Addison, ran an antiques business in Florida in the 1920s. Wilson tells of how he invited friends to his "antiquing factory" and offered to let them help inflict the ravages of time on a new dining room suite. "Don't shoot straight at it. Remember a worm always charges at a piece of furniture from an angle," he instructed.

Concluding Paragraphs

Thing Not to Do:

- Don't merely summarize the points you've made (not necessary in short essays—too repetitive)
- Don't apologize
- Don't make a qualifying remark
- Don't add minor details of afterthoughts

Concluding Paragraphs

Consider using a **climax conclusion**

- Final paragraph or sentences should be the **culmination** of the ideas you have been developing
- In papers about literature, especially, focus on the writer's conclusion; provide a **reading** of the conclusion
- Refer back to thesis somehow, but try not to sound repetitive
- Read it out loud—paper should **sound** final