All Levels

Paragraph Construction

General Guidelines for Teaching Paragraph Construction

Paragraphs are comprised of a collection of (ideally, strong) sentences that are grouped around a central topic. If you are new to writing instruction, here is an area where a little knowledge really goes a long way! There are just a handful of guidelines for paragraph construction that are easy to understand and to teach. If you teach them diligently and then grade for them carefully, they will guide your student and enable him to create strong paragraphs that express his ideas well.

This is a general guide for teaching paragraph construction at all levels. We focus on the starting instructions, but you'll want to review this basic material from year to year even as your children are in high school. To aid your teaching sessions, we've created a series of Talking Points. There are four levels of these. In each, there are bulleted points for you to go over and three sample paragraphs. The paragraph topics involve rainbows, dogs, and fish. Samples for successive levels increase in complexity and have differing details, but they are essentially just more complex variations on the themes outlined below.

Later, the topic sentence won't *always* begin the paragraph because older students can put a transition sentence or introductory sentence in the beginning of a paragraph and position the topic sentence in further. But it's easier to just strictly mandate this structure with beginners.

Basic Guidelines for Beginning Writing

Starting with stand-alone paragraphs

Teach beginners that each paragraph has three parts. It starts with a **topic sentence**, has a **body** of sentences that give the information or carry the story of the paragraph, and then ends with a **conclusion**. (With older students, the conclusion can become a transition. See more about this below.) Let's go through each of these three elements slowly. Introduce these to your young student as he begins to compose his first paragraphs. Using our Talking Points page on paragraph construction and the sample paragraphs there, share the following guidelines for each of the three parts of a paragraph.

Topic Sentence

First, teach the young student that all paragraphs begin with a topic sentence. Here are a few points to teach them about topic sentences:

- They are indented, but only because they are the first sentence (not because they are the topic sentence). Don't confuse your student!
- Like all sentences, they begin with a capital letter and end with proper punctuation.
- They tell the reader what the paragraph is going to be about. It's sort of like introducing someone to a new friend: you tell them the other person's name and maybe his relationship to someone else you both know. The topic sentence introduces the reader to the topic the student is about to discuss in the paragraph.
- A "hook" is often recommended for stand-alone paragraphs. This is when the student starts his work with a sentence that commands the reader's immediate attention. Many times, when using hooks, the actual topic sentence is the second one. This is especially so when the "hook" is a rhetorical question. Sentences like these make good hooks:
    - "George! Look out!" I yelled, as my cousin stepped in front of an oncoming car.
    - It was the hottest summer on record.
    - Did you ever pet a kangaroo?
- Our sample paragraphs "Rainbows" and "Doggies" (or "Dogs") have good topic sentences. "Fish" is lacking one.

Body

Next, discuss the body of the paragraph with your student. Although paragraphs can be any length, young students may want boundaries. We suggest that those who are comfortable with either handwriting or typing be given a goal of 4-5 sentences for the body.

It is helpful for all students to do prewriting before composing paragraphs. *Writing Aids* offers several graphic organizers that help students gather their information before they begin to write. Teach your student the relationships between the various types of graphic organizers and the bodies of specific types of paragraphs (expository, descriptive, narrative, or persuasive). (Your *Tapestry* writing assignments will typically suggest the proper *Writing Aids* supplement to use for each genre.)

What should these body sentences be like?

* They should be strong sentences. As you are grading paragraphs, one thing to look for is whether the key elements of good sentences (proper grammar and punctuation, use of concrete words and specific verbs, and, as students get older, increasingly complex and varied sentence structures, etc.) have been used.
* They should all relate to the topic introduced in the first sentence. Again, see our Talking Points pages, which have paragraphs with mistakes in them. Point out the fact that in the "Doggies" (or "Dogs") paragraph, the sentences about Mrs. Jones and the piano lessons (or library) does not relate to the topic sentence.
* Each sentence should begin with a capital letter and end with proper punctuation. Your student can self proof for this before turning in drafts for your input.
* We suggest that you teach students to double-space their paragraphs so that you can insert your feedback more easily.

See *Writing Aids* sections on Sentence Combinations, Word Games, and Sentence Structures for help with teaching students about strong sentences. These sections are good places to revisit regularly.

Conclusion

Teach your student that each paragraph needs to have a feeling of ending. It's sort of like saying goodbye to a friend at the end of a conversation. You don't just walk away or hang up the phone without saying farewell. Look again at Talking Points paragraphs. The third one, about fish, ends too abruptly. In "Doggies," the young author loses track of the main idea and wanders off into the distance. Stand-alone paragraphs should have a definite ending. Here are ways to end:

* Restate the topic sentence, only "with a twist." See our sample, "Rainbows," for an example of this type of ending. Here, the student returns to the theme of amazement, while adding the role of God into the sentence.
* Tell the reader what you have said or proven in the paragraph. For instance, "So we see that, though rainbows may look magical, they are only a mixture of sun and water."
* Finish the part of the story contained in the paragraph: "When night fell, the princess went to sleep happily."

Other Important Paragraph Guidelines

The following elements of paragraphs won't be at the forefront of beginners' works, but you should know about them and introduce them whenever they will help your student to grow as a writer.

Unity

Unity is important in paragraphs, and it is the most difficult characteristic to explain to younger students. Basically, unity with paragraph sentences is like unity in the family: no one is going off on their own or arguing (as in having a different theme or idea). All the "members" are working together to give the reader a clear communication.

* Unity is helped by the idea that all sentences relate to the topic sentence.
* In our sample paragraphs in Talking Points, each successive paragraph is less unified. In "Rainbows," the unity is strong. In "Doggies" (or "Dogs"), the writer leaves the topic and goes off onto Mrs. Jones, creating confusion and disunity. In "Fish," there is no unity what-

soever, since the student has neither a topic sentence nor a conclusion. There is no internal organization to this paragraph.

* A helpful exercise to teach unity to young students is to work with our samples and have them revise and rewrite #2 and #3. You can do this orally as well, if you like. Ask your students to think of ways that the paragraphs could be made stronger, according to the guidelines you've been discussing.

Parallelism

Another important feature in paragraphs is parallelism. Most younger students won't need to focus on this because they're writing simple, stand-alone paragraphs, but here is what it means, in case a child does get into a situation where you need to explain it. Parallelism is important when the author mentions more than one concept, argument, or thing in the beginning of the paragraph and then proceeds to expand on his introductory remarks. For instance, if I were writing about dogs, and in my topic sentence I mentioned that there were three breeds that I had experience with—Boxers, Dalmatians, and Huskies—I would want to then mention the details of my experience in this order. I'd talk about Boxers first, then Dalmatians, and finally Huskies. And, I would be careful not to omit any. If they are introduced, I must either expand all of them or none of them.

Genres

Finally, a quick word about paragraph genres. There are four commonly recognized genres of paragraphs, and *Writing Aids* gives you specific help with the particular aspects of each of these. See the related sections for more information.

* Expository: uses facts to explain or report on a topic.
* Descriptive: uses sensory words and adjectives to help the reader "experience" something.
* Narrative: uses language to tell a story. Dialogue involves advanced paragraphing.
* Persuasive: usually an advanced genre, requiring students to "prove" with evidence an assertion or position on an issue.

Most young students will be using expository and descriptive writing in *Tapestry* assignments, which focus on non-fiction writing. However, there will be times when the opportunity for narrative writing is also presented.

Advanced Paragraph Construction

Older students will need to master the basics we have been talking about before you want to either teach or require advanced paragraph constructions. However, that day of mastery will come! After students begin to join paragraphs together into longer works, any focus on basic paragraph construction from year to year should become review work. When they begin to need to join paragraphs together into longer works, it's time to teach about transition sentences and the variety of ways that paragraphs change to fit different writing situations.

Start teaching about this new focus with a lecture on transition words and sentences. Elsewhere in *Writing Aids*, we discuss the use of transition sentences in detail, providing a list of transition words so that you can more easily acquaint your student with this advanced concept and so that he can have a printed list in his notebook for reference. Teach him that the inclusion of transition sentences at the beginning or end of a paragraph helps the reader to follow an overall argument and significantly alters the structure of a paragraph from that of the simple, stand-alone paragraph of earlier years. Gone are the needs for hooks, topic sentences in the first-sentence position, or even concluding sentences! The new focus is the overall message of the

paper as a whole. As sentences were used in the past to form the message of a stand-alone paragraph (with an introduction, body, and conclusion), now each paragraph functions both as a group of sentences clustered around an idea *and* one idea contributing to the whole. This can be a bit bewildering to students as they begin consciously using transition sentences and working at new paragraph constructs. Here are some ways to talk to your student and tie the new elements (refinements) of paragraph construction in with older, simpler, more familiar structures. You can use the examples (on the following page) that we have provided to show him how these principles work out in practice. Feel free to print it for your student's reference as you teach!

- The purposes for the topic sentence that we required you to write when you were younger were twofold: 1) to alert the reader of the topic you were about to discuss, and 2) to help you, the writer, with paragraph unity.
  - You still want to signal the reader as to what the topic of your paragraph will be, but you will need to work a little harder at it. When making transitions between topics, a topic statement (or phrase) can be incorporated into your first sentence (with or without a transition word or statement), or it can be moved into the second- or third-sentence position of a longer, more complex paragraph.
  - A transition sentence that takes up all of the first sentence of the paragraph usually restates the point of the previous paragraph and opens a new balancing or countering thought. In this case, the topic sentence then states the purpose of the new paragraph.
  - In some cases, the topic sentence may even be in third-sentence position: one could use a transition sentence, then a rhetorical question, and then state the purpose for the collection of sentences at hand.
  - At first, it might be a good idea for you to make sure you can locate that topic phrase or sentence in each paragraph of your longer paper. Also check to see that all the sentences in the paragraph remain on that idea. Later, this kind of unity will come more and more naturally to you as you grow in skill.
- Conclusions are less conclusive in multi-paragraph papers as well. They, too, often constitute transitions, but they must still help the reader to know that the thought of the paragraph is concluding and the writer is about to move on to a different idea. Thus, the writer must learn both to signal the end of his thought and to think about the best way to help the reader connect the upcoming ideas with what he has just discussed. (Again, see examples on the following page for help with explaining these ideas.)
  - Teach students to end their introductory paragraphs with a clear statement of what the paper will be about. This may be the thesis of an essay or the main idea of a report or biography.
  - For the body paragraphs, a good idea for beginners is to teach them to end each body paragraph with a summary statement that also ties back to their opening point, or main idea. They can do this with or without a transition statement.
  - It is usually easier for students who are beginning to think about transition sentences to not introduce the next paragraph in the conclusion of each body paragraph. Skilled and mature writers can accomplish this; beginners should be discouraged from trying.
  - Concluding paragraphs of papers should tell the reader what was said, and, if possible, also include a new idea that arises simply and obviously from the whole paper (to add interest).

Examples of Advanced Constructions

Paragraph openings:

Let us say we are arguing for the merits of Moses as a leader. We are arguing that he was godly, brave, and humble. We are on our third paragraph, about his humility. Here would be a simple transition phrase, combined with a topic sentence:

> We have demonstrated that Moses was both godly and brave, and now we will discuss his humility.

Now, let us use a summary transition sentence to begin our paragraph, and put our topic sentence in the second position:

> We have been discussing Moses' godliness and bravery in some detail and have demonstrated how these character traits helped him be a great leader. Let us turn now to evidences of his humility, our third trait.

Finally, here is an example that puts our topic sentence in the third position. This position is necessitated by the inclusion of a rhetorical question after the transition sentence:

> Moses was both godly and brave, as we have demonstrated. But, was that all there was to his leadership? No, there was an important third element: humility.

Paragraph closings:

Continuing to use our topic above, let's look at the closures of a few paragraphs. First, let's see how to end our introductory paragraphs well (transitioning to the main body of our overall argument). Remember, each of these examples is the last sentence or two of a paragraph.

> Different people will point to various aspects of leadership as important to success. Moses was a great leader: he was godly, brave, and humble.

To that sentence, you might also add: *God meant him to be a role model for all His chosen leaders.*

The succeeding body paragraphs will now follow this order:

1. A paragraph on Moses' godliness.
2. A paragraph on Moses' courage.
3. A paragraph on Moses' humility.

See how these conclusion sentences or phrases tie back to the idea that Moses' character was a model for other leaders?

Here are good endings for each of these three paragraphs, in the same order as above.

> Moses' godliness made him a real example for the Israelites who followed him.

> Godliness and courage make a good combination in a Christian leader. But there is one more admirable trait that is also essential. Let's look at Moses' example of humility.

> Moses' humility allowed him to consistently put God's agenda ahead of his own. This is absolutely necessary for successful leadership of God's people.

Concluding Thoughts to Share with Your Student

Paragraph construction is one of those skills that constitutes the backbone of good writing. Great sentences are the stuff of great paragraphs. Great paragraphs turn any prose into a richer read! The older your student gets, the more complex his paragraphing will need to be, but a yearly review of the basics in this document will still serve to ground him and give him a firm handhold as he attempts to climb to newer, less familiar heights. Here are a few more ideas for you to share with your advanced writer as he begins to hone his skills even further:

- Here is a metaphor: frame packs help people carry heavy weights on their backs. They do this by containing heavy items and distributing the collected weight comfortably on the bearer's back, shoulders, and hips. Some frame packs have structures that you can see: there are bars from which cloth is slung to contain the carried objects. But some frame packs have internal frames: you cannot see them from the outside, yet their structure is real and makes a great difference to the ease with which the bearer carries his load. Just so with paragraph construction: the writer may learn to internalize the structures of a paragraph, making them all but invisible to the reader, but the structure is there nonetheless!
- The fact that you will be incorporating paragraphs into longer papers should actually help you remain on topic. Most of the genres that we're going to require of you will be as strictly structured as your paragraphs used to be when you were younger. For instance, as you've already learned, reports are structured in five paragraphs: the introductory and concluding ones, with the three body ones in between. Each of these paragraphs has a specific job to do in the paper. Thus, each paragraph has a unity that is both internal and external, as it were. The internal unity is all on one topic that constitutes just one point in a larger, external argument (the paper as a whole). Essays will work the same way.
- The concepts of parallelism and unity only grow more and more important as paragraphs gain complexity and sophistication. The reader still must be led carefully through your arguments and information! Advanced paragraph construction rests on habits of organization taught in earlier years.