



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

(From a Student Paper summarizing Henry David Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience")

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.

Problems with the previous paragraph?

- First sentence suggests the paragraph will be about the Mexican war, slavery, and majority rule
- Too much for a single paragraph?
- Switches to the issue of jail for many sentences in the middle
- Last sentence seems like a non-sequitur (something that doesn't logically follow what came before)

Commitment/Response Pattern

How do you solve the problem of the sprawling/jumbled paragraph?

- Try using 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*

- Sets up expectations (that there are 4 stages in composing a story)
- Then fulfills the commitment by explaining what those 4 stages are

Example 3

- Again, sets up expectations—a young man **might** expect something.
- Readers then get the information about what **really** happens in flight training

*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 Other 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.

Problems with the previous paragraph?

- Every sentence is very general
- Sounds almost as if each sentence could serve as the opening sentence of a new paragraph
- No specific examples or details that develop the idea
- All of the sentences simply **repeat** the same general idea, only in slightly different language

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.

Here's an example

(Levels of generality are marked, with 10 being highest, or most general statement)

10. There are signs that girls are finding their way into the world of computing, despite its male bias. (A large statement about girls and computing)
9. A large proportion of the current enrollment in college computing classes is female. (A bit more specific—moving into the world of college classes)
 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. (More specific—statistics about a particular college)
 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. (More specific—evidence taken from a particular professor)
 7. "The basic course in computing, taught twice a year, has quadrupled in enrollment from 30 students seven years ago to 120 today." (Same level of specificity—the same professor talking)

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

Practice Paragraphs

- The lab assignment asks you to practice plotting the levels of generality in sample paragraphs
- You can also practice on your own paragraphs
- No single pattern is required, but a strong, well-shaped paragraph usually downshifts from more general to more specific