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REFINING COMPOSITION SKILLS

Rhetoric and Grammar for ESL Students

**REFINING
COMPOSITION SKILLS:
Rhetoric and Grammar
for ESL Students**

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PREFACE

Refining Composition Skills presents an integrated program of writing for high intermediate and advanced students of English as a second language. It combines extensive practice in rhetorical strategies and techniques with a review of appropriate grammatical structures and verb tenses. With its extensive appendixes, the text can further serve as a handbook for writing, grammar, and mechanics. The primary audience is the academically oriented ESL student; however, the text might be useful in developmental writing courses for native speakers who could benefit from more guidance in writing compositions.

Refining Composition Skills can accommodate the needs of students of varying degrees of experience and levels of writing skills. Inexperienced writers will build a solid foundation in writing beginning with Unit I. This unit presents the basic paragraph patterns useful for high school or college-level writing: narrative, descriptive, and expository. This unit covers developing and restricting topic sentences; organizing and developing effective, detailed support of the controlling idea; and outlining. Students who have had considerable practice composing the types of paragraphs presented in this unit may consider the chapters in Unit I a review. More experienced writers might begin the text with Unit II. This unit focuses on the multiparagraph essay. This unit introduces the common patterns of exposition along with argumentation. Here the emphasis is on a strong thesis statement and appropriate and well-organized support.

Except for Chapters 1 and 5, which provide introductions to the paragraph and essay, respectively, each chapter in *Refining Composition Skills* focuses on a rhetorical mode of development and the conventions associated with that mode. Each chapter contains four basic components: introduction to the rhetorical pattern, composition skills (devices for achieving coherence), grammar review, and a reading passage. The rhetorical patterns are carefully and clearly explained and illustrated, often with student samples that can be used as models early in the chapter. The composition skills component introduces techniques for achieving coherence, such as the use of adverbial clauses and transitional expressions. Not only does the text provide exercises for mastery of the composition skills, but it also encourages the application of those skills in the writing of compositions, thus emphasizing the necessity for revision in the writing process. The grammar review component is designed to reinforce the rhetoric. Therefore, the grammatical structures re-

viewed are generally those that are particularly appropriate for the rhetorical pattern. Although the grammar review is not intended to be comprehensive, an attempt was made to include those common problem areas for ESL students. The grammar is presented in the context of the rhetorical mode—or pattern—and the exercises are often designed to generate further writing practice of that pattern. To conclude the writing and grammar components, additional writing assignments of varying difficulty are provided. Finally, the chapter contains a professionally authored reading passage (an essay or an extract from a longer piece of discourse). The reading serves four functions. First, it reinforces the rhetoric by providing an additional sample of the mode; second, it provides a more challenging sample of writing; third, it stimulates interest and discussion, from which can spring additional writing topics; and finally, it provides a valuable link between what is done in the writing class and what is done by published authors. In other words, the passages provide evidence that the principles of rhetoric apply in writing outside as well as inside the classroom.

In short, then, *Refining Composition Skills* is a developmental textbook, providing a step-by-step guide to building and refining composition skills.

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R. L. S.
M. R. H.

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UNIT **ONE** THE PARAGRAPH

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE PARAGRAPH

WHAT is a paragraph? You probably know that a paragraph is a group of sentences and that the first sentence of this group is indented; that is, it begins a little bit more to the right of the margin than the rest of the sentences in this group. But it is not enough to say that a paragraph is a group of sentences. How do these sentences relate to each other? How does a paragraph begin and where does it end? What constitutes a good paragraph? These are all questions that we hope to answer in this first unit.

The Topic of a Paragraph

To begin with, a paragraph may be defined as a group of sentences that develops one main idea; in other words, a paragraph develops a topic. A topic is basically the subject of the paragraph; it is what the paragraph is about. Read the following paragraph, which is *about* the habit of smoking cigarettes.

Smoking cigarettes can be an expensive habit. Considering that the average price per pack of cigarettes is sixty-five cents, people who smoke two packs of cigarettes a day spend \$1.30 per day on their habit. At the end of one year these smokers have spent at least \$474.50. But the price of cigarettes is not the only expense cigarette smokers incur. Since cigarette smoke has an offensive odor that permeates clothing, stuffed furniture, and carpet, smokers often find that these items must be cleaned more frequently than nonsmokers do. Although it is difficult to estimate the cost of this additional expense, one can see that this hidden expense does contribute to making smoking an expensive habit.

EXERCISE 1-1

Study the following paragraphs to find their topics. Write the topic in the space provided.

1. Another reason why I like the beach is its solitary atmosphere. At the beach I have no witness but the beach, and I can speak and think with pleasure. No one can interrupt me and the beach will always be there to listen to everything I want to say. In addition, it is a quiet place to go to meditate. Meditation requires solitude. Many times when I am confused

about something I go to the beach by myself and I find that this is the best place to resolve my conflicts, solve problems and to think.

—M. VERONICA PORTA

This paragraph is about _____.

2. Some seeming English-Spanish equivalents are deceptive. Their forms are similar but they have developed different shades of meaning in the two languages. These are sure to cause trouble for Spanish speakers learning English. The Spanish word *asistir* looks like the English word *assist* but has none of the latter's meaning of "help." Instead, *asistir* means "to attend" or "to be present." Thus, Spanish English speakers will say that they assisted a class when they mean that they were present at it. *Actual* in Spanish means "present," not English "actual"; *desgracia* means "misfortune" not "disgrace," *ignorar* means "not to know" instead of "to ignore."

—JEAN MALMSTROM, *Language in Society* (New York: Hayden Book Co., 1965), pp. 108-109.

This paragraph is about _____.

3. Chien and Chung also differ in hobbies. Chien likes to read true stories and books about real life. He likes to watch the news, late movies and midnight specials on weekends. He does not like to play any outdoor sports, even though he cannot miss a minute of sports news on television. Instead, he prefers indoor games such as ping pong, pin-ball machines and some other electronic games. In contrast to Chien, Chung likes to read science fiction stories and mystery stories. He enjoys making battle-ships, carriers, and freighters in cardboard. In addition, he likes to design ultramodern things. Whereas Chien likes to play indoor games, Chung likes to play football, baseball, and basketball. In conclusion, I guess that you could say Chien is more of an intellectual and realist, whereas Chung is more adventurous.

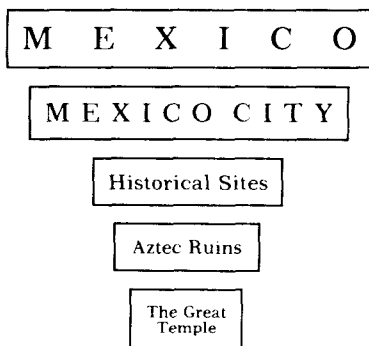
—CHUONG VU

This paragraph is about _____.

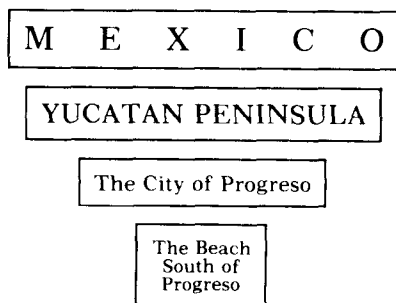
Although usually you are assigned topics to write about, often these topics are too general to be developed adequately in one paragraph. After all, for most practical purposes your paragraphs will range in length from about seven to fifteen sentences. Therefore, you will need to *restrict* your topic; that is, you will need to narrow down your topic to a more specific one. Let us say, for example, that you were asked to write about your favorite place and you chose a country such as Mexico. Although you could easily write several sentences naming all the things you like about Mexico, it would be more interesting for your reader if you narrowed down the topic of *Mexico* to a particular place in Mexico, such as the Great Temple in the Aztec ruins. Your topic should be narrowed

The Paragraph

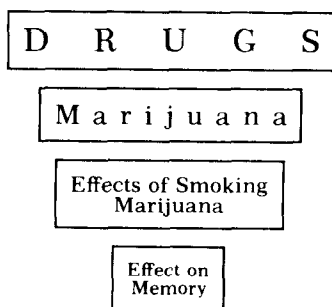
down as much as possible. Look at how the topic of *Mexico* was narrowed:



Of course there are many ways you could narrow down this topic. Here is another way:



Now let us say that you were asked to write about drugs. Obviously the topic *drugs* is far too broad for specific development in one paragraph; the topic needs to be narrowed down, restricted. Observe how the topic *drugs* can be restricted:



This paragraph, then, will discuss *one* of the effects of smoking marijuana. As any topic, this one could be narrowed down in several ways. Observe:

D	R	U	G	S
---	---	---	---	---

M a r i j u a n a

Reasons People Smoke It

Peer Pressure As a Reason

This paragraph will discuss one of the reasons people smoke marijuana: peer pressure.

EXERCISE 1-2

Fill in each line below by narrowing down the topics given. For the last one, you select your own topic and then narrow it down.

1. _____ Cigarettes _____
 _____ Effects of Smoking Cigarettes _____
 _____ Effects on Health _____
 _____ Effects on Lungs _____
2. _____ A Famous Man _____
 _____ The President of My Country _____
 _____ His Economic Accomplishments _____

3. _____ My Family _____
 _____ My Brothers and Sisters _____
 _____ Le and Thuy _____

4. _____ Television _____
 _____ Commercials _____

5. My Hometown

6. _____

The Topic Sentence

The topic of a paragraph is usually introduced in a sentence; this sentence is called the *topic sentence*. The topic sentence can do more than introduce the subject of the paragraph, however. A good topic sentence states an idea or an attitude about the topic as well. This idea or attitude about the topic is called the *controlling idea*; it controls what the sentences in the paragraph will discuss. All sentences in the paragraph should relate to and develop the controlling idea. To illustrate, let us look at the following topic sentence to identify the topic and the controlling idea about that topic:

Smoking cigarettes can be an expensive habit.

In this sentence the topic is the habit of smoking cigarettes; the controlling idea is that smoking can be *expensive*. A paragraph that develops this topic sentence should demonstrate that smoking cigarettes can indeed be an expensive habit. Go back over the paragraph on page 3 and see if it develops the idea of *expensive*.

Of course there are many other controlling ideas one could have about the topic of smoking cigarettes. Indeed, one of the most popular is that it is hazardous to health. See how this idea is developed in the following paragraph:

Smoking cigarettes is hazardous to your health. Several years ago, a United States government study was released which linked the intake of tar and nicotine, found in cigarettes, with the development of cancer in laboratory animals. The evidence was so overwhelming that the United States government required cigarette manufacturers to put a warning on the outside of each package of cigarettes, which says, "Warning: The Surgeon General has determined that cigarette smoking is hazardous to your health." Aside from the most serious and dreaded disease, cancer, cigarette smoking also can aggravate or promote other health problems. For example, smoking can increase the discomfort for people with asthma and emphysema. It can give one a "smoker's cough" and contribute to bronchitis.

Finally, recent studies have shown that cigarette smokers are more susceptible to common colds and flu. Whether you get an insignificant cold or the major killer, cancer, smoking cigarettes is hazardous. Is it worth it?

EXERCISE 1-3

Study the following topic sentences. Circle the controlling idea in each one. Underline the topic. *Note:* The controlling idea and the topic may be expressed in more than one word. The first one is done for you.

1. Another way to reduce the rate of inflation is to (balance the federal budget).
2. In addition to being unhealthy, smoking can be offensive.
3. Working outside the home also has psychological benefits for women.
4. We spent the second day of our vacation at the Museum of Science and Industry and found its collection of antique industrial appliances to be fascinating.
5. Another reason why I like the beach is its solitary atmosphere.
6. Some seeming English-Spanish equivalents are deceptive.
7. Chien and Chung also differ in hobbies.
8. Although pretty, Maria is a very shy girl.
9. The Industrial Machine Works Corporation has benefited our city's economy.
10. The architecture at this university is grotesque.

Improving the Topic Sentence

As indicated, a topic sentence introduces the topic and the controlling idea about that topic. However, it is not enough merely to have a topic and a controlling idea. The controlling idea should be clear and focused on a particular aspect; for example, consider the following topic sentence:

Drinking coffee is bad.

This sentence has a topic—drinking coffee—and a controlling idea—bad—but it is rather vague. In what way is coffee bad? For whom or what is it bad? Is drinking only a little coffee bad, or is drinking a lot of coffee bad? As you can see, this topic sentence leaves a lot of questions that probably cannot be answered effectively in one paragraph. This topic sentence needs more focus, and that focus can come from the controlling idea:

Drinking over four cups of coffee a day can be harmful to pregnant women.

In this version the topic itself is narrowed down some more, and the controlling idea is more precise.

The Paragraph