

Frank Chaplen

PARAGRAPH WRITING

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Paragraph Writing

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Preface

Students at an upper intermediate to advanced level of English will have very little difficulty understanding this book and working through the exercises provided they are willing to use a dictionary occasionally.

The book's purpose is to teach students of English as a foreign language what a paragraph is and how to write one in clear, correct English. It is intended to be an introduction to the practical, everyday English that is needed, for example, when writing examinations, reports of experiments, and letters.

The book is based on the principle that in practical, everyday writing, each paragraph should explain only one main idea. This main idea, which is called the controlling idea, controls or limits the information that can be included in the paragraph.

The advantage of this method of paragraph organization is that the reader can more easily follow and understand a writer's ideas when they are clearly separated into neat units or parcels. When a writer's ideas are heaped together in one untidy mass, the reader can neither follow nor understand them easily, and often refuses to try.

This book is a modified version of the one written for use in the intensive English course offered by the English Language Preparatory Division of the Middle East Technical University, Ankara. I would like to record my indebtedness to the staff of the E.L.P.D. during the years 1964-1967 for their advice and encouragement, and in particular to Miss Charlotte Hutchison, Paul Aiken, and Alan Harris. I would also like to record my thanks to the Director, Mrs Sabahat Tura, for her continual kindness and support.

FRANK CHAPLEN

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1 Introduction

Good writing should be the goal of every student. Unless a reader can easily understand what a writer has written, he cannot judge the value of either the writer's ideas or his work. Thus, the student who can write well has a great advantage over the student who cannot.

2 The good paragraph

A paragraph is a unit of information unified by a controlling idea. The paragraph is a good one only if the reader completely understands the unit of information it contains and if its controlling idea is completely developed.

3 The controlling idea

The controlling idea is the central idea that is developed in a paragraph. Therefore, the controlling idea is the summary of all the information contained in its paragraph. Consequently, no information that cannot be summarized by the controlling idea can be included in a paragraph. Thus, the controlling idea is a restricting idea because it limits the information that can be included in its paragraph.

The importance of completely developing the controlling idea

The controlling idea must be completely developed and explained in its paragraph. Having read a paragraph, the reader should not

have to ask questions that should have been answered in that paragraph. For example, read the paragraph that follows:

There are three reasons why John is not going to university. In the first place, his father is dead and if John went to university, his mother would be left all alone. She has a few friends, but they do not live very near, and she would probably have to spend most evenings alone. Consequently, although John wants to go to university very much, he is going to get a job near home instead.

The controlling idea of the above example paragraph is that there are three reasons why John is not going to university. Consequently, the reader expects to read about those three reasons in the remainder of the paragraph. However, only one reason is given: 'if John went to university, his mother would be left all alone'. The reader is left asking what the other two reasons were. Therefore, the paragraph is a bad one because the controlling idea is not completely developed.

If the controlling idea of a paragraph states that there are three reasons why John is not going to university, three reasons must be given. For example:

There are three reasons why John is not going to university. In the first place, his family is quite poor and, since he has four young brothers and sisters still at school, he feels that he should help his family financially as soon as possible. Secondly, if he went to university, his mother would be left alone to look after the young children. Finally, he has been offered a good job with excellent chances of promotion. Consequently, although he wants to go to university very much, John is going to take the job instead.

Now study the following example paragraph:

I admire my friend Richard because he is so talented, intelligent, and kind. He is also very intelligent and can understand complex problems very quickly. Above all, he is very kind to others. I admire my friend for all these reasons.

The example paragraph above has a clear controlling idea: the three reasons why the writer admires his friend. In addition, the reader has no difficulty in understanding the paragraph. Thus, it has two of the characteristics of a good paragraph; but it has only

two of them. The controlling idea is not completely or even partially developed. After four sentences, the writer had provided little more than the information that was given in the first sentence.

To develop the above example paragraph completely, the writer must give examples of his friend's talents, intelligence, and kindness. The example paragraph that follows does this:

I admire my friend Alec because he is so talented, intelligent, and kind. Not only can he play most sports well, he is also a good musician and actor. He has always been the best student in his class, and in the recent pre-university exams, he was placed third in the entire country. Although he is so intelligent and gifted, he is not standoffish or boastful. Indeed, Alec is one of the kindest people I know. If anyone has a problem, they know they can go to him for help. If anyone is ill, he is always the first to visit them; and if anyone is sad, he is always very quick to cheer them up. If a person has such wonderful qualities, I think you will agree that it is impossible not to admire him.

The meaning of the word 'development' in our definition of a good paragraph should now be clear. Each sentence in a paragraph must add a piece of information until the controlling idea is fully explained. A good paragraph, like a good story, must have a beginning, a middle, and an end.

EXERCISE I

Study the following paragraphs carefully. Decide whether each one has a definite controlling idea. If a paragraph has a clear controlling idea, decide if it is completely developed.

1. I had a chance to talk with Mary Smith earlier this week. She told me that she is much happier than she was last week because her mother, who was ill then, is now well again. She said that she had passed all her exams, and that she has been offered a job at the university library while she studies for her Ph.D. Mary also told me that next month she is going to France and then to Germany for three or four weeks on vacation.

2. 'Son,' he said, 'there are several very good reasons why you can't go and play in the garden now. First, it's time you went to bed. You

know it's six-thirty and we always start getting you ready for bed at this time. Look, your mother's over there waiting for you. You hurry over now and maybe she'll tell you a story after she has washed you and you're tucked up in bed. You can go and play in the garden tomorrow.'

3. Mary had a little lamb. Its fleece was white as snow. Everywhere that Mary went, the lamb was sure to go.

(An English nursery rhyme)

4. In Britain, a question often asked is whether the voting age should be lowered from twenty-one to eighteen. Many people think that eighteen-year-olds should be allowed to vote. However, most people think that teen-agers are ignorant about politics and do not think that eighteen-year-olds should be allowed to vote. They feel that since few teen-agers know enough about politics to make sensible decisions when voting, they should not have the vote.

5. In Britain, a question often asked is whether the voting age should be lowered from twenty-one to eighteen. Some people argue that if a man is old enough to die for his country in time of war, he is old enough to vote. Others argue that since, in criminal law, a person ceases to be a juvenile at the age of sixteen, he should cease to be a juvenile in civil law at that age, too. For example, he should be able to marry without his parents' consent, enter contracts, and vote. However, most people think that few teen-agers know enough about politics or people to be able to make sensible decisions when voting. They also argue that young people who have only recently left school have not had the necessary experience to decide the truth of what they hear and read during election campaigns. Therefore, it seems that until young people can show that they are critical of what they hear and read, and can make sensible decisions if they are allowed to vote, they will have to wait until they are twenty-one to vote.

6. I love swimming in the sea near my home. I live five miles from Chester. Chester is about twenty miles from Liverpool. Liverpool is a big industrial city. Industrial cities are important to the economy of a country.

7. There will be a trip to London next weekend to watch Manchester United play Arsenal. The cost of the trip will be £3.0.0., which includes the bus fare, the cost of dinner in the evening, and the ticket for the football match. The bus will leave from Piccadilly bus station

on Saturday at 7:00 a.m., and arrive in London at about 12:30 p.m. It will leave from outside the football ground at 7:00 the same evening, and arrive in Manchester at about midnight.

8. The human eye is one of Nature's most marvellously complicated mechanisms. Whenever I think about the human eye, I am amazed at its complexity. Although it looks very simple from the outside, the intricacy of the interior is amazing. It is made up of so many parts and yet is so small that it is difficult to think of it without being astonished. It is really miraculous in its complexity.

Excluding material that does not develop the controlling idea

The controlling idea restricts or limits the information that can be included in a paragraph. For example, take the controlling idea, 'I heard some good news from Mary Smith last week.' The writer should not write about Mary Smith, but only the good news he has had from her. He should not write about *any* good news, but only about the good news he has heard from Mary Smith. Finally, he should not write about *any* good news he has had from Mary Smith, but only about the specific good news he heard from her last week. Thus, the paragraph must contain nothing but the good news the writer heard from Mary Smith last week.

Since the controlling idea restricts the information that can be included in a paragraph, it follows that a writer must exclude information that does not develop the controlling idea, and include only the information that does develop it. For example, take the controlling idea 'why Mrs Smith is always so busy between 5:45 and 7:45 in the evening'. The information included in the paragraph must explain *only* why 5:45 to 7:45 in the evening is a very busy time for Mrs Smith. Information about other times in Mrs Smith's day is irrelevant, and should be excluded from this particular paragraph.

In the paragraph that follows, the writer has included information that is irrelevant. Study it and, before you continue reading, decide which sentences do not develop the controlling idea.

It is easy to understand why Mrs Smith is always so busy between

5:45 and 7:45 in the evening. Her two young boys go to school at 7:45 in the morning, and Mr Smith goes to work at 8:00. The boys eat lunch at school and Mr Smith takes sandwiches to work for his lunch. Therefore, Mrs Smith is not usually very busy at lunchtime. Mrs Smith's youngest child is only eleven months old, so she spends most of the afternoon sleeping. At about 5:45 Mrs Smith has to start cooking because Mr Smith gets home at 6:30 and wants his dinner soon after he arrives. At the same time she has to keep an eye on her two sons to see that they do their homework. At 6:15 it is time for the baby to be fed, bathed, and then put to bed. The two boys have to start getting ready for bed at about 7:15, and if Mrs Smith does not watch them carefully, they do not wash very well. Finally, she has to wash up the dirty dishes and tidy the living room and the kitchen. Only very rarely does she finish this before 7:45.

The controlling idea of the above example paragraph is why Mrs Smith is always so busy between 5:45 and 7:45 in the evening. Consequently, the information in the paragraph should be limited to explaining why she is busy at that time. Therefore, the second, third, fourth, and fifth sentences should not be included in this paragraph because they do not develop the controlling idea.

EXERCISE 2

Study the following paragraphs. Decide if each one has a definite controlling idea. If a paragraph has a clear controlling idea, decide if it is completely developed. Finally, decide if there is any irrelevant information in each paragraph.

1. It is easy to understand why Mrs Smith is always so busy between 5:45 and 7:45 in the evening. At about 5:45 she has to start cooking because Mr Smith gets home from work at 6:30 and wants his dinner soon after he arrives. At the same time she has to keep an eye on her two sons to see that they do their homework. At 6:15 it is time for the baby to be fed, bathed, and then put to bed. The two boys have to start getting ready for bed at about 7:15, and if Mrs Smith does not watch them carefully, they do not wash very well. Finally, she has to wash up the dirty dishes and tidy the living room and the kitchen. Only very rarely does she finish this before 7:45.

2. There are other curious little exchanges of materials between sea and

land. While the process of evaporation, which raises water vapor into the air, leaves most of the salts behind, a surprising amount of salt does intrude itself into the atmosphere and rides long distances on the wind. The so-called 'cyclic salt' is picked up by the winds from the spray of a rough, cresting sea or breaking surf and is blown inland, then brought down in rain and returned by rivers to the ocean. These tiny, invisible particles of sea salt drifting in the atmosphere are, in fact, one of the many forms of atmospheric nuclei around which raindrops form. Areas nearest the sea, in general, receive most salt. Published figures have listed 24 to 36 pounds per acre per year for England and more than 100 pounds for British Guiana. But the most astounding example of long-distance, large scale transport of cyclic salts is furnished by Sambhar Salt Lake in northern India. It receives 3000 tons of salt a year, carried to it on the hot dry monsoons of summer from the sea, 400 miles away.

Rachel Carson, '*The Sea Around Us*'.

This paragraph is taken from the chapter '*Wealth from the Salt Seas*'.

3. The two brothers were quite different. Bob was tall, fair, and slim; John was short, dark, and fat. Bob was like his mother, and John was like his father. Bob was never happier than when he had something practical to do; John, on the other hand, was clumsy when using his hands. Their sister, Mary, was also clumsy with her hands. Bob rarely spoke to other people unless he was spoken to first, but John was always the centre of a group, talking and chattering as if his life depended on it. I am sure you have friends like this. In fact, they were so different that it was hard to believe they were brothers.

4. Last winter was long, cold, and bitter. The stormy weather in November was followed by sleet and snow. For the next five months, the temperature during the day rarely rose above zero, and every night it fell to at least fifteen below. Then, quite suddenly at the end of March, the weather became milder. By mid-April it seemed that summer had begun without waiting for spring. May was as hot as July usually is, and for the next five months the sun shone so long and so hot that the previous harsh months of winter became a very faint memory. However, during that winter birds dropped dead from the sky, and old people died even while sitting in front of the fire. The sun was seen only occasionally, and even then it was a pale, yellow thing that gave no heat. Indeed, as the long, slow months of winter passed, people began to think it would never end.

5. The launching of the first Russian sputnik in 1957 was an event of tremendous importance in the history of foreign language teaching in America and Britain. It became immediately clear that it was no longer possible for the scientist and the technologist to notice only what is published in English: he must be aware of specialist literature in other European languages, but above all in Russian. In the United States of America the reaction was immediate and dramatic: the National Defence Education Act was passed authorizing the expenditure of huge sums of money on the improvement of methods of language teaching and the provision of facilities for the teaching of languages. British reactions—the creation of the Association of Russian teachers in 1958, the Annan report, 1962—have been slower and on a smaller scale, but the intention is the same. One wonders if one of the purposes of the sputnik programme was to popularise the reports of Russian scientists.

Adapted from P. D. Stevens, *Papers in Language and Language Teaching*, page 25 (O.U.P. 1965).

6. It is hard to avoid the impression, sometimes, that sea water is a mysterious, magical substance. You can't make it up in the laboratory by putting all the proper chemicals together; something important is always missing; probably some of the rare trace elements, probably also some of the things contributed by the microscopic and submicroscopic forms of life. Every child brought up by the seashore must have been disappointed by his efforts to take some of the sea home in a bucket; he can do this with a bit of a pond or a lake, but with the sea it is much more difficult. The fish and crabs and seaweed live hardly any time, and the water itself seems to decay. The sea is a unit that does not easily allow small bits of it to be carried away by boys with buckets.

Reproduced by permission of Time-Life books from Marston Bates, *'The Forest and The Sea'* (Time Inc. 1964).

4 The topic sentence

If the controlling idea is contained in one sentence, that sentence is called the topic sentence. It is called the topic sentence because it

contains the idea or topic that is developed and explained in the rest of the paragraph. This sentence may be found in any position in a paragraph: at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end.

Whenever possible, the topic sentence should be placed at the beginning of a paragraph. In that position, it is a very helpful guide to both the writer and the reader. The writer can more easily see what information to include in the paragraph, and what information to exclude. The reader knows immediately what the paragraph is going to be about and is, therefore, more prepared to understand it than if the topic sentence is placed at the end of the paragraph.

EXERCISE 3

Study each of the following paragraphs. Underline the topic sentence in each one. Decide if those paragraphs with topic sentences at the beginning are easier to understand when read only once than those with topic sentences in the middle or at the end.

1. Undoubtedly, the Russels' kitchen is one of the pleasantest and best planned that I have ever seen. It is large, painted white, and is very light and airy. There are bright curtains at the windows. The lights are situated over the stove and the sink as well as in the centre of the ceiling. The kitchen has a lot of cupboard space and more than enough electrical outlets. The working surfaces are all at just the right height, and the refrigerator and stove are both in extremely convenient positions. Finally, constant hot water is provided by a very dependable gas heater.

2. The Russels' kitchen is large, painted white, and is very light and airy. There are bright curtains at the windows. The lights are situated over the stove and the sink as well as in the centre of the ceiling. The kitchen has a lot of cupboard space and more than enough electrical outlets. The working surfaces are all at just the right height, and the refrigerator and stove are both in extremely convenient positions. Finally, constant hot water is provided by a very dependable gas heater. Undoubtedly, their kitchen is one of the pleasantest and best planned that I have ever seen.

3. No discussion of language-teaching problems in Africa can avoid the

crucial question of the part played in teaching a language by teaching all subjects *in* that language. In Ghana or Nigeria, for example, pupils in school are exposed to a much greater quantity of English in other subjects than they are in their English lessons alone. If they have different teachers for other subjects from those who teach them English, then it is likely that the general standard of English of these teachers will have more influence on the pupils than the standard of their English specialist teachers. The problem thus becomes one of raising the general standard of English in the teaching profession, rather than one of improving the English of English specialist teachers alone.

4. In Ghana or Nigeria, pupils in school are exposed to a much greater quantity of English in other subjects than they are in their English lessons alone. If they have different teachers for other subjects from those who teach them English, then it is likely that the general standard of English of these teachers will have more influence on the pupils than the standard of their English specialist teachers. It has been suggested that if the classes called English were removed from the timetables of schools in Nigeria, when the children now starting at school eventually come to leave, no difference in their ability in English, compared with the present standard, would be detected. Although I do not accept this as true, I insist that no discussion of language-teaching problems in Africa can avoid this crucial question of the part played in teaching *a* language by teaching all subjects *in* that language.

Paragraphs 3 and 4 adapted from P. D. Stevens, *Papers in Language and Language Teaching*, pages 108–9 (O.U.P. 1965).

5. Do you have problems heating your house? Do you spend the whole winter shivering? We have the answer to your problem. Let us supply you with one of our tame dragons; a guaranteed housetrained animal that eats very little and supplies enough heat all winter for a three-bedroomed house. In autumn, it can also be very useful clearing the garden of unwanted brushwood. No picnic or outdoor barbecue is complete without one. Don't wait; buy one today!

6. In a student cafeteria, the students serve themselves. When they have finished, they take their dirty dishes back to a special table. In this way the cost of employing cafeteria staff is reduced because there is no need for waiters. The same number of students eat in the cafeteria each day. As a result, the manager can calculate the exact amount of food to buy, and very little is wasted. Finally, the cafeteria makes no profit, which reduces the cost of meals by at least ten per cent. On account of

these three factors, the Student Union Cafeteria should be able to provide meals at a lower cost than restaurants in town.

7. By the beginning of the fourteenth century, the bigger Italian towns had established a hegemony over their neighbouring areas. They had become republics and their affairs were managed by committees of citizens. The majority of the committee members were rich men who maintained their wealth by trade and commerce, and were traditionally hostile to the gentry and nobles in the town whom they had largely evicted from power. However, in the rest of Europe, the monarchy and the nobility were supreme; the merchants and bankers were, politically, largely powerless. Thus, there was a sharp contrast between the city republics of Italy which, by the end of the thirteenth century, had risen to be of exceptional economic and political importance, and the predominantly monarchic government and powerful nobility of the rest of Europe.

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Paragraphs 7 and 8 adapted from Denys Hay, *The Renaissance*, page 21 (B.B.C. 1963).

9. During the past, dramatic changes have taken place inside the Earth. Indeed, it is probable that if these changes had not taken place, life would not have originated, and we would not be here today. Furthermore, changes are still going on inside the Earth. These show themselves in the occurrence of earthquakes, the activity of volcanoes, and in the movements of mountain ranges. We may conclude, therefore, that the planet we live on is not just a ball of inactive material speeding through space.

10. The planet we live on is not just a ball of inactive material speeding through space. During the past, dramatic changes have taken place inside the Earth. Indeed, it is probable that if these changes had not taken place, life would not have originated, and we would not be here today. Furthermore, changes are still going on inside the Earth. These show themselves in the occurrence of earthquakes, the activity of volcanoes, and in the movements of mountain ranges.

The importance of composing a clear topic sentence

One of the first steps in writing is to choose what information to include in a paragraph and what information to exclude from it. This is very difficult unless the writer composes a topic sentence containing a controlling idea that really does limit his subject. He must compose a topic sentence that provides a clear guide both to himself and to the reader.

Take the topic sentences 'I saw Mary Smith last week', and 'Dayton is a city in the state of Ohio'. Neither of these topic sentences contains controlling ideas that announce exactly what the paragraph is to be about. The writer could wander from idea to idea and never take the reader to a definite conclusion. Thus, using the first topic sentence, the writer could describe what Mary Smith was wearing, how she looked, what she said, where they met, whom she was with, even what the weather was like. Using the second topic sentence, he could talk about Dayton from a cultural point of view, about its geography, or its history, its industry or its weather. There is no clear central idea in either of these topic sentences that could guide either the writer or the reader.

By contrast, take the topic sentences, 'I heard some good news from Mary Smith last week', and 'Sheffield is an industrial city'. Both of these topic sentences contain a controlling idea that announces the true topic of the paragraph. The first example topic sentence would force the writer to concentrate *only* on the good news he had had from Mary Smith the previous week. Unless it helps to explain this good news, information about