

FOURTH
EDITION

STRUCTURING PARAGRAPH

A GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE WRITING

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fourth edition

STRUCTURING PARAGRAPHS

A Guide to Effective Writing

A. Franklin Parks

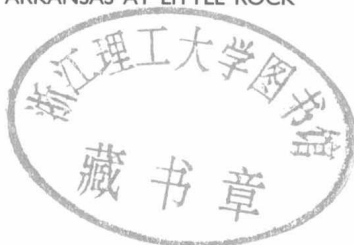
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PREFACE

Like its previous editions, this fourth edition of *Structuring Paragraphs: A Guide to Effective Writing* grows out of the basic premise that as students learn and understand the form of the paragraph they will also learn most of the principles of good writing. As we stated in the preface of the first edition, “Our experience has been that the student who can write a paragraph that is purposeful, coherently developed, and free of grammatical and usage errors is more than ready to tackle the essay when the time comes.” *Structuring Paragraphs* both presents the elements of effective paragraph writing and transfers those principles to the writing of the short essay.

Structuring Paragraphs: A Guide to Effective Writing guides students through the process of writing, introducing them sequentially and logically to the principles of good prose, leading them through the writing and revising of paragraphs and short essays. At each stage in the writing process, we try to give the student a great deal of practical, down-to-earth advice on how to write clearly and effectively. The presentation of each topic includes

1. a clear explanation of the concept;
2. a variety of good, representative models and examples that are exclusively student-written;
3. a concise but thorough summary; and
4. a carefully sequenced series of exercises and writing activities, interspersed throughout, that promote mastery of basic skills and the transition to independent writing.

In addition to presenting the basics of paragraph unity and development, *Structuring Paragraphs* also provides lessons in sentence-combining (in Chapter 6) and devotes full attention to the revision stage of the writing process (Chapter 9). It is this practical, clear approach to the writing process that many of the instructors and students who worked with the previous editions of *Structuring Paragraphs* found most useful about the book. It also emphasizes helping students to understand concepts rather than simply asking them to mimic the models. Instructors have told us that their students both learned and enjoyed learning from *Structuring Paragraphs*.

NEW TO THIS EDITION

The improvements to the fourth edition of *Structuring Paragraphs* are substantial and were guided by our own experiences, those of our colleagues, and the suggestions made by users of the third edition.

- First, we have added many new models on topics that are fresh and likely to be of interest to students. We have also revised a number of the exercises to make them more workable for student writers.
- Second, we have added a new chapter on answering discussion questions on quizzes and examinations (Chapter 8), which provides the student with a useful application of the writing skills taught in the text.
- Thirdly, we have introduced collaborative and portfolio activities to the chapters, enriching the writing experiences for students and increasing the number of exercise options for their instructors.
- Finally, we have expanded “A Concise Guide to Editing Sentences,” which provides students with quick answers to questions regarding grammar, punctuation, and usage.

We believe that these additions strengthen the text significantly for a wide variety of paragraph-to-essay writing courses.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In preparing this fourth edition of *Structuring Paragraphs*, we are again in debt to those who have assisted us. We wish, in particular, to extend our gratitude to our editor, Sam Potts; to Karen Allanson, for encouraging this edition; and to Edward Hutchinson for his thoughtful revision work. In addition, we thank Constance Chapman, Georgia State University; Martha French, Fairmont State College; David K. Himber, St. Petersburg Junior College; Rosemary Hunkeler, University of Wisconsin—Parkside; J. C. B. Kinch,

Edinboro University of Pennsylvania; Kate Mele, Roger Williams University; Linda C. Pelzer, Wesley College; and Judith Stanford, Rivier College, for their helpful comments on the third edition of *Structuring Paragraphs* and their guidance in the creation of the fourth edition.

Finally, we thank our students, whose work in the classroom has shaped and inspired this book since its first edition.

CONTENTS

Preface *xi*

I. THE GENERAL-TO-SPECIFIC PARAGRAPH **I**

Basic Structure and Purpose	2
The Importance of Specifics	2
Levels of Generality	3
Summary	4
Exercises	5

2. HOW TO BEGIN WRITING PARAGRAPHS **9**

Selecting a Suitable Topic	9
<i>Topic Ideas</i>	11
<i>Considering Audience</i>	12
Exercises	13
The Topic Sentence and the Controlling Idea	13
Exercises	14
Deciding on a Controlling Idea	15
The Topic Sentence as Contract	17
Summary	17
Exercises	18

3. PARAGRAPH UNITY AND STRUCTURE 21

What Is Paragraph Unity?	21
Summary	23
Exercises	24
Planning and Constructing a Unified Paragraph	26
<i>Preliminary Steps</i>	26
<i>Primary Supports</i>	27
Summary	30
Exercises	30
<i>Secondary Supports</i>	33
Summary	37
Exercises	38
How Much Support Is Enough?	41
<i>How Many Primary Supports?</i>	42
<i>How Many Secondary Supports?</i>	43
Summary	46
Exercises	46

4. METHODS OF DEVELOPMENT

Example, Cause and Effect, and Process Analysis 49

Example	50
<i>Choosing Appropriate Examples</i>	51
<i>Including Specifics</i>	52
<i>Providing Enough Examples</i>	53
Summary	54
Exercises	55
Cause and Effect	58
<i>Citing Important and Convincing Causes and Effects</i>	58
<i>Mistaking Conditions or Circumstances for Active Causes or Effects</i>	60
Summary	61
Exercises	61
Process Analysis	64
Summary	66
Exercises	66

5. FURTHER METHODS OF DEVELOPMENT

Definition, Comparison and Contrast, and Classification 71

Definition	71
<i>Formal Definition</i>	72
<i>Informal Definition</i>	74
Summary	75
Exercises	76

Comparison and Contrast	79
<i>Formal Comparison and Contrast</i>	79
<i>Two Ways to Organize and Present Your Material</i>	82
<i>Informal Comparison and Contrast</i>	84
Summary	85
Exercises	85
Classification	88
<i>Formal Classification</i>	88
<i>Informal Classification</i>	91
<i>A Word of Caution: Avoiding Oversimplification</i>	92
Summary	92
Exercises	92
Using Methods of Development	96
<i>Deciding on a Controlling Idea</i>	96
<i>Choosing the Best Method for Developing a Paragraph</i>	97
Summary	97
Exercises	98

6. ACHIEVING COHERENCE 103

Order	106
<i>Time Order</i>	106
Summary	108
Exercises	108
<i>Space Order</i>	109
Summary	111
Exercises	111
<i>Order of Importance</i>	112
Summary	114
Exercises	114
Transitional Devices	116
<i>Transitional Words and Phrases</i>	116
Summary	118
Exercises	119
<i>Pronouns</i>	122
Summary	124
Exercises	125
<i>Repetition of Key Words and Phrases</i>	126
Summary	126
Exercises	127
Combining Sentences	128
Summary	131
Exercises	132
Grammatical Consistency	134
<i>Consistent Verb Tense</i>	134

Summary	136
Exercises	136
<i>Consistent Pronoun Person</i> 137	
Summary	140
Exercises	140

7. FROM PARAGRAPH TO ESSAY 143

The 1-3-1 Essay	143
Summary	147
Exercise	147
Writing the Essay	149
<i>Paragraph into Essay</i> 149	
Summary	160
Exercises	160
<i>Writing an Essay from Scratch</i> 164	
Summary	170
Exercises	171

8. ANSWERING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ON QUIZZES AND EXAMINATIONS 175

How to Recognize a Discussion Question	175
Exercise	176
Responding to a Discussion Question	176
<i>Understanding the Question</i> 177	
Summary	180
Exercise	181
<i>Collecting Facts</i> 181	
Summary	182
Exercises	182
<i>Choosing between a One-Paragraph and a Multi-Paragraph Response</i> 183	
Summary	184
<i>Organizing and Writing the Essay</i> 184	
Summary	188
Exercises	189

9. REVISING PARAGRAPHS AND ESSAYS 191

Step One: Major Considerations	192
<i>A Checklist for Major Revisions</i> 192	
<i>Sample Revision</i> 193	
Step Two: Style and Usage	195
<i>A Style and Usage Checklist</i> 195	

<i>Sample Revision</i>	196
Summary	198
Exercises	198
Revising a Graded Paper	201
Summary	203
Exercises	204

A CONCISE GUIDE TO EDITING SENTENCES 205

Grammar	206
Punctuation	223
Mechanics	230
Spelling	239
Gender-Biased Language	249

Index 251

THE GENERAL- TO-SPECIFIC PARAGRAPH

Much of the writing you will do, in college and throughout your career, is *expository*, and the quality of your work will depend on how well you have mastered the skills and concepts that are basic to good expository prose. Expository prose is writing that *explains*: your purpose may be to describe a process, define a term, or discuss an idea or a point of view. In college, you will frequently be asked to write essays, research papers, or reports. On the job, you may be required to prepare letters, briefs, memorandums, or other written material. The writing skills you will need to accomplish such assignments successfully include the ability to select a topic and limit it, to organize and unify your material, to develop your topic adequately, and to connect your ideas logically and smoothly.

One good way to acquire these basic writing skills is to start on the level of the paragraph, where the demands of length do not overshadow the need to improve the *quality* of your writing. Concentrating on the paragraph will provide valuable practice on a relatively small scale. In this book, therefore, we will examine the expository paragraph. In particular, we will study the *general-to-specific* expository paragraph—the paragraph that opens with a general statement and goes on to support that statement with appropriate examples and details. Learning to write an effective paragraph of this kind means learning the skills and concepts that are essential to good writing in general. Moreover, because this type of paragraph is, in a sense, an essay in miniature, mastering its form should help you to master longer forms of writing as well. There is no better way to learn the skills of effective writing

than practice, and the form of the general-to-specific expository paragraph provides a controlled and effective structure for gaining that practice.

BASIC STRUCTURE AND PURPOSE

The general-to-specific expository paragraph, like most paragraphs, is a group of sentences that work together to present a single, unified topic or idea. The first line is indented to signal the reader that a new grouping of sentences is beginning.

The length of this kind of paragraph usually ranges from about one hundred to three hundred words. This is not to say that shorter or longer paragraphs are unacceptable. Essays may even have one-sentence paragraphs, used for emphasis; and thousand-word paragraphs can provide valuable exposition in all types of writing. But we are not concerned here with very short or very long paragraphs. Rather, it is our intention to examine and construct paragraphs that are useful as practice because they are long enough to require careful development but not so long as to be unmanageable. For this purpose, the expository paragraph of about one hundred to three hundred words is the best kind to undertake.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SPECIFICS

The general-to-specific expository paragraph, as we have said, moves from a general opening statement that stands in need of support to the specifics—examples and factual details—that support the general statement. The purpose of writing an expository paragraph is usually to state a general proposition that you want your reader to accept as true. A general statement requires support, or development, if readers are to find it convincing. The details the writer furnishes enable readers to understand and evaluate the point the writer is making. For example, the following sentence is a general statement:

Despite its brashness and humor, the long-running television sitcom *Roseanne* presents realistically many of the pressures confronting the American family.

Unless you have particular confidence in the writer's judgment, you would need to see some evidence in support of this statement. The writer should provide you with more specific information if he or she wants to convince you that the statement is valid. In the following paragraph, written by a student, a series of specific statements supports and explains the writer's point of view:

(1) Despite its brashness and humor, the long-running television sitcom *Roseanne* presents realistically many of the pressures confronting the American family. (2) Constantly faced with a pile of bills they cannot pay, Dan and Rose-

anne Connor embody the unrelenting economic struggle of the American family breadwinners. (3) Dan pursues his dream of owning a small business but fails in his attempt to jump start a motorcycle repair shop and ultimately must settle for a job as manager of a city maintenance facility. (4) Meanwhile, to buffer the family's economic woes, Roseanne takes what jobs she can get, including telephone soliciting, waiting tables at a lunch counter, and cleaning up at a beauty parlor. (5) As the economic pressures on the family mount, so do the emotional. (6) Roseanne's having to leave the home and her children in order to supplement the family income yields for her feelings of guilt and anger and results in additional friction between her and Dan. (7) The Connors's home is further immersed in turmoil by the elopement of daughter Becky with her unacceptable boyfriend Mark. (8) If economic and emotional pressures were not enough, the family has to wage the class struggle on a daily basis as well. (9) The issue of their low social status surfaces most clearly with the appearance of a condescending next door neighbor from Chicago who looks down her nose at the community and Roseanne. (10) Ultimately, however, Roseanne and the Connor family succeed in humorously sloughing off the pretension of the neighbor and others they encounter by simply outlasting them and finding strength in their family bonds.

This paragraph provides the reader with several reasons for seriously considering its opening statement. By developing that general statement, the writer has taken steps to satisfy the curiosity and skepticism it may have aroused in the reader.

LEVELS OF GENERALITY

An effective general-to-specific expository paragraph usually has at least three levels of generality. The first and most general level is the opening statement. The second level consists of more specific statements that directly support the opening statement. These, in turn, may be supported by statements that are even more specific—the third level of generality—and so on.

The following outline demonstrates how the example paragraph uses the general-to-specific structure:

General Statement: Despite its brashness and humor, the long-running television sitcom *Roseanne* presents realistically many of the pressures confronting the American family.

Specific 1: Constantly faced with a pile of bills they cannot pay, Dan and Roseanne Connor embody the unrelenting economic struggle of the American family breadwinners.

Specific 1a: Dan pursues his dream of owning a small business but fails in his attempt to jump start a motorcycle repair shop and ultimately must settle for a job as manager of a city maintenance facility.

Specific 1b: Meanwhile, to buffer the family's economic woes, Roseanne takes what jobs she can get, including telephone soliciting, waiting tables at a lunch counter, and cleaning up at a beauty parlor.

Specific 2: As the economic pressures on the family mount, so do the emotional.

Specific 2a: Roseanne's having to leave the home and her children in order to supplement the family income yields for her feelings of guilt and anger and results in additional friction between her and Dan.

Specific 2b: The Connors's home is further immersed in turmoil by the elopement of daughter Becky with her unacceptable boyfriend Mark.

Specific 3: If economic and emotional pressures were not enough, the family has to wage the class struggle on a daily basis as well.

Specific 3a: The issue of their low social status surfaces most clearly with the appearance of a condescending next door neighbor from Chicago who looks down her nose at the community and Roseanne.

Specific 3b: Ultimately, however, Roseanne and the Connor family succeed in humorously sloughing off the pretension of the neighbor and others they encounter by simply outlasting them and finding strength in their family bonds.

As the outline indicates, the most general statement in the paragraph is the first sentence. The sentences at the next level of generality are labeled specifics 1, 2, and 3. These three sentences furnish major points of support, but they become more effective when pinned down even further by the details presented in sentences 1a and 1b, 2a and 2b, and 3a and 3b. (We discuss the movements of paragraph development through levels of supporting statements in more depth in Chapter 3.)

Note that, because the paragraph moves from general to specific, there is no place in it for a second statement as general as "Despite its brashness and humor, the long-running television sitcom *Roseanne* presents realistically many of the pressures confronting the American family." For instance, if a new statement—"The private lives of the stars of the television sitcom *Roseanne* have often attracted more attention than the long-running show"—were inserted in the paragraph, the focus of the paragraph would shift. The new statement, because it has little to do with the content of the rest of the paragraph, cannot function as support in the paragraph. Furthermore, the new statement, because of its level of generality, is broad enough to require a whole paragraph of specific explanation in itself.

■ SUMMARY

1. To understand the basics of clear writing, it is useful to examine first the general-to-specific expository paragraph.
2. A general-to-specific expository paragraph is a group of sentences, set apart from preceding material by indentation, that present a unified topic or idea.
3. Most general-to-specific expository paragraphs range in length from one hundred to three hundred words.

4. The general-to-specific expository paragraph moves from a general opening statement to specific supporting statements.
5. The general-to-specific expository paragraph is usually built with three levels of generality: the general opening statement, less general supporting statements, and further details that elaborate on the supporting statements.
6. No other sentence of the same level of generality as the opening statement should appear in the paragraph.

■ EXERCISES

- I. In this chapter you have seen that a general-to-specific expository paragraph moves from a general opening statement to specific supporting statements and details. This exercise will give you practice in distinguishing the general from the specific. Examine the following sentences and decide whether each sentence, if used in a general-to-specific expository paragraph, would serve as a general statement requiring further support or a specific statement requiring no further support.
 - A. There are several stages of alcoholism.
 - B. The Berlin Wall fell in 1989.
 - C. Chunks of interstellar debris hit Jupiter.
 - D. It is difficult to be married to the Prince of Wales.
 - E. Education should do more than merely teach skills.
 - F. The car accident occurred on the south exit ramp of the highway.
 - G. Being a member of a social club has definite advantages for a college student.
 - H. Boston has a number of famous buildings that date back to the American Revolution.
- II. The following paragraphs, taken from student writing, move successfully through varying levels of generality. Read the paragraphs carefully and then indicate in the space before each sentence its level of generality. Use GS (general statement) to indicate a sentence that is at the first level of generality and that the other sentences support. Use Arabic numerals (1,2,3) to indicate sentences that are at the second level of generality, and use lowercase letters (a,b,c) to indicate sentences that are at the third level of generality.

MODEL:

GS Scientists are uncovering new facts that challenge their long held beliefs about dinosaurs. 1 First of all, dinosaurs were most likely not cold blooded. 1a Unlike cold blooded animals, they could travel briskly in cool weather. 1b Also, many lived above the Arctic Circle, where there is no sun during the winter. 2 Secondly, dinosaurs may not have been a uniform dull green in color. 2a Rather, evidence points to the possibility of their being striped, spotted, and even brilliantly colored. 3 Thirdly, dinosaurs were not the loners that scientists previously believed them to be. 3a For instance, the herbivore Triceratops, often perceived as solitary, traveled in herds and went on annual migrations. 3b What is more, the predatory Tyrannosaurus Rex hunted in packs. 4 Finally, and perhaps most significantly, scientists have discovered that not all dinosaurs are extinct. 4a In fact, one line is flourishing today. 4b That line of resilient descendants is birds.

- A. ____ Many popular sayings are based on historical situations and customs that have for the most part been forgotten. ____ To give someone the “cold shoulder,” for example, today means intentionally to shun or ignore that person. ____ The origin of this term is believed to go back to the ancient Scottish custom of offering guests who overstayed their welcome a “cold shoulder” of mutton instead of a warm meal for dinner. ____ The phrase “flash in the pan” has an equally interesting origin. ____ While today it refers to an overnight sensation whose popularity quickly fades because it fails to live up to expectations, the term originally referred either to a “flash in the pan” of a musket that exploded but failed to fire a bullet or to a speck of fools’ gold in a miner’s pan that brought immediate but false expectations of a large and valuable find. ____ The popular phrase “knock on wood” has several possible origins. ____ Today we “knock on wood” for good luck. ____ One explanation for this curious custom was the reverence early Christians showed for the wood of the cross. ____ Another tradition says that the practice of knocking on wood for luck began in medieval times, when accused criminals received sanctuary from the law as soon as they knocked on the wooden doors of a church. ____ Still another possible origin for this custom may be the worship of trees and shrubs by the prehistoric inhabitants of Great Britain.
- B. ____ Many questions linger today concerning the 1963 assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy in Dallas, Texas. ____ One major question that is often debated is the number of shots fired at the president’s motorcade. ____ Initially, investigators concluded that three shots were fired. ____ However, subsequent evidence has pointed to four and even six. ____ Another nagging question concerns the direction from which the shots were fired. ____ The official investigation concluded that the three shots came from the Texas School Book Depository. ____ But eyewitnesses have claimed that the president was fired upon from a nearby grassy knoll and from directly in front of the motorcade. ____ Perhaps the most controversial question concerns the number of assassins involved. ____ The investigation conducted by the Warren Commission concluded that a lone assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, was solely responsible for the act. ____ But since the time of the commission report, evidence has surfaced suggesting that three or more teams of assassins were responsible.
- C. ____ Walking has recently become extremely popular among people of all ages. ____ One important reason is the physical benefit of added strength and stamina that walking provides. ____ In their off-seasons, professional athletes often walk or hike when they are not exercising more rigorously. ____ Young people are now walking where they used to ride so that they can stay healthy and participate in physical activities. ____ A second reason for the popularity of walking is that a brisk walk can burn off calories and fat. ____ Dieters and people who have jobs that do not require a great deal of physical activity often walk because of this benefit. ____ Lastly, walking is especially popular among older people who find other forms of exercise too strenuous. ____ On the advice of a doctor, an older person can walk many blocks or even many miles a day without running the risk of a heart attack.
- D. ____ The inability of alcoholics to control their drinking often seriously affects the members of their families. ____ For example, alcoholics often