

MAKING WRITING WORK

EFFECTIVE PARAGRAPHS

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PREFACE

Writing can be a most frustrating task for anyone, particularly when circumstances interfere with it. People who write frequently—every few days or every few weeks—generally learn enough about their writing habits to know how to put themselves into the right frame of mind for writing: they know the right questions to ask themselves and the ways to focus on communicating to the audience. Unpracticed writers, however, are often unaware of their own writing habits, of writing strategies they might use, and of the importance of audience and purpose. Furthermore, many believe that they do not know how to start writing or even how to ask questions which will help them find ideas. Keeping in mind that unpracticed writers are simply unfamiliar with writing, I have designed this text to include information and practice for all stages of writing—finding ideas, thinking about ideas, finding a focus, jotting down notes, organizing and developing ideas, polishing structure and sentences.

This text introduces writing skills through the paragraph—the vehicle most appropriate for repeated practice of all writing skills. The paragraph allows for complete development of a single idea but restricts its scope so that the task of writing is less overwhelming. If necessary, students can practice focusing on an idea and developing a unified, coherent paragraph each day, whereas longer papers require more time and often diffuse students' attention from basic skills.

Although the focus of the text is on the paragraph, I first address some motivational problems, since these are among the most difficult and important problems that teachers of basic writing encounter. In "To the Student," I speak directly to students about the need for practicing paragraph skills—and so developing clear sentence skills—before moving to essays. I address *practice* of a skill to ensure persuasive communication to a given audience. Then the emphasis shifts to audience and purpose in writing, two elements that basic writers must understand before their writing will be worthy of practice.

Chapter 1 then addresses what is required for clear communication. I explain what expectations readers have when they begin reading and how writers exploit these expectations to communicate effectively. I develop exhaustively the role of the topic sentence in the paragraph and limitation of the topic through specific stance and focus in the topic sentence. I explain that the topic sentence sets up the paragraph, that it functions as a specific statement of purpose for both readers and writer, that it engages readers' attention, and that it creates the

dominant impression the writer wishes to convey. Questions help students see how to focus on specific topics and then devise their own topic sentences. In Chapter 1, I have included several activities and exercises on narrowing a subject to a suitable topic (something our students find extremely difficult to do without much practice) and then go on to developing a focus for the paragraph. Students using this approach soon see the difference between general and specific statements, and they make connections between specificity in the topic sentence and greater detail in the body of the paragraph. I use this notion of specificity to move into the first, detailed discussion of paragraph structure—unity, coherence, and detailed development.

The rest of the text focuses on rhetorical modes and strategies of development: narration, description, process analysis, illustration, comparison-contrast, classification, definition, causal analysis, and persuasion. Students benefit from an approach that allows them to develop writing skills first from purely a personal or egocentric and then from a more analytical perspective. Although teaching specific strategies of development may seem old-fashioned, I have found that students struggling with the act of writing are grateful for the structure they see in a specific assignment designed to elicit a specific kind of paragraph. At the same time, since students who have little experience with writing often do not know how to get started or how to go about writing, I emphasize the *process* of writing as much as I possibly can. In addition, I provide in each chapter detailed writing assignments that will engage students intellectually: paragraph assignments need not be mindless simply because the final product is one paragraph.

The student not quite ready for longer papers can also benefit from the emphasis on basic paragraph skills in the early chapters. Later chapters (Chapters 6, 7, and 9) then take up the two- and three-paragraph paper, and Chapter 11 introduces the essay so that students can move slowly from paragraph to essay skills and yet practice writing longer papers.

The text emphasizes writing—finding ideas, selecting a narrow focus, developing support. But because beginning writers often worry about picking the right words and forming correct sentences rather than communicating ideas, I have included explanations and exercises for practice in sentence and word skills. Each chapter covers a major point of grammar or usage so that students can immediately practice in their own writing principles of clear sentence construction and effective choice of words. I begin with recognition of independent clauses so that students can work on fragments and comma splices, the two most prevalent problems in our students' writing. I include explanations and exercises on coordination, subordination, agreement, reference, modification, sentence combining, and basic rules of punctuation, as well as explanations and exercises on choosing specific, active, and concrete words and eliminating deadwood and clichés.

This text has grown out of my experience as a teacher of basic writers and as a teacher of teachers of basic writers. The demands of the basic writing classroom are not comparable to those of the college composition classroom, yet our most

inexperienced graduate teaching assistants are now often teaching basic writing courses. This text attempts to address the problem that arises when increasing numbers of students who are unprepared to write meet teachers who are unprepared to cope with the many problems of the basic writing course. I have tried to make this text as thorough as the most inexperienced teacher of basic writing could hope for. The repeated emphasis on basic writing skills and how to develop those skills through continual practice should ease the burden on the new teacher—and even the experienced one—facing more and more unprepared writers in the classroom.

This text has taken shape over many semesters of teaching and writing. I wish to thank those readers whose help made the text more readable and useful: Stanley J. Kozikowski, Ken Krauss, and William Stryker. I also wish to thank my husband, whose help with the mechanics of the manuscript was indispensable and whose moral support was invaluable. Finally, I must thank the students who inspired and contributed so greatly to the text.

Kate Kiefer

TO THE STUDENT

Writing, like speaking, is such a common part of our everyday lives that we take for granted the writing we do on a daily basis. We jot down telephone numbers; we make notes to ourselves of things to do; we write checks; or we make out grocery lists—and we seldom if ever think seriously about the skill we are practicing. These kinds of writing are either very structured (there are, after all, only certain things to write on a check) or simple, cryptic notes to jog our memories. We do not usually need elaborate and detailed explanations to ourselves, especially about telephone numbers and grocery lists. For these pieces of writing, we recreate a context from our memories to account for the information that we haven't written down.

But the writing that proves more difficult for all of us is the writing that we send out to other people. We can't count on their memories to fill in gaps in information, and so we have to write down all the details we want to communicate. Think, for instance, of the last time you accepted a telephone call for someone else. Let's say the message was complicated: If your friend Pat had a certain piece of information, he should call Felice, and if he didn't have the information, he should call Georgia to get it and then call Tim, who would pass on the information to Felice, since she would be away from a phone by the time your roommate called Georgia. Now, if I were taking that message for myself, I would probably write something like this: "Call Felice @ date." If I didn't have the information, my message would be a little longer: "Call Georgia @ date and then have Tim call Felice." But to write that message out for someone else, I'd have to include both parts of the message—the first condition and what to do in that case ("If you know the date for the meeting, call Felice") and the second condition and its associated action ("If you don't know the date, call Georgia for the information and then call Tim so that he can pass the word to Felice, since she will be out by the time you call Georgia").

This example demonstrates that filling in the missing details for someone else takes longer—more words and more time—than making a note for ourselves. But to communicate effectively with readers, we must see what information is necessary if we are to be clear. We can take nothing for granted unless we know our readers very well. Only then can we assume that the readers have some specific knowledge of what we are writing about. We can abbreviate some

explanations or provide less proof of a point than we would need if we had to assume that the readers knew nothing about the subject.

One of the first things, then, that any experienced writer does before putting any words on paper is to identify the readers. If I write about an incident that happened to me—for instance, the bicycle accident I was in last year—I think about the details that I'd write in a letter to my parents, about the different details I'd write in a letter to a close friend, and about the objective details I'd give in a report to the insurance company. In each case, the *audience* for the writing changes the way I write. For the first audience, I want to be brief and reassuring; for the second, I want to be humorous; for the third, I want to be factual and persuasively clear—that is, I want the insurance company to settle my claim favorably. Knowing the audience and knowing what readers expect to read helps writers organize what they will say and how they will say it. For most college students, writing for classes means writing to an audience of peers or to an audience of professors. Knowing that the audience is an educated one with professional goals or careers helps writers pick an appropriate formal or informal style in presenting information or arguments and, further, helps writers make correct assumptions about what information the audience already has and what it still needs. Knowing the audience helps writers persuade readers. Finally, knowing the audience helps writers identify the purpose of their writing.

Identifying the audience and knowing why you write are the two preliminary steps to writing effectively. Even though most college students write only to fulfill course requirements, knowing that purpose makes writing easier. If your purpose in writing a term paper is to fulfill the assignment for the course, surely you will want to persuade the reader of your term paper—the instructor of the course—that you have fulfilled the requirement. You will write clearly to convey the information the instructor asked you to accumulate. You will organize your writing to demonstrate the amount of research you did for the paper. And you will present the paper in a final form that does not distract the reader from the content of your writing: you will be sure to type carefully and to proofread for spelling and grammatical errors. All these things are necessary to ensure that you will get a good grade on the term paper. If you write simply to finish a course or to fulfill an obligation, you will want to complete the assignment *successfully* for the sake of your grade point average.

But writing has other much more important purposes, although we seldom think of these as goals for writing. First, writing helps *writers* think clearly about issues. We are bombarded by information and opinions every day, so that we may not have time to think through every social, political, or even personal issue that comes up. Suddenly, someone asks our opinion or asks us to make a decision about one of those issues—asks us to sign a petition, to register for the draft, or to move out of a dormitory to an apartment off campus. When we take the time to write down arguments for and against a position or a decision, we reason through the first simple, easy opinion to a clear understanding or commitment. Writing helps us look objectively at facts and helps us make choices. Writing helps us discover what we really think about an issue. Although

we can always do the same reasoning in our heads or in conversation with friends, writing gives us a record of the process so that we can check the logical chains that led to our decisions, and it often shows us new ways of looking at connections and relationships among ideas.

Also, writing helps *readers*. Your writing helps your readers understand your ideas and positions. Your writing can set forth the logic of your reasoning so that readers know exactly where you stand. Just as important is your role as a reader. If you know how to write clearly and persuasively, you will see how others write to persuade you. You can protect yourself as a reader from being swayed by the hasty conclusions and inaccurate language that appear frequently in advertisements, political campaign speeches, and bureaucratic communications. With these goals in mind, you can make your writing much more than an exercise to fulfill a requirement. Writing is the record of our thoughts and of our sharing of those thoughts with readers to get them to agree with us.

Unfortunately, writing is seldom easy. But knowing where you are headed and why may make organizing your paper easier because you can concentrate on persuading your audience.

Almost all writing is persuasive in some sense. We know that when we write letters to the editor we plan to persuade the readers of the newspaper's editorial page that our views are correct. But even in the case of the required term paper, persuasion is important because writers must persuade the audience that they are knowledgeable and trustworthy. Even when we explain the simplest procedure, we must appear expert. And so persuasion becomes synonymous with purpose in writing: our purpose as writers is always to persuade readers at least to adopt our point of view for a moment and at best to adopt our side in an argument.

Persuasive writing—clear, crisp, complete writing—requires practice. Writers cannot expect to persuade on the first trial. Just as skiing, tennis, typing, or drawing, takes practice, writing is a skill that develops over time and with frequent (if not daily) practice. Some people have better facility than others with written language, just as there are Jean-Claude Killys and Van Cliburns who make their respective skills look easy. But if you're not Jean-Claude or Van, skiing and playing the piano do not come naturally. Similarly, if you're not a writer who has found that words come easily when a blank page is on the desk in front of you, you probably need much practice before writing gets easier. (Writing, by the way, rarely becomes *easy* even for the most skilled, practiced, fluent writers who write every day for a living.)

So that you can get plenty of practice, this text will concentrate on the principles of writing in terms of the paragraph, the most manageable unit of writing for the unpracticed writer. Paragraphs "work" on the same principles of composition as longer essays, but paragraphs provide the writer with a format that allows several trials, each of which takes less time than a full essay. In effect, you can practice every day on a new paragraph, on a new idea, so that the practice can be fresh and inviting without taking hours. Paragraphs also provide opportunities for you to take various persuasive roles—as the observer of a

person or place, as the narrator of an incident, as the relater of facts, as the definer of words and relationships, as the classifier of objects or categories, as the proponent of political or social change. In addition, paragraphs are, of course, composed of sentences, so that if you need practice on writing effective sentences, you can practice sentence skills as you practice paragraph skills. Furthermore, in each chapter, you will have the opportunity to choose from a range of topics, some easier and some more difficult, to give you practice with as many real-world applications as possible for each type of paragraph. However, if you feel the need to move beyond the single paragraph, later chapters of the text will cover briefly some of the ways to expand the single paragraph into a slightly longer paper. Only by practicing writing skills can writers become fluent in writing, and fluency is necessary for college students who will have to write several research papers or laboratory reports in addition to essay answers on examinations.

I assume that my audience consists of unpracticed writers, who find themselves unprepared for the amount and kinds of writing they are asked to do in their college courses. I expect that you have given some thought to the experiences you have had and so are able to write about those experiences. I also expect that you will sometimes want to do writing that has little to do with the everyday life of a college student, and so I have included some writing topics that depend less on personal experience than on thoughtful analysis of current social and political issues. I expect that you will benefit from seeing what other college writers, both unpracticed and practiced, can do with the topics I mention in the text, and so I will freely use examples based on students' writing, examples that are not perfect but that do communicate effectively to readers. Finally, I expect that you will practice on a daily basis, if possible, the skills I will discuss in the text so that you can prepare yourself for all the writing situations you will face in college and afterward.

Kate Kiefer

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INTRODUCTION TO THE PARAGRAPH

A paragraph is a unit of logical thought composed of any number of sentences supporting the central idea of the paragraph. The *topic sentence* of the paragraph states the central idea of the paragraph, and the paragraph focuses only on that central idea, so that the paragraph remains *unified* around the main idea. The body of the paragraph *develops* that central idea with specific facts, examples, details, etc. Furthermore, a paragraph develops the main idea in a logical, *coherent* order that is clear to readers. Before we examine in detail each of these notions about paragraphs, let us consider briefly the definition of a paragraph and the role of the paragraph in longer pieces of writing.

Readers in the 1980s are accustomed to fairly short paragraphs, in part because of the typographical conventions of newspapers. Glance at any newspaper, with its narrow columns, and you will see that each paragraph generally includes only two to four sentences. The entire news article covers one idea, and the paragraphs in that article report related facts. The article as a whole is a logical unit, as is any essay that you might write. But the paragraphs indicate breaks in thought; they indicate places where readers can sift through the information in the paragraph and relate that information to the central idea of the whole article or essay.

When paragraphs stand alone as units of writing (and single paragraphs often suffice for many memos, answers to essay-type test questions, lab reports, etc.), they are generally longer than paragraphs in newspaper articles. In fact, paragraphs in newspapers are among the shortest paragraphs printed. Most writers find that longer paragraphs serve their purposes better. Longer paragraphs that fully develop a specific idea as stated in the topic sentence often have between five and nine sentences and can have as many as twenty sentences. In

other words, the number of sentences does not determine the paragraph; rather, complete development of the central idea determines the length of the paragraph.

Writers must also remember that paragraphs are a convenience for readers. Readers automatically lump ideas together when they occur within one paragraph. Readers hold the information of one paragraph in mind until they reach the end of the paragraph. When readers spot the short line that indicates the end of the paragraph, they prepare to move to a new point or idea. Thus, paragraphing depends in part on the complexity of the points writers discuss, and it depends on what writers expect readers to remember as important information.

For writers of single paragraphs, focusing on a single idea becomes extremely important. Since writers of single paragraphs cannot count on prolonged attention from readers, these writers can safely assume that paragraphs longer than 300 words will be difficult to read. Most single paragraphs actually need approximately 150 words to begin to develop the main idea concretely and persuasively. But to be persuasive is to focus carefully, and so let us look at the topic sentence, which provides the key to clear paragraphs.

THE TOPIC SENTENCE

The topic sentence of a paragraph tells readers what the paragraph will be about. It generally comes early in the paragraph, because readers look for the topic sentence to inform them about the content and focus of the paragraph. The topic sentence, then, is most often the first sentence of the paragraph. Here is a sample paragraph with the topic sentence first. Notice that the underlined topic sentence sets up specific expectations for readers of this paragraph:

People cracking their knuckles in a quiet place really upset me because the sound interrupts my concentration. For example, I was in the library last week struggling to understand my sociology book when all of a sudden I heard a terrible cracking sound which shattered my train of thought. Similarly, while taking a biology exam the other day, my concentration was destroyed for the remainder of the test because an inconsiderate person was popping his knuckles in my ear. Another annoying occurrence happened at church last Sunday. As I was focusing all my attention on the minister's inspiring sermon, a thoughtless young man began cracking his knuckles, so my mind shifted to the grotesque snapping noise instead of the pastor's talk. Finally, the worst experience I've ever encountered was at the movie theater. While I was crouched down in my seat totally involved in the suspenseful climax of "The Shining," I heard the horrible popping of someone's knuckles. And again, my concentration was disrupted by this sickening sound. In short, people should practice this disgusting habit only in privacy. (Dale N.)

In this paragraph, Dale begins by identifying a major irritation for her—being disturbed by people who are cracking their knuckles. She then uses various

examples of “cracking knuckles” to show when and why she loses concentration. The topic sentence as the first sentence tells readers immediately what the paragraph will be about. The topic sentence in this position gets the reader’s attention and focuses it on the main idea that the paragraph will develop.

Now look at this paragraph with the topic sentence as the second sentence. The first sentence acts as a short introduction to the paragraph, and the topic sentence in the second position builds upon the introductory sentence to state a specific focus for the paragraph:

The male teenager in America has many ways of showing his masculinity. Of these, the most ridiculous is dangerous driving. By looking at the facts, one can easily see how senseless the male-female driving game really is. According to a 1973 study, 45 percent of all teenage drivers are female, and yet it was proven that girl drivers are four times as safe as boys. Safety was determined by number of accidents, seriousness of accidents, and the number of driving violations. Despite this, an independent survey conducted by Harry J. Woehr found that 100 percent of the teenage boys interviewed considered themselves safe drivers. Some of the boys included in this interview had as many as ten previous driving violations. The females, on the other hand, were substantially less confident about their driving abilities. In addition, one-half of the males surveyed believed that girls actually liked crazy drivers; and they were right. Only 19 percent of the girls surveyed stated that crazy driving was cause enough to refuse dating a guy. And so the game goes on. Boys work to make their cars faster, and the girls encourage them. This whole paradoxical farce is based solely on boys trying to prove their manhood by decreasing their chances of ever making it to manhood. (Ross K.)

In this paragraph, Ross wants to let his readers warm up to his point, and so he uses a more general sentence at the beginning of the paragraph just to get them thinking about the topic. Then he zeroes in on the main point of his paragraph—ridiculously dangerous driving. Ross uses both sentences, the introductory one and his topic sentence, to lead readers to the statistics that support his point.

Finally, examine the paragraph with the topic sentence as its conclusion. In this case, the writer lets the details and examples of the paragraph create the impression she wants to make:

The focus of the living room is the huge brick fireplace that takes up one entire wall. I love to watch the flames dance—casting shadows on the dark, lustrous wood of the mantle—and hear the wood crackle and pop each time we have a fire in there. The thick, wooden mantle holds our stockings stuffed with goodies every Christmas morning. The big, fluffy floor pillows in the corner are where our beagle used to sleep. In another corner sits an antique, wicker rocking chair that creaks. I loved to rock back and forth when I was little, and I remember my feet barely hanging over the edge of the seat. Big plaster crocks and old, green glass bottles dot the shelves and tables, and they all hold beautiful plants—African violets, philodendras, jades. The big, overstuffed chair with the flowered print material is where my grandfather would always sit. I can still smell his pipe smoke floating through the air. The big wooden trunk against one wall is where my mother would hide our Christmas and birthday

presents. The tall, twelve-pane windows rattle every time it thunders very loud in a storm but also bathe the room in early-morning sunlight. The tiny-printed wallpaper and antique furniture match the rest of the colonial decor of the house. In that room, we have shared with friends as well as relatives many holidays and regular days, countless memories that will never fade away. (Jenna H.)

The details and examples are so vivid that readers can wait until the end of the paragraph to read the exact statement of the main idea of the paragraph. Like the argument which builds to its conclusion, or the exposure of a murderer on television, the paragraph with the topic sentence last builds to a climax.

SUBJECT VERSUS TOPIC

As its name implies, the topic sentence states the topic of the paragraph. A topic is not the same thing as a subject. A topic is a much narrower, more focused idea for a paragraph; a subject denotes a much broader area. For instance, students take many subjects in college: English, European history after World War I, botany, and electrical engineering. But the topics discussed in individual classes will be more specific and often focused on a single, though possibly complex, idea: imagery in Keats' poetry, causes of World War II, differentiating between plant parasites, or circuits with resistors and capacitors in parallel. Likewise, for a single paragraph a writer would not seek to exhaust the subject of disco music or even the popularity of a single disco star; rather, the writer of the paragraph on "disco" would narrow the focus of the paragraph to a suitable topic that could be developed completely in one paragraph, possibly one reason why disco appealed to so many people.

When we think of ideas to write about, we generally think of subjects—broad areas we could find plenty to write about. We think of music, concerts, or singers. Maybe we think of movies we've liked or parties we've really enjoyed. Writing about subjects, though, means writing hundreds of *pages* rather than hundreds of words. (How much could you write about rock music? Wouldn't you want to include its history, its major stars, concerts, records and developments like "rock opera" and "punk rock"?) Unless writers want to write a book rather than a paragraph, they focus their attention on a small part of the subject. They ask themselves questions about the subject so that they can concentrate on one point. Writers might ask themselves "who," "what," "where," "when," and "why" to close in on the *topic* they want to write about. Suppose, for instance, that you are thinking about writing a paragraph on rock music. You know that your audience will be interested in rock music and feel confident that you have something to say which they will want to read. You ask yourself some questions:

Subject Rock music
When? 1980s
Where? United States
Who? Groups