

KATHLEEN E. SULLIVAN

Paragraph Practice

THIRD EDITION

her eyes are sunken into her head. Th
mutters to imaginary companions
zy old woman, I think, whom is she
series. I wonder how they can carry
bit of water that spills down onto
ges herself for a moment, then move
year onto the sidewalk again. I feel
ges - a verous creature is my neighbor
in the year, I think, for I see h
thin fingers. I stand at a
and repulsion can be
er, so little left

PARAGRAPH PRACTICE

Text and Exercises in the
Topic Sentence, the Paragraph,
and the Short Composition

Third Edition

Kathleen E. Sullivan
Merritt College

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Preface

TO THE INSTRUCTOR

In the third edition *Paragraph Practice* has been revised to introduce new exercises in writing topic and thesis sentences and in practicing the paragraph and the short composition. Some improvements have been made in the text and in the directions and discussion preceding or following the old as well as the new model paragraphs and compositions. Appendix 2, "Correction Symbols," has been expanded so that it might also serve students as a mini-handbook of grammar and usage. In general, the primary aim of the third edition is to be clearer and more current than its predecessors.

This new edition incorporates the additions to the original text made in the second edition, including expansion of Part III, "Writing the Short Composition," in which greater attention is given to the thesis sentence as the key to organization. This emphasis and the addition of many topical exercises in this section of the book should make it possible for *Paragraph Practice* to serve the needs of a broader range of college students than it did in the original edition and to increase the extent of its usefulness to the students for whom it was originally designed.

Like the first two editions, the third is a workbook designed not so much to *talk about* the paragraph as to provide models and exercises in *writing* the paragraph. It is intended to give the same kind of experience with the sentence and the short composition. The main point of this workbook, as Professor Strunk might have put it, is *practice, practice, practice!*

Why practice the paragraph? The paragraph is ideally suited to meet the needs of college students who, for one reason or another, need extra practice in writing. The paragraph is comparatively short and contains many of the basic elements to be considered in studying any form of writing. Because of its brevity, the paragraph permits frequent writing practice without overburdening either the student or the instructor. In addition, the brevity of the paragraph makes it ideal as a medium for controlled composition in which specific mechanics or techniques of writing can be studied.

Organization is the primary concern of this workbook. Organization does not come naturally to most students in college composition courses. Because it is unfamiliar and strikes many students as unnecessary pain, they often resist it. As a result, instructors frequently neglect it. Nonetheless, organization is vital to good composition. It is the aim of this workbook to make it as painless to learn as possible and also as enjoyable to teach. Consequently, the book begins with relatively simple problems and proceeds, by degrees, to problems of greater complexity.

The order of the text and exercises in Part I preceding the actual practice of the paragraph may be modified. For example, the section in Chapter 3 called "Finding the Right Word" may be deferred as a refinement that digresses from more essential requirements of the topic sentence. It can easily be taken up later when, for instance, problems of variety and imagination are introduced in Chapter 6.

Paragraph Practice may be used in combination with other books or it may serve by itself as a reader as well as a workbook in composition. The subject matter of the model sentences, paragraphs, and compositions can serve as topics for class discussions and for written exercises based on the discussions that will be of genuine interest to both instructor and students.

The advice and suggestions of many people have contributed greatly to improving the third edition of *Paragraph Practice*. I would especially like to thank my editor D. Anthony English and my friend and colleague Richard Vietti for their patience and invaluable help.

K. E. S.

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Introduction to the Paragraph

1. What is a paragraph?

A paragraph is composed of a group of sentences expressing one central idea. A paragraph is complete in itself and also a subdivision or part of something larger such as a composition or a chapter in a book.

2. What does a paragraph look like on the page?

It begins with an empty space called an indentation. The indentation of a paragraph indicates where the paragraph begins. A composition, which contains several paragraphs, will have several indentations, making it easy for the reader to see where each new paragraph or idea in the composition begins. One paragraph, however, contains only one indentation because there is only one beginning point. Figure 1-1 shows how a paragraph should look. Indent—once only! Figure 1-2 shows a paragraph indented too many times.

[illegible]

Figure 1-1

XX
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX.

XX
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX.

XX
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
XX.

XX
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX.

Figure 1-2

3. What is the difference between a paragraph and a composition?

A paragraph is a part of a composition. Just as a group of related sentences compose a paragraph, so a group of related paragraphs make up a composition. A group of compositions, in turn, can be the chapters that constitute a book. A book, then, is the largest unit, and it covers more ground and is more complex than any one of its chapters. A chapter or composition is broader and says more than any one of its paragraphs. A paragraph is generally shorter, less complex, and expresses a great deal less than can a composition. Figure 1-3 may be helpful in showing how a paragraph and composition are related.

Notice that the subdivisions of the book, which are indicated by increasingly smaller circles, each within the other, have been extended to the smallest unit of all, the word. Thus the paragraph, as well as the book and composition, can be subdivided.

In your college courses you will need to develop skill in writing compositions; therefore, it will be useful to keep in mind the relationship between a paragraph and a composition.

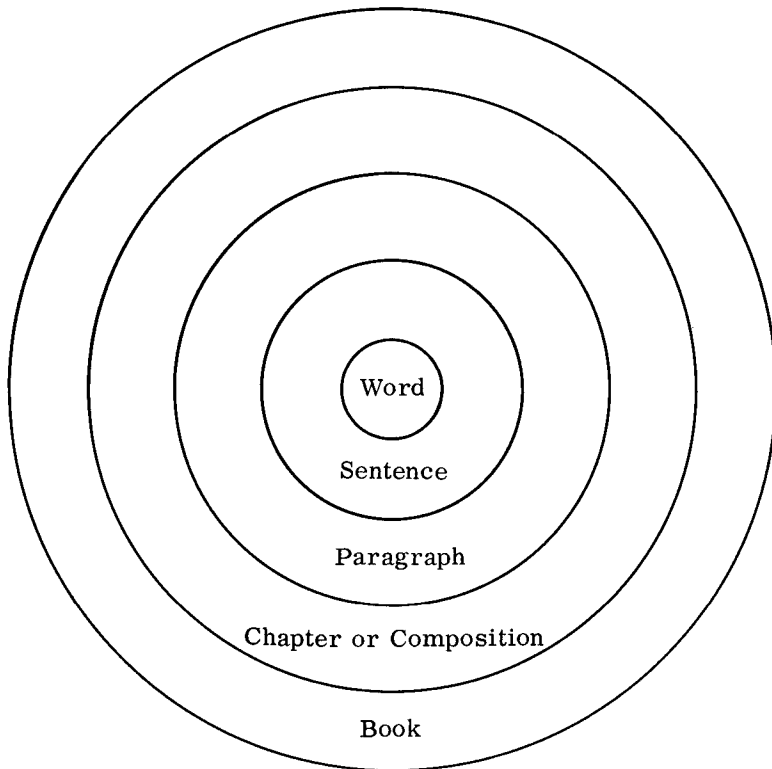


Figure 1-3

4. How long is a paragraph?

If the idea of the paragraph is simple, the paragraph will usually be rather short. If the idea is complicated, the paragraph will probably be somewhat long. You should keep in mind this principle: *the paragraph should be neither so short that the subject of the paragraph is underdeveloped and insufficiently explained, nor so long that it tends to break down into too many subtopics that would be better organized into separate paragraphs.*

Paragraph length varies according to place and purpose as well as idea. In a newspaper, for example, where the column of newsprint is narrow, one-sentence paragraphs are common. Because comparatively few words can be contained in each line of newsprint, several lines are often necessary in order to print one sentence. To provide breaks or resting spots that make reading easier, newspapers indent or paragraph frequently. Purpose also determines the length of a paragraph. Newspapers, novels, textbooks, and college compositions each have particular purposes and paragraph accordingly.

Your paragraphs for the exercises in this book should probably be approximately eight to twelve sentences long.

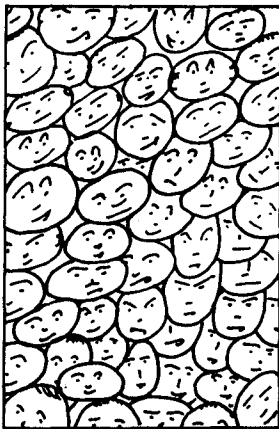
5. How is a paragraph organized or developed?

All paragraphs have one basic aim: to communicate a single idea clearly and effectively. All paragraphs, however, are not organized in the same way. *How* they communicate depends on *what* they wish to express. You will meet various types of “what” and “how” in the exercises that follow.

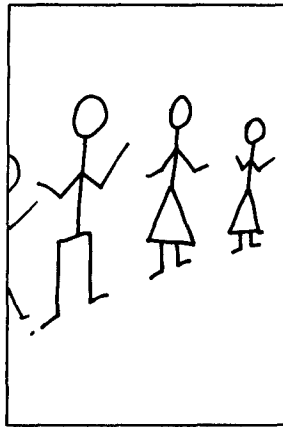
Although all paragraphs are not exactly alike, they all nevertheless have some things in common. Consider some of the factors that should be present in any paragraph.

A. THE PARAGRAPH SHOULD CONTAIN ONE CENTRAL IDEA ONLY

A paragraph with more than one central idea is usually overworked and tends to break down under the strain. *Limit* the paragraph. Limiting the paragraph is something like taking a snapshot with a small camera. You should not try to get everyone in your hometown into your picture. Even your own family is too large or too interesting for your paragraph-sized camera. You had better settle on one member of your family, and keep in mind that you cannot tell everything about even one person in a single paragraph of eight to twelve sentences. Make your picture a small portrait. See Figure 1-4.



Home Town



Family



Small Portrait

Figure 1-4

Like a small portrait, the paragraph should be limited to one part of a subject although the subject is probably much larger than the single aspect discussed in the paragraph. To illustrate this idea, suppose you are asked to write something about your house in a paragraph. You cannot tell all about your house. The subject is too big. Even your living room may be too large

a subject to discuss in a single paragraph. You need to select a part of the room such as your fireplace or your favorite chair. Examine the following paragraph.

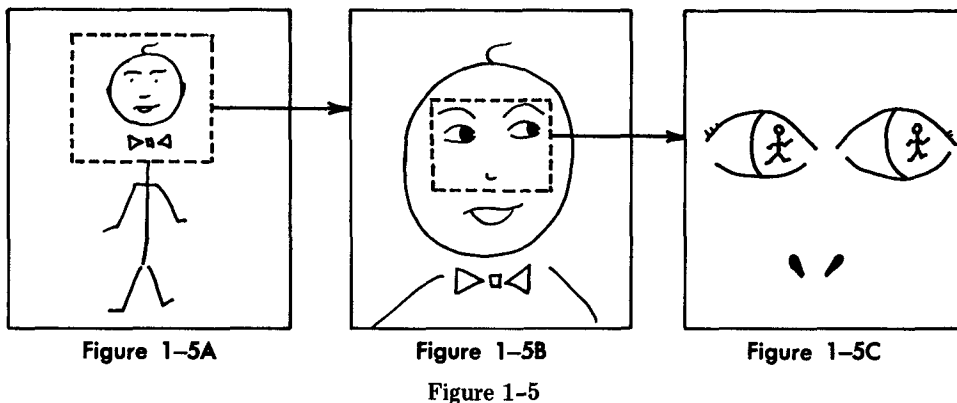
EXAMPLE

My favorite chair is ugly, but I love it. It is a recliner. Because it is shapeless, heavy, and covered with horrible material, it is an eyesore in my living room. However, it is so comfortable that I would not trade it for the finest piece of furniture I might ever hope to own. There is nothing quite so delightful after a hard day at work as sinking my weary body into that chair. With my back eased into it and my feet eased up from it, I am in heaven. I notice other people like that chair, too. Whenever I have company, the first chair everybody heads for is my ugly, lovely, recliner.

Limiting the paragraph is not an exact matter, but a useful rule of thumb may help you determine its approximate limitation: *the more deeply you go into a subject, the more the paragraph must be narrowed down or limited.*

A comparison of a paragraph to a camera is useful again. This time think of the process of enlargement. Suppose you take a picture of a standing figure. Then you decide that the expression in the face is good and that you want to see it in more detail. You decide to have that portion of the picture enlarged. Then you decide that there is something in the eyes that is fascinating (perhaps you see a mysterious figure reflected there) and that you want to enlarge that portion of the face. The closer you get to the subject, the more you see in it. Similarly, the closer you get to the subject in the paragraph, the more you see to discuss and consequently the more the subject must be narrowed if you want to discuss in one paragraph all that you see.

Figure 1-5 may clarify the rule of limitation.



As Figure 1-5 indicates, the paragraph must narrow down or limit its subject to the degree that it concentrates on it or any part of it. Figure 1-5A shows the whole subject but at some distance. Such a paragraph, although it may give an overall view, cannot go into much detail. Figure 1-5B represents a paragraph that, by limiting itself, can develop its subject more fully. Figure 1-5C shows further limitation that makes further or closer examination of its subject possible.

Although some of the paragraphs that you write may be like Figure 1-5A, your main aim is to develop skill in writing paragraphs like Figure 1-5B, or, in some cases, like Figure 1-5C.

Focus the paragraph. First, decide what the center of interest in your paragraph is and then make sure it is central and unmistakably clear. The following paragraph is focused.

EXAMPLE

My father's face is rough. His complexion is leathery and wrinkled. There are large pores in the skin that covers his nose and cheeks. His nose, broken twice in his life, makes him look like a boxer who has lost too many fights. His mouth, unless he smiles, looks hard and threatening. His chin is massive and angular. Shaved or not, my father's face is rugged.

The following paragraph is out of focus.

EXAMPLE

I want to talk about my father. He is strict with his children, especially me. He won't let me out of the house unless I've done all my homework. He is a tall and rather skinny man. Some people say he is good-looking. He has a nice streak of gray in his hair. He laughs a lot and enjoys life. My father is interesting.

The second paragraph fails to focus upon a particular aspect or make a main point about its subject.

Focusing the paragraph is also like taking a good picture. Like the picture, the paragraph must have a center of interest that is obvious and unmistakable. Bad paragraphs are sometimes like the pictures in Figure 1-6, fuzzy or off-center.

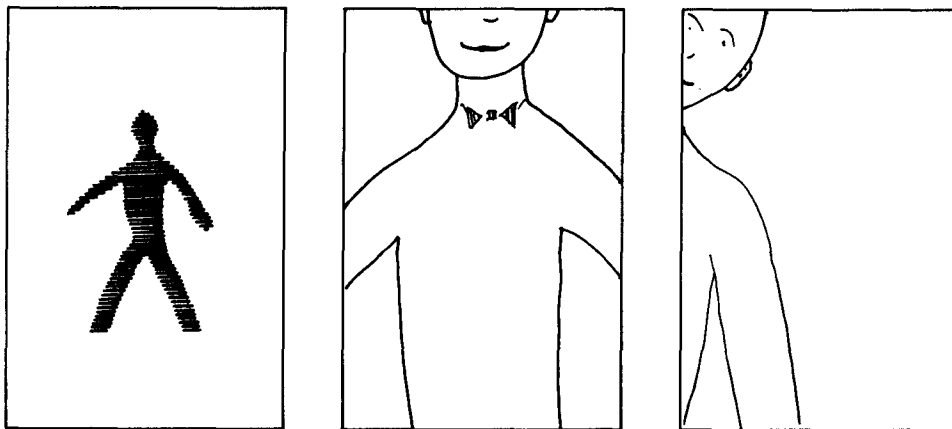


Figure 1-6

B. THE PARAGRAPH SHOULD HAVE UNITY

Unity means that the paragraph should be of one piece, a distinct unit that has one fundamental purpose. Remember that even though the paragraph is a subdivision or part of a larger unit, it should be complete in itself.

The example given previously of a paragraph that is focused serves also as an example of a unified paragraph. Notice that although the paragraph discusses only one part of a much larger subject than that contained in the paragraph, the part discussed is complete in itself and does not need the larger unit to be understood. The paragraph could fit easily into a whole composition entitled "My Father." Other paragraphs would be needed, of course, to give a complete picture of the larger subject, and they would each need to be distinct units also.

A paragraph should *not* be a *fragment*. It should not be like part of a conversation that is overheard but not quite understood because the complete conversation has not been heard, nor should it be like a piece from a jigsaw puzzle with shapes or colors that confuse the mind. It should be a whole, complete unit, understandable no matter whether it stands alone or is combined with other parts to form a larger whole.

Remember to *stick to the subject*! One of the easiest ways to destroy the unity of a paragraph is to skip from subject to subject, as in the following example.

EXAMPLE

My father is very strict with his children, especially me. He won't let me out of the house unless I've done all my homework. Frankly, I don't care

whether I go to school or not. School is such a waste of time. There aren't any good jobs, anyway. My mother doesn't agree with my father. They quarrel a lot. Sometimes I wish they would get a divorce, but then who would I live with?

The paragraph above lacks unity because it jumps from subject to subject. (Although it has psychological interest partly because of its lack of unity, the lack is a definite fault in a paragraph.)

Stick to the subject. If you begin a paragraph about dogs, don't switch the subject to parakeets in the middle of your paragraph unless, of course, you must talk about parakeets in order to clarify what you want to say about dogs.

C. THE PARAGRAPH SHOULD HAVE COHERENCE AND CONTINUITY

These terms are closely related. Coherence means that the parts of the paragraph should be logically connected. Continuity means that the connection of the parts should be smooth. To make a comparison, a coherent paragraph is like a motor that is properly assembled; with all the parts in the right places, the motor can run. Continuity is like an oil that lubricates the operation making it smooth and preventing the motor from burning out.

To be coherent, the paragraph must have *order* or *sequence*. The particular order or sequence needed depends on the subject. For instance, people are usually described from head to toe rather than vice versa. On the other hand, house building begins at the bottom and works up. Photographs are most often discussed from left to right. Recipes usually begin with ingredients and end with the oven. Dressmaking starts with the selection of a pattern rather than the final ironing process. (These subjects illustrate the idea of order or sequence, though some of them are too large to be contained in a single paragraph.) The order or sequence that is logical depends on the nature of the subject to be discussed. The following paragraph is coherent because it has order or sequence.

EXAMPLE

To get the most out of his textbooks, a student should follow several steps very carefully. He should make a survey of each book to get a general idea of what the book contains. He should read for understanding and formulate questions. He should make notes of the major points of each chapter. He should test himself to be sure that he can answer questions likely to be raised in class and in examinations. He should review his notes and reread any parts of the book that are unclear to him.