John
Ostrom

BETTER PARAGRAPHS and Short Themes

5TH EDITION

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FIFTH EDITION

This new edition of John Ostrom's classic text BETTER PARAGRAPHS expands on the coverage of the previous editions to provide thorough instruction in planning, organizing, and writing the short composition, making it an even more efficient tool for teaching and learning expository writing than its predecessors.

Now, in response to the suggestions of users of the text . . .

- An all-new section shows clearly and simply how the short theme is planned, controlled, outlined, and written in accordance with the principles of sound paragraph development.
- Unity and coherence in sentence, paragraph, and now the short theme are illustrated from modern writers and analyzed in accompanying examples.
- The new material on the short theme reviews and reinforces, in a larger context, the principles of unity and coherence formerly limited to paragraphs.
- A revision checklist and a concise guide to punctuation are provided within the front and back covers.

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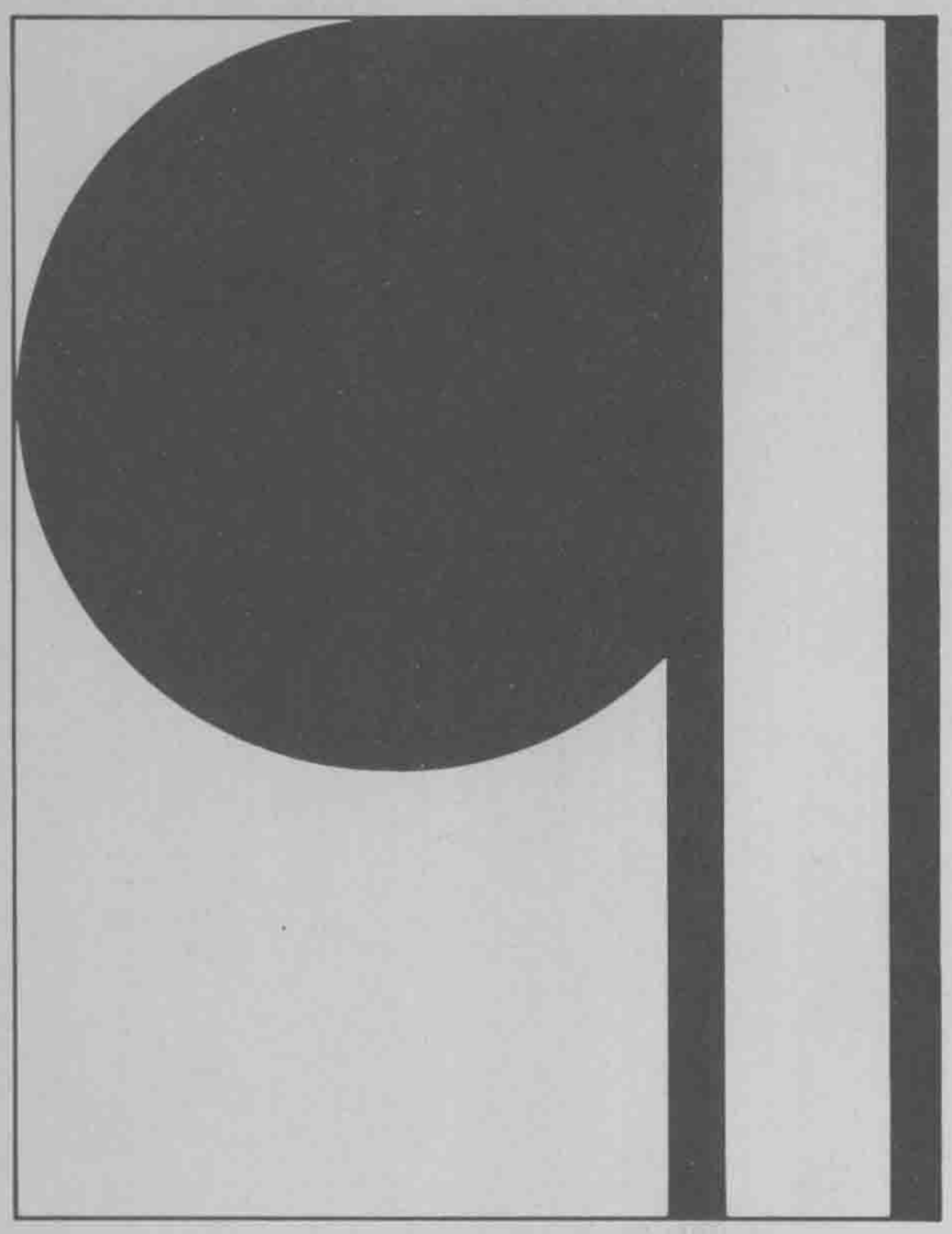

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Preface

In response to the urging of many current users of *Better Paragraphs,* this new edition expands on the coverage of the previous four to provide thorough instruction in the planning, organizing, and writing of the short composition. The many parallels between paragraph and short theme make this combined presentation both convenient and illuminating. Essentially the same principles of unity and coherence apply to both. More important, however, the controlling idea—so central to the approach of *Better Paragraphs*—can be applied with equal effectiveness to the short composition.

Teachers already familiar with *Better Paragraphs* will readily see how the controlling idea of a composition—formulated first as a working thesis sentence and later refined into final form—can serve to focus the student's attention and energy for the successful performance of each step in the planning and writing of the short theme. From the earliest stages of choosing and limiting a topic through those of gathering material, outlining, and writing, specific applications of this key concept guide the student to the successful completion of a unified, well-organized piece of writing. Each step in the process is illustrated through reference to a developing model theme. The decisions required at each stage are discussed and the skills needed to implement them are developed through appropriate exercises.

The enlarged scope of *Better Paragraphs and Short Themes,* Fifth Edition in no way reduces the effectiveness of the approach to the form and development of the paragraph which hundreds of teachers have successfully used for more than twenty years. Indeed, the new material on the short composition has the advantage of reviewing and reinforcing the instruction of earlier chapters as it applies the principles of unity and coherence, originally limited to paragraphs, in a larger context.

Better Paragraphs and Short Themes, Fifth Edition provides a thorough presentation of the means of paragraph development. Specific points are illustrated with copious examples from modern writers, discussed in accompanying analyses, and applied in closely related exercises. The new section shows clearly and simply how the short theme is planned, controlled, outlined, and written in accordance with the principles of sound paragraph development. A revision checklist and a concise guide to punctuation have been provided within the front and back covers.

Better Paragraphs and Short Themes, Fifth Edition continues to offer teachers of writing an approach to composition that has benefited from more than twenty years of testing in seminars, workshops, and classrooms. We believe that with its enlarged coverage, this new edition will provide an even more efficient tool for teaching and learning expository writing than its predecessors.

THE PUBLISHER

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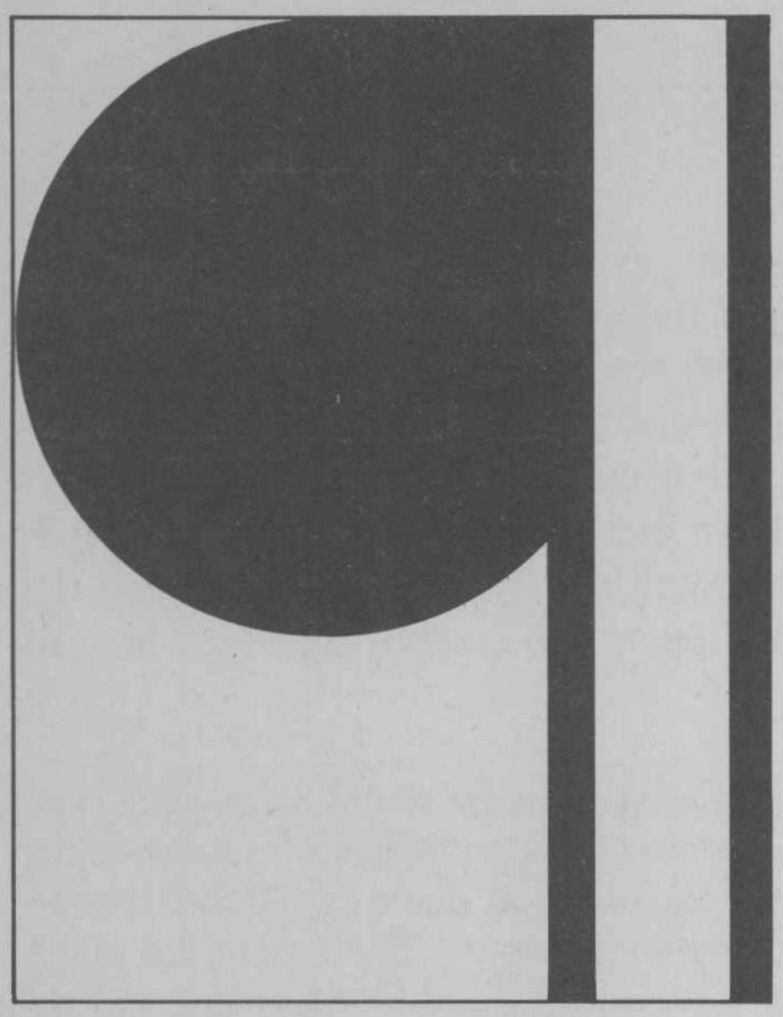


ONE:
Paragraph unity

EXPOSITION IS EXPLANATION

Writing that explains or clarifies is called *exposition.* Applicable to any topic that challenges the understanding, exposition is the form of writing you will use most often both in school and out. Right now, you use exposition when you write the answer to an essay question, a report of your findings in a laboratory experiment, or a research paper. Later on, whatever career you follow, you will be asked to make the knowledge you possess available to others in reports, memoranda, informational articles, or some other form of expository writing. The ability to write clear and effective exposition, therefore, is a skill of both immediate and long-term value to you.

The key unit in successful exposition is the paragraph: a series of sentences unified by a controlling idea that discusses a single topic or one segment of a larger topic. A single sentence is rarely enough to explain a topic adequately; and, although many topics require more than one paragraph, the writer who has mastered the principles of good paragraph writing will find them applicable as well to longer pieces of exposition.

Learning to write a good paragraph, then, is your first concern.

THE PARAGRAPH, THE TOPIC SENTENCE, AND THE CONTROLLING IDEA

Paragraphing is a way of making visible to the reader the stages in the writer's thinking. To be helpful to the reader, each paragraph must focus attention on a single topic or one part of a larger topic. An arbitrary grouping of sentences that discuss different topics and that have no clear relationship to each other tells the reader little about the writer's thinking, except to suggest that it is confused.

A good paragraph reflects unity of thought. It makes a definite statement, preferably at the outset, in a *topic sentence* and then backs up that statement with details, examples, or other kinds of supporting material that make the topic sentence fully meaningful or understandable. Anything that fails to support the statement made in the topic sentence does not belong in the paragraph.

In order to achieve unity in a paragraph, you should begin thinking about the point your topic sentence will make even before you start to write. Then when you write your first sentence, you should word it as an expression of that point, that is, as an expression of the limited subject matter you will discuss in the paragraph. Sometimes, you may hit on the topic sentence you want right away; but

more often you will need to tinker with it in order to limit the topic to a manageable size.

Suppose, for example, that you have decided to write a paragraph about the names of American cities and towns. It strikes you that many of these names are familiar. Your opening sentence might read:

Anyone who travels much in the United States soon realizes that towns and cities often have familiar names.

Such a sentence, placed first in the paragraph, presumably would serve as a generalized topic sentence. It states in a broad way what the paragraph will be about.

But a topic sentence, like the subject on which a camera has been focused, may not produce a clearly defined and artistic composition unless some central feature of that subject is brought into sharper focus by means of further adjustments. Therefore, the topic sentence about the familiar names of towns and cities should include some central point that you wish to stress concerning those names. After considering various possibilities, you may decide that the towns and cities you are really interested in have namesakes in various parts of the world, names with which you are familiar through reading or travel. You therefore adjust your topic sentence to read:

Anyone who travels much in the United States soon realizes that towns and cities have namesakes here at home and abroad.

At this point it may occur to you that you are not really interested in *all* towns and cities in the United States, nor, for that matter, in *all* types of travelers. Thus further limitation is needed to keep material under control. You then decide to change "anyone who travels" to "motorists traveling" and to choose (a) only certain towns and cities, (b) only those east of the Mississippi River, and (c) only those with famous namesakes. Your more restricted topic sentence now reads:

Motorists traveling in states east of the Mississippi River soon realize that certain towns and cities on their itinerary have famous namesakes here at home or abroad.

"Famous namesakes" becomes your main point or *controlling idea.* Your chief concern in writing *this* paragraph, therefore, is to choose a city like London, Ohio, first, because it has London, England, as a famous namesake and, second, because it is east of the Mississippi River. Any London *west* of the Mississippi must be ruled out as not within the geographical limits established by your topic sentence and controlling idea.

A topic sentence with a definite *controlling idea* is the first requisite of ultimate paragraph unity. In this statement, note, emphasis is placed on "controlling idea." However, unless *all* the material you include in the paragraph supports or proves the controlling idea *in terms of* the rest of the topic sentence, the paragraph will not be unified. In the following paragraph, for example, the writer has not kept the controlling idea sufficiently in mind; as a result, much material has been included that not only fails to support the controlling idea but leads away from it.

Motorists traveling in states east of the Mississippi River soon realize that certain towns and cities on their itinerary have famous namesakes here at home or abroad. Since the more populous states are in the East, there are more names to choose from. Georgia and Florida have a Milton, Illinois, a Carlyle, New York, a Homer and an Ovid, and Pennsylvania, a Seneca. Many students know that Milton was blind when he wrote *Paradise Lost.* Columbus is found in Arkansas, Georgia, and Ohio, De Soto and La Salle in Illinois, and Ponce de León in Florida. Even today the Fountain of Youth, which Ponce de León discovered, produces a million gallons of water each hour. Washington appears in eleven states, among which are Connecticut, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, North Carolina, and Virginia, and, of course, the District of Columbia. Eight states claim Lincoln, including Alabama, Maine, Mississippi, New Hampshire, and Vermont. One might expect to find a Lincoln in Kentucky, since he was born near Hodgenville in a cabin still preserved in a granite memorial there. From prominent ancient cities Illinois selected Athens, Rome, Sparta, and Troy; New York chose Athens, Babylon, Ithaca, Rome, and Troy. In fact, Troy appears in no less than eight other eastern states: Alabama, Indiana, Michigan, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee. Texans may have been motivated by a sequential optimism when they named six of their communities Earth, Eden, Tranquility, Happy, Blessing, and Paradise, to say nothing of Rail Road Flat, Scenic Loop Playground, and Twenty-nine Palms.

Even a cursory reading reveals that many ideas included in the paragraph do little or nothing to develop the controlling idea—"famous namesakes." Specifically, the following ideas probably do not belong in a paragraph with this controlling idea:

1. the references to Arkansas and Texas because the topic sentence limits the discussion to states *east* of the Mississippi
2. the irrelevant references to Milton's blindness, the Fountain of Youth (and how much water it produces), and the Lincoln Memorial in Hodgenville, Kentucky—none of these support the controlling idea
3. the examples of Texas place names, which are irrele-

vant because (with the possible exception of Earth and Eden) the towns mentioned do not have famous namesakes here or abroad.

Another problem with the paragraph is that, even with the irrelevant material cut out, it still tries to cover too much ground. The writer could narrow it further by eliminating "here at home" from the topic sentence and concentrating on namesakes abroad. This course would eliminate towns named for Washington and Lincoln, but other, foreign names, such as Bismarck, Elizabeth, and Raleigh, could easily be substituted.

The full topic sentence of an expository paragraph makes a commitment to the reader. Your job, once you have made that commitment, is to deliver by bringing to bear whatever details, reasons, illustrations, or other evidence you think appropriate. In choosing and arranging your supporting material, you may find it helpful to jot down your ideas in a scratch outline. Once you have your ideas on paper, you can easily see which ones to eliminate. Probably you will also think of new ones to add.

In developing a controlling idea like "famous namesakes," you might begin with such headings as *people* and *places,* jotting down as many in each category as you can think of that have provided the names for American cities. With your list before you, you can easily make refinements.

Let us now revise the original paragraph about famous namesakes, keeping in mind the suggestions that have been made. Only towns and cities in the United States that have well-known namesakes abroad will be selected. Names of people will be restricted to authors, explorers, and statesmen; places to ancient centers of culture.

Motorists traveling in states east of the Mississippi River soon realize that certain towns and cities on their itinerary have famous namesakes abroad. Representing authors, Georgia and Florida have a Milton, Illinois, a Carlyle, New York, a Homer and an Ovid, and Pennsylvania, a Seneca. To dignify explorers, Columbus is found in Georgia and Ohio, De Soto and La Salle in Illinois, and Ponce de León in Florida. In honor of foreign statesmen, Bismarck appears in Illinois, Napoleon in Michigan and Ohio, and Elizabeth in Georgia, Illinois, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia. From prominent centers of ancient culture, Illinois includes Athens, Rome, Sparta, and Troy; New York has Athens, Babylon, Ithaca, Rome, and Troy. In fact, Troy appears in no fewer than eight other eastern states: Alabama, Indiana, Michigan, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee.

When we contrast this paragraph with the original, we see how a close attention to the controlling idea and to the restrictions put on it by the rest of the topic sentence results in total paragraph unity.

The controlling idea of a paragraph may be expressed by a single word, a phrase, or a clause; for example:

- ☐ Pollution demands *action.*
- ☐ Pollution is *destructive.*
- ☐ Pollution exists *throughout the world.*
- ☐ Pollution requires *that everyone do something about it.*

If one word will express the controlling idea of a paragraph clearly and definitely, very well; but if it takes a phrase or a whole clause, do not hesitate to use either.

As you compose a topic sentence, guard against making a statement that is too general for development in a single paragraph. For instance, many beginning writers would be satisfied with the following topic sentence for a paragraph of some 150 words:

Miami is one of the greatest vacation resorts in America.

With this topic sentence they might tell how Miami, the city, is separate from Miami Beach, which is an island; of swimming and boating on Biscayne Bay and the ocean; of the Dade County Museum, the Miami Wax Museum, the glamorous hotels and restaurants on the ocean front, the Monastery of St. Bernard in Miami, and the transformed mangrove swamp of Miami Beach.

What would such a rambling discussion, a hodgepodge of data taken indiscriminately from visits to both Miami and Miami Beach, actually make clear? The truth is that no single idea confronts the reader because the writer had no definite controlling idea to guide the selection of supporting material. It is true that everything appears to be related to the Miami-Miami Beach area, but related in the way all the stock in a supermarket is related to the store. Unless the shopper knows what foods are needed for a specific occasion, he does not know which to choose from the many items on the shelves. Without a controlling idea, the writer does not know how to select just what will serve his or her purpose best.

Suppose, on the other hand, that the writer had worded the topic sentence like this:

For many Northerners Miami Beach is an ideal winter resort.

Such a topic sentence would limit what might be said about the whole Miami-Miami Beach area to Miami Beach alone and, more especially, to Miami Beach as an *ideal winter* resort. With "ideal" meaning "the best possible exemplification" of *winter* resort, and "winter resort"

meaning "a place to retreat to from the unpleasant, cold northern winter season," the controlling idea *ideal winter resort* directs the writer's selection of materials. The writer will choose only those things that make Miami Beach as a "winter" resort "ideal": sunshine, sandy beaches, miles of warm rolling surf, boating, swimming, surf-riding, and so on.

Recognizing and fixing the controlling idea

As we have seen, every expository paragraph, at least in the early stages of student writing, should begin with a topic sentence which expresses the limited subject matter to be discussed in that paragraph. The controlling idea is the main part of the topic sentence. It is *the* idea, within the frame of reference of the rest of the topic sentence, about which the paragraph is to be written. It may be stated in a single word, a phrase, or a clause.

Because the topic sentence with its controlling idea is a serviceable guide for achieving unity in the paragraph, you should place it first. Then, as you write, you should keep it clearly in mind, allowing it to control what you include and exclude. The topic sentence is your general frame of reference; the controlling idea is your specific focus.

Here is a list of topic sentences, submitted by students; the language stating the controlling idea of each sentence is italicized. By analyzing the sentences, determine just why the italicized elements represent the controlling ideas.

1. The house on Hominy Ridge was *haunted.*
2. For young people today, modern music has a *special appeal.*
3. Life is full of *near misses.*
4. Joe, who grew up with me, has proved to be a *real friend.*
5. *Three definite causes* led to the start of the War of 1812.
6. With the committee calling for a confidence vote, the chairman's *honor* was at stake.
7. An ordinary gas burner is a *simple piece of mechanism.*
8. The unresolved hostility between Israel and its Arab neighbors raises a *dangerous threat to international peace.*
9. Our hopes of winning the championship depend upon *whether our versatile star quarterback, Joe Smith, will be eligible to play.*
10. *Becoming a doctor* was Mary's primary desire.
11. History *repeats itself.*
12. The combination of Na, a dangerous chemical element, with C1, another dangerous element, produces a substance *essential to the human body.*
13. *Save* me.
14. Save *me.*
15. Save me *first.*
16. A program of space travel involves *great expense.*
17. A program of space travel involves *much scientific study.*
18. A program of space travel involves *specialized training of human astronauts.*
19. A program of space travel involves *whatever a nation is willing to invest in order to bring it to a successful conclusion.*
20. What is *jazz?* [When a topic sentence is expressed in the form of a question, the writer is probably thinking of the idea of the sentence in its declarative form; for instance, "What is *jazz?*" may be thought of as "I can tell you *what jazz is,*" or "I intend to discuss *what jazz is.*"]

Failure to recognize the controlling idea of a topic sentence or failure to include one in the sentence is likely to result in digressions and irrelevancies that seriously weaken the paragraph. Make it a point to fix your topic sentence and its controlling idea clearly in mind and to carry out the commitment it makes.

EXERCISES

A. Copy the following topic sentences and underline the words that express the controlling ideas. Be able to defend your choices.

1. First-aid measures taken in the first four minutes after a heart attack occurs can be critically important.
2. Luck may often be the deciding factor in a game.
3. A standard dictionary is a very serviceable tool.
4. An astronaut's space capsule is a miniature laboratory.
5. Sarasota, according to statistics, is the fastest growing winter resort on Florida's west coast.
6. The decathlon progressively tests an athlete's endurance.
7. What is capital punishment?
8. The slogan of Maxwell House coffee, "Good to the last drop," appeals to the inveterate coffee drinker.

9. Spelunking is a dangerous hobby.

10. While Boston and little Concord were moving forward, Salem, like most of the other seaports stricken by the War of 1812, had lapsed into quietude and decay.

B. Revise the following sentences so that each contains a *definite* controlling idea, appropriately limited, for a paragraph of about 150 to 200 words. Underline your controlling idea.

1. Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* is certainly a good book.

2. Every man has his rights.

3. In these days a high-school education is really not enough.

4. An important leader of our country was George Washington.

C. Write several sentences of your own that illustrate topic sentences with definite controlling ideas. Underline each controlling idea.

D. Where in the structure of a sentence does the controlling idea usually come? Where else may it come? Write several sentences illustrating the various positions in a sentence in which a controlling idea may be used.

UNIFIED SUPPORT OF THE CONTROLLING IDEA

A well-developed paragraph results from the writer's keeping constant control of materials and procedure. The topic sentence with its controlling idea must be fully developed, or explained. The explanation takes the form of supporting statements. Some of these statements are likely to be more important than others; all of them, however, must apply to the topic sentence that has been stated. More specifically, they must convince the reader by proving the controlling idea in its relation to the rest of the topic sentence. Any statement that does not fulfill this purpose will destroy the unity of the paragraph.

Major support

Once you have a definite controlling idea clearly fixed in mind, what is the next step? You should select from all you know about your subject such information as you need to support your controlling idea in its relation to the rest of the topic sentence. The controlling idea should be used to sort and select this information in such a way that everything you put into the paragraph rightfully belongs there. For instance, each sentence in the paragraph might read as a "*because* statement" in support of the controlling idea.

Charles Jones was a *scheming politician.*

☐ because: At picnics near election time in Minisink County he distributed free to prospective voters and their children all the ice cream they could eat.

☐ *because:* He created opportunities to do favors for anyone who could control votes at the polling places in the district.

☐ *because:* He tailored his various business activities to suit forthcoming legislation that he could draft or promote.

Now you should notice two important things about this series of sentences. First, the whole series is unified. When you say that your controlling idea, "scheming politician," is true "*because* . . ." and you then give support or evidence in one-two-three order, your sentences of explanation are likely to be definite supports of the central idea, or controlling idea, of your topic sentence. It follows that your series of sentences will probably be logical and unified, that your paragraph will have one dominant idea throughout, and that every sentence-idea given in support of the controlling idea will be closely related to it. But if one unrelated or irrelevant sentence-idea were to be introduced, the unity of the paragraph would be destroyed. In a flock of white sheep you find unity of color, unity of kind, and unity of impression. If one gray elephant steals into the group, that unity will be disrupted. One "gray-elephant" sentence in a paragraph breaks down the unity that your controlling idea leads the reader to expect.

The second important thing you should note about the "Charles Jones" sentences above is the function of the *because* statements as support of the controlling idea. As readers we may assume from the series of sentences given us by the writer that the three ideas, namely, the one about the "ice cream," the one about "favors," and the one about "business activities," were the most important ideas the writer wanted to use at that time. These three ideas, therefore, are the *major* supporting statements designed to convince the reader of the validity of the controlling idea.

Of course, in composing a paragraph you do not write the word *because* before each sentence. You should, however, *think* the *because* before you express your sentence idea. The *because* is a test for unity—a means to help you fix your attention upon the specific focus you have chosen for the subject area of your topic sentence. By establishing the validity of your controlling idea you may convince your readers; by distorting your focus you will only confuse them. In most paragraphs *because* will serve your purposes very well. On occasion you may prefer to substitute *for instance,* or *specifically,* or *namely,* or some simi-

lar test for the unity of sentence-ideas with respect to the controlling idea. The important point is this: whether you use *because* or a substitute, test each sentence-idea to be used in the paragraph with the same test word.

Sometimes a controlling idea requires a specific number of supporting statements. In the "Charles Jones" topic sentence the controlling idea did not imply a particular number of "proofs" for the validity of the topic sentence. The writer gave three; he might have given ten. But in the following example, the controlling idea calls for *three* effects, and three must be expressed.

The Treaty of Versailles had *three outstanding effects.*

☐ because: First, a League of Nations was formed.

☐ *because:* Second, a reduction of German armaments relieved the whole world from threatened German aggression.

☐ *because:* Third, Germany's colonies were awarded to various nations.

Notice that each of the three sentences serves as a *because* (or "namely") statement in direct support of the controlling idea with reference to "The Treaty of Versailles." In the same way that each *because* statement supported the idea that Charles Jones was a "scheming politician," so, here, each *because* statement directly explains the "outstanding effects" of the Treaty of Versailles. And since the controlling idea, in this particular topic sentence, mentions *three* effects, the writer has given three, not two or five. A topic sentence with its controlling idea, once expressed, obligates the writer to fulfill a given task, and a paragraph is not successfully composed until that obligation is met.

Paragraphs with major support only

In many of the paragraphs you write, you will be able to develop your controlling idea adequately with a series of statements or examples which do not require further explanation or proof. The following paragraph from a book about acting provides an example. The topic sentence is clear and to the point. The examples given in the supporting sentences develop the controlling idea, "variety of roles."

You spontaneously play a variety of different roles in life. Imagine yourself attending a cocktail party given for producers, agents, directors, all in a position to employ you. How you feel, how you dress, how you behave will be a you that is different from the you who goes to a party of friends and colleagues in a loft where you sit guzzling wine and beer, and munching on pretzels, or the you who attends a children's birthday party, or a party given by your parents for their friends. In each situation your very idiom changes, your self-image changes.(1)*

UTA HAGEN *Respect for Acting*

In the next example, the writer backs up the statement in her topic sentence by giving specific facts in support of it.

No leader of the Revolution except George Washington had a more difficult task than the Governor of New Jersey. The state was split almost fifty-fifty between Loyalists and rebels. Morale was a constant problem. Thousands gave up the fight and signed secret agreements with the British to remain neutral in return for a "protection." Others took advantage of the chaos to loot and abuse their neighbors. Still others concentrated on getting rich. In the middle of the war, [Governor] Livingston wrote to Washington: "I am so discouraged by our public mismanagement & the additional load of business thrown upon me by the villainy of those who pursue nothing but accumulating fortunes to the ruin of their country that I almost sink under it."(2)

MARGARET TRUMAN *Women of Courage*

Writing about the habits of birds, one author turned his observations into illustrations of the antics of the chickadee.

Storms with high winds that upset the equilibrium of other birds do not upset chickadees. People out in the rain see the acrobatic chickadee always headed into the wind to prevent rain or snow from being blown under his feathers from behind. In winter, when other birds have taken refuge, he comes out of his nesting hole in the trunk and frolics in a snowstorm. He will zip over to a dripping icicle and, without any support except the sensitive mechanism of wings and tail, catch the drops as they fall off the end of the icicle more neatly than you and I can drink from a fountain.(3)

RUTHERFORD PLATT *The River of Life*

Often a man's character can be highlighted by a story about one of his special weaknesses. Here in a single illustration, made up of nine sentences, the author reveals Tennyson's vanity.

Tennyson, while affecting to dread observation, was none the less no little vain, a weakness of which Meredith gave me this amusing illustration. Tennyson and William Morris were once walking together on a road in the Isle of Wight. Suddenly in the distance appeared two cyclists wheeling towards them. Tennyson immediately took alarm,

* Numbers within parentheses refer to the listing of complete source information appearing on pages 98–100.

and, turning to Morris, growled out, "Oh, Morris, what shall I do? Those fellows are sure to bother me!" Thereupon Morris drew him protectively to his side. "Keep close to me," he said. "I'll see that they don't bother you." The cyclists came on, sped by without a sign, and presently disappeared on the horizon. There was a moment or two of silence, and then Tennyson, evidently huffed that he had attracted no attention, once more growled out, "They never even looked at me."(4)

RICHARD LE GALLIENNE *The Romantic 90's*

In the following paragraph the striking details of a royal spectacular are presented as evidence that spectators could not "keep back gasps of admiration," as stated in the topic sentence.

So gorgeous was the spectacle on the May morning of 1910 when nine kings rode in the funeral of Edward VII of England that the crowd, waiting in hushed and black-clad awe, could not keep back gasps of admiration. In scarlet and blue and green and purple, three by three the sovereigns rode through the palace gates, with plumed helmets, gold braid, crimson sashes, and jeweled orders flashing in the sun. After them came five heirs apparent, forty more imperial or royal highnesses, seven queens—four dowager and three regnant—and a scattering of special ambassadors from uncrowned countries. Together they represented seventy nations in the greatest assemblage of royalty and rank ever gathered in one place and, of its kind, the last. The muffled tongue of Big Ben tolled nine by the clock as the cortege left the palace, but on history's clock it was sunset, and the sun of the old world was setting in a dying blaze of splendor never to be seen again.(5)

BARBARA W. TUCHMAN *The Guns of August*

In this paragraph, the writer adduces a number of facts to prove that competition is not as essential to business success as many believe.

The Shaker communities were a practical demonstration that competition is not necessarily the motivating force either of business success or of improved standards of living. Nothing they made was made primarily for profit. If they built up a good chair business at Mount Lebanon in the middle and latter part of the nineteenth century, if they found ready markets for the livestock raised in Ohio and Kentucky, the flannel manufactured in New Hampshire or the garden seeds and brooms put out by most of the societies, it was not because they had consciously striven for markets, or had produced for profit. Their first aim in any kind of production had been to supply their own needs—make themselves self-supporting and independent of "the world." That was why they had raised and manufactured so many different kinds of things.(6)

MARGARET FELLOWS MELCHER *The Shaker Adventure*

Minor support

In the preceding paragraphs, only major supports are needed. The topic sentence with its controlling idea is developed by one sentence after another, each serving as an individual major support. Even when illustrations are used—which may take more than one sentence—the illustration as a unit is treated as an individual support of the controlling idea. Good paragraphs in magazines and in books and in your own essays can be written with major supporting statements only.

However, it often happens, particularly in paragraphs dealing with complex matters, that a major support sentence will need one or more additional sentences to clarify its meaning. A sentence containing facts, examples, or other evidence that clarifies or explains the meaning of a major support sentence is called a *minor* supporting sentence.

Suppose, for example, that you were developing the following topic sentence:

In the early 1970s, many public schools faced a doubtful survival.

Your major supporting statements might be these:

☐ *because:* Financial funds to maintain services were inadequate.

☐ *because:* In many instances the level of instruction was dangerously eroded.

☐ *because:* A general enervation of morale in the school community militated against successful instruction.

It is evident that each of these support sentences will be more meaningful to your reader if you back it up with facts, reasons, or examples. These minor supporting sentences will directly relate to the major statement that precedes them and indirectly to the topic sentence. Your overall purpose is to convince your intended reader of the validity not only of the major statement that is being supported but also of the controlling idea of the paragraph itself. (The chart on page 9 shows in diagrammatic form how this double relationship works out.)

In the early 1970s, many public schools faced a *doubtful survival.*

☐ *because:* Financial funds to maintain services were inadequate.

because: Voters repeatedly rejected levies to provide money for teachers' salaries and basic maintenance.

because: National and state austerity programs cut off normal emergency funds for public schools.

☐ *because:* In many instances the level of instruction was dangerously eroded.

because: Many teachers quit or struck because of salary differences.

because: Teaching loads became inordinately high, and the quality of instruction was consequently lowered.

☐ *because:* A general enervation of morale in the school community militated against successful instruction.

because: Student respect for teachers and teacher solidarity in the profession became undermined by reactionary forces.

because: Local agencies of control were often unable to stop vandalism and rowdyism except temporarily.

Each of the three major statements gives a good reason for the truth of the controlling idea. In turn, each major statement has two minor supporting statements. The *because* test has been applied to each of the major statements and to each of the minor statements. Each minor statement develops its major statement in terms of the controlling idea and the purpose of the paragraph. As a result, *all* the sentence-ideas are closely related to the topic sentence, to the controlling idea, and to each other. Now, if you remove the word *because* from each sentence and write the sentences, one after the other, in paragraph form, you will have a unified paragraph. And that's just what is wanted.

Such a unified series of statements is not achieved without great care. It requires clear thinking and checking at each step in the development of the thought. If one unrelated or irrelevant sentence-idea is introduced, the unity of the paragraph is destroyed.

To keep firm control over the writing of a paragraph, you may find help in the analysis illustrated in the chart. For a paragraph beginning with a controlling idea, followed by major supporting statements, each of which is followed by minor supporting statements, your checking procedure may go something like the chart on page 9.

The chart shows how the major statement directly supports the controlling idea and the rest of the topic sentence and how the minor supporting statements not only support the major statement but also carry forward the whole thought that the topic sentence with its controlling idea seeks to develop. Such interrelationship of sentence-ideas makes for unity in the paragraph.

Finally, a very important word of caution! All too often a student carelessly admits into a paragraph something that looks like a *minor* supporting statement but is actually irrelevant. For example, let's go back to the three major statements supporting the controlling idea about the doubtful survival of the public schools. For the first major support suppose you gave as a minor supporting statement: "Levies in recent years had been generous," or "Voters attended meetings held by the Boards of Education and expressed their dissatisfaction with the way schools were being run." Such statements may seem related to the general idea of "inadequate funds" in the major statement, but these sentences *as written* do not indicate that the public schools are in any real danger of extinction. Since the controlling idea of the paragraph in which the minor statement is to be used says, "In the early 1970s, many public schools faced a *doubtful survival,*" the minor statement must support not only the major statement to which it most closely belongs but also the controlling idea of the paragraph of which it is a part. Unless the minor statement does *both* services at the same time, it is very likely to be irrelevant and out of unity.

When you prepare to write a paragraph, or even after you begin, you must decide whether the development of its central thought requires only a series of major statements or whether it requires minor supporting materials as well. In courses in government, political science, sociology, and history, brief answers to questions like "What were the chief political causes of the French Revolution?" or "What were the chief sociological causes of the Peasants' Revolt in 1381?" might involve only three or four major supports. But suppose the teachers in the same courses introduced a question with such words as *discuss, explain,* or *analyze.* Words like these are cues that the teacher expects not only major supporting statements but also minor supporting statements as well.

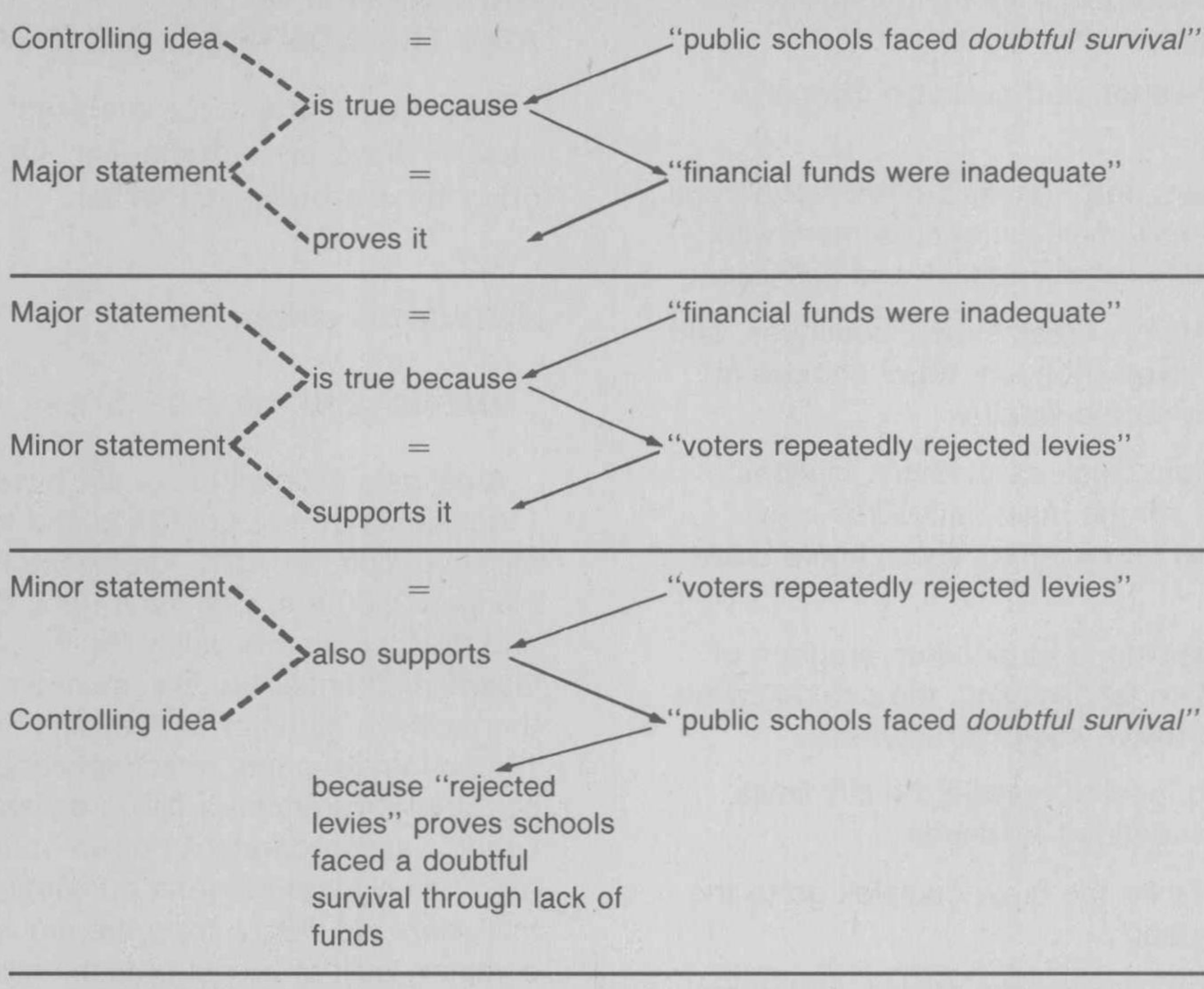
The relation of major and minor support

Here is a two-part rule to follow, for the present at least, as you develop a paragraph that begins with a definite controlling idea:

1. *Every* major supporting statement in the paragraph should be a direct and definite explanation of the controlling idea stated in the topic sentence.
2. *Every* minor supporting statement should explain its major statement *in terms of the controlling idea.*

EXERCISES

A. Under the heading "major support," list, from the following paragraph, the numbers of those sentences that serve as major supporting statements, and then under "minor support," list the numbers of those used as minor supporting statements:



[Additional *minor* statements should be checked in a similar way.]

TO USE THIS CHART:

1. *Read down the left and middle columns by following the dotted lines:* The controlling idea . . . is true because . . . major statement . . . proves it.
2. *Read down the right and middle columns by following the arrows:* "public schools faced *doubtful survival*" is true because → "financial funds were inadequate" → proves it.
3. *Combine both columns:* The controlling idea ("schools faced doubtful survival") ■ is true because ■ major statement ("financial funds were inadequate") ■ proves it.

The Treaty of Versailles had three outstanding effects. [1] First, a League of Nations was formed. [2]By uniting, the member nations would keep peace among themselves and would aid one another if an attack came from an outside enemy. [3]Submitting their own disputes to the League Council for arbitration would reduce the possibility of armed conflict. [4]Second, the reduction of German military strength relieved the whole world of the threat of German aggression. [5]Commissions of control, appointed by the Allies, entered Germany and supervised the execution of the disarmament clauses of the treaty. [6]The Allies destroyed great stores of armaments, munitions, and war supplies and sent investigating teams into areas suspected of hiding or manufacturing such materials. [7]The Allies also dismantled Germany's navy with the exception of a few ships and set about reducing naval personnel to 15,000 men. [8]Third, Germany's colonies became the spoils of various nations. [9]Her African holdings went to France and Great Britain. [10]Shantung, China, which Germany had seized, became a prize of Japan.

B. The following sentences are taken in order from a paragraph that discusses three outstanding effects of a new mall just outside a city's limits. The topic sentence is stated first; then each sentence-idea is listed and numbered. You are to list the numbers in the order in which they are given and assign to each the test word *(because)* for identifying the major and the minor supports. Also, you are to circle the numbers representing the minor supporting statements. If any sentence is out of unity, check it with an X and write "Out of unity."

TOPIC SENTENCE: A new suburban mall, just outside a city's limits, has three definite effects on the urban community.

1. First, it has a novelty that attracts not only shoppers but also the curious.
2. People enjoy just visiting the colorful, modern shops that line the covered concourse.
3. Seventy stores with their great variety of merchandise are easily and quickly accessible to all.
4. After a long day's shopping an entire family can visit