



The Well-Structured Paragraph

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To
GERALD WARNER BRACE
with
affection and admiration

PREFACE

Most students will never become professional writers, nor do they even aspire to. But they must communicate regularly in writing — with their professors through term papers and essay examinations; with their fellow students through official announcements, committee reports, and articles for campus publications; with businesses and future employers through letters; and even with themselves through classroom notes which they set aside for later reference. The need to master simple expository techniques is therefore as real and immediate to all students as the requirement to study formal rhetoric seems dreary and unreasonable to some. Further discouragement often comes from difficult prose models set up by English teachers of good will, who themselves perceive the best in literature and arbitrarily urge insecure students to emulate the balance of a Woodrow Wilson, the logic of a Paul Tillich, the antithesis of a George Bernard Shaw, or the imagery of a James Joyce. This book, then, operates on the assumption that those students who are intimidated by illustrative material which they cannot understand will more certainly respond to and profit from the competent if not brilliant writing of their peers.

Another assumption, offered more hesitantly, is that some students will develop a degree of self-confidence if encouraged to begin with the shortest expository unit — the paragraph — before attempting a longer composition. The teachers who disagree with me — and I anticipate many — may prefer to assign Part III of

this book before Parts I and II. Or they may be willing to consider an earlier textbook, *12 Steps to Better Exposition*, which treats the process of composition more traditionally.

The sample material here was collected over a period of years, but the ideas are of still earlier origin, dating at least to my own eighth grade experience under a remarkable English teacher, the late Miss Nell Rosser. Other outstanding teachers who have contributed to my philosophy of composition are Miss Millie Allen, Miss Phyllis Tregeagle, Prof. Myrtle Austin, Prof. Robert A. Crabtree, Prof. Brewster Ghiselin, Prof. Irving H. White, and Prof. Gerald Warner Brace, the last to whom this work is affectionately dedicated. More recent ideas stem from my students and colleagues at the University of Utah, particularly Mrs. Kathleen Darley of the Division of Continuing Education, who contributed sample material along with encouragement and sound judgment. Additional samples came from the files of my helpful, understanding, and incredibly patient husband, Prof. J. D. Williams of the Political Science Department. To all of these people I express appreciation for their wisdom and apologies for ways in which I might seem to misinterpret their points of view.

Last-minute clerical assistance came from Mrs. Mable Brooner, who proved both able and cooperative. To her, as well, I offer my thanks.

B.W.W.

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PART I

PARAGRAPH ELEMENTS

CHAPTER 1

FOOD FOR THOSE HUNGRY PARAGRAPHS

What do teachers consider the most serious weakness of student composition? Poor spelling? Awkward grammar? Careless punctuation? No. Mechanical errors merely slow down the process of communication. The average reader—if he doesn't become too disgusted to try—can usually figure out that “recieve” means “receive” and that “All the children was late” means “All the children were late.” What the reader can't always figure out are two far more serious problems: (1) those ideas which are so badly garbled in the process of getting on paper that they say something very different from what the writer intended; (2) those ideas which stay forever in the writer's head, never getting on paper at all.

The first problem—garbled and ambiguous prose—is nearly always the result of fuzzy thinking and therefore is not easily discussed in a textbook. Consequently, the purpose of this book will be to deal with the second problem by showing how to get ideas on paper, or in other words, how to feed the hungry and sickly paragraphs which too frequently occur in student writing. The following example, taken from a freshman theme, is typical:

- [1] Autonomous centers for African studies should be established on college campuses. This would be an extremely worthwhile pro-

ject. I feel it is high time that attention be brought to the study of Afro-American history. The American Negroes have been forced to accept the white man's culture and conform to our rules of society long enough. We have robbed them of their unique and curious ways of life. Their history is an interesting one which is often hidden under the carpet. It cannot be given proper consideration in one or two pages of an American history book. Much can be learned from the hardships of our African brothers. Therefore, I advocate African studies on college campuses.



Whether or not the conclusions expressed by the student writer in the above paragraph are valid, his arguments are not very convincing. Closer inspection reveals that the opinions are feeble because they are starving for some kind of paragraph nourishment: details, examples, anecdotes, analogies, or some other kind of sustenance discussed in Part II of this book. None of the sentences in the paragraph above provides any calories, but each is a generalization crying for food:

Autonomous centers for African studies
should be established on college campuses.

1st general statement

This would be an extremely worthwhile project.

re-phrasing of 1st
general statement

I feel it is high time that attention be brought
to the study of Afro-American history.

re-phrasing of 1st
general statement

The American Negroes have been forced to accept the white man's culture . . .	2nd general statement
. . . and conform to our rules of society long enough.	re-phrasing of 2nd general statement
We have robbed them . . .	re-phrasing of 2nd general statement
. . . of their unique . . .	3rd general statement
. . . and curious ways of life.	re-phrasing of 3rd • general statement
Their history is an interesting one . . .	re-phrasing of 3rd general statement
. . . which is often hidden under the carpet.	re-phrasing of 2nd general statement
It cannot be given proper consideration in one or two pages of an American history book.	4th general statement
Much can be learned from the hardships of our African brothers.	5th general statement
Therefore, I advocate African studies on college campuses.	re-phrasing of 1st general statement

In good writing every generalization is vigorous and healthy because it is well fed. But repeating a request for food is not the same thing as providing it. To re-structure this material, the student might use the 1st general statement as the thesis for an entire paper. The 2nd, 3rd, and 5th general statements could then function as topic sentences for four additional paragraphs, and the 4th general statement might serve as an illustration in support of the 2nd. Probably one or two additional generalizations (with supporting evidence) would provide continuity and depth. Now, what kinds of nourishment can the student writer provide for the hungry mouths which hang gaping before him? What are some substantial facts, examples, or arguments he might use?

Or consider another student paragraph:

- 2** As long as campus "sit-ins," "walk-outs," boycotts, or verbal protests do not inflict harm on people or property, I am in favor of

them. It is when they lead to violence that demonstrations are to be condemned. Such violence is often caused by a few trouble-makers, who are usually students without any real goals in life. Most demonstrators, however, are students with honest grievances against the institutions. The demonstrations are the students' cries to be heard and to be helped. The cries are usually against school policies that are no longer applicable to the present campus situations. By demonstrating, the students can get the attention of the administrations involved.

Does this paragraph contain any evidence, or is it comprised—like the one which precedes it—of a string of general statements? Have any generalizations been repeated? Could the order of the sentences be improved? Can you see some ways of providing nourishment for the opinions expressed here? Does the paragraph contain too many opinions to be treated in a single paragraph?

Part II of this book will suggest specific methods for the care and feeding of paragraphs, but before looking at them, you may find it useful to learn more about paragraph anatomy. Chapters 2 and 3 will describe this interesting organism, the paragraph.

CHAPTER 2

UNITY THROUGH THE TOPIC SENTENCE AND CONTROLLING IDEA

Most of the writing you will do in college will be explanation—how Shakespeare’s “Hamlet” reflects English rather than Danish society, how the various courts of law function within our democratic system, what adaptations mammals have made in their evolution from life in the sea. In this kind of writing, known technically as *exposition*, your purpose is to enlarge the reader’s understanding of something by sharing your own knowledge with him. Because exposition *explains*, it always provides both information and value judgments. It differs, therefore, (1) from news reporting, which *informs* only (without value judgments or opinions); (2) from narration, which *shows* human beings acting out events (without an obvious overriding judgment); and (3) from description, which *details* the physical properties of something (with or without any statement of opinion). Within these four kinds of prose—exposition, news reporting, narration, and description—the paragraph has different functions and different structures, as shown in the chart on pages 8 and 9.

In exposition, each paragraph must explain an idea. And because a sentence or two can seldom explain anything, most

Kind of Paragraphs	Purpose of Paragraphs	Length of Paragraphs	Content of Paragraphs	Special Qualities of Whole Composition
Expository	Signifies a logical unit.	Fairly consistent throughout composition (about 100-200 words).	Topic sentence (or central idea) plus specific evidence in 3 or more supporting sentences.	Composition calls for logical arrangement with introduction, body, conclusion.
		Shorter paragraphs used sparingly and only for (1) transition, (2) summary, (3) emphasis.		
Narrative	Signifies a unit of the story or a change of the speaker in dialogue.	Very short to very long.	No topic sentence required because material calls for time order, not logical order.