

The Place of the Paragraph in Written Composition: Description, Structure, Cohesion and Kinds

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The reasons why students should be required to do composition at University are so obvious as to hardly need enumerating. It is a facet of language learning that is unjustly ignored, the Cinderella of the linguistic skills. It is generally shelved at the end and where possible ignored and, yet, how can a person be said to be educated in his own or a foreign language unless he knows how to write it? And, however, God knows, the reasons why composition writing is so ignored are not difficult to find: it is difficult work even with small classes and this difficulty is exacerbated by the proliferation of student numbers. The bravest cannot be blamed if they quail when confronted with a veritable sea of faces, which portend a veritable mountain of work to be corrected.

Also, composition, to be effective must be continuous and progressive, going from step top step, from difficulty to difficulty. P. B. Ballard in his book *Teaching and Testing English*¹, gives the figures of the weekly number of words written in composition by American and British students as between 430 and 680. Though foreign-language students could not be expected to reach this figure, it gives one an idea of the effort that must be put into it by both students and teacher.

Another reason why composition must be taught is that the standard is abysmally low not only, one is gratified to hear, in this country but in the United States, as Donald J. Lloyd writes in his article, «Our National Mania for Correctness».

«...almost any university professor, turning the spotlight with some relief from himself and his colleagues to his students, will agree that their writing stinks to high heaven too. It is a rare student who can write what he has to write with simplicity, lucidity and euphony, those qualities singled out by Somerset Maugham; far more students are candidates for a remedial clinic than can pass a writing test with honours»².

I should think that this estimate of composition-writing ability is fairly representative of any university course where English is taught either as a first or second language.

1. P. B. BALLARD, *Teaching and Testing English*, Univ. of London Press, 1962.

2. DONALD J. LLOYD, «Our National Mania for Correctness» in *Essays on Language*, Dean and Wilson, Eds., O.U.P. New York, 1963, p. 306.

And, yet, paradoxically, never has there been more need for emphasis on this exercise than there is at the present time, as yet another American author, Hulon Willis, states in his *Structural grammar and Composition*:

«American universities are increasingly demanding of their students higher levels of competence in writing. Poor writers are finding it more and more difficult, if not impossible, to graduate from college.. For this reason, the university composition requirement is a highly practical one. No other university course so much affects other courses. As our society becomes more and more complex, fewer and fewer occupations are open to people who cannot write clearly and precisely»³.

When writing competence is thought of, one generally has the composition, or essay, in mind instead of the more humble paragraph and yet there are sound reasons why this unit of writing should be considered first. 1) When the student reaches the last years of the degree course, it is to be supposed and hoped that he has a sufficient grounding in both morphology and sentence structure, but it is to be assumed that he is as yet unskilled in or unable to write full compositions. 2) The paragraph is a transitional step; it is an essay in miniature. As Imhoof and Hudson point out in their book, *From Paragraph to Essay*, paragraphs and essays are quite similar structurally:

Despite their obvious differences in length, the paragraph and essay are quite similar structurally. For example, the paragraph is introduced by a topic sentence In the essay, the first paragraph provides the introductory material and establishes the topic focus. Next, the sentences in the body of a paragraph develop the topic sentence. Similarly, the body of an essay consists of a number of paragraphs that expand and support the ideas presented in the introductory paragraph. Finally, a terminator –whether a restatement, conclusion or observation– ends the paragraph. The essay too, has a device which brings the ideas to a logically and psychologically satisfying completion: the concluding paragraph. Although exceptions to these generalisations may be observed... most well-written expository paragraphs and essays are comparable in structure»⁴.

3) As Professor Shefter points out in his book, *Shefter's Guide to Better Compositions*, learning to write a paragraph is the most important step in learning to write:

«Any discussion of writing improvement must begin with the paragraph because anybody who can learn to write a good paragraph can be taught to write well. Let these words sink in for a few moments. They represent the most significant statement that can be made about the writing process and their basic truth is recognized by every authority in the field. There is no question about it. The paragraph is the key to all writing. It is the material with which you build compositions and, when the occasion demands it, longer essays, chapters, whole books. That's why it is essential that we take a long close look at how good paragraphs are constructed»⁵.

3. HULON WILLIS, *Structural Grammar and Composition*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1967.

4. MAURICE IMHOOF and HERMAN HUDSON, *From Paragraph to Essay*, Longman, 1975, p. 17.

5. HARRY SHEFTER, *Shefter's Guide to Better Compositions*, Washintom Square Books (New York), 1960, p. 74

4) The ability to write paragraphs is particularly important for university students, as Imhoof and Hudson, in the above-mentioned book, quite rightly state:

«The ability to write well organized, concise paragraphs is essential to a student's success in almost all university courses...»⁶.

SOME DEFINITIONS OF THE PARAGRAPH

One of the things that most surprises one when teaching the theme of the paragraph is that so many students lack the grasp or cognizance of what a paragraph really is. So much so is this, that a teacher finds it necessary from time to time to give a definition of the word and concept. Herein lies the second surprise: to learn the many different definitions of the term and concept of paragraph. Forgetting for a moment the various dictionary definitions of the paragraph –which, incidentally, all differ, albeit slightly, one from the other– here are a few definitions and descriptions of the paragraph I came across in grammars and course books when preparing this article:

1. The author and teacher, T. W. Knight, in his *A New Comprehensive English Course*⁷:

«A paragraph is a grouping together of a series of sentences –and they may be few or many in number– which are connected with the development of some single idea, or deal with some single topic».

2. Ann Eljenholm Nichols, in *Advanced Composition for Non-Native Speakers*⁸:

«A paragraph is a struture, an ordered whole, but its organization is primarily logical. It is the organization of ideas, and the organization of a series of sentences that express these ideas... A paragraph does not begin at the left-hand margin but is indented about five spaces (Etymologically, *indent* means to put one's teeth into: thus the first sentence of the paragraph looks as if someone had taken a bite out of it). Each succeeding sentence is written out to the right hand margin. Unless the last sentence ends at the right-hand margin, another white space indicates the end of the paragraph. Thus a white space at the beginning and often one at the end of a sentence signal the beginning and end of the paragraph».

3. In his book, *Structural Grammar and Composition*⁹, Hulon Willis, in a long definition of the paragraph, makes the following points:

«The term paragraph is difficult to define beyond saying that a paragraph is a unit of composition set off by indentation, for paragraphs vary widely according to the kind of writing involved... But in the kind of expository writing college students are called upon

6. *Op. cit.*, p. 6.

7. T. W. KNIGHT, *A New Comprehensive English Course*, U.L.P. 1959.

8. ANN ELJENHOLM NICHOLS, *English Syntax: Advanced Composition for Non Native Speakers*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965.

9. *Op. cit.*

to do, a good deal can be said about the nature of the paragraph. Most specifically, it can be said that indentation alone does not necessarily make a paragraph... It is what is said about a main point that makes a paragraph in expository writing. So we will define a paragraph as a unit of composition that develops a main point or topic».

4. Finally, these words about the paragraph from a fairly recent article in FORUM are worth quoting:

«The English paragraph tends to be linear. It is organized according to time, space or logic. The logical paragraph presents only one limited idea—the main idea—and this idea is developed by several supporting details. In order to link the independent ideas and details, transitional devices are usually employed, so that the paragraph is coherent. The English paragraph contains two different types of sentences: a *topic* sentence and supporting sentences»¹⁰.

Significantly, many authors of composition courses and writers of text books do not attempt to define or describe a paragraph. This is the case, for example, of Jupp and Milne in their books, *Guided Paragraph Writing* and *Guided Composition Writing*, as of Alexander in his *Essay and Letter Writing*. Neither do Ronald White in his book, *Teaching Written English*, or Mott and García Fernández in their book, *La Composición Escrita en Inglés*, attempt to define what a paragraph is.

To sum up then, my definition of a paragraph, especially of an expository paragraph of the kind that students are asked to write, would be: «a group of related sentences developing a single theme or topic to form a unit complete in itself. The first sentence is indented and each succeeding sentence is written out to the right-hand margin, except the last sentence, which may end before».

Here is an example of a model paragraph—one of the many I could have chosen—from a book on paragraph writing¹¹:

«Perhaps it is because of its terrifying teeth that the shark has always been one of man's most hated and feared enemies. Located beneath its snout, the shark's mouth contains between four and six rows of teeth, but these may number up to twenty-four rows in some species. The teeth are embedded in the gums and gradually move forward as they are used. Eventually these large teeth drop out and are replaced by new teeth moving up from behind them. It is possible for one species of shark to produce up to 24,000 teeth over a ten-year period. This awesome dental equipment produces a jagged crescent-shaped bite».

LENGTH OF THE PARAGRAPH

This is always a difficult point to decide because the length of a paragraph will depend on different factors: for example, in journalistic writing, in newspapers, paragraphs

10. NATSUMI ONAKI, «Developing Paragraph Organization Skills», FORUM, July, 1984, p. 15.

11. MARTIN L. ARANAUDET, and MARY ELLEN BARRETT, *Paragraph Development: A Guide for students of English as a Second Language*, Prentice Hall, 1981. p. 27.

are short, with an average of one or two sentences. This also happens in adventure-type narrative, where events occur in rapid succession. On the other hand, in scientific debate or learned discourse, in what is sometimes called «heavy writing», paragraphs will be much longer. In the same essay, beginning and ending paragraphs will be shorter than middle ones.

On the average, in discursive writing, in essays, which do not include dialogue or letter writing, paragraphs should neither be too long nor too short. Only four of the many works of reference I consulted when preparing this article had anything to say about the suitable length for the composition paragraph. Hulon Willis¹² advises students to write paragraphs averaging between 150-200 words. «A shorter paragraph», he says, «is likely to be underdeveloped. A longer paragraph usually needs to be divided into two parts, for overlong paragraphs become fatiguing to a reader just as overlong sentences do».

T. W. Knight¹³ also warns against the use of too long paragraphs and makes the following point:

«The natural pause the eye and mind make between one paragraph and another provides a welcome interval and rest for them both. How often do we abandon, or never start, the reading of an article or essay whose paragraphs take up a whole column or page?».

Forester and Steadman in their book, *Writing and Thinking*¹⁴, advise against «short, choppy» paragraphs as also against «unduly long» ones. For them, the ideal paragraph should be no less than 100 words and no more than 250. Ann Eljenholm Nichols considers that expository paragraphs, such as students write, should average between 100 and 200 words, that is to say, from six to eight sentences. Professor Shefter doesn't pronounce on this point, but in the numerous examples of paragraphs in his book the average length is between 75 and 100 words.

When I set exercises in paragraph writing for the students, I advise them to write paragraphs of an average of about 100 words, as this is a manageable length. They should take into consideration that each paragraph will contain about five or six sentences and that the average length of the English sentence is 20 words, unlike the Spanish sentence, which tends to be much longer. The important thing, however more than the actual number of words, as all the reference works indicate, is that students should develop a «paragraph sense» in the same way they develop a «sentence sense», and that their written work should have that segmented «paragraph look».

Paragraph Construction:

Just as the paragraph is structurally similar to the essay, it also, as Shefter points out, bears a structural resemblance to the sentence. The sentence has a *subject*, which tells what we are talking about, a *verb*, which tells what we are saying about the subject, and

12. *Op. cit.*

13. *Op. cit.*

14. NORMAN FORESTER, and J. M. STEADMAN, *Writing and Thinking*, Riverside Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 1952.

modifiers, which provide the finishing touches. In the same way, the paragraph has a *topic sentence*, corresponding to the *subject*, *related* or *subordinate* sentences corresponding to the *verb*, and a *concluding sentence*, corresponding to the modifiers. It should be possible, Shefter says, theoretically, to expand any sentence, however short, into a paragraph¹⁵.

The sentence in any paragraph which is equivalent to the *subject* in the sentence is called the *topic* or *key* sentence. All of the reference works which I have consulted, and which are mentioned above, save those which do not define the paragraph, speak of and define the *topic* sentence. A typical definition is that by Ely J. Marquez in her article, «Teaching Grammar and Paragraph Structure Simultaneously»:

«The topic sentence summarises a narration or description as a single event. The succeeding sentences within the paragraph go over the same ground to retell the narration in a series of events, or the description as a bundle of details»¹⁶.

Forester and Steadman develop the definition of the topic sentence a little further; they state:

«As the reader passes from paragraph to paragraph, the topic sentences inform him promptly of the changes in subject matter. It is not their function, of course to state everything that the paragraph contains, nor, even, in most cases to summarise the contents of the paragraph: their object is simply to point out the thought to be developed—to state the topic»¹⁷.

The topic is generally placed first thing in the paragraph and this is the easiest place for beginning writers to put it, but as they progress in proficiency, they can experiment with different placings. T.W. Knight suggests putting the topic sentence at the end of the paragraph to heighten the dramatic effect, much as the periodic sentence achieves the same effect by putting the main clause last.

L.G. Alexander, in his book *Essay and Letter Writing*, doesn't mention the topic sentence by name, but among the snippets of advice he gives his students, is to «save the most interesting part of the paragraph for the end or near the end»¹⁸. By this, one surmises, he means the topic sentence, though in the specimen paragraphs he writes, what one could call the topic sentence comes at the beginning in every case.

Shefter says that the topic sentence «carries the punch», and continuing with the boxing metaphor, he considers it a good strategy not to use it always in the same place, but to surprise the reader with it, by using it at the beginning, middle or end. Although it is not recommended that students should experiment with the placement of the topic sentence until they are quite proficient, it is useful for them to be able to identify it when it is located in different parts of the paragraph.

15. *Op. cit.*, p. 77.

16. ELY J. MARQUEZ, «Teaching Grammar and Paragraph Structure Simultaneously», FORUM, n. 3, July, 1981, pp. 14-17.

17. *Op. cit.*

18. L. G. ALEXANDER, *Essay and Letter Writing*, Longman, 1965.

This brings us to the next point: the subordinate sentences which develop the paragraph –their type, their function and the cohesive devices that are used to link them together..

In a book which I have previously cited, *From Paragraph to Essay*¹⁹ the authors identified four different types of sentences inside the the paragraph: the paragraph *introducers* (which are synonymous with the topic sentence), the paragraph *developers*, which present «examples or details of various kinds that support the ideas set forth by the paragraph introducers». Then they mention the paragraph *modulators*, sentences that provide» a smooth transition between different sets of ideas». Finally, there are the paragraph *terminators*, which conclude the paragraph in a «logical and psychologically satisfying manner». Not all paragraphs the authors say, contain all these types of sentences, but most «successful» paragraphs contain some combination of these four sentence types.

In my opinion, however, if a paragraph is supposed to contain only *one* idea, it is incorrect to speak of sentences which modulate between one idea and another. In whatever case, the transition between one idea and the next would be carried out by the paragraph terminators. None of the other reference books I consulted mention paragraph «modulators», but most of them identify paragraph developers and terminators.

First, a word about the paragraph *terminators*. Not all paragraphs will have paragraph terminators; for example, those in which the topic sentence comes last. There is simply no place in such paragraphs to put in a terminator. Professor Shefter suggests three different types of typical paragraph endings: the most common he calls the *standard*, in which the topic sentence is restated or summarized; another is the *short sentence* type, which may sometimes be a rhetorical question, and the third is the *foreshadowing* type, which provides a transition between one paragraph and another and which would be similar to what the authors of *From Paragraph to Essay* called «modulators»²⁰.

Anita Pincas in her book, *Teaching English Writing*²¹, gives a list of twelve kinds of paragraph terminators, which she calls «endings». Some of them, for example «quotation», «anecdote», or «poetry» seem to me to be packing too much into a simple paragraph and would be more suitable as a concluding gambit for an essay. Others, like two short parallel sentences, or two short contrasting sentences, or a false statement. which is obviously seen to be so, are interesting possibilities, but are rhetorical devices difficult for students to manage.

The paragraph developers or the *middle* sentences are those which form the bulk and those on which the writer must impose order. They lead the thought as Forester and Steadman²² say, «from somewhere to somewhere else». In a paragraph, these authors claim, these sentences should each have «a place of its own and a place so plainly its own that it could not be shifted to another place without losing coherence». Order, or coherence, requires a steady forward movement, and the kind of order to be employed will depend on the type of paragraph.

19. *Op. cit.*, p. 1.

20. *Op. cit.*

21. ANITA PINCAS, *Teaching English Writing*, Macmillan (London), 1982.

22. *Writing and Thinking, op. cit.*

In narrative writing the order is chronological, i. e. from an earlier to a later date; in descriptive writing, it is from place to place, or from one part to another part. In argumentative or expository paragraphs it will be, these authors say, of four kinds: i) from greater to lesser value, ii) from the familiar to the unfamiliar, iii) from the general to the particular, and iv) from the particular to the general.

COHERENCE

A Paragraph can be the right length, have the right shape, possess a clear topic sentence, which is perfectly developed by the subordinate sentences, and be rounded off by an appropriate terminator, and yet not be satisfactory. This is because it lacks cohesion; lack of cohesion, sometimes loosely called «grammatical mistakes», or «omission», or «faulty phrasing», is what mars otherwise perfectly good paragraphs; in other words, without the necessary cohesive devices these paragraphs are not complete in meaning. They are not *texts*.

A text, as described by Halliday and Hassan, in their book. *Cohesion in English*²³, is «...best regarded as a semantic unit; a unit not of form but of meaning. Thus, it is related to a clause or sentence not by size but by realization. A text does not consist of sentences. It is *realized by* or encoded in sentences...».

A paragraph, then, which, contains the correct cohesive ties –all other things being equal– is complete in itself; in other words, it can be qualified as a *text*, or as we say, in non-technical terms, it «holds together». The cohesive devices that make a text –a paragraph in this case– hold together, are grammatical and lexical. The most common are, with respect to grammar signals, *reference*, *substitution*, *ellipsis* and *conjunction*. With respect to vocabulary signals, they are: *synonymy*, *repetition*, and the use of *general words* (or *superordination*). The grammatical signals can be further broken down into subordinate categories.

Although students can subconsciously recognize these linkers when they read a text, they are averse to using them, or rather, not confident enough to use them in writing. They tend to overwork certain conjunctive linkers, like «and» or «because», as for example, in these two sentences from students' paragraphs:

- 1) When the cake is ready take it out of the oven *and* out of the mould *and* let it get cool (don't put it the fridge) *and* help yourself.
- 2) I didn't get up in time *because* I overslept *because* I forgot to wind the clock.

Misuse of reference is even more common than that of conjunction. Reference errors are of all kinds –*personal*, *demonstrative* and *comparative*– and they occur especially when the sentences are long and the student hasn't a clear idea of what he wants to say. At worst these errors are serious grammatical mistakes and at best they are annoying and

23. M. A. K. HALLIDAY, and R. HASSAN, *Cohesion in English*, Longman, 1976.

ambiguous; sometimes they are all three. They can be amusing too, unconsciously, of course.

It is less common, perhaps, but also, irritating to come across a paragraph opening with an *anaphoric* demonstrative, the reference to which is later left unexplained. Examples are these first sentences from students' paragraphs:

- 1) *That* day was special for Robert.
- 2) He knew he had to spend his life in *that* room.

This use of anaphora supposes a knowledge of what had happened before the action of the paragraph began, but in these examples, as in the majority of similar mistakes, we are not afforded the privilege of learning either what «that» day was and what was special about it, or where «that» room was and what it would be like living in it.

It is pleasant, however, to come across paragraphs where the cohesive devices are effectively used, as in the following one from a student's composition about giving and receiving presents:

«Love is a wonderful feeling. One of our most pleasant tasks is to demonstrate *this* to the people that surround *us*. There are many ways of doing *this*. A present sometimes says what you dare not *say*. There is a portion of yourself in the *thing that you give*».

The underlined words here achieve cohesion very effectively. In the second sentence, the anaphoric «this» refers back to the whole first sentence, or possibly just to the word «love»; and in the same sentence «us» links up with «our». In the third sentence, «this» refers back to the ideas included in the first two. In the fourth sentence there is effective repetition of the verb «say» and, in the last we have an even more striking use of synonymy, where the student uses «the thing that you give» to refer back to «present» in the previous sentence.

Finally, both *substitution* and *ellipsis* are cohesive devices which sometimes give trouble, not because they are difficult but simply because the student forgets to use them. This is all the more surprising, especially in the case of substitution, since the substitutive, elements are only five or six in number: i.e. *one, same, do, so not*, but their omission gives rise to the commonly encountered case of tautology, which one has to draw the red pencil through.

KINDS OF PARAGRAPHS

The last point concerns the kind of paragraphs that students are usually asked to compose, as an exercise in paragraph writing, not as part of longer composition. Undoubtedly, the most common are the *narrative* paragraph, the *descriptive* paragraph, the *process* paragraph and the *contrast* paragraph.

Once the student has achieved a grasp of what the paragraph is all about, when he is familiar with its correct form, the right length, the function of the sentence and that of the subordinate sentences and can manage reasonably well the appropriate cohesive devices, the instructions to be given him when writing a narrative, descriptive, contrast or process paragraph are few and simple.

In the narrative paragraph, ideally only narrative verbs should be used and qualifying words should be avoided as far as possible. The narrative should be chronological, that is, going from an earlier to a later date, and usually written in the past tense.

In the descriptive paragraph, the student is asked to employ principally linking verbs and make use of all the descriptive devices he can muster. As Harry Shefter points out, the more kinds of description he can work in, the better—visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile—. If the description is of a person or object, it should move from point to point in ordered progression and not jump about haphazardly.

In the process type paragraph—which describes a process or an action—the student is generally asked to use the imperative mood, or a construction with «you»—the impersonal «one» is another alternative, or even, in some few cases, the passive voice—. For obvious reasons, the simple tense of the verb is used, and the process is described in a logical, chronological sequence.

The contrast paragraph is more difficult for the student to grasp, and in my opinion should not be practised until students have mastered the other types. In this kind of paragraph, which is generally longer than the preceding types, what the student has to do is to contrast two ideas, descriptions or points of view, by using alternative sentences in the same paragraph. It is important that he be able to use the rhetorical and cohesive devices, otherwise the paragraph won't «flow» smoothly. Once they have mastered these, adult students enjoy this kind of paragraph for the intellectual and formal challenge it offers. Other types of paragraph could be enumerated—such as the *definition* paragraph, the *classification* paragraph, the *comparison* paragraph and the *cause and effect* paragraph—but they are basically variations on the above themes.