

## I know you are, but what am I? Topic Sentences and Paragraphs

### **What is the Ideal Arrangement or Natural Flow?**

Glenn and Connors. "Teaching Arrangement and Form"

"We must regularly ask students to recognize the interconnections between form and content and between genre and intention, and we must work to assist them in the subtle task of creating forms that fit their ideas and emphases...Methods of arrangement can provide a rough framework on which to build an essay, but they should neither limit the development of an essay nor demand sections that are clearly unnecessary." (230)

### **What is the Topic Sentence, and what does it do?**

Cohan, Carol. "Writing Effective Paragraphs." College Composition and Communication 27.4 (December 1976): 363-365.

"Defined in manageable terms, the topic sentence is that sentence which implies a *question to be answered by the rest of the paragraph*. To be effective, the topic sentence, a statement of commitment, must elicit this reaction: *prove it to me; tell me why (or how or to what extent or in what way or any other similar question)*." (364)

1. Turn the topic sentence into a topic-sentence question, beginning with *why, how, to what extent* or any other similar question. (A question which elicits a *yes* or *no* answer does not work.)
2. List the answers to that question.
3. Judge each item in the list of answers on the basis of whether the statement *does* or *does not* answer the topic-sentence question.
4. If the statement does answer the topic-sentence, accept it. If it does not, decide whether the information the statement contains must be restructured to deal more directly with the question or whether it must be rejected.
5. Rewrite the accepted items on the list to form smoothly flowing sentences that will build the paragraph. (364-5)

### **Yeah, okay, but what and where is it really?**

Brooks, Cleanth and Robert Penn Warren. *Modern Rhetoric*. Sorter ed. New York: Harcourt, 1961.

"It is frequently said that every paragraph contains a topic sentence, stated or *implied*. A more accurate statement, however, is that some paragraphs have topic sentences and that others do not; for an "implied" topic sentence is one which the reader must construct for himself as a way of summarizing the paragraph in question. Obviously any piece of composition possessing even a minimum of unity may be summed up in some kind of sentence. The "implied" topic sentence, therefore, is an abstraction—a not very useful kind of ghost sentence."

Martin, Harold C. and Richard M. Ohmann. *The Logic and Rhetoric of Exposition*. Rev. ed. New York: Holt, 1963:

“The topic sentence (or thesis statement, as it is sometimes called) is a more or less fictitious entity. It does sometimes make an appearance in so many words, of course, but fully as often it is not something written but what is meant by what has been written. That is, the topic sentence is something a reader extracts from a paragraph and something a writer has in mind as the unity he wants to achieve. The schoolboy notion of a topic sentence as the big firecracker, from which a string of little firecrackers is ignited, has little relationship to the truth.”

### **What is the best we can say about the Topic Sentence?**

Braddock, Richard. “*The Frequency and Placement of Topic Sentences in Expository Writing.*” *Cross-talk in Comp Theory: A Reader*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. Victor Villanueva. Urbana Il: NCTE, 2002. 189-203.

“In my opinion, often the writing in the 25 essays would have been clearer and more comfortable to read if the paragraphs had presented more explicit topic sentences. But what this study does suggest is this: While helping students use clear topic sentences in their writing and identify variously presented topical ideas in their reading, the teacher should not pretend that professional writers largely follow the practices he is advocating.” (202)

D’Angelo, Frank. “*The Topic Sentence Revisited.*” *College Composition and Communication* 37.4 (December 1986): 431-441.

“Readability research demonstrates that if writers use topic sentences or macropropositions to divide a text into meaningful units and to summarize the main ideas in the paragraph that follow, then their readers will recall more of what they have read and will read more efficiently (i.e. faster) than they would if writers presented the same information in a less organized or random fashion. In brief, topic sentences and macropropositions can help writers to organize their ideas more effectively and reader to follow the logical development of the writer’s thoughts.” (438-9)

### **With the Topic Sentence in place, what is the Paragraph, and what does it do?**

“A paragraph is a collection of related sentences dealing with a single topic. Learning to write good paragraphs will help you as a writer stay on track during your drafting and revision stages. Good paragraphing also greatly assists your readers in following a piece of writing. You can have fantastic ideas, but if those ideas aren't presented in an organized fashion, you will lose your readers (and fail to achieve your goals in writing).” ~The OWL at Purdue (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/606/01/>)

### **That’s nice, but how do we write one?**

Christensen, Francis. “*A Generative Rhetoric of the Paragraph.*” *College Composition and Communication* 16.3 (October 1965): 144-156.

“Most paragraphs are like the sentences I called ‘cumulative.’...Let us think of the topic sentence as parallel to the base clause of a sentence and the supporting sentences a parallel to the added single-word modifiers and clusters and subordinate and relative clauses. (1) There could be no paragraphs without *addition*. (2) When a supporting sentence is added, both writer and reader must see the *direction of modification* or *direction of movement*...The failure to see the relation of each upcoming sentence to what has gone before is probably one source of the difficulty many people have in reading. (3) When sentences are added to develop a topic or subtopic, they are usually at a lower *level of generality*. (4) Finally, the more sentences the writer adds, the denser the *texture*. The paragraphs our students write are likely to be as thin-textured as their sentences, and teachers can use this structural analysis of the paragraph to *generate* paragraphs of greater depth.” (145)

Winterowd, W. Ross. “The Grammar of Coherence.” *College English* 31.8 (May 1970): 828-835.

“I argue that there is a set of relationships beyond case and syntax and that this set constitutes the relationships that make for coherence—among the transformational units in a paragraph, among the paragraphs in a chapter, among chapters in a book. I call these relationships transitions, and I claim that beyond the sentence marker...we perceive coherence only as the consistent relationships among transitions.” (830)

“They are expressed in a variety of ways: through coordinating conjunctions, transitional adverbs, and a variety of other moveable modifiers.” (831).

Coordinate: and; obversative: but; causativity: for; conclusivity: so; alternativity: or; inclusivity: colon; sequential: first, second, earlier...later, on the bottom, in the middle, on top.

### **Oh really? I’m not buying what you’re selling.**

Hartwell, Patrick. “Teaching Arrangement: A Pedagogy.” *College English* 40.5 (January 1979): 548-554.

“Teach the paragraph” Flaw: No precise analog in ordinary language, idealized. “By reducing the paragraph to a rule-governed abstraction, we have destroyed its life.” (549)

Rockas, Leo. *Modes of Rhetoric*. New York: St. Martin’s, 1964.

“The paragraph is an arbitrary and conventional unit, susceptible of extensive editorial tampering. Indeed, in recording conversations, the paragraph has not even a conventional status. There the unit is the ‘line’—not the poetic or typographical line, but ‘those chunks of talk that are marked off by a shift of speaker.’ The paragraph is no more bounded than this ‘line’ or ‘utterance unit,’ and includes, according to the whim of author or editor, one to any number of sentences....the paragraph is simply a convenient grouping of sentences. In a progression of sentences a few places will be more suited to indentation than others, but you can justify an indentation before almost any sentence of sophisticated prose.”

Rodgers, Jr. Paul C. "A Discourse-Centered Rhetoric of the Paragraph." *Cross-talk in Comp Theory: A Reader*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. Victor Villanueva. Urbana Il: NCTE, 2002. 175-188.

"Paragraph structure is part and parcel of the structure of the discourse as a whole; a given stadium becomes a paragraph not by virtue of its structure but because the writer elects to indent, his indentation functioning, as does all punctuation, as a gloss upon the overall literary process under way at that point. Paragraphs are not composed; they are discovered. To compose it to create; to indent is to interpret. Accordingly, the qualities of the paragraph can no more be grasped through normative statement than can the qualities of discourse." (180)

### **Hey, what about me? I have to read this stuff.**

Eden, Rick and Ruth Mitchell. "Paragraphing for the Reader." *College Composition and Communication* 37.4 (December 1986): 416-430+441.

"Paragraphs depend for their effectiveness on the exploitation of psycho-linguistic features—that is, of the reader's conventional expectations and perceptual patterns. For example, readers treat the first sentence of a paragraph as the orienting statement necessary for them to understand the rest, regardless of whether the writer so intended. Thus a paragraph does not 'need' a topic sentence; every paragraph has one, willy-nilly." (416-7)

"Paragraphing cannot be completed until the writer has made decisions about his purpose, audience, and rhetorical stance. Because these decisions emerge during the process of composing, we recommend that textbooks and instructors remove paragraphing from the generative stage of writing and place it with revising, even editing. At these stages the writer concentrates on preparing his text for a reader." (417)

### **What is the best we can say about the Paragraph?**

You'll know one when you see one...Good luck!?

### **Other Readings:**

Becker, A.L. "A Tagmemic Approach to Paragraph Analysis." *CCC* 16.5 (December 1965): 237-242.

Broadhead, Glenn J. and James A. Berlin. "Twelve Steps to Using Generative Sentences and Sentence Combining in the Composition Classroom." *CCC* 32.3 (October 1981): 295-307.

Connors, Robert J. "The Erasure of the Sentence." *CCC* 52.1 (September 2000): 96-128.

D'Angelo, Frank. "A Generative Rhetoric of the Essay." *CCC* 25.5 (December 1974): 388-396.

Elbow, Peter. "The Music of Form: Rethinking Organization in Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 57.4 (June 2006): 621-655.

Grady, Michael. "A Conceptual Rhetoric of the Composition." College Composition and Communication 22.5 (December 1971): 348-354.

Hartwell, Patrick. "Teaching Arrangement: A Pedagogy." College English 40.5 (January 1979): 548-554.

Haswell, Richard. "The Organization of Impromptu Essays." CCC 37.4 (December 1986): 402-415.

Podis, JoAnne M. and Leonard A. "Identifying and Teaching Rhetorical Plans for Arrangement." CCC 41.4 (December 1990): 430-442.

Podis, Leonard. "Teaching Arrangement: Defining a More Practical Approach." CCC 31.2 (May 1980): 197-204.