

PART IV

WRITTEN COMPOSITION

CHAPTER 33

PARAGRAPH – WRITING

If you look at any printed prose book, you will see that each chapter is divided up into sections, the first line of each being indented slightly to the right. These sections are called paragraphs. Chapters, essays and other prose compositions are broken up into paragraphs, to make the reading of them easier, for the beginning of a new paragraph marks a change of topic, or a step in the development of an argument or of a story. In writing essays or other compositions, it is important to know how to divide them properly into paragraphs; for an essay not so broken up, looks uninteresting and is not easy to read.

Definition.— A paragraph is a number of sentences grouped together and relating to one topic; or, a group of related sentences that develop a single point.

These definitions show that the paragraphs of a composition are not mere arbitrary divisions. The division of a chapter into paragraphs must be made according to the changes of ideas introduced.

There is, therefore, no rule as to the length of paragraphs. They may be short or long according to the necessity of the case. A paragraph may consist of a single sentence, or of many sentences.

Note.—In this respect, the paragraphs of a piece of prose differ from the stanzas or verses of a poem. The stanzas of a poem are usually of the same length and pattern; but paragraphs are long or short according to the amount of matter to be expressed under each head.

PRINCIPLES OF PARAGRAPH STRUCTURE

1. UNITY.—The first and most important principle to be observed in constructing a paragraph is that of *Unity*. Just as each sentence deals with one thought, each paragraph must deal with *one topic or idea*—and *with no more than one*. In writing an essay, for example, every head, and every sub-head, should have its own paragraph to itself. And every sentence in the paragraph must be closely connected with the main topic of the paragraph. The paragraph and every part of it must be the expression of one theme or topic.

Note.—A good practice is to read a chapter in a book, and give a short heading or title to each paragraph, which will express in a word or brief phrase the subject of the paragraph.

The topic, theme or subject of a paragraph is very often expressed in one sentence of the paragraph—generally the first. This sentence is called the *topical sentence* (because it states the topic), or the *key-sentence* (because it unlocks or opens the subject to be dealt with in the paragraph).

2. ORDER.—The second principle of paragraph construction is *Order*—that is, *logical sequence of thought* or development of the subject. Events must be related in the order of their occurrence, and all ideas should be connected with the leading idea and arranged according to their importance or order.

Note—The two most important sentences in the paragraph are the first and the last. The first, which should as a rule be the topical sentence, should arouse the interest of the reader; and the last should satisfy it. The first, or topical, sentence states the topic—a fact, a statement, or a proposition; the last should bring the whole paragraph on this topic to a conclusion, or summing up.

3. VARIETY.—A third principle of paragraph construction is *Variety*; by which is meant that, to avoid monotony, the paragraph of a composition should be of different lengths, and not always of the same sentence construction.

To sum up :—the essentials of good paragraph construction are— (1) Unity. (2) A good topical sentence. (3) Logical sequence of thought. (4) Variety. (5) A full and rounded final sentence in conclusion.

EXAMPLES

Now let us examine a few paragraphs by standard authors, in illustration of these principles of paragraph construction.

1. "Hence it is that it is almost a definition of a gentleman to say he is one who never inflicts pain. This description is both refined and, as far as it goes, accurate. He is mainly occupied in merely removing the obstacles which hinder the free and unembarrassed action of those about him; and he concurs with their movements rather than takes the initiative himself. His benefits may be considered as a parallel to what are called comforts or conveniences in arrangements of a personal nature, like an easy chair or a good fire, which do their part in dispelling cold and fatigue, though nature provides both means of rest and animal heat without them." —J.E. Newman.

This is a paragraph from Cardinal Newman's famous description of a "Gentleman" in his *The Idea of a University*. Notice that the paragraph is confined to *one point* in the character of a gentleman, which is clearly stated in the first, or *topical sentence viz.*, that "he is one who never inflicts pain." The rest of the paragraph is simply a development and illustration of the topical sentence. And the concluding sentence drives home the statement of the subject with its similes of the easy chair and the good fire.

2. "The Road is one of the great fundamental institutions of mankind. Not only is the Road one of the great human institutions because it is fundamental to social existence, but also because its varied effects appear in every department of the State. It is the Road which determines the sites of many cities and the growth and nourishment of all. It is the Road which controls the development of strategies and fixes the sites of battles. It is the Road that gives its framework to all economic development. It is the Road which is the channel of all trade, and, what is more important, of all ideas. In its most humble function it is a necessary guide without which progress from place to place would be a ceaseless experiment; it is a sustenance without which organised society would be impossible, thus the Road moves and controls all history." —Hilaire Belloc.

In this paragraph, the first sentence states the subject. It is the topical sentence. The body of the paragraph consists of examples which prove the statement in the first sentence. The final sentence sums up the whole.

3. "Poetry is the language of the imagination and the passions. It relates to whatever gives immediate pleasure or pain to the human mind. It comes home to the bosoms and businesses of men; for nothing but what comes home to them in the most general and intelligible shape can be a subject for poetry. Poetry is the universal language which the heart holds with nature and itself. He who has a contempt for poetry cannot have much respect for himself, or for anything else. Wherever there is a sense of beauty, or power, or harmony, as in the motion of a wave of the sea, in the growth of a flower, there is poetry in its birth." —William Hazlitt.

Here again, the first sentence is the topical sentence. The sentences that follow enforce or restate the statement that "poetry is the language of the imagination and the passions"; and the concluding sentence reinforces it by showing that poetry exists wherever men feel a sense of beauty, power or harmony.

In all these paragraphs, the principles of Unity and Order are observed, and also the general rules about the place of the topical sentences and the rounding off the whole with a good conclusion.