

Chapter Two

The Paragraph

The most frequent comment teachers, administrators, and test-scorers make about student writing is, that though full of potential, it lacks organization. According to teacher/writer Carol Jago, most writing instruction lacks “cohesion.” Planning a paragraph is an exercise that can be taught, practiced, and mastered by writers at every level if writing skills are taught in a step-by-step and cumulative manner.

As in sentence writing, you must begin simply. Perform pre-writing activities by making lists of all sorts. This is an invaluable activity. Students then apply to their lists what they have learned about sentences. First, they turn list items into supporting sentences, as these are conceptually the easiest and most concrete. The next step is to have students develop topic sentences. Finally, they learn to create concluding sentences. These sentences (the topic sentence, supporting sentences, and concluding sentence) form the basis of the five-sentence paragraph. Students can then embellish these basic paragraphs with interesting and important details. They will learn to use transitions to lend structure to their writing. Once students have become proficient in paragraph writing, they will be ready to tackle multi-paragraph compositions. Presented in this cumulative and orderly fashion, writing skills are most easily learned and retained.

Prewriting

From the very beginning of the program, students can be writing lists of all sorts. Writing a list, besides being fun, is a way of brainstorming, generating ideas, and unleashing the student’s innate creativity. Like sentence writing, it is a non-threatening activity. A list is a group of similar things or ideas, and the activity provides practice with the sophisticated thinking that depends on perceiving these similarities. A student who has practiced writing lists will not have trouble generating appropriate supporting topics when it comes to paragraphs and compositions.

A list of fifteen items seems to be the right length, but, with an individual student the list can be extended to twenty or limited to ten. Needless to say, at this stage, spelling should be ignored. If a student is still struggling with writing or is especially inhibited, use oral exercises—student and

List Topics

Beginning

Animals with Fur
 Articles of Clothing
 Blue Things
 Books
 Boys' Names
 Breakfast Foods
 Cartoon Characters
 Colors
 Compound Words
 Costumes
 Farm Animals
 Favorite Foods
 Holidays
 Homonyms
 Ice Cream Flavors
 Insects
 Kinds of Sandwiches
 Kinds of Weather
 Movies
 Musical Instruments
 Pets
 Pizza Toppings
 Playground Games
 Red Things
 Relatives
 School Supplies
 Signs of Spring
 Soft Drinks
 Soft Things
 Street Names
 Superheroes
 Sweet Things to Eat
 Things at The Circus
 Things in the Sky
 Things That Are Cold
 Things That Glow in the Dark
 Vegetables
 Ways of Getting Exercise
 Words That Begin with *St*
 Zoo Animals

Intermediate

Ancient Civilizations
 Basketball Teams
 Board Games
 Camping Gear
 CDs You Would Like to Own
 Chores
 Computer Words
 Electronics
 Excuses for Being Late
 Excuses for Not Doing Your Homework
 Famous Women
 Fast Food Restaurants
 Flowers
 Furniture
 Games
 Girls' Names
 Hobbies
 Junk Foods
 Cars
 Dances
 Reptiles
 Kinds of Stores
 Man-Made objects
 Music Groups
 Middle School Subjects
 Souvenirs
 Summer Jobs
 T.V. Shows
 T.V. Stars
 Team Sports
 Things at the Movies
 Things in a Medicine Cabinet
 Things in the City
 Things at the Gym
 Things Made of Paper
 Things That Cost Less Than a Dollar
 Things That Need Batteries
 Video Games

Advanced

African Nations
 Airlines
 Plays
 Books Made into Movies
 Capital Cities
 Car Parts
 Clichés
 College Majors
 Colleges
 Companies
 Cosmetics
 Current Political Issues
 European Nations
 Famous Sayings
 Herbs and Spices
 High School Subjects
 Cheeses
 Languages
 Magazines
 Mottos
 Car Parts
 Careers
 Renaissance Painters
 Signs of Being Sick
 After-School Jobs
 The Planets
 Things on a Resume
 Things People Collect
 Tools
 Art Supplies
 Party Supplies
 Trees
 Benefits of Exercise
 Ways of Saving Money
 Ways of Saying "Hello" in Other Languages
 Ways to Cook Eggs
 Word Pairs (*cup and saucer, lost and found*)
 World Leaders

teacher contributing in turn. Sometimes such a game can fill a couple of minutes left at the end of class or provide a moment of relaxation during a one-on-one session. Many of these lists can encourage a student to exercise his imagination, ingenuity, or humor—several lend themselves readily to subdivision. The following have proved successful, but the best topics are probably those designed for the individual student, or worked out by pupil and teacher in collaboration. Have fun with this prewriting activity, and try to make it fun for your students.

List making is a useful skill when students must choose their topics—if a student cannot come up with five to ten good items for a list, it is a signal that the student should broaden her topic or use one with which she is more familiar.

The lists of topics on page 34 are divided by suggested levels, which correspond to the *Writing Skills* student books. You will, of course, find appropriate topics in each list, regardless of writing level. You may provide a writer struggling with a topic with several from page 34 and have him choose his favorite. Further topics can be found in the *Writing Skills* student books. Keep your own list of ideas, favorite topics, and topics that inspire your students. You may find yourself referring to these master lists again and again.

Supporting Sentences

The next step is to have students select three to five of the best items on their list and turn each one into a sentence. First, have your students reread their list. Then have them put a check mark beside their best items. Next, have students write a complete sentence for each list item they chose.

Order is important. Whenever possible, supporting ideas should be arranged either in chronological order (from first to last) or in order of importance (from least important to most important). The following are student samples of prewriting at this stage.

Student Sample Supporting Sentences: Beginning

List: *Things to drink*

- soda
- ginger ale
- ✓ milkshakes
- apple juice
- milk
- cocoa
- ✓ creamsicle
- ✓ orange juice

Supporting Sentences

Fresh orange juice is great with breakfast.
Creamsicle tastes like ice cream.
Milk shakes are thick and sweet.

Student Sample Supporting Sentences: Intermediate

List: *Things I could not live without*

- ✓ legos
- chocolate T.V.
- ✓ computers
- ✓ my school

Supporting Sentences

Legos expand my creativity.
The computer lets me go on the Internet and chat with other kids.
My school teaches me how to read and write.

At this stage, what counts are the ideas. If you worry too much about mechanics and style, you will miss the point. Remember, this is an exercise in thinking—not in spelling nor in style.

Topic Sentences

Be sure to teach your students what a topic is. The topic is what your paragraph is about. It can be a category or a theme. For instance, if I say “pineapple, banana, mango, papaya” my topic is *fruit*. If I say “take out a book, join a reading club, listen to a CD, and read a magazine” my topic is *things you can do at the library*. When students are writing lists, the heading of the list is also the topic. In order to create a topic sentence, you must change the topic into a sentence. For the topic *fruit*, a good topic sentence would be *Many delicious fruits grow in the tropics*. For things you can do at the library, a good sentence would be *There is something for everyone to do at the library*.

Many delicious fruits grow in the tropics.
There is something for everyone to do at the library.
When I return from school I have to relax.
There are things kids can do to save money.

Students, especially struggling writers, will need plenty of practice identifying and writing a topic sentence because it requires more abstract thinking. For practice with this concept, provide a set of supporting sentences and have the students devise appropriate topic sentences to match.

T.S. *A garden can be a lot of work.*

S.S. You have to plant rows of seeds.

S.S. Weeds have to be kept under control.

S.S. You should fertilize in the early spring.

S.S. Unless it rains, you have to keep watering it.

T.S. *Used cars are often better than new ones.*

S.S. A used car is much cheaper than a new one.

S.S. You do not have to worry about every little dent.

S.S. It does not decline in value as fast.

S.S. Insurance is often less expensive as well.

Further suggestions for practice with topic sentences is provided on page 70.

Concluding Sentences

A concluding sentence should not merely restate the topic; it should reflect the writer's feeling or opinion, offer a solution to a problem, or suggest an action to be taken. For the sets of sentences above, possible concluding sentences might be: *A garden can be a peaceful place, but it requires a lot of work. Your first car should be a used one.*

Do similar exercises with concluding sentences. Provide a topic sentence, three supporting sentences, and have the student write a concluding sentence. Or give students a choice of several concluding sentences and ask them to choose the best one. Ask them to explain their choice. You may also ask them to write another.

- T.S. When I come home from school, I need to relax.
- S.S. I enjoy listening to music.
- S.S. I like to change into my pajamas.
- S.S. Sometimes exercising helps.
- C.S. Relaxing in the evening helps get me ready for a new day.

Concluding Sentences

1. I need to relax when I come home from school.
2. There are many relaxing things to do in my house.
3. Relaxing in the evening helps get me ready for a new day.

The Five-Sentence Paragraph

The five-sentence, or basic, paragraph consists of a topic sentence, three supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence. Though somewhat formulaic, it is an indispensable concept, especially for struggling writers who need this structured approach to composition. It is a valuable skill for short writing assignments at every level, and is especially handy for short answer test questions, including those found on most state-mandated exams.

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Once the previous steps have been completed, students should have all the skills necessary to write five-sentence paragraphs on any topic.

Use the following format to help students organize their ideas into a five-sentence paragraph. You will also find blank worksheets with these templates in the appendix.

- T.S. _____
- S.S. _____
- S.S. _____
- S.S. _____
- C.S. _____

Use the topics on page 34 to model a five-sentence paragraph with your class. Depending on the level of your students, you may want to start with a list, choose the best items, and add supporting, topic, and concluding sentences. If your students are skilled in prewriting, you may begin with the topic sentence, and add the other sentences in order.

These five-sentence paragraphs are important to practice over a long period of time, even when students have moved on to more extensive forms of writing. They form the basis for five-paragraph essays and are useful for short-answer questions at any level. Before beginning to write a lengthy response to a question, students who would never bother with a formal outline will scribble down a quick list and formulate topic, supporting, and concluding sentences before beginning their composition.

Formatting Paragraphs

You may need to spend just a little time teaching students to format their paragraphs. If they are beginning from a list, the list topic may become the title. They may use the topic exactly as it appears or be creative. Titles should be written in the middle of the first line, and not underlined. Have students skip a line to start their paragraphs. Older students will understand indenting right away; younger students may need some guidance. Instruct them to leave a space about the width of two fingers at the beginning of each paragraph.

Expanded Paragraphs

The next step is to expand these basic paragraphs by adding more details to each supporting sentence. Say to your students, "Suppose you wanted to give more information about each of your supporting ideas—to write several sentences instead of just one."

When you begin expanding paragraphs, teach transitions. Explain that these are ways to keep students' writing organized. For younger or struggling writers, call these words signal words. They signal to the reader that a new idea is coming.

Introduce the words *first*, *next*, and *last*. For more advanced writers, introduce *then* and *finally*, and allow them to choose which transitions to use. (For more transitions, see page 75.) For all writers, model the use of

transitions in the expanded paragraph. Provide a basic paragraph with a topic sentence, three supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence. With the student, brainstorm and write the details.

Writing the Expanded Paragraph

Taking Care of My Dog

T.S. Having a dog is a big responsibility.

S.S. First, I have to feed him.

Detail 1 _____

Detail 2 _____

S.S. Next, he needs to be walked every day.

Detail 1 _____

Detail 2 _____

S.S. Last, we have to take him to the vet.

Detail 1 _____

Detail 2 _____

C.S. I want my dog to be healthy and happy.

While you model, write with your students, and while students are writing on their own, provide explicit direction: Write your topic sentence. Use the word *first* and write your first supporting sentence. Give all the information you can think of about your first supporting idea. Write the word *next*, or *then*, and add your second supporting sentence and tell all about it. Then use *next* or *last* and talk about your third idea. Write a concluding sentence. Transitions, or signal words, should always be followed by a comma.

When students understand how to use transitions and add details to an expanded paragraph, have them write their own. Have them choose a topic; write a list; choose their best items; create topic, supporting, and concluding sentences; and add transitions and details. Here is a sample of student writing at this stage. This student noticed that several items in his list belonged in the same category and decided to use these as his details. Remember, writing is an exercise in thinking.

Student Sample: Expanded Paragraph, Intermediate

List: Ice Hockey Equipment

- ✓ helmet
- neck guard
- elbow pads
- chest protector
- pants
- hockey gloves
- knee pads
- ✓ skates
- ✓ stick

If you plan to play ice hockey, this is the equipment you will need. First, you will need a stick. The stick is what you use to shoot the puck. There are all different kinds of sticks. There are aluminum, graphite, and wood. A wooden stick will cost from ten to twenty dollars, and aluminum or graphite up to one hundred dollars. Next, you will need hockey skates. Hockey skates are not like figure skates, they do not have a rugged edge on the front. And they are not like speed skates because they are not so long. The price range is about fifty to five hundred dollars. Finally, you will need a lot of protective gear. The helmet is one of the most important things you will need. It protects your brain from hitting the ice. You also need a neck guard, chest protector, elbow pads, knee pads, and gloves. You would probably have to spend about three hundred dollars on equipment, but the expense is worth it because you have something fun to do every weekend. You are able to travel different places and have fun playing hockey.

Remember to incorporate grammar instruction with writing instruction. This was an excellent opportunity to revisit run-on sentences: *Hockey skates are not like figure skates, they do not have a rugged edge on the front.* Remind the student of the many ways to fix a run-on sentence. He may look back at the list of coordinating conjunctions and choose the best one for his sentence. *Hockey skates are not like figure skates because they do not have a rugged edge on the front.*

The expanded paragraph is an essential skill where length is important, such as on standardized tests, which require a large enough sample to score

adequately. Many writers are often unable—or so they think—to write longer compositions. Length, however, is largely a matter of organization. When writing is presented in this fashion, students gain confidence in their ability to make their paragraphs grow. One of the fears struggling writers have is that they will never be able to write anything long enough to satisfy their teachers. “How long does it have to be?” they ask.

Some students may be better able to expand a basic paragraph on the computer, where they can more easily manipulate their text. Start with a basic five-sentence paragraph, as you would on paper, then add transitions and details to each of the supporting sentences. Sometimes you may want to scribe all or part of a students’ text, on paper or on the computer, to show that they can succeed at composing a paragraph. (See Chapter 7 for more on interactive writing.)

Transitions

Transitions are words that connect ideas and lend cohesion to writing. They give several kinds of important information to the reader. Some (*another, yet another*) signal that a new topic is coming up. Some (*moreover, furthermore, also*) indicate that more information will be given about a topic. Some show time sequence (*first, next, then, later, finally*). Some signal relative importance (*most important, least important, best, worst*). Some indicate a change of direction in an argument (*however, on the other hand, nevertheless*). Some indicate a condition (*if, if only, unless*).

Some students use transitions instinctively in their writing; most have to be taught explicitly. It is best to begin with the basic *first, next, last* when teaching the expanded paragraph and add more as you introduce the various types of writing. There are categorized lists of useful transitions in later sections and in the appendix. Allow students to refer to these throughout.

An important benefit of understanding the role of transitions is improved reading comprehension. Readers often miss the significance of these important guides to organization and understanding, especially in their textbooks and in the short passages that appear frequently on standardized tests.

For further information on transitions, see the next chapter on essay writing.

