**THE ENGLISH PARAGRAPH**

A paragraph is a set of related sentences that express or develop a topic. A paragraph is usually part of an extended piece of writing, although in some situations you need only one paragraph to fulfil your purpose. In narration or description, a new paragraph usually signals a shift in time, scene or speaker. In exposition or argument, a new paragraph adds information or announces another point supporting your thesis.

Paragraphs serve several purposes for you and your reader. You can use them to divide your subject into manageable units of information: by grouping ideas into paragraphs, you show the relationship of ideas to one another and their significance to your overall purpose. You can also use paragraphs to control emphasis: by placing a paragraph in a particular position.

Each paragraph should leave the reader more informed at the end than he was at the beginning. It is normally identified by having its first sentence indented a few spaces. This indentation tells the reader that the material in the paragraph represents a separate unit of thought. An effective paragraph must meet at least three requirements: *unity, coherence and topic sentence*.

**THE****TOPIC SENTENCE**

To write a good paragraph, you first need to decide upon your purpose in writing. In other words, since each paragraph should be a separate unit of thought, you will need to decide in advance exactly what idea you are trying to communicate in each paragraph. Once you are sure of your idea, the next step is to make it clear to your reader. You can do this by stating your idea in a **topic sentence.** The topic sentence expresses your paragraph’s central purpose. As you write, you are responsible for keeping your purpose firmly in mind and continually signalling it to your reader. Seeing your topic sentence written out, will help you focus on your subject. But if a topic sentence is expressed in terms that are too general, it will be less likely to help you limit your idea and eliminate unrelated ideas. To prevent yourself from introducing unrelated material, you will want to place in most of your topic sentences a controlling idea, a word or group of words to show which aspect of a basic idea will be discussed in a paragraph. Occasionally the entire topic sentence will be needed to present this aspect, but often it will appear in only a word or a phrase.

Study the following examples of broad, general topic sentences and the revisions of them. Each revision makes the original sentence more specific by emphasising a controlling idea (boldfaced).

**Too general** **Controlling idea is added**

- *2001: A Space Odyssey is an interesting movie. - 2001: A Space Odyssey describes some*

*of the* ***problems*** *of space travel.*

*- The Olympic Games are exciting - In the Olympic games the athletes*

***compete intensely.***

*- Music is enjoyable. - Music arouses many* ***different***

***emotions*** *in listeners.*

*- Mahatma Ghandi was an inspiring leader. - Mahatma Ghandi used* ***passive***

***resistance*** *to reach his political goals.*

Here is a paragraph that illustrates how a topic sentence and a controlling idea work to a writer’s advantage. The short first sentence announces the paragraph’s subject; the controlling idea is contained in the word “miracle”.

***It is a miracle that New York works at all****. The whole thing is implausible. Every time the residents brush their teeth, millions of gallons of water must be drawn from the hills of Westchester. When a young man in Manhattan writes a letter to his girl in Brooklyn, the love message gets blown to her through a pneumatic tube. The subterranean system of telephone cables, power lines, steam pipes, and gas mains, is reason enough to abandon the island. By rights New York should have destroyed itself long ago, from panic or fire or failure of some vital supply line in its circulatory system.*

A second paragraph:

*In some of the Quechua language of Peru and Bolivia one speaks of the future as “behind oneself” and the past as “ahead”. Such interpretations of time have given rise to remarks by foreigners that the Quechuas have a perverted philosophical instinct. However, the Quechuas argue “if you try to see the past and the future with your mind’s eye, which can you see?” The obvious answer is that we can see the past, and not the future; to which the Quechuas reply “ if you can see the past, it must be ahead of you; and the future, which you cannot see, is behind you****”.*** *Such an explanation does not mean that the Quechuas worked out a philosophical interpretation of the past and future before talking about it****,*** *but it does suggest that there may be equally valid but opposite ways of describing the same thing.*

**Exercise:**

List the word or words containing the controlling idea in the following topic sentences.

1- *Good study habits are useful to a college student in three ways.*

*2- Holiday ocean cruises attract four types of passengers.*

*3- Censorship of films, television and printed matter is a controversial issue in some countries.*

*4- One of the busiest seasons for travel agents is the summer.*

*5- Some people see electronic computers as a threat to modern man.*

*6- In 1930 marine biologists made a strange discovery off the coast of Africa.*

*7- The noise level in large factories has caused problems for many manufacturers.*

*8- Travelling by plane has several advantages over travelling by train.*

*9- Many automobile drivers have the habit of taking risks.*

*10- Whooping crane is a very rare species of bird.*

**Exercise:**

Revise these topic sentences to narrow the focus by stressing a controlling idea.

e.g.: *The Porsche is a fine car.*

***- Superior engine performance*** *and* ***beautiful design*** *make the Porsche a fine automobile.*

*e.g.: Today good cameras are manufactured in many countries.*

*- Good cameras are manufactured in* ***Germany, Japan,*** *and* ***United States.***

1. *Participation in college athletics is beneficial.*
2. *People could make better use of their leisure time.*
3. *Marriage for couples under twenty five is foolish.*
4. *The United Nations should take a stronger role in world affairs.*
5. *Studying a foreign language is useful.*
6. *A college education is becoming more important every year.*
7. *Islam is a popular religion.*

**UNITY**

The fact that an English paragraph constitutes a separate unit of thought is its most important quality. In composing a paragraph, a writer discusses only one topic or one aspect of a topic. This characteristic of a paragraph is known as unity.Because English paragraph concentrates on a single idea, all the facts, examples and reasons used to develop that idea must be relevant. A writer who introduces material that is not directly related to a paragraph’s topic runs the risk of losing his reader. Any sentence that is not related to the central idea of the paragraph is said to be irrelevant, and thus, breaks the unity of the paragraph. Study the following example and notice that every sentence expands on the topic announced in the opening sentence: the beginning of the sea.

*Beginnings are apt to be shadowy, and so it is with the beginnings of that great mother of life, the sea. Many people have debated how and when the earth got its ocean, and it is not surprising that their explanations do not always agree. For the plain and inescapable truth is that no one was there to see, and in the absence of eyewitness accounts there is bound to be a certain amount of disagreement. So, if I tell here a story of how the young planet earth got its ocean, it must be a story pieced together from many sources and containing many whole chapters the details of which we can only imagine. The story is founded on the testimony of the earth’s most ancient rocks. Another evidence written on the earth’s satellite, the moon; on hints (small signs) contained in the history of the sun and whole universe of star-filled space.*

In fact, any sentence that digresses away from the topic blurs the focus of the paragraph and obscures your purpose.

*(1)The legend of the Old South has a certain timeless beauty. (2) On the veranda of impressive houses, courtly gentlemen and charming ladies talked quietly of family, land and cotton. (3) Even the slaves who worked the field were said to be content. (4) The poor whites were barely visible until the movement after the Civil War. (5) They formed secret societies such as the Klan to terrorise the black community and to acquire political power. (6) Political power led economic power, and by the turn of the century the poor whites were no longer poor*.

The first three sentences deal with the legend of the Old South, and the reader assumes that this “timeless beauty” will be the topic of the rest of the paragraph. In sentence four, however, the writer shifts to poor whites, a topic that is “barely visible” in the legend. The remaining sentences build on the allusion to the vigilante movement and shift the focus of the paragraph to the Klan and its use of violence to acquire political and economic power. Most readers can follow this digression, but as they proceed past the first few sentences they become less sure about the main topic of the paragraph and more certain that the paragraph lacks unity.

*Exercise: Write out the sentence in each paragraph that is unrelated to the other sentences.*

*1°- Pearls are gathered by men known as pearl divers. Actually, these men do not dive. They are lowered by a rope to the bottom of the sea. Many tourists to Japan enjoy shopping for cultured pearls. Pearl gatherers work in pairs, with one remaining at the surface to help the other return from his dive. An experienced pearl diver can stay down about a minute and a half and can often make as many as thirty dives in one day.*

*2°- For hundreds of years, man has made use of the talents of monkeys. Egyptian paintings of 2000 B.C show baboons gathering fruit for their masters. Even in 1879, in Abyssinia, monkeys were still being used as torchbearers at feasts. The monkeys would sit in a row of bench and hold the lights until the guests went home. Then the monkeys would eat. Most of the world’s zoos contain a variety of monkeys for people to watch.*

*3°- Not all chance discoveries are made in laboratories. Some occur in the unlikely places. While walking through a Paris street, Dr René Laennec observed some children at play. He noticed one child cupping his ear on an old wooden plank. Another child at the other end of the plank was tapping a message to him on the wood. Laennec had had trouble that very morning trying to hear the heartbeat of one of his patients. In the children’s game, he at once recognised the principle of the stethoscope. The discovery of the X-ray has also contributed greatly to the advance of modern medicine. Laennec rushed home and built the first crude stethoscope from a slender, hollow wooden tube. Then he hurried back to the hospital to try it on his patient. It worked. He was able to listen to his heartbeat.*

**COHERENCE**

The words and word groups of one language do not fit together in the same way as the words of another language do. Perhaps even more important, ideas do not fit together in the same way from language to language. Thus, in order to write well in English, a foreign student should first understand how English speakers usually arrange their ideas.

A basic feature of the English paragraph is that it normally follows a straight line of development. This English thought pattern is important for a writer to understand. The paragraph often begins with a statement of its central idea, known as a topic sentence, followed by a series of subdivisions of the central idea. The Arabic line of development is circular while the French one is usually interrupted by rather complex digressions. The typically straight line of development of an English paragraph is the basis of its particular type **coherence.** An English paragraph is **coherent** when its ideas are clearly related to each other in orderly sequence. Each sentence in such a paragraph should naturally grow out of each previous sentence in developing the central idea. Ideally, there should be a sense of movement or flow, a going forward and building on chat has been said before.

One way to achieve coherence is to arrange a paragraph’s details in a systematic way that is appropriate to the subject matter. For example, many writers of English place their supporting details in order of importance, often starting with the least important detail and ending with the most one. Another way to ensure coherence is to add various transitions that connect ideas. In few words, the criteria which do achieve coherence are the following:

**1**-Arrangement of the ideas in a logical order

**2**-Use of transitions

**3**-Use of pronouns

**4**-Repetition of the most important words and ideas

**5**-Use of the parallel construction

Exercise: Revise these paragraphs for greater coherence by arranging the sentences in a logical order.

*1°- George always shaves and dresses before eating. Sometimes he falls asleep again. Then he brushes his teeth, puts on his coat, and says goodbye before he leaves for the office. When the alarm clock rings, George wakes up and shuts it off. If this happens, his mother wakes him so that he won’t be late for work. After he finishes breakfast, he usually reads the morning newspaper.*

*2°- Pine trees grew down to the lake’s edge, so we had to walk through a small pine forest to reach the water. We drove as close as we could to the lake, parked the car, and got out. John was the first one to dive into the lake. As we drove down the road, the lake came into view. He laughed at us for being afraid to get our hair wet. We decided to stop and take a swim for an hour.*

*3°- Begin by breaking two eggs into a bowl, adding small amounts of salt, pepper, and milk. When the butter in the frying pan is melted, pour in the egg batter. To make a small omelette you need three eggs, a slice of cheese, salt pepper, butter, milk, a frying pan, a bowl, and a spatula. Then, heat the frying pan over a medium fire, malting a small amount of butter in it. After the eggs are partially cooked, place a slice of cheese on them and fold one half of the omelette over the other half. Remove from the frying pan and serve.*

*4° - They do not serve among parrots for communication, which after all, is the function of language. The record is 100 words. They may say “goodbye” when someone leaves the room or “hello” when the telephone rings. Parrots and mynah birds are famous for their ability to reproduce human speech. It is difficult, however, to show that such words have a real meaning for the parrots. The parrot with its vivid green and red feathers is more brightly coloured than the black mynah bird. Mynah birds can imitate parrots learn human vowel sounds better than parrots, but parrots can remember a larger vocabulary. Many parrots learn to associate particular words with specific actions.*