

On the Papers

WHAT'S AT ISSUE? THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE ENGLISH PARAGRAPH, PART I

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Most people educated in this country were taught that a proper paragraph contained five sentences: The first is the “topic sentence,” which states the issue and point of the whole paragraph; the fifth is the “conclusion,” which, in the sixth grade, meant a repetition of the topic sentence; and the middle three are the “body”—not a development of thought, but just three examples that support the topic sentence. Go look at the structure of 100 paragraphs in any legal document: You will be hard pressed to find a single one that adheres to this topic sentence model. For schoolkids, it is a good way to learn that structure exists. For professionals, it is a lie.

This teaching model of the paragraph was based on good instincts. First sentence: You tell them what you’re going to tell them. Second, third, and fourth sentences: You tell them. Fifth: You tell them you told them. It is orderly. It feels logical. It seems complete. But its intent

was to cope with the pedagogical problem of needing something to tell young students about paragraphs. It was easily graded: Two examples? You fail. It was not created to deal with the development of thought—and especially not with complex legal thought.

This pedagogical creation depended greatly on the era in which it was developed—from the late 18th century in Scotland to the late 19th century in America. Children at that time were to be seen and not heard. They were to remain orderly. They were not to embarrass themselves or their parents in public. They were all to resemble the model of the well-behaved, incipiently well spoken child. When summoned to examinations, these children should demonstrate accuracy, succinctness (so as not to be overly heard), and responsiveness to authority. The one-size-fits-all paragraph served these desiderata perfectly.

Translate this model of paragraph structure into a litigative metaphor. The witness (student writer) here is led by the attorney (writing teacher) to produce the perfect five-sentence paragraph:

Attorney: Please tell the Court what you know about this issue.
Witness: I know X.
Attorney: Can you give us some indication why you think this is true?
Witness: Here is Example A.
Attorney: Is there anything else that will lend weight to your observation?
Witness: Here is Example B.
Attorney: Aha. And is there something more that will convince us to believe you?
Witness: Here is Example C.
Attorney: Three examples? It sounds like you know what you’re talking about. So tell us again what it is you know.
Witness: I know X.
Attorney: I have no more questions for this witness.

Though it is difficult to explain why, it is clear that the number three suggests to our culture a sense of sufficiency, of almost magical completeness. Evidence of this abounds. Ancient numerology assigned 1 to the male, 2 to the female, and 3 to union between the two. The most populous religion in the world presents us with the mystical equation of $1 = 3$, a triune God concept. Folklore is geared to triplets: There are usually three sons of the king, or three magical tasks to perform, or three dogs with eyes of different sizes. Can you imagine your children’s response to your reading them “Goldilocks and the *Four Bears*”? “‘Who’s been sleeping in *my bed*?’ said the Papa Bear. ‘Who’s been sleeping in *my bed*?’ said the Mama Bear. ‘Who’s been sleeping in *my bed*?’ said the Adolescent Bear. ‘Who’s been . . .’” “Aw c’mon, Mom, get ON with it!” They

know to expect that three will signal closure. Four might as well be a million. And did you ever have a power-hungry track coach start your race by saying, “Ready . . . on your mark . . . now set . . . go!” knowing that at least some of you would leap from the starting line on hearing “now set,” knowing that 1-2-3 was how the world functioned?

Did that paragraph seem a bit too long to you? Did you think I had already made my point and should have “gotten on with it”? If so, perhaps it was due to my having given you four, not three, examples of threeness. This number has a hold on us. No wonder we were taught that three examples in a paragraph “prove” your point. If you surround those three with “Here we go” before them and “Now we’ve arrived” after them, then you’ve finished the job. And in the sixth grade, you had.

That repetitive opening and closing sentence also has its roots in our artistic subconscious, most straightforwardly demonstrated by the way we write and hear music. Whatever key in which the song (or sonata or symphony) begins is known not as the “topic” key, but as the “tonic” key. It states which “tone” will provide for us a sense of “home.” In structurally simple pieces of music—the great majority of songs written up through the 1970s—we are usually aware of what that “home” is and how far away from it we have wandered. We are relieved, or at least we have our expectations fulfilled, when we return to that home. Ninety-nine percent of songs (and, until the 1920s, sonatas and symphonies) resolved at the end to that same “tonic” key in which they started. In the typical ABA song form, the B section wanders into a different but closely related key; then the A section begins by returning not only to the original melody but also to the tonic key. That is why the return to the A section is often the song’s most affecting moment.

That otherwise inadequate five-sentence model, however, teaches one important structural truth: Readers will expect

that your paragraph will be about whatever greets them up front. If you begin your paragraph with a sentence about the price of kumquats and then discuss world peace for the other eight sentences, most readers will use a good deal of reader energy in looking for the return of the kumquats. The principle of stating the issue of your paragraph up front concords precisely with the reality of how readers read.

In school, the *issue* of a paragraph and the *point* it tries to make are one and the same. “I have so many things to do today. Task number 1. Task number 2. Task number 3. I have so many things to do today.” As professional readers, we would not tolerate such prose. If we found someone writing like that (which we never do), we would simply train ourselves not to read the final sentence.

In professional life, the issue states what the paragraph will concern, while the point lets you know why the paragraph was written. “I have so many things to do today. Number 1. Number 2. Number 3. I’m wondering if I should take two bottles of 6-Hour Energy.”

Professional paragraphs, dealing with sophisticated, complex material, become significantly more challenging to compose than those we churned out in high school, for two main reasons:

1. The issue may often require two sentences, or sometimes even three. But note (this should sound like an echo): It should never be allowed to extend to four. I’ll explore that in a later article.
2. The issue and the point are often not the same statement.

Readers—no surprise here—have expectations of where that point will appear. I’ll also explore that in a later article. Here I’ll oversimplify the matter by stating that the point is expected to appear in one of two places: either (1) up front, at the end of the issue; or (2) at the end of the discussion of that issue, which most often

(but not always) means the final sentence. This is the only reader expectation that has a fallback expectation attached to it: If you do not find the point up front, then expect to find it near the end.

I had a friend who took 10 years to write his magnum opus, a really wonderful book about early North American history. It was turned down by over 100 publishers. I believe it was because he loved putting his point dead center in every paragraph. During the year of rejections, he churned out a book about two engaging rascals in early California history, which everyone wanted to publish because they could smell the movie rights. One press, having made him an offer one day too late, told him it would publish instead that big book of his, which they thought would coattail on the success of the smaller one. George F. Will gave the long one a rave review in the *New York Times Book Review*. It went through three printings in 40 days. Everyone assumed the book must be well written and therefore figured out how to crescendo in the middle of a paragraph.

Moral of the story: Put your point anywhere you want—after you are famous. Until then, put it where readers expect to find it. More on all these matters later. ■