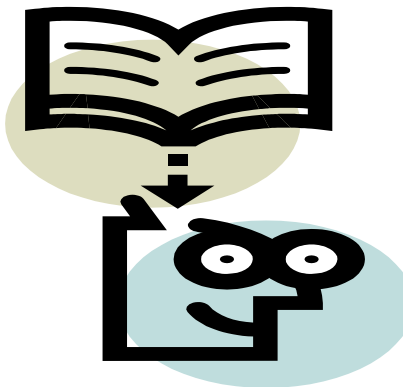


Developing your Writing

A Handbook from
The Writing Center



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The Writing Center at Roxbury Community College

INTRODUCTION

Writing is one way to send a message. There are other ways of course, such as speech and the body language of facial expressions and gesture. Writing, however, is more demanding than face-to-face communication. A speaker can instantly reword his message, change his tone of voice, or add emphasis with a gesture when he sees that his message is not getting through. A writer does not normally have such instant feedback. If a writer fails to get his message clearly and accurately on paper, the message will be garbled or misinterpreted. Accurate writing demands careful selection of words. Clear writing demands logical patterning of ideas.

The following chapters are designed to help you become proficient in the techniques and patterns that make writing clear. The chapters are arranged in a sequence. Each new chapter builds on skills previously learned. By the time you complete the final chapter, you will be able to write effective, well developed and logical paragraph with a new sense of confidence and competence.

At the end of this handbook we have suggested some websites that will help you practice what you have learned. Let us begin to learn all about paragraphs.

CHAPTER 1

The Logical Basis of Paragraphing

Idea Patterning

Without a pattern, bits of information make little sense. Disconnected items seem illogical and unclear. Notice this in the following series of numbers that we will call *Pattern A*:

10 2 12 6 4 18 14 8 16 20

Do these numbers make much sense? How logical does the series seem to be?

Now look at the same numbers arranged in a different pattern, *Pattern B*:

2 4 6 8 10 12 14 16 18 20

Does this pattern make more sense? Why?

The second series makes more sense because it follows a recognizable pattern, ascending order of magnitude by two's. Similarly, when the ideas in a paragraph follow a pattern, the paragraph makes sense. The paragraph seems clear and logical. What patterns of ideas produce clear paragraphs? Topic patterns do. To illustrate topical patterning of ideas, look at the following topics:

Soft drinks
Bakery goods
Vegetables

Dairy products
Meat
Fruit

Now think of three items that would logically fit under each topic.

Write the items in the following blanks:

Soft drinks

Bakery goods

Dairy products

Meat

Fruit

Does your list look something like the following?

Soft drinks

Pepsi
Coke
7-UP

Bakery goods

Pie
Cake
Cookies

Vegetables

Chard
Green beans
Squash

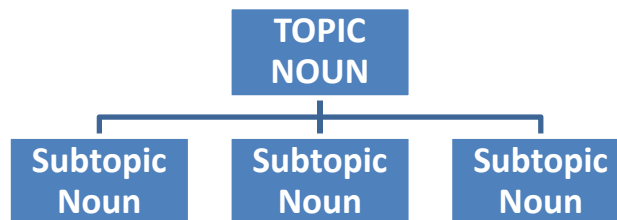
Dairy products

Milk
Eggs
Cheese

Meat
 Hamburger
 Lamb chops
 Bacon

Fruit
 Plums
 Oranges
 Lemons

Notice that each heading (Vegetables, Meat, Fruits, etc.) is a noun that names a topic. Each indented word (Milk, Plums, Bacon, etc.) is a noun that names a subtopic. Which noun names a larger category of items, a topic noun or a subtopic noun? Which pattern on page 3 is logically correct, A or B?



Pattern B is logically correct. Subtopics always name smaller categories that fit into larger categories named by topics. Subtopic nouns name specific examples of topic nouns. When related topics are consistently arranged by subtopics, a paragraph or essay becomes coherent. Coherent writing is clear writing because all of the ideas fit together in a logical way.

CHAPTER 2

General and Specific Statements

In Chapter One we examined nouns (topics) that name a general category of items (vegetables, meat, fruit, etc.) and subtopic nouns that name specific examples of the general category nouns (milk, plum, bacon, etc.) Similarly, statements like nouns can be categorized as general or specific as in the following example:

General statement: Marie always had an artistic inclination.

1. When she was four years old, she would eagerly sing solo renditions of “ There was an Old Man who had a Wooden Leg.”

1. The following year, however, Marie quit soloing and took refuge in Miss Zimmer's Kindergarten chorus.
2. The piano was next, followed by a serious attempt at the clarinet in Mr. Smith's Eighth Grade orchestra.

In the above example, you will notice that the three specific sentences support the general statement (topic sentence) that "Marie always had an artistic inclination." One of the characteristics of paragraphs is the combination of general and specific statements.

CHAPTER 3

The Writing Process: Steps in Paragraph Development

A paragraph consists of several sentences that develop one main idea. It may be a complete composition in itself, or it may be part of a longer composition. In either case, the process of writing a well-developed paragraph consists of three steps. Consider the following steps:

Step 1: The main idea of a paragraph is the general statement that the other sentences explain. The main idea is expressed in the **TOPIC SENTENCE**.

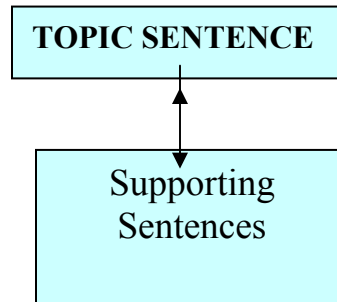
Step 2: **Supporting sentences** explain the main idea. The supporting sentences are specific rather than general and develop the main idea by examining it in more detail. It is also referred to as the body of the paragraph.

Step 3 The conclusion, a **concluding sentence**, restates the main idea expressed in the topic sentence. It is general rather than specific.

It is important to note that while the process of writing a well-developed paragraph has three steps, the process is not complete until the paragraph undergoes editing and revision. **Revision** is an essential component in the composing process.

The Four R's: To **revise**, the writer must **rethink**, **reshape**, and **re-write**, resulting in a final draft.

Revise and edit the paragraph by going over the paragraph, making changes and improving the organization and content, word choices and sentences, and correcting spelling and punctuation, and then writing a final draft.



CHAPTER 4

Subject and Focus:

A paragraph, as you have learned, usually has one **topic sentence**. The topic sentence states the main idea, which tells the reader what the paragraph is about. The topic sentence is divided into two parts: a topic noun or short phrase, sometimes referred to as the **subject**, that names the *general topic* discussed in the paragraph; and what was said about the subject is referred to as the **focus**.

In outlining a paragraph it is important to identify the topic sentence. The following paragraph has only two sentences. Which one is the topic sentence?

Reformers try to change institutions largely by means of words. Years ago people began to talk about the emancipation of “woman.”

Topic Sentence:

The first sentence is the topic sentence. Which word in the topic sentence is the topic noun or subject?

Topic Noun:

Which word is the focus?

Topic Focus:

The noun or subject is **Reformers** and the focus is **try to change institutions**.

Now read the next paragraph. First find the topic sentence and underline the topic noun or subject and what is said about the subject or focus. Then, notice there are other

sentences added to support the main idea statement expressed by the topic sentence. The supporting sentences present the sub-topics (specific statements) that explain in detail the general topic (main idea statement).

The commuter is distinguished from other mortals by (perhaps most notably) his remarkable vigor. Under physical and psychic strains, which might easily prove too much for the average urbanite or countryman, he not only survives but he thrives. The physical strains of his life start early each working day. On the average he rises an hour before his urban fellow workers, dresses and breakfasts more quickly, drives from half a mile to ten miles to a station, rides a train for at least half an hour – and only then copes with the city transportation which takes his non-commuting colleagues from home to office. In the evening the process is reversed, and he has barely climbed from his car at an hour when city people have already been happily relaxed for an hour or two. His dinner is usually correspondingly late, and either his postprandial leisure or his sleep is accordingly curtailed. In the winter, he may seldom see his home by daylight until the weekend. He enjoys certain advantages in the summer, but he continues to pay heavily for them. (taken from The Exurbanites by A. C Spectorosky. Copyright © 1955, International Creative Management).

Topic Sentence: _____

Subtopic Noun: _____

Subtopic Noun; _____

Notice that the first sentence is the topic sentence. It names the general topic for discussion in this paragraph, which is vigor or the commuter's vigor. Two subtopic nouns are physical strains and psychic strains (italicize vigor, physical strain, and psychic strains)

Finding the patterns of topics and subtopics in the writing of others will help you develop coherence in your own thinking and writing. The subject of the topic sentence here is "the commuter" and the focus is "is distinguished from others..."

Factual and Sensory Details:

We have said that the combination of general and specific statements is an important characteristic of paragraphs. However, the effectiveness of the paragraph will depend, to a larger extent, on the types of specific details used to support the main idea. Some state facts and others impress the senses.

Factual Details give facts about the object being discussed. Factual details not only give readers explicit exact information, it provides such details as dates, numbers, statistics and measurements, places and names.

Sensory Details focus on how something looks, sounds, feels, smells, or tastes.

Sensory details stimulate the imagination by appealing to the senses. This can be done by using descriptive words, those that have the most sense appeal, and by using comparisons.

Some words have more sense appeal than other words. Words with sense appeal make you see, smell, hear, taste, and touch. A headache, for example, can be described as a “bad” headache or as a “pulsating, throbbing” headache.

Another way to stimulate the imagination is by using comparisons. Comparisons tell what something is like. For example, you can say that a traumatic experience is “horrible” or you can use a comparison to create a striking visual image by saying, “it left me staggering like a drunken man.”

The combination of factual and sensory details helps the reader to comprehend the main idea and gives the paragraph its rhetorical quality.

CHAPTER 5

Writing a Topic Outline:

Writing an outline is an excellent way to study paragraph patterns and practice coherent thinking and writing. It helps to prevent errors in logic, which occurs when the topic categories are confused in some way. For example, if you list motor vehicles under cars, you have listed a larger category under a smaller one. This says that a motor vehicle is a type of car when in actual fact a car is a type of motor vehicle. Look at a **formal outline**:

- I. **Introduction:** _____
 - A. Supporting Sentence 1
 - B. Supporting Sentence 2
 - C. Supporting Sentence 3
- II. **Body Paragraph 1**
 - A. Supporting Sentence 1
 - B. Supporting Sentence 2
 - C.

Another error in logic is to list a topic under one that is equal to it. For instance, the topic category *cars* cannot be listed under trucks because a car is not a type of truck.

There are two types of outlines: **topic outlines** and **sentence outlines**. Topic outlines name the topics and subtopics with a single word or short phrase. Sentence outlines require a complete sentence for every topic and subtopic. Both types of outlines are like “blueprints”; they show the structure or pattern of a composition by showing how all of the topics and subtopics are connected to each other.

Write a topic outline of “The Commuter” by A.C. Spectorosky. Before actually writing the topic outline, follow the PRE-WRITING steps below.

- 1) Read the article to find **UNFAMILIAR WORDS**. Try not to filter words you don’t really know. Study the following list of words taken from “The Commuter.” Can you spell each word correctly, pronounce it in an accepted way, tell what Spectorosky means by it, and use it in a sentence of your own? If not, use the vocabulary learning techniques explained in appendix A. The line where each word is found is indicated in parentheses.

urban (3)	psychic (6)
postprandial (3)	schizoid (6)
colleagues (3)	borne (6)
incompetent (4)	symbols (6)
attrition (5)	psychotic (6)
sedimentary (5)	

- 2) Underline the **TOPIC SENTNCE** in each paragraph
- 3) Circle the **TOPIC NOUN** or **PHRASE** in each topic sentence.
- 3) Find the **Organizational Pattern** that groups the subtopics.
- 4) Are the subtopics arranged according to chronological order, comparison/contrast, example/illustration, or classification? Discovering the organization al pattern will help you compose headings for grouping the subtopics.

READING SELECTION: “The Commuter”

1. Just what is a commuter, besides a rider of trains? Let’s look at him.
2. The commuter is distinguished from other mortals by (perhaps most notably) his remarkable vigor. Under physical and psychic strains, which might easily prove too much for the average urbanite or countryman, he not only survives but he thrives.
3. The physical strains of his life start early each working day. On the average he rises an hour before his urban fellow workers, dresses and breakfasts more quickly, drives from half a mile to ten miles to a station, rides a train for at least a half hour – and only then copes with the city transportation which takes his non-commuting colleagues from home to office. In the evening the process is reversed, and he has barely climbed from his car at an hour when city people have already been happily

Par #6

Did you list words and phrases like early each day, evening, wintertime, weekend, daily, and weekly sedimentary life? After finding all topics and subtopics in the article, begin your topic outline. A topic outline never contains a complex sentence. Use only a brief phrase or a single word to name the author's topics and subtopics. It is not always necessary to use a writer's exact word or phrase in your outline. You will often want to use a synonymous word or phrase of your own.

Also do not assume that every time a writer uses a new paragraph, you must enter something in your outline. Your job is to represent each of the writer's ideas in your outline, not necessarily each of his paragraphs. Sometimes, a writer will express the same idea in more than one paragraph, using different words each time. If you have stated an idea once in your outline, that is enough. It is not necessary to keep repeating the same idea.

Finally, remember that all outlines need not be worded exactly the same. Get the main idea and indent enough of the subtopics under general headings to give a complete "blueprint" of the original.

Using the following sheet, complete the outline of "The Commuter." Remember to indent topics and subtopics as needed.

ROUGH DRAFT

"The Commuter"

I. The vigorous commuter

(A) Physical strains

1. Morning strains

II. Evening strains

III. Winter strains

IV. Summer advantages

V. Daily strains

VI. Weekend strains

(B) Psychic strains

PROOFREAD YOUR OUTLINE

Everything you write should be proofread several times. Use the following list to help evaluate your topic outline of “The Commuter.” Make a checkmark when you’ve completed the steps:

1. I’ve used as few words as possible to name each topic and subtopic:	
2. I’ve written only one topic or subtopic per line:	
3. I haven’t asked questions:	
4. I have listed topics:	
5. I have made sure that I have used correct spelling and grammar by using Spell Check and Grammar Check as well as a dictionary:	
6. I’ve typed and double-spaced my outline using appropriate font (recommended Times New Roman 12):	
7. I’ve checked to make sure the form is correct (formal outline):	
8. The outline represents the writer’s pattern of ideas fully and accurately:	
9. Subtopics are placed logically under general topics:	
10. I’ve carefully reviewed the outline and made appropriate changes:	

CHAPTER 6

Paragraph Format and Design

FORMAT

In most writing situations, each paragraph should begin with an indented first line. The space between the margin and the first line is called an indentation. In general, it is five spaces in from the margin.

INDENTATION

DESIGN

Most paragraphs contain a topic sentence. The topic sentence states the main idea that is developed by other sentences in the paragraph. The other sentences state subtopic ideas (specific statements or details) that support, explain or illustrate the topic sentence.

Usually the topic sentence is placed at the beginning of the paragraph or as a first sentence.

The topic sentence (main idea statement) can also occur in various locations in a paragraph, as a second sentence, as a middle sentence, as a last sentence, and as a first and last sentence. At other times the topic sentence that expresses the main idea can be implied that is not explicitly or directly stated and in which case the reader has to figure it out by examining closely all the specific details of the paragraph.

Design A: Main idea as a first sentence:

Topic Sentence

Subtopic

Subtopic

Subtopic

Design B: Main idea as a second sentence

Subtopic

Topic Sentence

Subtopic

Design C: Main idea as a middle sentence

Subtopic

Subtopic

Topic Sentence

Subtopic

Subtopic

Design D: Main idea as a last sentence

Subtopic

Subtopic

Subtopic

Topic Sentence

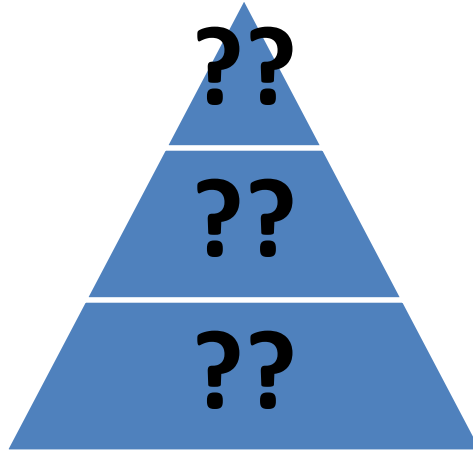
Design E: Main idea as a first and last sentence

Topic sentence

Subtopic

Subtopic

Topic Sentence



Use this triangle to create your Paragraph Design

CHAPTER 7

Paragraph Development:

There is no standard length for a paragraph. The number of sentences in a paragraph depends on the main idea and the extent to which the writer wishes to develop it. When all the subtopic ideas, that is the specific supporting statements, relate directly to the main idea, the result is a coherent paragraph.

A common problem, however, is thinking of ways to develop a main idea. Have you ever written a topic sentence and then been unable to think of anything more to say? This problem can be overcome by thinking of topic development as a question and answer process.

No main idea can be developed without answering one or more of six basic questions:

WHO?
WHAT?
WHEN
WHERE
WHY?
HOW?

Sometimes one of these questions is written down and answered in a paragraph. Usually, though, an experienced writer asks these questions to himself as he writes. A topic sentence is written, a question is asked in the writer's mind about the main idea, and the answer leads to another sentence that is added to the first. This process continues until a paragraph is produced.

To illustrate how the six basic questions can be used to expand a main idea into a paragraph, we will reread paragraph 1 of "The Commuter." The first sentence is the topic sentence. Notice how each of the other sentences answers one or more of the six questions.

The physical strains of his life start early each working day.

(When do they start?) On the average he rises an hour before his urban fellow worker, (What does he do then?) dresses and breakfasts more quickly, drives (How far?) from half a mile to ten miles to a station, rides a train (How long?) for at least a half hour- and only then copes with the city transportation which takes his non-commuting colleagues (Where?) from home to office.(What happens later?) In the evening the process is reversed, and he has barely climbed his car at an hour when city people have already been happily relaxed for an hour or two. (When is his dinner?) His dinner is usually correspondingly late (What is the result?) and either is postprandial leisure or his sleep are accordingly curtailed. (When do other strains occur and what are they?) In the wintertime he may seldom see his home by daylight until the weekend. He enjoys certain advantages in the summer, but he continues to pay a heavily for them.

You never need to be at a loss for what to say after writing a topic sentence. Begin by asking the six questions and writing down the answers. You will soon have a paragraph.

CHECK LIST

1. Is the first sentence the topic sentence?	
2. Do all other sentences relate to the topic sentence?	
3. Is the structure of each sentence correct?	
4. Is the paragraph organized in a logical pattern?	
5. Is the punctuation of each sentence correct?	
6. Are the words spelled correctly (using Spell Check and a dictionary to check)?	

Remember the Four R's: To Revise, you must Rethink, Reshape, and Rewrite!

FOR FURTHER PRACTICE

You have now learned how to construct clear, organized and focused paragraphs. For practice, we suggest the following websites and programs available:

- ✓ *Expressways* – paragraph development available in the Writing Center
- ✓ *ReWriting Plus* – “Make a Paragraph Kit” available in the Writing Center
- ✓ <http://nutsandbolts.washcoll.edu> – this comprehensive site will help you write better paragraphs and essays.
- ✓ www.studygs.net/ - this site includes a discussion of basic writing; it is highly recommended for second language speakers as well, as there are multiple language translations.
- ✓ www.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar - this is an excellent site that moves from sentences to paragraphs to essays. There are also exercises for practice.
- ✓ <http://owl.english.purdue.edu>: the Online Writing Lab of Purdue University has superior resources for students of writing.
- ✓ <http://rcc.mass.edu> – go to Academics – Academic Divisions – Liberal Arts – Writing Center to find this text and other helpful workshops on writing.

NOTES