

THE "WRITE" STUFF

Springfield College

School of Human Services

CONSTRUCTING PARAGRAPHS

WHAT IS A PARAGRAPH?

The "answer" is obvious, isn't it? Go ahead -- define "paragraph." Having trouble? Hmm. Maybe there's more to constructing paragraphs than we assume.

The simplest way to think about a paragraph is that it presents an idea in its "topic sentence" and explores that idea in the sentences that follow. Here are some tips for creating effective paragraphs when you write.

TOPIC SENTENCES

Every paragraph needs a "topic sentence" that introduces the "main idea" of the paragraph. The "topic sentence" is often the first sentence in the paragraph. Wherever it appears, it should be clear and direct.

Topic sentences can take many forms. Most are statements. That's the case in this paragraph and in the previous one. However, a topic sentence can take the form of a question, as in the first paragraph of this newsletter: "The 'answer' is obvious, isn't it?" (This question is also *ironic* -- it says the opposite of what it means. The answer *isn't* obvious at all!) A topic sentence can be a quotation. Consider this example: "The Buddhist scripture 'It is better to conquer yourself than to conquer thousands of others' holds true for people in recovery from addiction." It can even be an exclamation: "Domestic violence has got to stop!"

Whatever its form, the topic sentence must convey the "main idea" of the paragraph. Actually, if an essay or article is well-written, you can read the topic sentence of each paragraph and get a good feel for the whole piece. Additionally, reading topic sentences can be a good way to quickly review an article you read earlier in the month on the day before class!

TOPIC SENTENCES AS TRANSITIONS

Sometimes topic sentences serve two purposes: they announce the main idea of a paragraph and also provide a "transition" between ideas. Consider the topic sentence of

the previous paragraph: "Whatever its form, the topic sentence must convey the 'main idea' of the paragraph." The first half of the sentence tells the reader what the previous paragraph was about (*the various forms topic sentences can take*) and the second half announces the topic of the current paragraph (*topic sentences always announce the main idea of the paragraph*). Thus, this topic sentence not only announces the main idea of the paragraph but also helps the reader make a "transition" from one idea to the next.

Topic sentences that provide a transition between ideas usually contain transition words or phrases. Here are some common examples: ***on the one hand, on the other hand, in comparison, in contrast, however, in addition, in fact, in other words, consequently, as a result, therefore, thus, although, yet, of course, after all, finally, in conclusion.*** Using transition words and phrases lends your writing clarity and smoothness. In fact, you can use these words throughout your paragraph to move gracefully from one sentence to another.

SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

How do you develop your main idea, or "support" it? In other words, what should follow the topic sentence in a paragraph? Remember last month's edition of "The Write Stuff"? It contained several ideas for supporting main ideas and developing paragraphs. These include: "comparison and contrast" -- tell how your subject is like something else, or different from something else; "cause and effect" -- discuss the consequences or results of a given experience or event; "defining" -- explain what a term or condition means; "narrating" -- give an example or two to illustrate your point; and "describing" -- for instance, what does "shingles" look like, anyway? or how does a person who is clinically depressed view life?