Effective Paragraphs

Organization, Coherence, Transitions,
A Brief History

• Prior to the nineteenth century, paragraph structure as we know it did not exist.
• Scottish polymath Alexander Bain developed an “organic paragraph model”
• Among his proposals, he suggested unity—one idea per ¶ that is clearly stated (in topic sentence).
• He also advocated coherence (logical order and transitions between sentences) and development (support of main idea).
A Brief History

Although there are many paragraph models and variation, Bain’s ideas of unity, topic sentence, coherence, and development are still valuable tenets.
"A paragraph is a unit of discourse developing a single idea. It consists of a group or series of sentences closely related to one another and to the thought expressed by the whole group or series. Devoted, like the sentence, to the development of one topic, a good paragraph is also, like a good essay, a complete treatment in itself."

(Fred Newton Scott and Joseph Villiers Denny, Paragraph-Writing: A Rhetoric for Colleges, 1909)
Unity

• A ¶ makes one main point.

• If it has more, these smaller points must be unified under a common theme or idea.

• This is often achieved through a topic sentence, in which the purpose and/or the main idea of the paragraph is clearly presented:
Cueing

• Topic sentences at *the beginning* announce what the rest of the paragraph will develop; its strengths are development and amplification.
• Topic sentences at *the end* tend to move from the particular to the general; they work particularly well with presenting a contentious argument, as the reader is able to consider and accept evidence before the argument is fully presented.
• Anything that does not support the unifying point of the paragraph should be moved or deleted!
Cueing

Topic sentences typically perform three tasks:

• Indicate the ¶’s main point

• Indicate how that point relates to the thesis

• Provide a link to the preceding paragraph(s)
Development

Each claim made in the topic sentence must be corroborated by evidence (anecdotes, raw data, research studies, etc).

Remember that you will probably have more evidence than you need; sheer bulk or length does not make an argument more compelling.
Coherence

Two types of coherence:

• Intra-paragraph:
  use **transitional** words and phrases to move us along your ideas
  make **lexical connections**: repeat key words and synonyms from one sentence to the next

• Inter-paragraph (connects paragraphs to one another):
  use transition sentences, that show us the relation of one idea to the next
  add to this the same lexical connections between paragraphs
  include **topic-to-thesis explanatory sentences**: explain *why* or *how* the paragraph supports your thesis; usually comes at the beginning or end of paragraphs.
George Abbot was perhaps the ugliest of them all, a morose, intemperate man, whose portraits exude a sullen rage. Even in death, he was portrayed on his tomb in Holy Trinity Guildford, as a man of immense weight, with heavy, wrinkled brow and coldly staring eyes. He looks like a bruiser, a man of such conviction and seriousness that anyone would think twice about crossing him. What was it that made George Abbot so angry?
Hype and hysteria have always been a part of movie advertising, but the frenzy of film trailers today follows a visual style first introduced by music videos in the 1980s. The quick cut is everything. Next time you go to a film, study the three or four previews that precede the main feature. How are these teasers constructed? What are their common features? What might trailers say about the expectations of audiences today?
The Rough Plan is a simple—but effective—graphic organizer designed to save time. It helps you establish the direction of your paper, determine the best organization for your ideas, and foresee paragraphs that are irrelevant or redundant.
Rough Plan

1. Establish your thesis and main sub-points.
2. Arrange these points in a logical (but provisional) order.
3. State each point so it indicates what paragraph will do, not just what paragraphs is about (see next slide).
4. The plan also suggests how paragraphs will be developed (what kinds of support/analysis is needed).
5. Check plan to see how well it holds together, and where changes are necessary.
Rough Plan

- offering an example
- counterargument
- introducing
- concluding
- offering the primary support for thesis
- combining minor support under one paragraph
- transitioning us to another idea
- giving context
- widening the significance
Problem Diagnosis

- Paragraph without a point
- Point irrelevant to thesis
- Unnecessary summary
- Paragraph with multiple points
- Paragraph sequence out-of-order
- Redundant paragraphs
Conceptual Ordering

Instead of just using this formulation:
Thesis, because A
and B
and C
and D
and E
try
Thesis, because A
or B
so C
but D
yet E

From Ross Winterowd’s *The Grammar of Coherence*
Transitions

Transitions are key to creating the feeling of continuity for your reader.

A single transition word also cue your reader about the main idea of the paragraph (e.g. *similarly*, *however*, *consequently*)

Some papers may require transition paragraphs to help link two ideas. In longer papers, a mini-conclusion at the end of a main section is helpful for reader before moving to new material.
Transitions

Hooping: Step by Step

1. Print out a copy of your essay.
2. Isolate two sequential paragraphs from the body of your essay.
3. Circle the last two or three sentences from the first paragraph and the first two or three sentences of the second paragraph.
4. Rewrite the circled sentences as if they were combined in one paragraph. Read this new paragraph for coherence. Does it flow? If not, it may mean that you need to add a transition between the two paragraphs.
Transitions

Hooping: Step by Step

Paragraph 1

Paragraph 2

Paragraph 1

Paragraph 2

Checking for Transitions

*This exercise was developed by John Bruns.*
Transitions

Don’t forget that headings can work as effective transitions.

Section headings such as “Methods,” “Results,” and “Discussion” provide easy clues to help guide the reader, and can be just as effective as more traditional transition words or phrases.
To strengthen your point, consider alternate positions or interpretations. You need a balance, however, between acknowledging the counter-argument without appearing to waffle between two sides of the issue.

It is important to do more than simply state the opposing view; you must refute its validity, or provide a rebuttal. If you attack potential opposition it will weaken, invalidate or reduce their credibility.
If the counter-argument is too strong or valid to refute entirely, you can concede that the opposition may have a point in one matter, while explaining that you believe that the opposition’s argument does not mean that your own argument loses any validity: “Despite the fact that... (concession/qualification) it is still more important that... (your/primary argument).”
Counter-Argument

• Question the evidence.
• Attack the warrants or assumptions that underlie the claim.
• Attack the logic or reasoning of the opposing view. Identify any possible logical fallacies.
• Attack the possible solution. Is it feasible? Practical? Ethical?

Sample language for phrasing counter-argument:
While opponents of __ have understandable/reasonable concerns ...
Though it may be true that...
Many believe...But...
Unless A changes, then B cannot be true/occur/be improved...
While it might be the case in _____ situation, it is not always true...

Adapted from a worksheet by Mariko Dawson
Introductions

- Directly declare focus of investigation
- Preview scope of project
- Provide needed background (relevant studies, definition of key terms, context for topic)
- Set the tone for the paper

- Remember to write the introduction when you are ready. This might be at the END of the paper.
Introductions

Professors aren't known for fussing about their looks, but the results of a new study suggest they may have to if they want better teaching evaluations.

Daniel Hamermesh, a professor of economics at the University of Texas at Austin, and Amy Parker, one of his students, found that attractive professors consistently outscore their less comely colleagues by a significant margin on student evaluations of teaching. The findings, they say, raise serious questions about the use of student evaluations as a valid measure of teaching quality.

In their study, Mr. Hamermesh and Ms. Parker asked students to look at photographs of 94 professors and rate their beauty. Then they compared those ratings to the average student evaluation scores for the courses taught by those professors. The two found that the professors who had been rated among the most beautiful scored a point higher than those rated least beautiful (that's a substantial difference, since student evaluations don't generally vary by much).

While it's not news that beauty trumps brains in many quarters, you would think that the ivory tower would be relatively exempt from such shallowness.
Introductions

• Bold statement/lead with thesis
• Reframe or narrow question
• Define the opposition
• Quotation
• Hard Facts
• Anecdote
• Metaphor, symbol, reference

(See handout for examples, advantages, disadvantages of each)
Conclusions

• Summarize points AND connect them
• Reiterate the thesis

• Can propose further questions for debate or research
• Can conjecture about broader implications based on the information provided
• Can suggest action step or policy change based on idea you’ve proven
Conclusions

Though research on CDCS remains far from abundant, existing studies prescribe early and ongoing intervention by a team of specialists, including speech-language pathologists, physical and occupational therapists, various medical and educational professionals, and parents. Such intervention has been shown to allow individuals with CDCS to live happy, long, and full lives. The research, however, indicates that the syndrome affects all aspects of a child's development and should therefore be taken quite seriously. Most children require numerous medical interventions, including surgery (esp to correct heart defects), feeding tubes [...] Currently, the best attempts are being made to help young children with CDCS reach developmental milestones earlier, communicate effectively, and function independently. However, as the authors of the aforementioned studies suggest, much more research is needed to clarify the causes of varying degrees of disability, to identify effective and innovative treatments, and to individualize intervention plans.
Conclusions

What to do Instead

For every category, emphasize how your paper has shed new light on the topic***

1. Return to the ongoing conversation.

2. Consider again the background information with which you began.

3. Return to the key terms.
Conclusions

4. Use an anecdote or quotation that summarizes or reflects your main idea.

5. Evoke a vivid image.

6. Call for action or suggest a course.

7. Acknowledge your opponents—if only to emphasize that you've superseded them.
Conclusions

8. Ask, and perhaps answer, a provocative question.

9. Universalize carefully (compare to other appropriate situations)

10. Suggest consequences or results (what benefits/costs will ensue if your argument is heeded or dismissed?)
Conclusions

Remember: **language** is especially important to a conclusion. Your goal in your final sentences is to leave your ideas resounding in your reader's mind. Give her something to think about. Make your language ring.