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Source: *College Composition and Communication*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Oct., 1976), pp. 253-257
Published by: National Council of Teachers of English
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/357044
Accessed: 21-08-2019 17:44 UTC

When Is a Paragraph?

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FOR THE PAST FEW YEARS, for reasons that will soon become apparent, I have asked students in one of my courses to take part in a small, informal experiment. Each student receives a duplicated copy of the same 500-word expository passage. The passage, I explain, has been transcribed verbatim from Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's *Fundamentals of Good Writing* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1950), pp. 290-291, departing from the original in only one respect: the original passage was divided into two or more paragraphs; the copy contains no paragraph indentations. Their task is simply to decide into how many paragraphs they think it should be divided and to note the precise point (or points) at which they would make their divisions.

The exercise usually takes fifteen minutes or so, and we spend another ten or fifteen analyzing the results, which are invariably intriguing. We discover that some students have divided the passage into two paragraphs, others into three, still others into four or five. What is more, nearly all of these possible divisions seem justifiable—they "feel right." Most surprising of all is the fact that only five students out of the more than 100 who have tried the experiment have paragraphed the passage precisely as Brooks and Warren originally did.

These results are hardly earthshaking, I realize. They prove, if they prove anything, only that different students have different intuitions about paragraphing and that many of these intuitions turn out to be equally acceptable, equally "correct." But perhaps a few facts I have so far neglected to mention will make this discovery less trivial than it may at first appear.

First of all, the students who took part in the exercise were not college freshmen; they were teachers of English. Secondly, most of them were committed to the theory, promulgated by many handbooks, that the paragraph is a purely "logical" unit of discourse. They believed, that is to say, that a paragraph is a group of sentences developing one central idea. They believed that good paragraphs always (or usually) contain identifiable topic sentences which always (or usually) occur toward the beginning of the paragraphs. They believed that a well-developed paragraph is "a composition in miniature." They believed, accordingly, that good English teachers should concentrate on teaching their students to write good paragraphs, because good paragraphs are really good essays writ small.

My purpose in having them try my little experiment was to induce them to question the adequacy of the theory they had accepted. If, as the handbooks declare, a paragraph represents a "distinct unit of thought," why is it that we can't recognize a unit of thought when we see one? If every paragraph contains an identifiable topic sentence, then why don't all of us identify the same topic sentence? If good paragraphs are really compositions in miniature, why do some of us, given a passage not marked off into paragraphs, find in it two mini-compositions, while others find three or four or five? Aren't compositions—even miniature ones—supposed to have clear beginnings, middles,

and conclusions?

Too many of us, I suspect, have based our teaching of the paragraph on a theory whose origins we do not know and whose validity we have not tested. Like the poet's neighbor in Frost's "Mending Wall," we go on repeating our fathers' sayings without ever going behind them.

Behind the logical (or "organic") theory of the paragraph lies a history replete with facts that cast doubt upon its authenticity. That history, as Paul C. Rodgers, Jr. has told us, begins a little more than a hundred years ago with Alexander Bain, a Scottish logician.[1] The fact that Bain was a logician, not a teacher of rhetoric, is itself of first importance; for he conceived the paragraph as a deductive system, a collection of sentences animated by unity of purpose, a purpose announced in an opening topic statement and developed through a logically ordered sequence of statements that "iterate or illustrate the same idea."[2]

What is more, Bain appears to have constructed his deductive model by a purely deductive procedure. Making no empirical analysis of actual paragraphs, he simply transferred to his collection of sentences the classical rules governing the individual sentence—rules, now discredited, which defined the sentence as a group of words containing a subject and predicate and expressing a "complete and independent thought." Bain's paragraph, notes Rodgers, "is simply a sentence writ large,"[3] that is, an extension by analogy of logic-based grammar.

Others—John Genung, Barrett Wendell, and George R. Carpenter among them—subsequently refined Bain's theory without questioning its assumptions, reducing Bain's original six principles of paragraph construction to the now familiar triad of Unity, Coherence, and Emphasis, and tacking on the added notion that the paragraph is the discourse in miniature. Bain's influence is thus responsible, Rodgers observes, "for placing twentieth-century paragraph rhetoric in a deductive cage, from which it has yet to extricate itself."[4]

The work of extrication has been quietly going forward, however. The most recent empirical testing of Bain's theory, and the most damaging to it, was undertaken by Richard Braddock in 1974.[5] Braddock's study, completed shortly before his untimely death, took specific aim at two of Bain's assertions: that all expository paragraphs have topic sentences and that topic sentences usually occur at the beginnings of paragraphs. Braddock's method of research and his findings call into question not only Bain's century-old paragraph theory but also, as I shall try to show, the procedures and generalizations of such "new" rhetoricians as Francis Christensen and Alton L. Becker.

Braddock began by making a random selection of essays published in *The Atlantic*, *Harper's*, *The Reporter*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Saturday Review*. Almost immediately, he ran into trouble, finding it extremely difficult to define the very item he was looking for—the topic sentence. "After several frustrating attempts to underline the appropriate T-unit where it occurred," Braddock reported, "I realized that the notion of what a topic sentence is, is not at all clear."[6] In an effort to define this central term, he developed an entire catalogue of "types" of topic sentence: the *simple*

[1] Paul C. Rodgers, Jr., "Alexander Bain and the Rise of the Organic Paragraph," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 51 (December, 1965), 399-408.

[2] Alexander Bain, *English Composition and Rhetoric* (London: Longmans, Green, 1866), cited by Rodgers, p. 404.

[3] Rodgers, Alexander Bain," p. 406.

[4] Ibid., p. 408.

[5] Richard Braddock, "The Frequency and Placement of Topic Sentences in Expository Prose," *Research in the Teaching of English*, 8 (Winter, 1974), 287-302.

[6] Ibid., p. 291. [7] Ibid., p. 301. [8] Ibid., p. 298.

topic (the kind the handbooks say all paragraphs should contain); the *delayed-completion* (a topic stated in two T-units, not necessarily adjacent); the *assembled* (not actually a sentence at all, but a composite, gummed together from fragments of several sentences running through the paragraph); and the *inferred* (a "topic sentence" nowhere explicitly stated by the writer, but construed by the reader).

But even after thus extending—one might say stretching—the definition of "topic sentence," Braddock found that a considerable proportion of the paragraphs in his sample contained no topic sentence of any type. In some instances, a single topic sentence governed a sequence running to several paragraphs; in others, the indentations seemed "quite arbitrary." All told, fewer than half the paragraphs contained a simple topic sentence; even when topic sentences of the delayed-completion type were included, the total came to little more than half (55%). How many paragraphs *began* with topic sentences? Fewer than one out of seven (13%) in all the paragraphs Braddock analyzed.

These findings, Braddock noted with quiet understatement, "did not support the claims of textbook writers about the frequency and location of topic sentences in professional writing."[7] Although scientific and technical writing might present a different case, with respect to contemporary professional exposition the textbooks' claims were "just not true."[8]

Braddock's study thus effectively disposes of the hand-me-down Bainalities of the textbooks. But it does more than that: as I have already suggested, Braddock's empirical method and his findings cast some doubt upon certain conclusions reached by Francis Christensen and A. L. Becker, and upon the evidence those conclusions are based on.

In his "Generative Rhetoric of the Paragraph," Professor Christensen proposes, as did Alexander Bain, "that the paragraph has, or may have, a structure as definable and traceable as that of the sentence and that it can be analyzed in the same way."[9] From this premise he moves rather swiftly to conclusions hardly distinguishable from Bain's:

1. The paragraph may be defined as a sequence of structurally related sentences.
2. The top sentence of the sequence is the topic sentence.
3. The topic sentence is nearly always the first sentence of the sequence.[10]

Although he subsequently allows for exceptions (some paragraphs have no topic sentence; some paragraphing is "illogical"), there is no mistaking that Christensen's second and third "rules" are essentially those which Braddock found to be false. Unlike Braddock, Christensen seems to believe that the term *topic sentence* is self-explanatory, requiring no precise definition. In support of his claims, Christensen cites the "many scores of paragraphs I have analyzed for this study."[11] He does not tell us how these paragraphs were selected or from what sources; he tells us only that in the paragraphs he analyzed "the topic sentence occurs almost invariably at the beginning."[12] Had he detailed his procedures as he did in his study of sentence openers,[13] we would have reason to be more confident of his conclusions. But he doesn't. The evidence underlying his statements about the paragraph is soft and rather vague.

A. L. Becker's "Tagmemic Approach to Paragraph Analysis," viewed in the light of Braddock's study, seems similarly flawed. Like Christensen, Becker applies to the paragraph the instruments of sentence-analysis, with the purpose of "extending grammatical theories now used in analyzing and describing sentence structure . . . to the description of para-

[9] *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 54.
[10] Ibid., pp. 57-58. [11] Ibid., p. 58.
[12] Ibid. [13] Ibid., pp. 39-51.

graphs."[14] He cautions at the outset that he intends to examine the paragraph from only one of three possible perspectives—the "particle" perspective—and that his description will necessarily be somewhat distorted because it suppresses the "wave" and "field" aspects of paragraph structure. But this disclaimer hardly prepares us for his subsequent assertion that there are "two major patterns of paragraphing in expository writing,"[15] and only two: the TRI (Topic-Restriction-Illustration) pattern and the PS (Problem-Solution) pattern. Becker continues:

> Although there are more kinds of expository paragraphs than these two, I would say that the majority of them fall into one of these two major types. Many expository paragraphs which at first appear to be neither TRI or [*sic*] PS can be interpreted as variations of these patterns. . . . There are also minor paragraph forms (usually transitional paragraphs or simple lists)—and, finally, there are "bad" paragraphs, like poorly constructed, confusing sentences.[16]

Again, one is left in doubt as to the evidence on which these generalizations rest. Surely, in preparing his study, Professor Becker cannot have read *all* expository paragraphs; how, then, can he justify a claim concerning a "majority" of them? What were his sampling procedures? Were "bad" paragraphs included in his total count, or were they summarily rejected as unworthy of consideration? To these and other questions he provides no answers. We know only that his findings conflict sharply with Braddock's, and that, in Becker's case as in Christensen's, we find, somewhat disguised by modern terminology, the century-old claim that a "good" paragraph begins with a topic sentence and develops the idea stated by the topic sentence.

If we are ever to rid ourselves of Bain's lingering legacy we must, it seems clear, abandon his exclusively sentence-based, "particle" approach to paragraph description, an approach that treats the paragraph as if it were an isolated, self-contained unit, and imposes upon it a rigid set of logical and quasi-grammatical rules. We must adopt an approach that describes not only the internal structure of a paragraph but also its external connections with adjoining paragraphs and its function in the discourse as a whole. What we need, Paul Rodgers proposes, is "a flexible, open-ended *discourse-centered* rhetoric of the paragraph":

> All we can usefully say of *all* paragraphs at present [Rodgers explains] is that their authors have marked them off for special consideration as *stadia of discourse,* in preference to other stadia, other patterns, in the same material. Paragraph structure is part and parcel of the discourse as a whole; a given stadium becomes a paragraph not by virtue of its structure but because the writer elects to indent, his indentation functioning, as does all punctuation, as a gloss upon the overall literary process under way at that point.[17]

Paragraphing, Rodgers here suggests, is governed by rhetorical choice rather than by logical or grammatical rule. Like the structure of a sentence or that of a fully-developed essay, the structure of a paragraph arises out of an *ethos* and a *pathos* as well as out of a *logos*—out of the writer's personality and his perception of his reader as well as out of his perception of the structure of his subject-matter. The logic and "grammar" of a given paragraph are conditioned—sometimes

[14]A. L. Becker, "A Tagmemic Approach to Paragraph Analysis," in Francis Christensen *et al., The Sentence and the Paragraph* (Champaign, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1966), p. 33.

[15]Ibid., p. 34. [16]Ibid., p. 36.

[17]Paul C. Rodgers, Jr., "A Discourse-Centered Rhetoric of the Paragraph," in Francis Christensen *et al., The Sentence and the Paragraph* (Champaign, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1966), p. 42.

powerfully—by what may be termed the psychologic and socio-logic of a particular rhetorical occasion.

As every experienced writer knows, paragraphing helps establish a tone or "voice." (Editors know this, too. That is why they frequently re-paragraph a writer's prose to bring it into conformity with their publication's image.) Short paragraphs appear to move more swiftly than long ones; short paragraphs lighten up the appearance of a page, whereas long ones, containing the identical information, give the page a heavier, more scholarly look. Just as he adjusts his sentences and his diction, the writer may adjust his paragraphs, deliberately or intuitively, to achieve a variety of rhetorical effects—formality or informality, abruptness or suavity, emphasis or subjunction.

Paragraphing practices are also governed by changes in fashion and social convention. Today's paragraphs are considerably shorter than those of fifty or a hundred years ago. "In books of the last century," Paul Roberts reminds us, "a paragraph often ran through several pages, but the modern reader wants to come up for air oftener. He is alarmed by a solid mass of writing and comforted when it is broken up into chunks."[18] In consequence of this change in literary fashion, nineteenth-century rules of "logical" paragraphing, dubious in their own day, are outmoded now. What might once have appeared as a single paragraph is today routinely broken up into smaller units which, taken together, comprise what William Irmscher has labeled a "paragraph bloc."[19] Indeed, when Richard Braddock observed that one topic sentence frequently governed an entire sequence of paragraphs, he was suggesting that contemporary professional writers use blocs rather than single paragraphs as logical units much of the time.

In sum, today's paragraph is not a logical unit and we should stop telling our students it is. It does not necessarily begin with a topic sentence; it does not necessarily "handle and exhaust a distinct topic," as the textbooks say it must do. It is not a composition-in-miniature, either—it is not an independent, self-contained whole but a functioning part of discourse; its boundaries are not sealed but open to the surrounding text; it links as often as it divides. Shaped by the writer's individual style and by the reader's expectations as well as by the logic of the subject-matter, the paragraph is a flexible, expressive rhetorical instrument.

Perhaps some day it will be possible to teach paragraphing by rule and formula, though I frankly doubt it. In any case, the rules and formulas that govern the paragraphing practices of professional writers have yet to be discovered. Let us, therefore, focus our students' attention on what they have to say—on the arguments they want to present, the points they want to make—and not on the number of indentations they should use in saying it. Let us make them think about the topics they plan to discuss rather than about the "correct" location of their topic sentences. Let us, in other words, make our teaching discourse-centered. If the whole does indeed determine the parts, their paragraphs should improve as their essays mold them into form.

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[18] Paul Roberts, *Understanding English* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. 423.

[19] William F. Irmscher, *The Holt Guide to English* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1972), p. 86.