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## CREATE A PARAGRAPH-BY-PARAGRAPH PLAN

YOU now know roughly the number of paragraphs you will have in each section. The next step is to assign a topic to each of those paragraphs. What you will end up with is a list of paragraph topics in the order they will appear in your report, interspersed among your section and subsection headings—in short, a paragraph-by-paragraph plan of places to gather your material. Don't worry about getting the list of paragraph topics right the first time. The first list will suggest other topics in different order. And as you begin to write, many of the topics will be divided or collapsed. But the more time you spend on this, the more solid the structure of your argument.

Paragraph-by-paragraph plans can be made at any stage of the writing process. I often prepare one for manuscripts that I edit—to get me quickly up to speed on content, structure, and balance. But it is most helpful to make one in the planning stage, after you've determined your messages and section headings, and then revise it when you have completed your first draft. The revised one will help you stay aware of changes in structure and the continuing relevance of your messages. Showing your paragraph plan to the people who will be reviewing your report—or to your fellow authors in a group project—is a good way to have them

buy into what you're planning write. It also allows them to comment before you've invested a lot of time in writing.

Here is the paragraph-by-paragraph plan for the Census Bureau's policy brief:

### Introduction (no heading)

- ¶1. Summary of messages
- ¶2. Quotation from analyst Paul Campbell: "Keep in mind that these are just projections . . ."

### Different paths to growth

- ¶3. California, Texas, and Florida take different paths
- ¶4. California's losses through interstate migration
- ¶5. Texas's gains from all three contributors
- ¶6. Florida's small natural increase
- ¶7. Biggest interstate migration—New York

### 27 Floridas

- ¶8. 27 states will have one in five people elderly
- ¶9. 21 states will double their 65 and older population
- ¶10. Youth population—Alaska will have largest gains

### Big gains for Hispanics and Asians

- ¶11. Hispanics and Asians and Pacific Islanders—61 percent of the growth
- ¶12. Big gains in California and the East
- ¶13. Growth in Black population in Georgia, Texas, Florida, Maryland, and Virginia
- ¶14. Growth in White population in Florida, Texas, Washington, North Carolina, and Georgia
- ¶15. Native American population rising
- ¶16. Campbell quotation: "What might seem unusual today will be usual tomorrow . . ."

# 6

## MAKE A STRONG POINT ABOUT EACH OF YOUR PARAGRAPH TOPICS

WRITE the first topic of your paragraph-by-paragraph plan at the top of a sheet of paper (or at the top of a fresh page on your word processor), and make a strong point about it. If you have a general topic such as this:

*Topic* Partnerships of governments, businesses, and citizens

you might move to a strong point such as this:

*Point* When governments listen to businesses and citizens and work in partnership with them in deciding and implementing policy, they create programs that people will support.

Now do the same for all the other topics in your plan. You'll find for some that it's easy, and for others, impossible—and that will suggest refinements to your plan.

Here are some examples of moving from topic to point for the Census Bureau's brief on projections:

*Topic* California, Texas, and Florida take different paths



*Point* California, Texas, and Florida will probably see the most growth but they will grow in very different ways.

*Topic* California's losses through interstate migration



*Point* California will see big gains through natural increase and international migration but big losses through interstate migration.

*Topic* Texas's gains from all three contributors



*Point* In Texas there will be a balance among all three contributors to its rising population.

Here's a set of topic-to-point conversions for the overview of the recent *World Development Report*:

*Topic* New ideas about the role of the state



*Point* The world is changing and with it our ideas about the state's role in economic and social development.

*Topic* Expectations met, but not everywhere



*Point* In a few countries things have indeed worked out more or less as the technocrats expected, but in many countries outcomes were very different.

*Topic* Government getting bigger



*Point* Over the last century the size and scope of government have expanded enormously, particularly in the industrial countries.

*Topic* Focus on state inspired by dramatic events



*Point* As in the 1940s, today's renewed focus on the state's role has been inspired by dramatic events in the global economy, which have fundamentally changed the environment in which states operate.

*Topic* Clamor for more effective governance



*Point* The clamor for greater government effectiveness has reached crisis proportions in many developing countries where the state has failed to deliver even such fundamental public goods as roads, property rights, and basic health and education.

# 7

## GATHER YOUR DETAILS, EXAMPLES, AND COMMENTS

ON each page, under each point—20 for a 20-paragraph report, 100 for a 100-paragraph report—begin noting your support—data, details, examples, and comments. It helps to spread all your pages out on a large table. I generally carry them around in a binder. That allows jotting down—and not losing—ideas that come to mind. It also allows working on one paragraph at a time.

The support for some of your points will fill some pages quickly, while others remain empty. If one point is short on detail and examples, you may need to compile more information by doing more research. If you can't support a point well, consider cutting it. And remember, an ounce of example is worth a ton of abstract generalization.

Here are examples from the Rockefeller Foundation's report:

*Point* The integrated model provides in-depth training in the skills required for a specific job and—just as important—places heavy emphasis on work habits.

*Support* Less intensive programs offer little to those with special disadvantages

- Development of life skills
- Stresses punctuality and attendance

*Point* The integrated model provides literacy and numeracy training concurrently with job training.

*Support* Only elements directly related to job included

- Just-in-time remediation of basic skills speeds learning process
- The closer the tie between job skills and basic literacy and numeracy training, the more willing trainees are to increase basic skills

*Point* Another key feature of the integrated model is to have the education and employment program plugged directly into the requirements of industry—and to have industry plugged into the development of the program.

*Support* When the demand and wages for a skill fall, it is phased out of the skill offerings

- Technical instructors drawn from industry
- Approach treats training as a business

Having all your material slotted into a paragraph-by-paragraph plan enables you to refine it *before* you've written a paragraph.

## 8

### CONVERT YOUR RAW MATERIAL INTO DRAFT PARAGRAPHS

WITH the contents of each paragraph roughed out, the material of your paragraphs is now before you. Writing the perfect paragraph still won't be easy, but it should be much easier now that you have planned the order and content of each one.

Rough out your paragraphs by numbering your supporting elements—details, examples, and comments—in the order they might appear. Details that complement each other might be combined into one sentence. Paragraphs that are long and bristling with numbers may work better as a table or chart. Be especially careful to put dates or statistics in a logical order. Strike out unnecessary detail, and move elsewhere material that is not relevant to your point.

California will see big gains through natural increase and international migration but big losses through interstate migration.

- Projected increase of 17.7 million residents in the next 30 years
- California is the most populous state
- One in eight Americans live in California

- One in seven Americans will live in California by 2025
- The largest natural increase
- The largest net international migration
- The second largest inflow of interstate migrants
- The largest outflow of interstate migrants

The paragraph:

With California's projected increase of 17.7 million residents in the next 30 years, one American in seven will live in California by 2025, up from one in eight today. For this most populous of states, everything happens in a big way: the largest natural increase, the largest net international migration, the second largest inflow of interstate migrants, and the largest outflow of interstate migrants.

A solid first draft.

The following sections contain a few paragraph models (drawn from the companion book *Powerful Paragraphs*) to help you convert your raw material into draft paragraphs.

### LEAD WITH THE POINT AND SUPPORT IT

The most common way to develop a paragraph is to state the point in the first sentence and support it, in subsequent sentences, with evidence: details, examples, and comments. When you lead with the point, your reader can identify it immediately, and a skimmer can pick up your line of argument by reading the first sentence of each paragraph. This form of development is what most of us use for two-thirds of our writing. It becomes less effective when overused, and more when alternated with other ways of developing a point.

*Over the past century, the human race has been affected by a slew of what demographers call "secular" trends. One such*

trend is an increase in average size. You have to stoop to get through the doorways of a Tudor cottage in England because its inhabitants were smaller than you are, not because they had a penchant for crouching. Another trend is in life expectancy. People are living longer. Life expectancy in Africa increased over the past 20 years from 46 to 53 years. Over the same period in Europe, where things were already pretty comfortable to begin with, life expectancy increased from 71 to 75 years. The global average was an increase from 58 to 65 years.

### LEAD WITH THE POINT AND CONCLUDE WITH A COMMENT

Concluding a paragraph with a comment can inject a bit of your personality and, at times, humor. A comment can also put a paragraph in perspective, create a bridge to the next paragraph, or reinforce your point after presenting a series of facts.

*Geography is not geology, but they can be interlinked in surprising ways. Geographically, Sakhalin Island is part of the Russian Far East, though half of it was Japanese territory until 1945. Geographically, though, it is a northward extension of Japan and thus prone to the same sort of seismic ups and downs as the rest of that archipelago. Earthquakes are no respectors of political boundaries.*

### LEAD WITH THE POINT AND FOLLOW IT WITH A BULLETED LIST

A list of numerical facts, complicated details, or recommendations can be difficult for readers to lift off the page from a block of text. Breaking that block into bulleted items clarifies those elements, a style good for setting up a line of argument.

The ratio of global trade to GDP has been rising over the past decade, but it has been falling for 44 developing countries, with more than a billion people. *The least developed countries*, with 10% of the world's people, *have only 0.3% of world trade*—half their share of two decades ago.

The list goes on:

- More than half of all developing countries have been bypassed by foreign direct investment, two-thirds of which has gone to only eight developing countries.
- Real commodity prices in the 1990s were 45% lower than those in the 1980s—and 10% lower than the lowest level during the Great Depression, reached in 1932.
- The terms of trade for the least developed countries have declined a cumulative 50% over the past 25 years.
- Average tariffs on industry country imports from the least developed countries are 30% higher than the global average.
- Developing countries lose about \$60 billion a year from agricultural subsidies and barriers to textile exports in industrial nations.

## CONCLUDE WITH THE POINT AFTER INTRODUCING THE SUBJECT

Occasionally, put the point at the end of a paragraph to build suspense. One way to conclude with the point: introduce a subject, discuss it, then make a point about it at the end.

Imagine that a mad scientist went back to 1950 and offered to transport the median family to the wondrous world of the 1990s, and to place them at, say, the 25th percentile level. The 25th percentile of 1996 is a clear material improvement over the median of 1950. Would they accept his offer? Almost surely

not—because in 1950 they were middle class, while in 1996 they would be poor, even if they lived better in material terms. *People don't just care about their absolute material level, they care about their level compared with others.*

## START WITH A QUESTION AND ANSWER IT IMMEDIATELY

Asking a question in the first line of a paragraph grabs readers' attention and sets up your point. Using an immediate, direct answer to make your point demonstrates a firm stance, emphasized by the surety of a fragment.

So will squash eventually rival tennis as a spectator sport, and will Jansher Khan and Peter Marshall become as rich and famous as Pete Sampras and Andre Agassi? *Almost certainly not.* For all the gimmicks of a glasswalled court, a special white ball and more and better cameras, squash remains fearsomely difficult to televise. Not only does the ball move too fast but the camera lens foreshortens the action. Squash, therefore, is destined to remain a sport better played than watched. Given its propensity for what the tennis authorities term “audible obscenities”, that may be just as well.

## 9

## TAPE YOUR DRAFT ON A WALL TO APPLY THE FINISHING TOUCHES

A little-used but wildly effective technique is taping your entire draft report on a wall. That permits many things. One is to see more than a page at a time—indeed, to see all the pages at a time. Only by so doing can you assess overall structure and the balance of your sections and subsections. This also makes it easier to track your various levels of headings, switching sections to subsections and vice versa. And it makes it easier to revise your headings, injecting more punch, ensuring parallel treatment as appropriate.

A second virtue of taping your draft on a wall is that it puts the writer and reviewer side by side, dealing with the problems of a draft, rather than face to face, in the usually uncomfortable confrontation.

A third is that it allows you to make cuts quickly. If you need to cut a 50-page draft to 20 or 30 pages, it's the best technique. I use it for slash-and-burn editing, especially *stripping*—crossing out most sentences in a succession of paragraphs—lifting the points, and then stringing the points together to form new paragraphs.

## REVIEW YOUR LINE OF ARGUMENT

To distinguish the levels of your headings, use a marker to circle all your A-level section headings and underline all your B-level subsection headings. Are there blocks of argument that would work better elsewhere? Look first at your sections, seeing whether you should move any of them. Next look at your subsections—and then at your paragraphs. Ask yourself whether your ideas flow in a logical and obvious way. If not, you may want to change some of your section and subsection headings to make the progression of your argument clearer.

## SPOTLIGHT YOUR MESSAGES

The messages of a report or chapter are too often buried in the last 3 or 4 pages. Move them up front so that readers don't have to wait for them. Your readers should know your main message after reading only the first few paragraphs.

## ADJUST LENGTH AND BALANCE

Think again about your target audience. How much do your readers really want, or need, to read? Look for duplication of information across sections, for long explanations of concepts that your readers may already know, and for tangents that sidetrack your argument. If you have a highly detailed or technical section, consider making it an appendix at the end of your report. If you cut or combine sections, you may need to adjust the balance of your report. Try to keep the sections roughly similar in length.

## REFINE YOUR TITLE AND SECTION HEADINGS

You've been continually revising your title, now give it another test. Does it convey your message? For the example here, we moved from this title:

Growing the Economies of the Middle East and North Africa

to:

Claiming the Future: Choosing Prosperity in the Middle East and North Africa

After the title, take a look at headings. How could they better convey your messages? Headings engage your reader, so don't leave them empty.

A two-hour wall session with the lead authors of a World Bank policy research report on aid effectiveness began with this outline of headings:

**Rethinking Aid**

The new international environment  
New thinking on development strategy  
Aid and development  
Aid, policy reform, and conditionality  
Aid and public expenditures  
Aid and the institutions for public services  
Rethinking development agencies

Those became:

**Assessing Aid: What Works, What Doesn't, and Why**

New thinking on development strategy  
Money matters in a good policy environment

Aid as the midwife of good policies  
Money matters—in a good institutional environment  
Aid as the midwife of good institutions  
Moving aid from money to ideas

Far more informative.

## TAKE A LAST LOOK

Before ripping your report off the wall, make sure that any changes you made in the last few sections didn't displace another element. Now you are ready to edit line by line to make your report absolutely riveting. (See *Powerful Paragraphs*, *Stunning Sentences*, also in this series, and *Edit Yourself*.) Last, do a spell-check and final leaf-through to pick up incidental flaws that might unnecessarily distract your readers.



Traci Nagle

THE EFFECTIVE WRITING SERIES

# RIVETING REPORTS

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W. W. NORTON & COMPANY • NEW YORK • LONDON

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Printed in the United States of America  
First Edition

The text of this book is composed in Electra  
with the display set in Futura  
Composition by Allentown Digital Services Division  
of R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company  
Manufacturing by the Haddon Craftsmen, Inc.  
Book design by JAM Design

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ross-Larson, Bruce Clifford, 1942–

Riveting reports / Bruce Ross-Larson.

p. cm. — (The effective writing series)

ISBN 0-393-31793-5 (pbk.)

1. English language—Rhetoric. 2. Report writing. I. Title.

II. Series: Ross-Larson, Bruce Clifford, 1942– Effective writing  
series.

PE1478.R594 1999

808'.042—dc21

98-30520

CIP

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110  
[www.wwnorton.com](http://www.wwnorton.com)

W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., 10 Coptic Street, London WC1A 1PU

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

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