

Powerful Paragraphs

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This is a demonstration and exercise on the connection between word placement and emphasis, adapted from Patricia Goodson's *Becoming an Academic Writer*. We humans tend to remember the first and last thing that is said in any chunk of information, like a paragraph. You can use this principle to organise your writing. The first sentence in every paragraph is your 'soap box' – the place where you assert yourself as an author and set up what the paragraph is about. Try to avoid using quotes from other people in your first sentence. Here is an example of a paragraph from one of my published papers that is pretty flabby:

Talk is identity work, a way of making us legible to ourselves as well as others. Telling stories about troubles is one way to come to terms with an altered identity. The concept of identity work has become a useful way of understanding the process of becoming an academic (Green and Lee 1998; Johnson and Lee 2000; Barnacle 2005; Dall'Alba and Barnacle 2007; Petersen 2007), the production of thesis texts (Kamler and Thompson 2007; Dunleavy 2003), the management of supervisor student relationships (Johnson, Lee and Green 2000; Green 2005) and in the practices of everyday doctoral life (Barnacle and Mewburn 2010).

While the topic sentence summarises, it doesn't do it very clearly. Let's try that again:

Talk is identity work; the stories we tell about ourselves signal to others what kind of person we think we are and reinforce our sense of self. Telling stories about troubles is one way to come to terms with an altered identity. The concept of identity work has become a useful way of understanding the process of becoming an academic (Green and Lee 1998; Johnson and Lee 2000; Barnacle 2005; Dall'Alba and Barnacle 2007; Petersen 2007), the production of thesis texts (Kamler and Thompson 2007; Dunleavy 2003), the management of supervisor student relationships (Johnson, Lee and Green 2000; Green 2005) and in the practices of everyday doctoral life (Barnacle and Mewburn 2010)...

The key idea in this paragraph is not in the topic sentence, but in the second one: "Telling stories about troubles is one way to come to terms with an altered identity". There is no clear end to the paragraph; it just trails off with a list of other people's work. Below I have moved the key idea to the end of the paragraph and massaged it a little, to create more emphasis.

*Talk is identity work; the stories we tell about ourselves signal to others what kind of person we think we are and reinforce our sense of self. The concept of identity work has become a useful way of understanding the process of becoming an academic (Green and Lee 1998; Johnson and Lee 2000; Barnacle 2005; Dall'Alba and Barnacle 2007; Petersen 2007), the production of thesis texts (Kamler and Thompson 2007; Dunleavy 2003), the management of supervisor student relationships (Johnson, Lee and Green 2000; Green 2005) and in the practices of everyday doctoral life (Barnacle and Mewburn 2010). **No one has yet studied talk and identity in PhD candidature. This paper argues that telling stories about themselves 'in trouble' is not always complaining, but a strategy PhD students use for all sorts of reasons: to bond with others, to troubleshoot their experience and to come to terms with their altered state of being.***

- 1) Pick a paragraph of your own writing.
- 2) Examine the text sentence by sentence and ask yourself: *Where did I place the key idea in this paragraph?* Highlight it.
- 3) Try moving the key idea around – to the first sentence, or the last. See what effect it has on your paragraph. Can't find the key idea in the paragraph? Reconsider the paragraph!

Reference:

Goodson, P (2013) *Becoming an Academic Writer: 50 Exercises for Paced, Productive, and Powerful Writing*, SAGE, NY

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