

The Paragraph Manifesto History 106

A specter is haunting universities—the specter of poorly conceived and badly written paragraphs. All the powers of bad writing have entered into a holy alliance to mask and confound students’ understanding of this core element of good writing. It is high time that the guardians of good writing should openly, in the face of the whole world, declare their commitment to fostering excellent paragraphs among their otherwise oppressed and downtrodden students. Those students have nothing to lose but their intellectual chains. They have a world to win!

I. The General Picture

In this course we are focusing on one major writing skill: paragraphs. The paragraph is the fundamental building block of good writing, which is in turn a critical skill to have wherever one’s study or career might take one. The paragraph’s essence and importance are almost intuitively obvious, but producing even a single good paragraph takes a lot of work. Doing it consistently takes practice. That is why paragraphs are a focus of this course.

Students will immediately note that although paragraphs can vary considerably in length, good ones are usually comparatively short, which is to say rarely much more than one page in length and often a good deal shorter. From this standpoint, the writing requirement for this course is very modest. But our goal will be to focus *on quality rather than quantity*. My expectation, then, is that each student will invest real effort in composing each paragraph with maximal effectiveness in mind. This will mean planning, writing, revising, and revising again.

Indeed, the task of revision is absolutely essential and warrants emphasis. A few gifted people think in paragraphs and can jot them down straight from their heads. Most of us have to struggle. We have to think hard about how to formulate the most effective topic sentence and where precisely to place it. We have to contemplate how much evidence is necessary to make the point that we wish to make. We must sometimes embrace contradictory evidence in such a way as to convey complexity without making our writing seem schizophrenic. And we must carefully reflect on word usage, often having both thesaurus and dictionary at the ready so as to locate the words and phrases that best convey our meaning. Very few of these things will be achieved on the first draft of a paragraph, so we need to invest time and energy in revising, usually multiple times.

But mercifully help is at hand. By the time you read this, you will have received a two-page document called “Effective Paragraphs,” which provides excellent guidance on the matter. Note the emphasis in that document on organization (the central idea & the topic sentence), unity, and coherence. These principles should serve as your guide and inspiration. Be thinking always about how to bring them to bear on your own paragraphs.

II. Prompts

On what basis will you write paragraphs for this course? In advance of each paragraph’s due date, I will provide a prompt of one sort or another. In some cases, I will offer two or three questions or theses and ask you to choose one, making that the basis for your paragraph. In other cases, I will provide you with a set of terms, concepts, and people, asking you to choose three of them and link them in a single sentence that will serve as your thesis or topic sentence (I call these “triads,” and you will learn more about them later). I am also open to your ideas: if you

have an interesting basis for composing a paragraph, run it past me. The only fundamental requirement is that the paragraph in some manner address the history we are studying.

Each paragraph will address a particular set of historical problems that we are exploring. And each paragraph will emphasize and develop a **particular skill or attribute** of good writing that warrants your close attention. Be sure to pay special attention to that skill or attribute, since the failure to do so will result in the return of the paragraph to you without a grade, as if you had not submitted a paragraph on that due date.

III. Grammar, Proofreading, and Plagiarism

Good paragraphs depend on many things, including grammar and proofreading. Proper grammar is absolutely central to clear expression; poor grammar will compromise even the most brilliant insight. If you know you have trouble with grammar—and we all do, to some extent—then you should consult a grammar textbook or some knowledgeable person. The same is true for *spelling*. With the appearance of computer dictionaries that can run spell-checks of your written documents, there is really no excuse for turning in a paper with misspelled words. In short, grammar and spelling count. This is part of focusing on quality over quantity.

It is also essential that you *proofread* what you have written before you turn it in to me. Virtually every text has at least a passage or two that could use further clarification or effective rephrasing. It is very difficult to proofread effectively what you have just written, especially when the matter concerns coherence, unity, and organization. This suggests that you should allow time for proofreading, meaning that you complete a draft and then do something else for at least an hour or so to clear your mind. You can then come back to the paragraph with a more sharply critical eye and make necessary adjustments.

Here we must also address *plagiarism*. The matter can be confusing at times, but the basic definition is the use of other peoples' ideas and words without proper attribution or acknowledgement. There may be a temptation at times to steal something off the internet and pass it off as your own work. I can assure you that I will be on the lookout for this, and I will react severely if I ever should encounter it. The matter of attribution also carries the obligation to convey the ideas of others accurately—that you quote them accurately if you choose to quote, and that you do not take quotations out of context (since that means to misrepresent them).

IV. General Rules for Submission

Before submitting your paragraph, make sure that it conforms to the following expectations:

- Be sure to pay special attention to that skill or attribute, since the failure to do so will result in the return of the paragraph to you without a grade, as if you had not submitted a paragraph on that due date.
- Each paragraph should have a brief title, one that says something about the contents and argument of the paper.
- Each paragraph should use evidence from course readings to support its central idea.
- Avoid contractions in your paragraph. The only exception to this rule is when you cite a passage that contains a contraction in the original.
- Avoid use of the second person (you, your, etc.)—unless, once again, you are citing another source.
- Do not use passive constructions in your paper unless it is absolutely unavoidable.

- Give reference (author + page number) immediately following any and all citations. For this course, these would take the following form: (Hirst, 25) or (Reader, 65). You do not need “p.” or “pp.”, just the form I have given here. (I do not expect you to cite any external sources for the course; if you really wish to do so, then consult with me).
- Make absolutely certain, when you quote from a source, that you have cited the text *exactly* as it appears in the original and that you have not taken the quote out of context.
- Proofread. Then proofread again. Then proofread one more time. And then repeat.

V. Rubrics

Everyone loves rubrics these days, so let the following be the rubric for us:

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| A | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The paragraph has a brief title that relates to its contents. • The paragraph has a central idea that is clearly articulated in the topic sentence. • Everything in the paragraph relates, in some clear fashion, to that topic sentence. • The paragraph offers relevant evidence for its thesis (topic sentence) from sources and readings to make its case. • Any quotations from sources or readings are accurate and presented in their appropriate context. • Direct quotation from sources and readings is limited but effective (i.e., no massive bloc quotes) • The paragraph effectively uses good transitional expresses to guide the reader. • The paragraph avoids the use of passive and contradictions. • The grammar, punctutation, and spelling in the paragraph are excellent. • There is strong evidence of careful proofreading. |
| B | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The paragraph’s title relates to its content, but not so directly or clearly • The paragraph has a main idea, but it is not articulated with the requisite clarity. • Most information in the paragraph realtes to the topic sentence, but in some cases the connections are not clear. • The paragraph offers good evidence for the thesis, but the author has not fully made the connections explicit or has ignored more compelling evidence (or indeed evidence that points in the opposite direction). • Quotations are almost accurate and largely presented in context. • Quotations are largely effective, but somewhat longer than they need to be. • The paragraph makes good use of transitional expressions, but the reader still needs more guidance. • The paragraph mostly avoids passive and contractions. • Grammar, punctuation, and spelling are good, but with some laspses. • There is evidence of proofreading, but clearly the author could have done more. |
| C | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The relationship between title and content is not very clear; the reader is forced to speculate about the connection. • The author is groping toward a central idea, but that idea does not emerge clearly for the reader. • The relationship between the material in the paragraph and the main idea, such as it is, remains something of a mystery. • The evidence provided from sources is either limited or not clearly relevant to the central idea. • There are some inaccuracies in quoting sources or the material has been presented out of context. |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is an excessive reliance on quotations, so that the author's own ideas are unclear. • The paragraph largely neglects transitional expressions, leaving the reader somewhat confounded. • The author relies on passive construction and uses contractions. • Grammar, punctuation, and spelling show signs of deficiency. • There is little evidence of proofreading. |
| D | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is no title or it makes no sense in relation to the paragraph's contents. • There is no central idea that a reasonable reader could identify. • The material presented appears random. • The paragraph offers little by way of evidence. • Sources, if used at all, are misquoted or taken out of context. • The author relies too much on quotation; his/her own ideas are absent. • There are no transitional expressions; reader is deep in the woods. • Grammar, punctuation, and spelling are very deficient. • No evidence at all of proofreading. |
| F | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is no title at all. • There is not even an attempt at articulating a central idea. • The material in the body of the paragraph is utterly incoherent. • There is no deployment of evidence, or the evidence is completely irrelevant to the matter at hand. • Sources, if used at all, are misquoted or taken out of context. • There are no transitional expressions. • Bad grammar, punctuation, and spelling render the paragraph illegible. • No evidence whatsoever of proofreading. |