

# WHAT'S A PARAGRAPH?

*...and how do I write one?*

## A STORY ABOUT PARAGRAPHS:

I can remember picking up my father's books before I could read. The words themselves were mostly foreign, but I still remember the exact moment when I first understood, with a sudden clarity, the purpose of a paragraph. I didn't have the vocabulary to say "paragraph," but I realized that a paragraph was a fence that held words. The words inside a paragraph worked together for a common purpose. They had some specific reason for being inside the same fence. This knowledge delighted me. I began to think of everything in terms of paragraphs. Our reservation was a small paragraph within the United States. My family's house was a paragraph, distinct from the other paragraphs of the LeBrets to the north, the Fords to our south and the Tribal School to the west. Inside our house, each family member existed as a separate paragraph but still had genetics and common experiences to link us. Now, using this logic, I can see my changed family as an essay of seven paragraphs: mother, father, older brother, the deceased sister, my younger twin sisters and our adopted little brother.

At the same time I was seeing the world in paragraphs, I also picked up that Superman comic book. Each panel, complete with picture, dialogue and narrative was a three-dimensional paragraph. In one panel, Superman breaks through a door. His suit is red, blue and yellow. The brown door shatters into many pieces. I look at the narrative above the picture. I cannot read the words, but I assume it tells me that "Superman is breaking down the door." Aloud, I pretend to read the words and say, "Superman is breaking down the door." Words, dialogue, also float out of Superman's mouth. Because he is breaking down the door, I assume he says, "I am breaking down the door." Once again, I pretend to read the words and say aloud, "I am breaking down the door" In this way, I learned to read.

From "Superman and Me" by Sherman Alexie. (Also an Education Narrative!)

## ONE CLEAR WAY TO ORGANIZE PARAGRAPHS:

- Point
- Information
- Explanation

### POINT!

Every paragraph has to have a point-- and only one main point-- that doesn't mean you need to make it really simple or dumb, but that, as Sherman Alexie says, "The words inside a paragraph work together for a common purpose. They have some specific reason for being inside the same fence." If you're writing a paper about problems with the subway system, you don't want to write one paragraph with 23 things wrong with the subway. You want to have one paragraph in which you talk about train delays, one paragraph in which you talk about how dirty trains can get, one paragraph in which you talk about how they never tell you when they're doing repairs, one paragraph in which you talk about fare hikes. In the discussion of fare hikes, you can still mention the other topics, saying it's ridiculous we pay more and more while these issues get worse and worse-- but fares are still the MAIN point!

## SOME MORE POINTS ABOUT POINTS

- Some paragraphs have something called a "Topic Sentence," which says, in 1 sentence, what the point of that paragraph will be at the beginning of the paragraph. These are not always necessary, but they DO make your essay more easy to follow-- for you and your reader. On the other hand, sometimes they feel a little extra. If I feel like your essays could use a little help with organization, I might suggest you use topic sentences. This is not an insult! My advisor suggested I use topic sentences when I was writing my PhD dissertation.
- Whether or not you use topic sentences, your reader is going to want to know what the point is of your paragraph IN THE BEGINNING OF THAT PARAGRAPH! They should not have to read to the end of the paragraph to figure out what it's about.

## INFORMATION / ILLUSTRATION

The INFORMATION is kind of the evidence of your paragraph. Say I'm writing an education narrative and I say "my teacher was a real jerk." I can't just expect my readers to believe me; I need to prove it. By "information," I mean: show me how this person was a jerk! give me examples! Illustrate the point! When you are writing a more researched article, and you say something like "the MTA gathers millions of dollars each year but they don't put any of that toward public services," you're going to need to back that up with some information and evidence, such as some facts about how much money the MTA gathers and where that money actually goes. If you just go around making random claims, whether they're about US Politics or your own life, and you don't have credible examples and evidence to back that up, nobody is going to believe you!

## SOME EXAMPLES OF INFORMATION:

(you will choose the type that best fits your essay!)

- Personal experience
- Quotes from other sources (books, articles, etc)
- Statistics
- Historical events
- Interviews
- Scientific studies or facts
- Songs/videos/art
- Can you think of others?

## GENERAL TIPS FOR PARAGRAPHS

- Make sure you clarify where your new paragraph begins by EITHER indenting (which you do in a formal paper in MS Word or so forth) or adding a space, which people generally do online. You can do either in this class, but do not do both.
- You can have a lot of information and/or a lot of explanation in a paragraph (PIEIEIEIEIE or PIEEEEEIE or PIIIIIEEEEE) but generally speaking, you need all three ingredients, plenty of evidence and NEVER more than one main point!
- Again, PIE is one way to make a paragraph. This is not a hard and fast rule that you must always follow, but rather a guideline that's pretty helpful for writing in college.

## WHAT IS A REVERSE OUTLINE? WHY MIGHT I WANT TO DO ONE?

If you find yourself with a really long document that has no paragraphs at all, it is likely that you have an organization issue-- you have one point and then another, and then the information for the first point, the explanation for the third point, the information for the second point and then you finally get around to mentioning what the third point even is. with very rare exception, this is so confusing that your reader is going to jump ship and stop reading. That said, you may have needed to write this way for your first draft in order to get all your ideas out!

In this situation, it can be useful when you revise to do something called a "reverse outline."

## HOW-TO WRITE A REVERSE OUTLINE

1. Write a rough draft to get all your ideas out. (DONE!)
2. Go through and look for your main points. Write these down in an outline, leaving space below.
3. For each POINT, go through and look for the INFORMATION that supports that POINT. You might need more! Put this in your outline, leaving space for the explanations
4. For all the EXPLANATION go through and find what POINT or INFO it relates to. Put it in your outline!
5. You WILL have gaps! Are your POINTS clear? Do you have enough INFORMATION or are you just making claims and not backing them up with proof or evidence? Do you have enough EXPLANATION or are you expecting your readers to read your mind and know why you have chosen your points and info?

## EXPLANATION!!!

As you may have gathered from all the exclamation points, this one is really important. They are all important, but this is the one that people forget the most. The Explanation is where we see YOU in the essay. Why did YOU choose this info-- what do you want your readers to know? What did YOU think of it? Some genres allow the writer to be more opinionated than others, but even in very dry, subjective-seeming writing, the writer STILL explains what the information means, what they think of it, and why it is in the article. You can even disagree with the sources you have quoted here.

YOU NEED TO EXPLAIN WHY THE QUOTES, EXPERIENCES, FACTS, ETC YOU HAVE CHOSEN ARE IMPORTANT AND HOW THEY RELATE TO YOUR MAIN POINTS. Believe me, it may seem obvious to you, but your reader does not know. If I'm talking about the need to reform the MTA and I spout a statistic about how ridership has dropped by 75% since March-- I need to explain what I want my readers to think about this.

This can be tricky sometimes. Of course, you don't want to hit your readers over the head with the obvious. That said, this almost never happens in Comp classes. Seriously. Usually people underexplain. You should have at least as much explanation as you do information. Usually MUCH more!