

"Whose Paragraph Is It, Anyway?": The Shapes of the English Paragraph

Procrustean Problems in Constructing a Paragraph

What have most of us been taught as the proper method of constructing a paragraph? Since the beginning of composition instruction in this country, most high school textbooks have suggested that if we know how to produce correct sentences, then combining several into a proper structure would produce a proper paragraph. That structure has most commonly required that the opening sentence should be a "topic sentence," which, by definition, states the issue and point of the paragraph. The topic sentence is to be followed by "support" (examples, proofs, or reasons) -- usually three of them -- each encapsulated in its own sentence. Then the final, fifth sentence should restate the claim of the first sentence. This produces a form we could call the "Wizard of Oz" paragraph -- with its middle three sentences singing "because, because, because. . ."

For students in grammar school and middle school, this structure accomplishes a great deal of good:

- It provides a place to start. Once you have the topic sentence nailed down, paragraph construction seems all downhill from there.
- It makes young students feel secure, grounded, founded, found.

- It teaches the helpful lesson that good writing demands good structure.

But this rigid regulation of paragraph construction produces serious problems: Although well suited to the needs of eighth-graders, it fails to describe the actual shape of paragraphs created by professional adults. If you took any published book down from the shelf, selected a paragraph at random, and inspected the next 99 consecutive paragraphs, how many of them would be likely to contain precisely five sentences, the first of which is recognizable as a topic sentence, the next three as support, and the fifth as the conclusion which restates the topic sentence? Perhaps zero. Perhaps one. The odds are low that you will find two. To understand how real paragraphs are formed, we have to recognize how varied and complex those paragraphs really are.

Greek mythology tells us that in the days of Theseus, there was a villain known as Procrustes who ran a macabre bed-and-breakfast place just off the road somewhere between Corinth and Thebes. Knowing that travelers would be unable to complete the journey in a single day, he would wait on the road at sunset, ready to persuade a weary pedestrian to spend the night at his place. "You'll need a good meal and a good night's rest to finish the journey. Why not stay with me tonight?" It sounded like the kindest of invitations. But although the unsuspecting houseguest might well have enjoyed the fine dinner, he could take little pleasure in the sleeping accommodations; for Procrustes suffered from a murderous compulsion that all visitors should fit the length of his guestroom bed -- precisely. Those who were too tall had their feet amputated or their legs shortened and died from loss of blood. Those who were too short were stretched on the rack and died from the resulting complications. Only occasionally were travelers just the right shape for the predetermined structure. Those lucky few escaped unharmed and thought all was right with the world.

The Topic Sentence paragraph structure is just such a Procrustean bed. One size fits all. It matters not what size or shape the bulk of your thought might be: To fit this prescribed resting place, it must be foreshortened or (more often, in the sixth grade) unnaturally extended to satisfy the requirements of your host, the teacher. Somehow we know, when we become adults, that we cannot function with such restraints; but too few of us have received any guidance in understanding the structure(s) readers expect to experience when making their way through an adult paragraph. It should come as no surprise, when we stop to think about it, that no single structure could possibly accommodate the wide variety of shapes human thought can take.

The five-part Topic Sentence paragraph model fails for many reasons, three of which are paramount:

- (1) It assumes that the issue of the paragraph can always be stated in a single sentence.

- (2) It assumes that the issue of a paragraph is always the same as its point.
- (4) It limits our perspective on the paragraph; it looks inward, treating the paragraph as a unit that exists all by itself. That distorts a reader's normal experience. Readers rarely read isolated paragraphs; most paragraphs proceed from a previous one and lead to a following one. Nor do readers usually stop at the end of each paragraph to analyze its contents in retrospect.

To understand paragraphs better, we have to take into account the realities of how adult paragraphs function:

- Readers do not assume that once they have read the first sentence of the paragraph, nothing new will happen to them until the next paragraph begins.
- Readers do not assume that a paragraph's *issue* is always the same as its *point*. The issue is the ground the paragraph may cover; the point is the intellectual claim it wants to make.
- Readers experience a paragraph as discourse that is constantly unfolding. Their interpretation of a paragraph therefore shifts and changes with the appearance of each additional word.

Let us therefore take a closer look at the relationship between the issue of a paragraph and the point it tries to make. From that, we can begin to see how varied the shapes and movements of paragraphs really are.

The Issue

The Topic Sentence approach was right about one important reality of reading: It is generally the case that readers expect a paragraph will be about whatever appears up front. In this sense, a paragraph resembles a sentence: Whatever comes first provides a context for all that follows.

Paragraphs written by grade-school students are essentially over by the end of the first sentence. The rest is merely support -- examples that demonstrate they were justified in saying what they said in the topic sentence. Here is a real example from grade 6:

- 1a. I like the Spring because of the pretty flowers. I like the Spring because of the tulips. I like the Spring because of the roses. I like the Spring because of the daffodils. I like the Spring because of the pretty flowers.

By the end of the first sentence, the *thinking* is complete. A more mature mind would recognize that there is only one sentence's worth of thought in the entire paragraph:

- 1b. I like the Spring because of the pretty flowers -- the tulips, the roses, and the daffodils.

Mature paragraphs *start* from the first sentence but continue to develop from there, allowing the thought to unfold. *Unfold* is the important word here. We read each succeeding sentence of a paragraph to see how that issue develops. Let us look at a paragraph unfolding in slow motion.

- 2a. Much has happened since the Apollo program and the Mercury and Gemini missions that paved the way for it in the early 1960s.

If the rest of the paragraph is about this initial sentence, what is the rest of the paragraph likely to be about? Most (but not all) readers expect either that we will hear more about what has happened in the development of the space program or that we will hear why the 1960s was such an important time. (The former information occupies the Topic position in (2a); the latter occupies the Stress position.)

Here is the second sentence:

- 2b. Numerous scientific and communications satellites have been launched into Earth orbit.

Does this begin to fulfill the promise of (2a)? It could: It might be the first of several examples of the "much that has happened" in the space program. On the other hand, it might not: The paragraph may settle down to talk exclusively about Earth orbit experiments -- in which case it would have taken two sentences, not one, to state the issue. We will not know until we read at least one more sentence.

Here is the next sentence:

- 2c. Unmanned deep-space probes have been sent to the sun, the moon, and the planets, where they gathered a wealth of information about our solar system.

Apparently we are not going to linger over the Earth orbit experiments. Because we are hearing about yet more of the "much that has happened" in the space program, it now looks like the whole paragraph will be devoted to this continuing effort -- the one that was presented to us in the first sentence. The next two sentences confirm this suspicion:

- 2d. Skylab demonstrated that American astronauts could live and work in space for months at a time.
- 2e. And a dramatically different launch vehicle entered service: the space shuttle.

Here is the final sentence of the paragraph.

- 2f. The winged reusable craft was supposed to make space flight routine and cheap.

The "winged reusable craft" refers backward to "the space shuttle." Thus, for the paragraph as a whole, it took only one sentence to get on the table the issue that would be discussed. We could not be *sure* of that until the paragraph had progressed for more than one sentence.

Here is the paragraph in its entirety:

2. Much has happened since the Apollo program and the Mercury and Gemini missions that paved the way for it in the early 1960s. Numerous scientific and communications satellites have been launched into Earth orbit. Unmanned deep-space probes have been sent to the sun, the moon, and the planets, where they gathered a wealth of information about our solar system. Skylab demonstrated that American astronauts could live and work in space for months at a time. And a dramatically different launch vehicle entered service: the space shuttle. The winged reusable craft was supposed to make space flight routine and cheap.

Often, however, a mature paragraph requires more than a single sentence to state its issue. Readers have to be aware -- and actually are naturally aware -- of that possibility. Since we do not print big numbers at the beginning of the paragraph to indicate how many sentences will be necessary to state the issue, readers have to figure it out for themselves. Once again, it is a process of watching the paragraph *unfold*. Let us watch another paragraph appear in slow motion.

- 3a. I did not allow blindness to intimidate me.

This sounds like a good candidate for being a regulation high school essay topic sentence -- a one-sentence issue if there ever was one. If it is indeed a one-sentence issue, then we should be ready to hear about a number of ways in which blindness did not prevail over the human spirit:

I did not allow blindness to intimidate me.

It didn't stop me from X.

It didn't stop me from Y.

It didn't stop me from Z.

Let us see if that is what happens in this particular paragraph. Here is the second sentence:

- 3b. I set about memorizing the number of stairs in each staircase of the new house, searching for ways to keep them all straight.

This does not have the ring of "It didn't stop me from X." It is not, in itself, an example of how blindness did not intimidate her. It is not in any clear way a fully self-explanatory statement. It sounds like it is leaning forward to a sentence that will either explain or begin to explain why this memorizing was a strong, self-reliant act.

Here is the third sentence:

- 3c. The fourteen steps of the front hall staircase summoned the word "fortunate" -- the way I felt about being able to have a new and better place in which to live: "Fourteen"; "fortunate."

This partially explains the second sentence. We might now be developing a suspicion that we will soon hear about other staircases. If that is indeed the case, then what we have here is a *two-sentence* issue. The next sentence should solve the puzzle for us. Here is the third sentence:

- 3d. The seven steps to the upper level, where my CD player and all that wonderful music resided were my "seven" steps to "heaven."

Now we are more or less convinced. The first two sentences, put together, announced the issue of the paragraph: So as not to be intimidated by blindness, she memorized the number of stairs in the various staircases. The third and fourth sentences are developing that issue. We might expect that development to continue.

Here is the rest of the paragraph:

- 3e. The ten stairs to the basement recalled the "ten steps" of St. John of the Cross, who tells us that "the way down," through denial and self-cleansing, is a good way to find God. And the three steps of the front doorstep could be distinguished from the two steps of the back doorstep because to ascend in life is always a step more difficult than to descend.

The structure of the paragraph now seems clear: The two-sentence issue is followed by a number of examples.

I was not going to be beaten by blindness.

I figured out mnemonic devices for dealing with the various staircases.

Staircase #1

Staircase #2

Staircase #3

Staircases 4 and 5.

Here is the whole paragraph:

3. I did not allow blindness to intimidate me. I set about memorizing the number of stairs in each staircase of the new house, creating a device

for keeping them all straight. The fourteen steps of the front hall staircase summoned the word "fortunate" -- the way I felt about being able to have a new and better place to live: "Fourteen"; "fortunate." The seven steps to the upper level, where my CD player and all that wonderful music resided were my "seven" steps to "heaven." The ten stairs to the basement recalled the "ten steps" of St. John of the Cross, who tells us that "the way down," through denial and self-cleansing, are the best way to God. And the three steps of the front doorstoop could be distinguished from the two steps of the back doorstoop because to ascend in life is always a step more difficult than to descend.

Let us do this once more, looking at a paragraph that has yet a different shape.

- 4a. All through the 1950s and well into the 1960s, his published articles glowed with patriotic zeal and communal self-satisfaction.

If the rest of the paragraph goes on to tell us all about those glowing articles, or the zeal and the self-satisfaction, then what we have here is a one-sentence issue, much resembling the old-style topic sentence. Here is the second sentence:

- 4b. They praised the country's stability, our national sense of progress, our international status on the rise, and the political resiliency that allowed us to survive the McCarthy Era and the Korean War effort.

It seems our expectation is being fulfilled. This sentence might be the beginning of the kind of discussion that (4a) promised. By the end of the third sentence, we will be convinced, one way or another. Here is the third sentence:

- 4c. But in the late 1960s, everything changed, and his prose grew sour and darker.

The "But" changes our mind. The discussion of the glowing articles of the 1950s and early 1960s is over. The "But" signals that we are turning in a new direction. The Stress position occupant in this sentence, "sour and darker," seems to herald a new discussion -- one that will have little space for more "glowing" articles. Here is the fourth sentence:

- 4d. The Vietnam War depressed him.

We seem to be descending into the "sour and darker" side. Will it continue?

- 4e. The widening "generation gap" made communication seem increasingly difficult, if not impossible. The assassinations of Bobby

Kennedy and Martin Luther King seemed to promise that the assassination of John F. Kennedy had not been an isolated event, but rather had been the implanting of a national poison that was spreading and conquering. And with the Watergate scandal in the early 1970s, he seemed to give up hope altogether. He stopped writing.

It continued. This paragraph set us up with two sentences of "glowing" only for the purpose of emphasizing by contrast the descent into the "sour and darker." Thus, we have a *three-sentence* issue:

In the 1950s and early 1960s, everything was great.

Boy, was everything great.

But, after that things went downhill.

Bad thing.

Bad thing.

Bad thing. . . .

Here is the whole paragraph:

4. All through the 1950s and well into the 1960s, his published articles glowed with patriotic zeal and communal self-satisfaction. They praised the country's stability, our national sense of progress, our international status on the rise, and the political resiliency that allowed us to survive the McCarthy Era and the Korean War effort. But in the late 1960s, everything changed, and his prose grew sour and darker. The Vietnam War depressed him. The widening "generation gap" made communication seem increasingly difficult, if not impossible. The assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King seemed to promise that the assassination of John F. Kennedy had not been an isolated event, but rather had been the implanting of a national poison that was spreading and conquering. And with the Watergate scandal in the early 1970s, he seemed to give up hope altogether. He stopped writing.

I have noted twice that by the end of the third sentence, we should know what is really going on with the development of the paragraph's structure. That is a curiously common expectation among native readers of English. Three is perfection. Three is complete. The arrival of three suggests the beginning and the end of things -- "ready, set, GO!" . . . "and so we come to an end" -- or the perfection of things -- "the red, white, and blue." Three is mystical, magical, and melodic. If we are handed more than three -- even if the number is only four -- we tend to feel overburdened. If three is perfection, four is a crowd. Can you imagine Goldilocks and the *four* bears?

"Somebody's been sleeping in *my* bed," said the Papa Bear.

"Somebody's been sleeping in *my* bed," said the Mama Bear.

"Somebody's been sleeping in *my* bed," said the Baby Bear.

"Somebody's been sleeping in -- --" [Oh shut up already!]

This limit of three applies to our reading endurance when trying to determine how many sentences make up the issue of a paragraph. Any first sentence *could* be a one-sentence issue of a paragraph. We therefore keep (subconsciously) aware of that possibility as we proceed to the second sentence. At the end of that sentence, we are able to maintain our sense that "the jury is still out": The second sentence could be (1) the beginning of the discussion of a one-sentence issue, or (2) the second half of a two-sentence issue, or (3) the setup for the arrival of another sentence that will complete a three-sentence issue. That is a complicated state of affairs to hold in mind -- too complicated for us to be able to absorb any more complications. The puzzle will have to be solved by the end of the third sentence. By then, we should know how many sentences it took to state the paragraph's issue -- one, two, or three sentences. If by the end of the third sentence we are still muddled, we tend to give up on the question and proceed to absorb the rest of the information as best we can. Alternatively, once readers have wandered three sentences into the paragraph, they might seize upon whatever material they can in those first one, two, or three sentences and make it *their* issue, regardless of whether the rest of the paragraph discusses it or not. Experience has demonstrated that when this is the case, ten readers are likely to make anywhere from five to ten different decisions as to what the issue was supposed to have been.

Under the old topic sentence model, we were taught that issues should always be easy to spot. The first sentence should always translate, "This paragraph will be about X."

5. I like the Spring because of the pretty birds. I like the Spring because of the robins. I like the Spring because of the blue jays. I like the Spring because of the cardinals. I like the Spring because of the pretty birds.

In sophisticated prose, however, the two-sentence issue is not only quite common but also quite necessary. Here are a few of the many recognizable two-steps that have to be danced before some issues are completely stated:

- 6a. "So you see where we've come from. Well, here's where we're going..."
 6b. "Here is a general statement. From that generalization, I'm going to focus on this more specific development..."
 6c. "You may think that things are X. Well, they're really Y..."

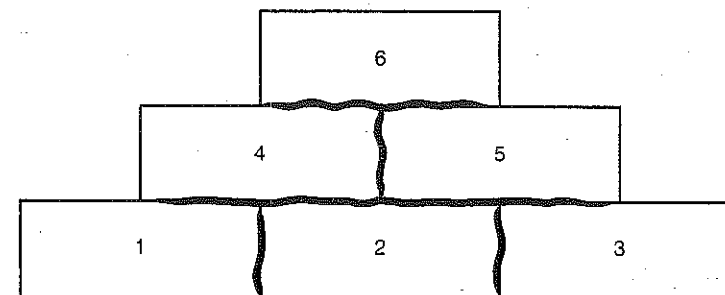
Even three-sentence issues are possible, and not unfamiliar:

- 7a. "So you see where we've come to. It's not been much help. Let's take a look at X instead..."

- 7b. "Here is X. Here is Y. The important thing to consider here is the relationship between X and Y..."
 7c. "X is intriguing. Just look at how intriguing X can be. But that is the case only when you ignore Y..."
 7d. "X looks convincing. Y looks convincing. But neither does the job very well when you consider Z..."
 7e. "We began with X. Then we moved on to Y. Only when we had experienced X and Y could we turn our full attention to Z."

Our middle school and high school composition texts have urged students to become proficient at forming correct sentences, to learn how to make a comprehensive topic sentence, and to learn how to support it with examples. Even those more sophisticated college texts that stress what they call development of thought tend to talk about the "construction" of paragraphs, suggesting a process of concrete accumulation. It would be like constructing a paragraph-building out of brick-sentences. It might be visually represented like this.

We create sentence #1. It is a visible entity, whole unto itself, like a brick. Call it brick #1. Then we create the second sentence, brick #2. If we are "good" writers, we might provide the reader with some sort of mortarlike connecting material that cements the two together. Then we create brick #3, perhaps with more mortar -- and then bricks #4 and #5 and so forth, until we have "finished" our paragraph. A six-brick paragraph might look like this:



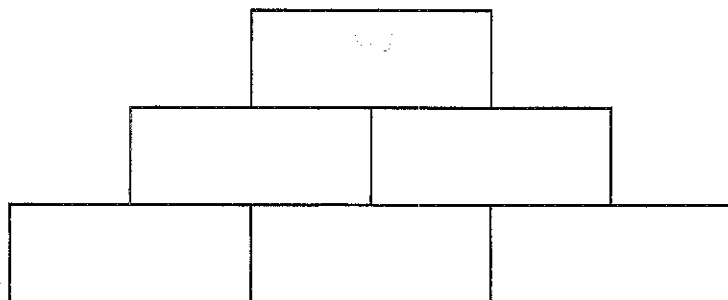
As we gaze at this paragraph-building, we can still see clearly the definition of each individual brick. The unit as a whole remains the sum of its individual, still perceivable parts.

I submit that this image provides a false representation of what actually happens to readers in their linear journey through a paragraph. It even more greatly falsifies the nonlinear experience the reader has of perceiving the paragraph as a whole.

Let us not think of paragraphs as essentially linear:

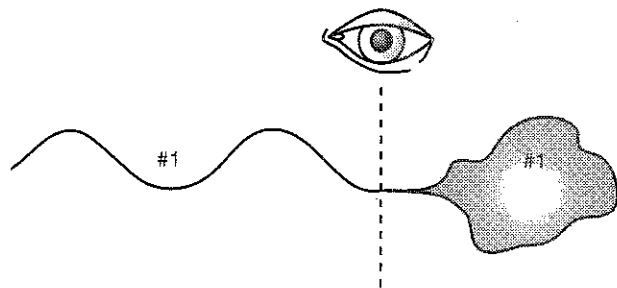


nor as brick buildings,

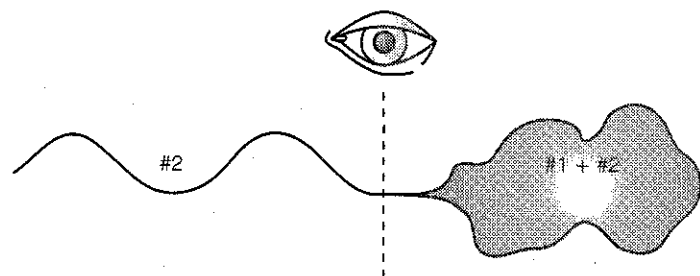


but rather as having a liquid, fluid shape that continually changes as we progress into it.

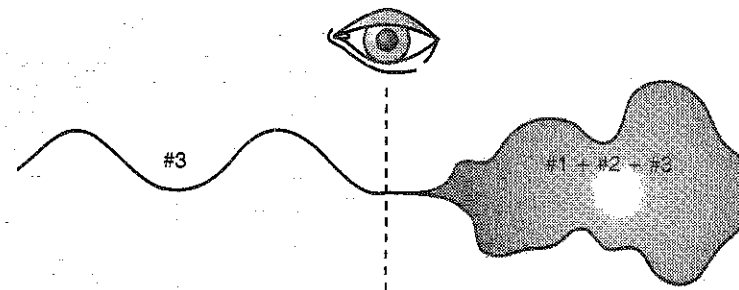
In the figure below, consider the dotted line a moment of time -- the moment when the reading eye encounters the information flowing to it from the sentence. Sentence #1 of the paragraph is pictured as a wavy line, approaching that eye-moment from the left. On the right, the brain is forming a concept of the thought of the sentence as the eye encounters its words. Once the eye has taken in the totality of the sentence, the totality of its thought is pictured as a liquid pool.



At that moment, sentence #2 starts to flow past the eye. As the brain processes sentence #2, it *adds* that information/experience/thought to the pool generated by sentence #1. The result is not a bricklike juxtaposition of two distinct thoughts but rather a new, conglomerate pool that is shaped differently from the sentence #1 pool. The former pool is no longer perceivable as the unit it once was, absorbed as it now is in a two-sentence pool.



Then sentence #3 flows by the eye, is processed by the brain, and further changes the shape of the pool, making it now a three-sentence pool. Some parts of the pool may be enlarged; some may be constricted; some old shapes may have disappeared; and some new ones may have been generated.



By the end of sentence #3, the pool often tends to have expanded to what will more or less be its final shape. That is, by the end of the third sentence, we as readers should know what the *issue* is and be prepared for further strengthening and weakening of the shape that is now before us. Fourth, fifth, and other succeeding sentences may continue to fill up the pool. Whether that happens after sentence #3 or not, by the end of the paragraph the pool will have attained a shape; but it will no longer be possible to recognize sentence #1 -- or any other of the individual sentences -- as a discrete unit. How different this is from the brick metaphor, where brick #1 -- and each of the others -- is *always* recognizable and re-recognizable in its original shape.

I would argue that one can *never* see sentence #1 again in the way one experienced it the first time around. Even when we reread the paragraph, the experiencing of sentence #1 will be influenced and contextualized by our having read the paragraph before. One can never step one's toe into precisely the same textual pool twice.

The reading of a paragraph is indeed a liquid experience: It constantly flows in a forward motion; every moment is new and different in itself, but it also *changes* the "meaning" of what has already been experienced; everything that has already arrived contextualizes and controls that which will arrive thereafter. In order for a writer to control -- *insofar as possible* -- the continual and continuing interpretive process of the reader, the writer must understand what kinds of expectations a reader is likely to have concerning what will come next. *Placement* of information highly influences what the reader will have perceived as the paragraph's meaning.

It seems Procrustes was the wrong mythical model; let us substitute for him another mythological creature: Proteus, the shape-changer. Whenever his freedom was threatened, he could turn into whatever shape he felt best suited the situation -- animal, vegetable, or mineral. Paragraphs should be Protean, not Procrustean. Their shapes should not be crushed to fit a pre-ordained, rule-dominated shape; instead, they should adapt their shape to the needs and nature of the thought they represent.

Every paragraph is constructed to accomplish some or all of the following:

- It offers cohesion;
- it presents unity;
- it indicates purpose;
- it raises an issue;
- it makes a point;
- it tells a story;
- it generates development;
- it provides coherence; and
- it creates shape.

The last is of special importance. Paragraphs must not be crammed into a preexisting shape rather but must help create structural shapes that in turn help communicate their substance. A change of shape produces a change in meaning; a change of meaning requires a change of shape. And if we ask, "Whose paragraph is it, anyway?" we must assuredly answer, "It is the reader's." Since paragraphs should be judged by how well they show themselves to their readers and not by how well they conform to previously established academic regulations, we must avoid Procrustes and embrace Proteus.

All the paragraphs I used as examples above had a structural characteristic in common: They all stated an issue and then spent the rest of their time and energy exemplifying or supporting that issue statement. This kind of paragraph construction accounts for only a moderate percentage of professional and published paragraphs. More often than not, a well-written paragraph will grow continually and organically from beginning to end. There is no stopping point after which all the rest merely summons examples for what has already been said conclusively. Let us take a slow-motion look at just such a paragraph from an undergraduate essay. The first sentence:

- 8a. The office of the Vice President of the United States is often considered one of the most pointless positions in politics.

We might expect to hear why this office seems so dreary. If we do, this will have been a one-sentence issue. (Again, prose is fluid: We cannot tell whether or not this one sentence states the whole of the issue until we read further.) The second sentence:

- 8b. John Adams, the first vice president, referred to it as "the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived or his imagination conceived."

That is an appealing and entertaining piece of support for what is now seeming quite distinctly to be a one-sentence issue paragraph. The third sentence:

- 8c. Daniel Webster refused to accept the job, saying, "I do not choose to be buried until I am really dead."

That is the same kind of support as was offered by the second sentence, but a touch funnier. Where from here? Sentence four:

- 8d. Because the vice president's only real duty is to preside over the Senate, the job is not very attractive, and vice presidents are not usually chosen because they are strong, experienced leaders.

This is something new. It does not merely *support* the first sentence but rather goes *beyond* it, developing a more sophisticated thought from the straightforwardly judgmental opening sentence. It speaks not only to the *nature* of the vice presidency but also to what *results* that nature generates. Nature: The office is silly. Results: The people who get the job are not necessarily among our best and brightest. Continuing:

- 8e. This is alarming because the vice president sits just a heartbeat away from the presidency.

This develops the thought yet further. Once you have these *results*, here are the *dangers* that naturally ensue. The final sentence:

- 8f. Since he could become the president of the United States at any time, his job should be regarded more seriously, and he should be an independently elected official.

Here, at the end of the paragraph, is the payoff *recommendation* toward which the writer had been working all along. After defining (sentence #1) and exemplifying (#2 and #3) the *nature* of the office, he demonstrated what *results* might follow (#4) and what *dangers* might arise (#5) thereafter. As a result of all this preparation, he was finally ready to offer us his *recommendation*. The paragraph has shape, flow, and purpose.

Here is the paragraph as a whole:

8. The office of the Vice President of the United States is often considered one of the most pointless positions in politics. John Adams, the first vice president, referred to it as "the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived or his imagination conceived." Daniel Webster refused to accept the job, saying, "I do not choose to be buried until I am really dead." Because the vice president's only

real duty is to preside over the Senate, the job is not very attractive, and vice presidents are not usually chosen because they are strong, experienced leaders. This is alarming because the vice president sits just a heartbeat away from the presidency. Since he could become the president of the United States at any time, his job should be regarded more seriously, and he should be an independently elected official.

Readers have expectations concerning the beginnings of paragraphs that somewhat parallel their expectations concerning the beginnings of sentences. Just as readers tend to read a sentence as being the story of whoever or whatever shows up first, so they tend to assume that a paragraph will develop the issue stated at its beginning. The expectation is so strong that most readers will consider the first sentence or two or three the issue whether it was intended to be or not. In other words, what we can speak of as an expectation is perhaps more a habitual reading procedure. To demonstrate, let us revisit paragraph example (2) above, the one that announced in its first sentence that it would talk about the many things that have happened in the space program in the past few decades. Will the paragraph really become hopelessly muddled if that clear one-sentence issue appears someplace other than at the beginning, where readers need and expect to find it? Yes.

Let us transplant the first sentence (the one-sentence issue statement) to the end of the paragraph and see what happens. Again, we will take the slow-motion approach so we may see the paragraph revealing itself in the fluid way paragraphs appear to us when we read them for the first time. (Try to forget you have seen the paragraph before.) Our new first sentence, then, is that which was second sentence in the original.

- 9a. Numerous scientific and communications satellites have been launched into Earth orbit.

This opening sentence seems a reasonable candidate to be a one-sentence issue statement. If it is so, then the rest of the paragraph will probably go on to discuss earth orbit experiments. This paragraph's second sentence might clarify this matter for us.

- 9b. Unmanned deep-space probes have been sent to the sun, the moon, and the planets, where they gathered a wealth of information about our solar system.

Not only does this *not* launch us into an earth orbit discussion section, but there is no evident link that we can perceive between these two sentences. Since the promise of a one-sentence issue seems to have been undone, and we cannot see how the two go together to make up a two-sentence issue, our last hope for coherence is that the third sentence will show us clearly how this is the unfolding of a *three-sentence* issue. We would be

pleased with a third sentence that began, "But whether in earth orbit or far beyond into outer space, our efforts. . . ." But here, alas, is what we actually get as a third sentence:

- 9c. Skylab demonstrated that American astronauts could live and work in space for months at a time.

Now we are in trouble. It is not absolutely impossible to figure out a way in which these three sentences could reasonably "talk" to each other; but we, as readers, would have to do all the work ourselves. That should have been the writer's job.

Since three sentences is our normal limit for recognizing issues, we are reduced to hoping we will be able to survive the rest of the paragraph and salvage whatever coherence we can. Here is the fourth sentence:

- 9d. And a dramatically different launch vehicle entered service: the space shuttle.

At this point we have four sentences that cover four different topics. All we are convinced of at the moment is that every new sentence will *not* be connected to its predecessor. Here, then, is the fifth sentence:

- 9e. The winged reusable craft was supposed to make space flight routine and cheap.

Oops. The one expectation in which we had confidence is now violated. For some odd reason, the shuttle seems to have deserved two sentences to everyone else's one. Now, thoroughly baffled, we stumble on to the final sentence:

- 9f. Much has happened since the Apollo program and the Mercury and Gemini missions that paved the way for it in the early 1960s.

We hardly know what to make of this. The paragraph as a whole is a disaster. And yet not a single sentence has been changed from the relatively clear and controlling prose of the original. Only a structural location -- a most significant one -- has been changed. The issue statement -- without a single word altered -- has simply arrived too late to *function* as an issue statement. The place for such a thing was up front. When it was not there, we presumed whatever *was* there had to be the issue. We tried for one, two, and three sentences and then gave up; by the time the real issue statement arrived, we were no longer looking for it, and therefore we could not recognize it.

Structure is 85% of the ballgame.

Context controls meaning.

For easy comparison, here again is the paragraph in its original form. Note how the contextualizing first sentence helps us make sense of all the other sentences as we encounter them.

9. Much has happened since the Apollo program and the Mercury and Gemini missions that paved the way for it in the early 1960s. Numerous scientific and communications satellites have been launched into Earth orbit. Unmanned deep-space probes have been sent to the sun, the moon, and the planets, where they gathered a wealth of information about our solar system. Skylab demonstrated that American astronauts could live and work in space for months at a time. And a dramatically different launch vehicle entered service: the space shuttle. The winged reusable craft was supposed to make space flight routine and cheap.

With paragraphs, as with sentences (and with most experiences in life), people wish to be contextualized before they have to deal with new and challenging material. Readers expect the issue to begin each paragraph, with the discussion of that issue usually filling the remainder of that unit. (There may or may not be a renegade kind of final sentence we will be calling a *coda*; but more on that later.)

Think of the upper part of the paragraph as a structural location -- a place where readers expect certain things to happen. That structural location is relatively fixed in terms of reader expectation and cannot be easily modified by any individual writer. The *substance*, on the other hand, is in the control of the writer. You can think up whatever you want and place it wherever you want. My advice here will be the same as the advice I offered at the sentence level: In general, place substance in the structural locations where readers tend to expect that substance to appear. And, once again, two major benefits will result: (1) That substance will be labeled and interpreted as you want it to be labeled and interpreted; and (2) the reader will spend a minimal amount of reader energy on unraveling the *structure* of the paragraph and have a great deal more energy left for contemplating its *substance*.¹

STRICT	ISSUE	DISCUSSION (Coda)	FIXED
SUBS			MOVBL

The above paragraph boxes are seriously flawed in one important way: The Issue is not always approximately the first third of a paragraph. Often it will consume only 10% of the space. On occasion it can extend to as much as two thirds of a paragraph; that is commonly the case for three-sentence opening paragraphs, especially in professional research articles:

Sentence 1: Experts have long said. . . .

Sentence 2: Experts have failed to realize. . . .

Sentence 3: This article sheds clearer light on the subject by demonstrating that. . . .

It is important to note that not all paragraphs present and discuss issues. Narrative paragraphs, for example, may simply tell a story in chronological (or otherwise logical) order. In such paragraphs, the Issue position should contain a clue for the reader *not* to expect an issue and a discussion but rather to expect a narrative. Here is an example:

10. The summer I was 16, I took a train from New York to Steamboat Springs, Colorado, where I was going to be assistant horse wrangler at a camp. The trip took three days, and since I was much too shy to talk to strangers, I had quite a lot of time for reading. I read all of *Gone with the Wind*. I read all the interesting articles in a couple of magazines I had, and then I went back and read all the dull stuff. I also took all the quizzes, a thing of which magazines were even fuller than now.

Here the emphasis on setting a time frame ("The summer I was 16") and the presentation of simple fact ("I took a train") may lead us to expect the ensuing travelogue. Whether or not you wish to think of this as an issue, there is no discussion. The Issue position is filled with the clue that raises the expectation of a narrative; the Discussion position is filled with the rest of that narration. Such paragraphs normally (but not always) present such a structural clue in the paragraph's first sentence and confirm it, at the latest, by the third sentence.

The traditional topic sentence paragraph model oversimplifies paragraphs. It takes no account of different paragraph functions; nor does it recognize the frequent need of sophisticated writers to take more than a single sentence to state the paragraph's issue. But if the latter were the only problem with the topic sentence approach, we could easily readjust the model instead of discarding it. We would need note only that sophisticated writers often take two or three sentences to create what for younger writers would be a single topic sentence. Far more problematic, however, is the assumption that the topic sentence must always state both the issue *and* the point. For sophisticated writers, issue and point are often not identical. After an exercise on Issue statements, we will turn our attention to the nature of the Point and the ways in which it can be distinct from the statement of the issue.

EXERCISE P

Here again are the opening seven paragraphs of Lewis Thomas's *The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher*. You have seen them before, in the exercise at the end of the previous chapter. This time, go through all seven paragraphs to determine what you consider to be the issue statements. How

many sentences does each paragraph's issue require? (Keep track of your responses. You will be able to use them again in a later exercise.)

- A. We are told that the trouble with Modern Man is that he has been trying to detach himself from nature. He sits in the topmost tiers of polymer, glass, and steel, dangling his pulsing legs, surveying at a distance the writhing life of the planet. In this scenario, Man comes on as a stupendous lethal force, and the earth is pictured as something delicate, like rising bubbles at the surface of a country pond, or flights of fragile birds.
- B. But it is illusion to think that there is anything fragile about the life of the earth; surely this is the toughest membrane imaginable in the universe, opaque to probability, impermeable to death. We are the delicate part, transient and vulnerable as cilia. Nor is it a new thing for man to invent an existence that he imagines to be above the rest of life; this has been his most consistent intellectual exertion down the millennia. As illusion, it has never worked out to his satisfaction in the past, any more than it does today. Man is embedded in nature.
- C. The biologic science of recent years has been making this a more urgent fact of life. The new, hard problem will be to cope with the dawning, intensifying realization of just how interlocked we are. The old, clung-to notions most of us have held about our special lordship are being deeply undermined.
- D. *Item.* A good case can be made for our nonexistence as entities. We are not made up, as we had always supposed, of successively enriched packets of our own parts. We are shared, rented, occupied. At the interior of our cells, driving them, providing the oxidative energy that sends us out for the improvement of each shining day, are the mitochondria, and in a strict sense they are not ours. They turn out to be little separate creatures, the colonial posterity of migrant prokaryocytes, probably primitive bacteria that swam into ancestral precursors of our eukaryotic cells and stayed there. Ever since, they have maintained themselves and their ways, replicating in their own fashion, privately, with their own DNA and RNA quite different from ours. They are as much symbionts as the rhizobial bacteria in the roots of beans. Without them, we would not move a muscle, drum a finger, think a thought.
- E. Mitochondria are stable and responsible lodgers, and I choose to trust them. But what of the other little animals, similarly established in my cells, sorting and balancing me, clustering me together? My centrioles, basal bodies, and probably a good many other more obscure tiny beings at work inside my cells, each with its own special genome, are as foreign, and as essential, as aphids in anthills. My cells are no longer the pure line entities I was raised with; they are ecosystems more complex than Jamaica Bay.
- F. I like to think that they work in my interest, that each breath they draw for me; but perhaps it is they who walk through the local park in

the early morning, sensing my senses, listening to my music, thinking my thoughts.

- G. I am consoled, somewhat, by the thought that the green plants are in the same fix. They could not be plants, or green, without their chloroplasts, which run the photosynthetic enterprise and generate oxygen for the rest of us. As it turns out, chloroplasts are also separate creatures with their own genomes, speaking their own language.

Point

The Point and How to Find It

In the sixth grade, a paragraph's issue and the point the paragraph intended to make were almost always one and the same thing:

I like the Spring because of the pretty flowers.

The same continued to hold true throughout high school:

Capital punishment should be abolished because it is cruel and inhuman.

Violence on television should be eliminated because it influences people to go out and commit violent acts.

These statements were both the issue the paragraph would discuss and the point the paragraph intended to make. Summoning three examples and restating the Topic Sentence created a complete, cohesive, and coherent paragraph, and the job was done. It was a controllable task for the student and a reviewable task for the teacher.

But in sophisticated, professional prose, the *issue* the paragraph will discuss and the *point* the paragraph wishes to make are often distinct from each other. The *issue* refers to the intellectual geographic boundaries within which the discussion might wander; the *point* is the interesting place within those boundaries at which the reader is intended to arrive. It should come as no surprise that readers expect the point of a paragraph (with a lowercase *p*) to arrive in a particular structural location, which we will refer to as a Point position (with an uppercase *P*). The old Topic Sentence model taught us that the issue and the point are identical and should always be articulated at the start in a Topic Sentence; but in professional prose, this tends to happen only between 15% and 22% of the time. What happens the rest of the time?

Readers usually need to be told what the point of a paragraph is -- clearly and explicitly. They are grateful when that clear point is presented in a single sentence. They also want to *know* that sentence when they see it. An extensive investigation of thousands of professional paragraphs makes it evident that readers expect that point to appear at particular structural locations. To state this more compactly, readers hope the point will be stated in a Point sentence; and they know where in the paragraph to look for it.

Unlike any of the other reader expectations we have explored, however, there are *two* possible structural locations for the point to arrive in paragraphs. One is a fallback plan for the other: If the point did not show up in the first Point location, then we look for it in the other.

If we put together what we have already investigated about issues and what has just been claimed about points, notice what has happened to our conception of "the" paragraph: It no longer can be said to have "a" shape. It has many possible shapes, because the issue can be stated in one or two or three sentences, and the point can appear at one of two locations. And there are paragraphs that do not make points. And there are even paragraphs that explicitly announce their own variant structures. (We will return to those later.)

Let us revisit several of our example paragraphs to determine their points. Here are three ways of asking the appropriate question:

- i) "I am a busy and intolerant reader. I haven't the time to read your whole paragraph. I'll read only one sentence. Which do you choose?"
- ii) Of all the sentences in this paragraph, which suffers least from the annoying question, "So what?"
- iii) Which of the sentences in this paragraph explicitly articulates the point the paragraph is trying to make?

As a shorthand for all these combined, we will use the following question:

- iv) In this paragraph, which is the point sentence?

(Note: It is possible to leave the paragraph's point unarticulated -- to allow it to hover over the surface of the prose, relying on the reader to figure out what you as writer see as obvious. That is possible to do, but risky.)

Here again is this chapter's example (2):

2. Much has happened since the Apollo program and the Mercury and Gemini missions that paved the way for it in the early 1960s. Numerous scientific and communications satellites have been launched into Earth orbit. Unmanned deep-space probes have been sent to the sun, the moon, and the planets, where they gathered a wealth of information about our solar system. Skylab demonstrated that American astronauts could live and work in space for months at a time. And a dramatically different launch vehicle entered service: the space shuttle. The winged reusable craft was supposed to make space flight routine and cheap.

Which is the point sentence? The answer is hard to come by -- because we have this paragraph before us in isolation, out of its natural context. If we consider this paragraph only by itself, we could make a good case for the point being the first sentence: "Much has happened since the Apollo program and the Mercury and Gemini missions that paved the way for it

in the early 1960s." The rest of the paragraph talks about this at all times; and no other single sentence seems to claim a superior importance compared to the others. As a result, we would say that this paragraph has a one-sentence issue, with the point being the first sentence.

But what if the next paragraph told us how although the space shuttle "was supposed to make space flight routine and cheap," it failed badly to do so? Then we might well make the argument that the point of its preceding paragraph had been the final sentence. Then we would have to say that paragraph (2) had a one-sentence issue with the point being the last sentence. The point a paragraph makes always depends on where we have come from and where we are going. The same paragraph, in two different contexts, could make two distinctly different points. Context controls meaning.

Now look once more at the paragraph from example (8):

8. The office of the Vice President of the United States is often considered one of the most pointless positions in politics. John Adams, the first vice president, referred to it as "the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived or his imagination conceived." Daniel Webster refused to accept the job, saying, "I do not choose to be buried until I am really dead." Because the vice president's only real duty is to preside over the Senate, the job is not very attractive, and vice presidents are not usually chosen because they are strong, experienced leaders. This is alarming because the vice president sits just a heartbeat away from the presidency. Since he could become the president of the United States at any time, his job should be regarded more seriously, and he should be an independently elected official.

We noted that this paragraph had a one-sentence issue -- that announced the emptiness of the position of vice president. But was that the point of the paragraph as well? It certainly could be the point of *some* paragraph. Such a paragraph would develop examples and arguments until, in its totality, it would try to convince us that the vice presidency is *indeed* "the most pointless position in politics." But paragraph (8) does not do this. It progresses beyond that statement of definition to develop what the author sees as the problem that develops from it: "Since he could become the president of the United States at any time, his job should be regarded more seriously, and he should be an independently elected official." That final sentence, then, might well be considered the paragraph's point. Then we would have a paragraph with a one-sentence issue with the point in the last sentence.

Here is yet a differently shaped paragraph, example (3) from above:

3. I did not allow blindness to intimidate me. I set about memorizing the number of stairs in each staircase of the new house, creating a device for keeping them all straight. The fourteen steps of the front

hall staircase summoned the word "fortunate" -- the way I felt about being able to have a new and better place to live: "Fourteen"; "fortunate." The seven steps to the upper level, where my CD player and all that wonderful music resided were my "seven" steps to "heaven." The ten stairs to the basement recalled the "ten steps" of St. John of the Cross, who tells us that "the way down," through denial and self-cleansing, are the best way to God. And the three steps of the front doorstep could be distinguished from the two steps of the back doorstep because to ascend in life is always a step more difficult than to descend.

This was an example of a two-sentence issue: In order to maintain independence in the face of blindness, this person figured out how to memorize the number of steps in each of the house's staircases. Which sentence is the point sentence? The paragraph seems to be designed to show how this independence was achieved; if that is the case, then the point is the second sentence: "I set about memorizing the number of stairs in each staircase of the new house, creating a device for keeping them all straight." We thus would have a two-sentence issue with the point being the second sentence.

Here is yet one more paragraph, example (4) from above:

4. All through the 1950s and well into the 1960s, his published articles glowed with patriotic zeal and communal self-satisfaction. They praised the country's stability, our national sense of progress, our international status on the rise, and the political resiliency that allowed us to survive the McCarthy Era and the Korean War effort. But in the late 1960s, everything changed, and his prose grew sour and darker. The Vietnam War depressed him. The widening "generation gap" made communication seem increasingly difficult if not impossible. The assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King seemed to promise that the assassination of John F. Kennedy had not been an isolated event, but rather was the implanting of a national poison that was spreading and conquering. And with the Watergate scandal in the early 1970s, he seemed to give up hope altogether. He stopped writing.

We had noted that it took three sentences in this paragraph to state the issue: While things looked bright in the 1950s and early 1960s, things looked darker thereafter. Which is the point sentence? One good candidate is the third sentence: "But in the late 1960s, everything changed, and his prose grew sour and darker." The rest of the paragraph certainly goes on to expand upon that statement. But there is another, equally strong candidate -- the last sentence: "He stopped writing." In other words, the point of the whole paragraph might have been to build up to the stark statement

that "he stopped writing." How can we decide between two such equally convincing candidates? Once again, we would have to look to the context. If the next paragraph continues to talk about the depressing effect of events in the late 1960s and beyond, then the third sentence wins and contains the point; but if the next paragraph tells us more about why he stopped writing and the resulting effects, then the last sentence wins.

Let us see what the scoreboard looks like at this moment.

Example	Issue	Point
2	1	1 or last (depending on context)
8	1	last
3	2	2
4	3	3 or last (depending on context)

We can start to see a pattern:

Example	Issue	Point
2	1-sentence issue	point in the 1st
3	2-sentence issue	point in the 2nd
4	3-sentence issue	point in the 3rd

That turns out to be such a consistent mode of construction for mature paragraphs that we can call it another Reader Expectation:

Readers of English initially expect that the point of a paragraph will appear as the last sentence of the paragraph's issue."

That expectation, however, will not account for all the point placements in the examples we have been investigating. Another pattern exists on our scoreboard:

Example	Issue	Point
2	1-sentence issue	point in the last
8	1-sentence issue	point in the last
4	3-sentence issue	point in the last

To these we could easily add a paragraph example that would have a two-sentence issue with the point in the last sentence. It seems there is an alternate or fallback Reader Expectation concerning the location of the point sentence:

Readers of English expect that if the point of a paragraph is not the last sentence of the paragraph's issue, it will be the final sentence of the paragraph.

However, this statement is not quite accurate. There is yet one more paragraph-level structural location we must take into account. It is neither a common occurrence nor a scarce one; but it happens enough for us to take note of it. What would you consider the issue and point of the following paragraph?

11. Many residents in the several counties that surround the Perkins Nuclear Energy Plant have expressed concern over the potential dangers from the storage of nuclear waste in the Plant's four storage tanks. While it is true that we have not been successful in finding ways to eradicate the potential radiation altogether from the waste products, nuclear engineers have developed a storage system that is adequately monitored by a sophisticated system of safety gauges. The tanks are constructed of materials that will not deteriorate over time. They are filled with a liquid "bath" that renders the waste products completely harmless, as long as they are totally submerged in the liquid. And three backup systems of safety gauges, easily monitored by well-trained watch-personnel, make it virtually impossible for any leakage or spillage or bath evaporation to be a threat to the earth, the atmosphere, or human beings. The potential danger to the surrounding areas is therefore negligible, if there is no human error involved in the monitoring of the safety gages. That, of course, is a troublesome "if."

Let us follow the development of this paragraph sentence by sentence, as it would unfold for any first-time reader.

- 11a. Many residents in the several counties that surround the Perkins Nuclear Energy Plant have expressed concern over the potential dangers from the storage of nuclear waste in the Plant's four storage tanks.

This could presumably be a one-sentence issue. If it is, then the rest of the paragraph would go on to discuss any or several of its major component pieces of information: the residents' concerns; the potential dangers; or the storage of waste in the four tanks. Could this also be the point? It could, if the point of the paragraph were simply to make us aware that many residents were concerned. We await further developments.

- 11b. While it is true that we have not been successful in finding ways to eradicate the potential radiation altogether from the waste products, nuclear engineers have developed a storage system that is adequately monitored by a sophisticated system of safety gauges.

This sentence does not begin a discussion of any of the major components already stated in the first sentence. Rather, it takes one of those com-

ponents -- the concerns -- and offers a counterbalancing point of comfort: Because a safe storage system has been created, there may be no reason for anyone to be concerned. At the moment, this sounds like a two-sentence issue. Is the second sentence the point? It certainly could be -- if no better point comes along later. Again, the reading experience is a *fluid* one, constantly offering the possibilities of change in its shape or its direction. As readers, we have to go with the flow. We continue:

- 11c. The tanks are constructed of materials that will not deteriorate over time.

This does not change direction. It sounds like the beginning of a discussion that will offer support to the second sentence's statement of comfort. At the moment, it sounds like we have here a two-sentence issue, with the point being either the second sentence or something yet more powerful that will arrive later in the paragraph. Now that we have left the Issue section and have launched into the Discussion section, our fallback expectation clicks into place: If there is a later, stronger statement that will state the point, it will appear at the end.

- 11d. They are filled with a liquid "bath" that renders the waste products completely harmless, as long as they are totally submerged in the liquid.

This continues the discussion. If it were the final sentence in the paragraph, we might consider it the point; but since there is yet more prose to encounter, we tend to continue to expect (if the paragraph is well written) that if the point is not the second sentence, it will appear at the end.

- 11e. And three backup systems of safety gauges, easily monitored by well-trained watch-personnel, make it virtually impossible for any leakage or spillage or bath evaporation to be a threat to the earth, the atmosphere, or human beings.

This sounds like more discussion. The "And" suggests we are hearing the last piece of evidence to be added to this move in the paragraph. It is quite possible that the next sentence, or one soon after that, will be the point at which we have been aimed throughout.

- 11f. The potential danger to the surrounding areas is therefore negligible, if there is no human error involved in the monitoring of the safety gauges.

That certainly has a pointlike ring to it. There is *no* danger -- as long as human beings do their job right. That point sentence, if that is what it is, answers all the concerns raised at the top of the paragraph. However, there

is still one sentence remaining to be read. Will it supplant this one as the point sentence? Will it be even more conclusive, more comforting, more final? Here it is:

11g. That, of course, is a troublesome "if."

Oh dear. Just when we were getting comforted by the arrival of sentence (11f), along comes this last sentence to trouble us once again. But we cannot look at the development of thought in this paragraph and reasonably believe that it was all aimed at this last sentence. Most of the activity in this paragraph has expended energy in the service of telling us why the problem is not such a problem. That next-to-last sentence was the arrival place, the target, the end result of all that comfort-building development. What then is this last moment reversal? What could we call it?

Let us call it a "coda." That is an Italian term, meaning "tail," used in music to describe a section at the end of a piece or a movement that is additional to the otherwise complete structural unity.

In a paragraph, the coda, when there is one, is always the last sentence. The Coda position functions as a wildcard spot. We can do all sorts of things there that we could not get away with elsewhere. It is used by good writers sparingly but to good effect. It is the safest place, for example, to insert a wisecrack, a witticism, or even a slight pun. It can be used to restate the point. It can be used as a repository for that additional example that, although unnecessary to the argument, is too delicious not to include. Or, as here, it can be used to blow the rest of the paragraph out of the water:

Issue . . .

Discuss . . .

Discuss . . .

Discuss . . .

Discuss . . .

Point!

[Coda]: OK, yes, but forget it!

Therefore in paragraph (11), the point appears not as the last sentence of the paragraph as a whole, but rather as *the last sentence of the discussion*. When there is a coda, the point will be expected to appear either as the last sentence of the issue or as the last sentence of the discussion. We should therefore make that adjustment to our last boxed statement of Reader Expectations:

Readers of English expect that if the point of a paragraph is not the last sentence of the issue, it will be the last sentence of the discussion.

Where there is no Coda, the last sentence of the Discussion will also be the last sentence of the paragraph. Visually, that can be expressed by our paragraph boxes:

SUBS STRICT	ISSUE	DISCUSSION (Coda)	FIXED MAYBE
	POINT	POINT	

All the Reader Expectations that have preceded this one may well sound like common sense, available to you from your own experiences as readers. This one might sound a good deal more technical and a good deal less intuitive. Stated as it now is, it sounds like it must be memorized by rote. Here is a restatement of the same expectations that should make them sound much more recognizable from your own reading experience:

Readers expect the point of a paragraph to be made explicit either just before the discussion of it begins or just as the discussion of it ends.

The important relationship here is that of the point and the discussion: Either (1) "Here's the *issue*, which culminates in this *point*, which I will now *discuss*"; or, (2) "Here's the *issue*, which I continue to *discuss* until I am ready to make this comprehensive *point*." Either make the point at the conclusion of the issue and then discuss it, or establish the issue and discuss it until you are ready to make a point.

A Note on Narrative Paragraphs

Not all paragraphs were born to make a point. Some were created just to tell a story, to put some facts on the table.

- To prepare for the final project, the writing groups had to be formed by the third week of the semester. They were to meet during weeks four and five to choose a topic, establish its limitations, and divide the tasks equally among the group members. Sometime between week four and week six, the group had to submit a written prospectus and then meet with the instructor to discuss potential problems. By the end of week eight, the first working draft was due. That would be circulated to everyone in the group, with extensive written comments being due by the end of week ten. The final draft was to be handed in at the end of week twelve, bound in a single volume, with a communally produced three-page introduction.

There is no argument here, nor any development of thought; we therefore have no need for a point sentence. The job of this paragraph is to narrate the facts: We refer to it as a *narrative paragraph*.

Readers tend to expect a paragraph will have a point -- unless they are otherwise informed. It is up to the writer to make sure this contrary indication is somehow made clear. That has to occur up front in the paragraph, in the Issue position. Notice the way it happens as this example (12) unfolds:

- 12a. To prepare for the final project, the writing groups had to be formed by the third week of the semester.

This could be a one-sentence issue. It could even be the point. We stay tuned for further developments:

- 12b. They were to meet during weeks four and five to choose a topic, establish its limitations, and divide the tasks equally among the group members.

It seems quite possible -- even probable -- that what we have developing here is a chronology: "third week" . . . "weeks four and five." It is possible, of course, for this chronology to stop here, making this a two-sentence issue, with the discussion of that issue leading eventually to a point at the end. But if the next sentence continues with the chronology, or indicates the probability that the chronology will resume shortly, then what we probably have here is a narration. We continue:

- 12c. Sometime between week four and week six, the group had to submit a written prospectus and then meet with the instructor to discuss potential problems.

We are pretty much convinced by this point that the job of this paragraph is to take us through the process of the creation of this final project. We no longer expect to hear a point at the end but rather to continue with this string of "and then . . .," "and then . . ." And that is precisely what we get:

- 12d. *By the end of week eight*, the first working draft was due. That would be circulated to everyone in the group, with extensive written comments being due *by the end of week ten*. The final draft was to be handed in *at the end of week twelve*, bound in a single volume, with a communally produced three-page introduction. (Emphasis supplied)

Narrative paragraphs, like all other paragraphs, are in the service of making a point; but that point will appear sometime later in the document. We presume, as readers, that if we are handed all these facts without further comment on them at the moment, these facts will come into use someplace farther down the road. It is a bit like reading in a mystery novel: "Just as he closed the door, he heard the clock strike midnight." If that fact makes no sense by itself at this moment, we have a suspicion that eleven chapters

later we will discover it was essential to know that the closing of the door happened precisely at midnight. (Of course, sometimes we are wrong.)

Reader Expectations are neither simple nor simplistic; but they do exist. Good writers take care of them either naturally or knowingly. The more you know about them, the better you can direct them, and the more natural it all will seem to your reader.

EXERCISE Q

Use one of the following sentences as the first sentence of a paragraph and write three different paragraphs based on it, as follows:

- 1) Make your chosen sentence a one-sentence issue and the point of your paragraph;
- 2) Make that sentence half of a two-sentence issue and make the last sentence of your paragraph the point; and
- 3) Make that sentence a one-sentence issue, make the next-to-last sentence of your paragraph the point, and add a coda.

Here are the sentences from which you should choose:

- A) Violence depicted on television is a serious social problem because it leads people to be more likely to commit violent acts.
- B) The first year of college study should be graded Pass/Fail only, to allow students to become accustomed to the higher level of sophistication college thought will demand.
- C) All the freshmen should be housed on East Campus so they may be more safely and easily integrated into the college experience.

Point Placement and Paragraph Types

It may come as no surprise that readers have a pretty good idea ahead of time whether to expect the arrival of the point before the discussion begins (that is, at the end of the Issue) or just as the discussion is ending. It depends on what type of paragraph is being written -- which in turn depends to some extent on *where* the paragraph appears in the document as a whole. I list for you here five paragraph types that send these kinds of default value expectations. These five types do not by any means cover all the possible shapes of paragraphs nor all the expectations concerning the arrival of the point. They do, however, cover a great percentage of the paragraphs normally encountered.

First Paragraphs

Readers have a remarkably fixed expectation that the point of an opening paragraph will arrive at the end. As readers, we greatly desire to be led gradually into a new piece of prose, to be made as comfortable as

possible with the new surroundings before we have to go to work. We do not appreciate being greeted in an opening paragraph with the following progression:

THIS IS THE POINT OF IT ALL.

And we'll be spending some time together.

This is what I sound like.

Did you know there was a problem?

Hello.

We much prefer the reverse order:

Hello.

Did you know there was a problem?

This is what I sound like.

And we'll be spending some time together.

So now that you have a sense of me and this document,

THIS IS THE POINT OF IT ALL.

There is the added expectation that in most pieces of expository or persuasive discourse the last sentence of the first paragraph will also state the thesis or contract for the discourse as a whole. Joseph Williams and Gregory Colomb constructed but never published a convincing piece of research that demonstrates this. They collected a number of essays by English graduate students, 20 to 25 pages each, all of which had received an A or A- at the University of Chicago. They made a second version of each essay by changing only one sentence -- the last sentence of the first paragraph -- so that it no longer promised what the essay would consider. They then made packets containing some original essays and some revised ones and sent them to several professors across the country, requesting them to grade the essays and to append a brief comment in support of the grade. The original essays came back with grades of A, A-, or B+, with complimentary comments; but many of the revised essays returned with substantially lower grades, some at the C and D level, with comments about poor development of thought, lack of focus, and fuzzy writing.

I had an occasion to describe this experiment to a dean at Duke University. It especially piqued his interest because on that very day he had learned that an article of his had been rejected by a journal -- the first such refusal he had suffered in some 20 years. They had apparently not understood the whole purpose of his text. The next time I met with him was some three months later. With a broad grin he told me he had indeed found that the last sentence of the opening paragraph -- the contract sentence -- had failed to inform his readers accurately what to expect from the article. He changed *only* that sentence and resubmitted the article to a much more discriminating journal; on this very day he received an acceptance from them, with glowing comments about the clarity and brilliance of his work.

This expectation -- that the last sentence of the opening paragraph will articulate the nature of the focus of the article as a whole -- may well be the single strongest of all the Reader Expectations in English. But even such a strong expectation as this cannot be rigidified into a rule for writers: "Always place your thesis statement at the end of your first paragraph" will not do. Just as some paragraphs take more than one sentence to state the issue of that unit of discourse, so some essays take more than one paragraph to get around to articulating their grand issue or thesis. If it does take (for example) three paragraphs to get that job done, readers will expect to discover the thesis statement -- I prefer the term *contract statement* -- in the last sentence of the third paragraph. In other words, just as with paragraphs, readers would like to know the issue of the discourse as a whole *just before it begins to be discussed*. Note that good writers usually give readers a clue that this is happening: After that third paragraph, there might be a quadruple space instead of a double space, or a horizontal line, or a Roman numeral, or a line of asterisks, or some other visual indication that the opening move had taken three paragraphs, not one.

Counterexamples of this expectation abound, but they all seem to have good explanations for why they function the way they do. Business memos, for instance, almost always begin with the contract statement, if any, in the very first sentence. The explanations: (1) In business, time is money; there is no money available to buy time to make readers comfortable; (2) the appearance of comfort contradicts the impression of hard work; (3) and, most importantly, there is usually a line preceding the first line of prose, headed by "re: ," in which the subject of the memo is announced. That line will establish a context for the reader far more quickly and directly than two or three sentences could manage. Like any other reader expectation, this one should be violated when there is a distinct purpose for doing so.

For an example of this, see the paragraph concerning the office of the vice president, on page 115 above.

Last Paragraphs

Readers have an equally fixed expectation that the point of a final paragraph will arrive at its end. We like our endings to bring with them a satisfying sense of closure. That closure can act as symphonic cymbals clashing or as a modest good-bye; it can produce a final thought not previously articulated or recapitulate material that has been thoroughly developed earlier; it can shock, or it can relax.

If the point were to appear at the beginning of a final paragraph, the progress of the sentences would produce a faltering sense of anticlimax rather than a fulfilling sense of closure:

SO YOU SEE I WIN

since I produced certain general theories
based on a number of individual details.

But when the point of a final paragraph appears at its end, climax and closure combine to create a far more satisfactory effect:

So, having summoned a number of individual details,
I created from them certain general theories,
AS A RESULT OF WHICH
I WIN.

Whatever form that closure takes, its nature, length, or impact should vary in proportion to the shape, size, and weight of the text as a whole. Long or complex documents may take several paragraphs to achieve a sense of final resolution. Again, no rule will be sufficient to handle all cases. The final paragraph(s) should reach out to the needs of the reader for closure rather than merely express the relief of the writer.

A great majority of students have been taught in school that the final paragraph of an essay should summarize everything the essay has presented. For some unknown reason, teachers rarely tell students how boring, unsatisfying, and sometimes downright annoying such formulaic closing paragraphs can be. Once a reader recognizes that nothing new will appear in such a final paragraph, she may be overcome by impatience. That is decidedly *not* the emotional state in which you wish to leave your reader. The document must not simply *end*; it must be brought to a state of *resolution*.

The final paragraph sometimes can end with a Coda -- a wry twist that opens up again that which had been closed:

And so we come to an end.
But where should we go from here?

For an example, see the final paragraph of Joan Didion's *The White Album*, quoted on page 80.

Most Medial Paragraphs

In most paragraphs between the first and the last ("medial" paragraphs), readers tend to appreciate being given the point up front. Many a reader will dip into a paragraph just long enough to decide whether it holds anything of promise for them. If it seems unlikely to engage their attention, they skip to the next paragraph. The writer who does not put the point up front in most of these paragraphs runs the risk of having the reader disappear before the point actually arrives.

One might wonder why readers expect the point to be at the end of first and last paragraphs but at the beginning of most others. There is a logical reason for this: You can afford to leave your point for the end -- and thereby make use of the dramatic crescendo effect -- if you can be fairly sure your reader will still be with you at that time. For most pieces of writing, readers tend to read *all* of the opening and closing paragraphs. At the beginning, they have a sense (intuitively and from long experience) that the most important message will arrive in that final sentence. Therefore, they stay

around for it. And can you remember the last time you read just about all of a document or book but stopped halfway through the last paragraph? If you have read that far, by golly you want to stay for the great reward of getting all the way to the end. It brings with it a satisfying sense of accomplishment.

For an example, see the paragraph that begins "I did not allow blindness to intimidate me," on page 99.

Medial Paragraphs: Clear, With a Dramatic Point

A writer can effectively delay the point of a medial paragraph until the end if the paragraph will benefit from the drama of such a buildup. In order to maintain interest until that important moment, you should take care of the following:

- 1) Insofar as possible, the last sentence of the issue should *not* give the impression that it might be the point.
- 2) There should be a sense of urgency about the development of the discussion that hints that the paragraph has a goal not yet disclosed; readers should be able to feel something building -- enough to make them stay around for the end.
- 3) The reader should be able to understand everything during the paragraph's development without having had the point stated up front.

For an example of this, see my paragraph on page 126 that begins "One might wonder why readers expect. . . ."

Medial Paragraphs: Complex, With a Dramatic Point

What can you do if a point requires the dramatic emphasis of placement at the end but the development of the discussion is too complex to be understood without the point having been announced up front? In such cases, you would do well to state the point *both* at the beginning *and* at the end. When the point is first announced, the reader may be unconvinced or uncomprehending; but after the discussion has developed the supporting reasons, the second coming of the point can be greeted with a sense of new recognition -- "Ah, so *that's* what was meant before!" The point may be the same old point, but it will be comprehended in a new way.

Ironically, this somewhat scarce type of paragraph comes the closest to the old topic sentence model for writing paragraphs: State the issue and point; give your reasons; then state the point again. This second serving of the point works poorly in easily comprehended paragraphs, where the reader is annoyed to be burdened a second time with material already understood. It works well in paragraphs where the reader could not comprehend the point fully in advance of its being discussed.

In other respects, however, these paragraphs do not resemble the typical topic sentence style paragraph: These often have a two-sentence or three-sentence issue; they do not necessarily have precisely three examples

between the two statements of the point; and the sophistication of the argument often connects the medial sentences in one long development rather than staking three separate claims as support for the point.

Here is an example, with a two-sentence issue and the point both in the second sentence and the last:

Where readers are concerned, we cannot limit even such a small unit of discourse as a sentence to one perceivable interpretation. All units of discourse are infinitely interpretable. By "infinitely interpretable" I do not mean that for each unit of discourse an unthinkably large number of interpretations are simultaneously known or knowable. Instead, I am using the term in the following way: If the number of interpretations perceivable at a given moment for a unit of discourse is "N," then "N + 1" is always a possibility. Someone with a different frame of mind or semantic experience or cultural bias could come along and perceive in the unit of discourse something that no one yet had noticed -- and the number of interpretations increases yet again. All units of discourse are infinitely interpretable.

A Note on One-sentence Paragraphs

Can there be such a thing as a legitimate one-sentence paragraph? (Many of us were taught in high school that one-sentence paragraphs are strictly forbidden.) You can find one on almost any page of a newspaper; but they also show up in the scientific literature, often enough not to be considered scarce. One-sentence paragraphs are appropriate as long as they contain all the rhetorical elements necessary for the definition of a paragraph. For paragraphs that intend to make a point, we generally expect the following:

1. There must be a clearly stated issue.
2. There must be a clearly ascertainable point.
3. There must be sufficient discussion to establish that point.

To accomplish all of this in only one sentence, all of the following must happen:

1. The issue must be able to be stated in a single sentence. That is clearly a possibility.
2. The issue and the point must be the same. That also is clearly a possibility.
3. No discussion must be necessary. That can happen when all the necessary discussion happens just before or just after the one-sentence paragraph.

The best uses for a one-sentence paragraph, therefore, are either as a kind of punchline that summarizes a previous development or as a challenging claim statement that will require substantial future development to justify itself. Example:

-- No good will come of our spending \$3,000,000 on the MXR project.

This will be a fine one-sentence paragraph if (1) The last five pages have been spent demonstrating why the MXR project is a disaster, or (2) the next five pages will be spent demonstrating why the MXR project will be a disaster.

Pointless Paragraphs

You run a real danger if you construct a paragraph that needs a point but has no point sentence. Sometimes, to be sure, many of your readers will figure out the point without further help from you: It may be relatively obvious to start with; or you may have led up to it so well that anyone could supply the next logical step accurately. Much more often, however, different readers will deduce different points from the material you have given them. That kind of multiple interpretation will get you in trouble sooner or later. There will come a time when it is crucial for some reason or other that you be as clear as possible, and you will have fallen short. But there is something even more troubling: When you fail to produce an explicit point statement in a paragraph, you may often fall short of completing your own thinking process. You may feel you know what you want to say; and you may be able to reread your paragraph intelligently, but the thinking process will not have been completed.

To explore these problems, let us look at example (13), which is a response to an assignment in a freshman writing course that required each student to write a real letter of comment or complaint to a real person. The final drafts were actually mailed, occasionally with interesting return results. Here is a letter to President Ronald Reagan in 1987 concerning the oppressive governing system in South Africa called apartheid.

13. Dear Mr. President,

As a concerned citizen of the United States, I am writing to you to express my disapproval of the current state of affairs in South Africa. Certainly you are aware of the system of apartheid, which has been in effect for some three hundred years. Apartheid is a system of racial segregation in housing, education, and commerce throughout the various provinces of South Africa. It is propagated by the government of South Africa, which is composed entirely of whites, in a nation with a large black majority. The government keeps the black majority in a state of disenfranchisement and denies all means of self determination to the country's majority.

Mr. President, this flagrant disregard for human rights and democratic principles flies in the face of all accepted principles of democracy and morality. Seeds of rebellion are being sown by black opposition leaders in South Africa. A liberated black majority in South Africa is a nation whose time has come. There will be no turning back.

Considering the geopolitical position that South Africa maintains, I urge you not to alienate the emerging black revolutionary forces that will inevitably claim power in South Africa. Please pledge the complete support of the United States to ending apartheid in South Africa and ensuring a healthy relationship with the new government that is to come.

Yours truly,

Let us take a slow-motion tour of this letter, this time asking two questions of each paragraph: (1) What is the issue? and (2) What is the point? Here is the first sentence:

- 13a. As a concerned citizen of the United States, I am writing to you to express my disapproval of the current state of affairs in South Africa.

If this first sentence is the entirety of the issue, then we probably expect to hear more about the author's disapproval of the state of affairs in South Africa. This sentence is hardly likely to be the paragraph's point: "I am writing to you" is an unlikely target for that kind of spotlight. Besides, we expect the point of an opening paragraph in such a letter to occupy the final sentence.

We continue:

- 13b. Certainly you are aware of the system of apartheid, which has been in effect for some three hundred years.

This conceivably might begin the discussion of the one-sentence issue of the first sentence. It is hardly likely, however, to be the point of the paragraph, since it does no more than note President Reagan's certain awareness of apartheid. Where are we likely to go from here?

- 13c. Apartheid is a system of racial segregation in housing, education, and commerce throughout the various provinces of South Africa.

This sentence is also unlikely to be the point. It is, however, a bit of an insult. After assuring the President that he knows all about apartheid, this student somehow feels the need to offer him a working definition of it.

- 13d. It is propagated by the government of South Africa, which is composed entirely of whites, in a nation with a large black majority.

Like its predecessor, this sentence further (and merely) defines apartheid and is therefore unlikely to be the point of the paragraph. However, we have finally arrived on the doorstep of the final sentence of the first paragraph—a sentence we fully expect will articulate the paragraph's point.

- 13e. The government keeps the black majority in a state of disenfranchisement and denies all means of self determination to the country's majority.

This sentence makes exactly the same kind of move as its predecessor. It is yet a third sentence devoted to apartheid's definition and is therefore unlikely to be the point of the paragraph. But this sentence disturbs us more than the others, since we so strongly expected it would present us with that point. That expectation has been violated. We have here a paragraph that is pointless.

We begin the first sentence of the second paragraph expecting that it will announce or begin to announce the issue of the new paragraph.

- 13f. Mr. President, this flagrant disregard for human rights and democratic principles flies in the face of all accepted principles of democracy and morality.

This sentence suggests that the second paragraph will discuss questions of morality. This turns out *not* to be the case; but we cannot know that at this moment in time. The rest of the paragraph is going to concern itself not with general moral principles (which are the concern of this opening sentence) but rather with predicting a black victory in the unavoidable revolution.

What, then, is the real function of sentence (13f)? Since it asserts disapproval of apartheid on moral grounds, it turns out to be the point of the first paragraph. All the flailing about we witnessed in the first paragraph makes far more sense if it builds to the climax of this charge of immorality. To improve the first paragraph immeasurably, all we need do is surgically remove sentence (13f) from the second paragraph and suture it to the end of the first paragraph. Then not only does the point appear exactly where we expect it to appear but also it creates adequate closure for the paragraph as a whole.

Here now is the sentence that becomes the first of our new second paragraph:

- 13g. Seeds of rebellion are being sown by black opposition leaders in South Africa.

What is the function of this sentence? It turns out to be the real issue of the second paragraph, now placed where we expect to find it. It could be the point of *some* paragraph; but it turns out not to be the point of this one.

We continue:

- 13h. A liberated black majority in South Africa is a nation whose time has come.

Could this be the point? Again, it certainly could be the point of *some* paragraph; but it is neither the last sentence of this paragraph nor even the last sentence of the discussion here. We hope, therefore, that something yet more vital is yet to come.

The next sentence is indeed yet more vital:

13i. There will be no turning back.

Continuing to develop the issue announced by the issue sentence, this yet more dramatic sentence sounds like it could be the point of the paragraph; but if so, then what does the writer expect to gain by making this point to the president? We are still in hope that a yet more compelling point will arrive before the paragraph ends. We can hear the crescendo building.

That buildup seems to climax in the next sentence:

13j. Considering the geopolitical position that South Africa maintains, I urge you not to alienate the emerging black revolutionary forces that will inevitably claim power in South Africa.

This sentence seems a reasonable candidate -- indeed, an admirable candidate -- to be the paragraph's point. The issue was that the black population would eventually rebel and win out over the whites of South Africa. The author is now urging the president to make use of this certain knowledge. We are Americans, it argues. That means we like to be on the side of the winners. The South African blacks will eventually win. If we befriend them now, we will be able to say we supported them all along. We should get in while the getting is good. Machiavelli himself would have been impressed with this student's strategy.

There remains a problem here: Since sentence (13j) is the next-to-last sentence in the paragraph, it will not be located in one of the two places we expect the point to be announced -- unless, of course, the sentence that follows it acts as a coda.

We turn to that last sentence:

13k. Please pledge the complete support of the United States to ending apartheid in South Africa and ensuring a healthy relationship with the new government that is to come.

There is nothing about this sentence that suggests coda. Located as it is in this paragraph, it seems a lame way to end such a Machiavellian piece of political advice. If, however, this sentence were split off from this paragraph to form a paragraph of its own, the whole letter will function better: (1) It would allow the point of the second paragraph to be located in that unit's last sentence, where we expect to find it; and (2) It would transform the lame ending of the original second paragraph into a perfectly acceptable (and perhaps somewhat clever) one-sentence summation paragraph

for the letter as a whole. Its first part ("Please pledge the complete support of the United States to ending apartheid") can be read as nodding backward to the moral statements of the first paragraph; its second part ("ensuring a healthy relationship with the new government") is a clear reference to the pragmatic advice offered in the second paragraph.

Note also that this final sentence is a fine example of a legitimate one-sentence paragraph: It requires no discussion, since the discussion has already taken place. Such marshmallowlike one-liners are quite acceptable just before a letter-writer says goodbye. A common example: "Please feel free to contact me if you have further questions."

This revised letter now becomes the product of a clever and insightful young man, aware of political and rhetorical realities. After articulating the mandatory moral principle in the first paragraph, he offers a sly and pragmatic reason for following what will seem a moral course of action.

The structural locations of the individual sentences now offer the reader instructions for interpreting the whole. Here is the entire revised version.

13k. As a concerned citizen of the United States, I am writing to you to express my disapproval of the current state of affairs in South Africa. Certainly you are aware of the system of apartheid, which has been in effect for some three hundred years. Apartheid is a system of racial segregation in housing, education, and commerce throughout the various provinces of South Africa. It is propagated by the government of South Africa, which is composed entirely of whites, in a nation with a large black majority. The government keeps the black majority in a state of disenfranchisement and denies all means of self determination to the country's majority. Mr. President, this flagrant disregard for human rights and democratic principles flies in the face of all accepted principles of democracy and morality.

Seeds of rebellion are being sown by black opposition leaders in South Africa. A liberated black majority in South Africa is a nation whose time has come. There will be no turning back. Considering the geopolitical position that South Africa maintains, I urge you not to alienate the emerging black revolutionary forces that will inevitably claim power in South Africa.

Please pledge the complete support of the United States to ending apartheid in South Africa and ensuring a healthy relationship with the new government that is to come.

Yours truly,

Before the revision, the first paragraph was pointless, the second paragraph raised a misleading issue, and the letter ended lamely. After the revision, the issues are clear, the points appear where expected, the development is surer, and the tone stronger. All this was accomplished by restructuring, without the alteration of a single word choice -- or even the

reordering of a single sentence. We have just made sure that the sentences arrive in structural locations that send the right interpretive messages to the reader.

Could the author have discovered for himself the same things I discovered? Yes; he merely needed to ask himself *where he had located* the points he was trying to make in these paragraphs. He might well then have been led to exactly the revision we have here. In other words, the weakness of the *structure* could have led him to perceive the incompleteness of his *thought*.

Note the difference between his asking *where* the points are and *what* the points should be. The former is a relatively objective question with the relatively objective answers of "here," "there," or "nowhere." The latter is the more abstract inquiry into the thought process, all too easily answered by "I meant to say exactly what I said."

EXERCISE R

For each of the following two paragraphs, determine which you think are the point sentences. Compare your choices (and the reasons for your choosing them) with those of two or three classmates. What problems do you encounter?

- A. Violence on television may offend people of highly moral beliefs. These people live cleanly and despise any corrupt acts. For example, if people worship the devil then this could greatly disturb their life. These scenes presented on television demoralize people of definite tenets. Besides providing a bad influence, this type of violence may affront people considerably.
- B. The summer I was 16, I took a train from New York to Steamboat Springs, Colorado, where I was going to be assistant horse wrangler at a camp. The trip took three days, and since I was much too shy to talk to strangers, I had quite a lot of time for reading. I read all of *Gone with the Wind*. I read all the interesting articles in a couple of magazines I had, and then I went back and read all the dull stuff. I also took all the quizzes, a thing of which magazines were even fuller than now.

Connections Between Paragraphs

In some ways, connections between paragraphs resemble connections between sentences. In both cases, the reader is departing from a unit of discourse that has raised numerous possibilities for further development. In both cases, the reader wishes to know as soon as possible exactly which strands of the former discourse will be the connecting links to the present and ongoing discourse. The writer can furnish that information (1) by sig-

naling forward at the end of the previous unit, (2) by motioning backward at the beginning of the new unit, or (3) by doing both of these.

One might think that since sentences are usually much shorter than paragraphs, they might offer far fewer possibilities for linkage to future sentences than paragraphs do for future paragraphs. This turns out not necessarily to be the case. Any of the contents of a sentence are available for future development. The occupants of the Topic position or the Stress position may often be the leading indicators of future linkage, but they are never the only possibilities. Any important word in a sentence can become old information in the next Topic position and take over the storyline. Paragraphs, on the other hand, usually work with much larger units of thought. Their structure and development often aim at limiting the likelihood of what can come next, sometimes far more than sentences tend to do.

Sentences offer a much larger number of future possible connections than one might think upon first reading them. I borrow an example from fiction -- the ironically argumentative opening sentence from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*:

- 14a. It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

Consider the wealth of possibilities for development crammed into this one delightful sentence. Here is only a partial list:

truth	universally
acknowledged	universal truth
universally acknowledged	a single man
a man	possession
a good fortune	in possession of a good fortune
must be	must be in want
a wife	in want of a wife
must be in want of a wife	

Any or many of these stepping stones might be used to forge the connection to the next sentence. If you ask 20 people who have not read *Pride and Prejudice* to create a logical second sentence to follow Austen's first, the chances are high that no two people would come up with precisely the same sentence.

Here is the one Jane Austen provided:

- 14b. However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

Note how many of the candidates on my list she managed to cram into this single sentence. The rest of the book can be read as a virtuosic development of precisely the information she has hurled at us, in ever so genteel a manner, in the book's opening sentence.

EXERCISE S

The following four sentences are each the first sentence of a paragraph of a well-known essay. Produce one or two reasonable sentences to follow each of them. Consider what the forward lean seems to be and fashion something both cohesive and coherent as the next sentence. After you have finished, you may be interested to see what actually was the author's second sentence. I have reprinted them in an endnote to this chapter.⁵ Do not be surprised if you are surprised by what you find there. There is no reason you should have been able to guess precisely where the author was going. All the same, note what kind of backward link was created. Prose is fluid.

1. I remember one splendid morning, all blue and silver, in the summer holidays, when I reluctantly tore myself away from the task of doing nothing in particular, and put on a hat of some sort and picked up a walking-stick, and put six very bright-colored chalks in my pocket.

(G. K. Chesterton, "A Piece of Chalk")

2. The acquisition of books is by no means a matter of money or expert knowledge alone.

(Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library")

3. Being blind has its advantages.

(Jorge Luis Borges, "Blindness")

4. I remember once, one cold bright December evening in New York, suggesting to a friend who complained of having been around too long that he come with me to a party where there would be, I assured him with the bright resourcefulness of twenty-three, "new faces."

(Joan Didion, "Goodbye to All That")

If you have just done the above exercises, you can see that the possibilities of where "the next sentence" may go in any piece of discourse are infinite. The possibilities for linking paragraphs are also infinite, but somewhat less surprising. I will not attempt to offer a detailed catalogue of the types of transitions that can be made from paragraph to paragraph; a brief discussion of just a few will have to suffice. I begin with the narrative paragraph.

Narratives take us from point A to point B in time and experience. As readers, we maintain a few dominating expectations for the beginning of the paragraph that follows:

- 1) It might continue the chronology of the previous paragraph, beginning from where the previous one left off.

- 2) It might choose a particular detail or moment from the previous paragraph upon which to dwell and expand.
- 3) It might shift dramatically to a topic that the reader has been given no cause to expect.

Readers are pleased and relieved when they are told as early as possible -- preferably in the first sentence -- which of these options will be realized. For an example, reconsider example (10) of this chapter, briefly encountered on page 111 above and which you may have worked on as the recent exercise on page 134:

10. The summer I was 16, I took a train from New York to Steamboat Springs, Colorado, where I was going to be assistant horse wrangler at a camp. The trip took three days, and since I was much too shy to talk to strangers, I had quite a lot of time for reading. I read all of *Gone with the Wind*. I read all the interesting articles in a couple of magazines I had, and then I went back and read all the dull stuff. I also took all the quizzes, a thing of which magazines were even fuller than now.

The paragraph that follows this one could continue the discourse in any number of ways, including innumerable variations on the three general directions suggested above.

- 1a) [continuing the chronology]: "After a nearly terminal case of boredom, I finally arrived in Steamboat Springs."
- 1b) [a different way of continuing the chronology]: "Having finished with the quizzes, three times each, I was heading toward reader's despair. In a last gasp effort, I resorted to studying the prose on the back of my ticket. 'The Railroad is not responsible for personal items lost or damaged during passage.' I started to wonder: What if I lost the. . . ?"
- 2a) [expanding on a particular detail]: "After all those quizzes, I started to appreciate the complexity of a sprawling novel like *Gone with the Wind*."
- 2b) [expanding on a different particular detail]: "The one that held my undivided attention was called 'How Masculine/Feminine Are You?'"
- 3) [an unexpected shift]: "Little did I know that the entire summer would pass by without my being allowed to read a single page."

Of particular help here is the nature of the paragraph's final sentence. Especially in narrative paragraphs (but somewhat in all paragraphs), it provides the surest of launching pads for the flight into the next sentence. Since example (10) is the opening paragraph of the essay from which it comes, the last sentence has particularly strong powers. Why should it end with those quizzes? If it is a well-written paragraph, with the quizzes

prominently displayed in the final sentence, might we not expect that this essay will go on to tell us all about the author's opinions of them? Let us look at the paragraph again, this time in slow motion. If you can, pretend you have never seen the paragraph before.

- 10a. The summer I was 16, I took a train from New York to Steamboat Springs, Colorado, where I was going to be assistant horse wrangler at a camp.

Any of the pieces of information here -- summer, 16, train, took a train, New York, Steamboat Springs, Colorado, going to be, assistant, horse, horse wrangler, assistant horse wrangler, camp -- any of it is available as old information in the second sentence. Any one of them might be a reasonable candidate for taking over the Topic position of that sentence, as long as it turns out to be "whose story" the second sentence is all about. The leading candidates are probably the occupants of the Topic position (the sentence's first eight words or so) and the occupants of the Stress position (the sentence's last five or six words): Either we are going to hear more about the train trip or more about the horse-wrangling camp experience.

- 10b. The trip took three days, and since I was much too shy to talk to strangers, I had quite a lot of time for reading.

The Topic position here harkens back to the Topic position of the first sentence, forming a short topic string: We are to continue to hear about this train trip. The Stress position is filled with "a lot of time for reading," new information that is presumably stressworthy. While the third sentence could take off from anywhere, we rather expect it will tell us more about the reading, since it receives such special emphasis here and is not self-explanatory. It sounds like a herald Stress position. If the next sentence goes on to something else, we will be somewhat perplexed as to why "reading" had deserved its privileged location.

- 10c. I read all of *Gone with the Wind*.

A Topic Change: The occupant of the previous Stress position has taken over the new "whose story?" position. "A lot of time for reading" has more than adequately been filled up with the lengthy, sprawling novel, *Gone with the Wind*. Where will we go next? We might expect a topic change, importing *Gone with the Wind* into the Topic position of the fourth sentence in preparation for pages of analysis of Margaret Mitchell and the burning of Atlanta. We could just as reasonably expect a continuation of the "I read" topic string. Either would seem smooth, logical, compelling; anything else would be jarring, disconnected, unsettling. (None of those adjectives need carry any value judgment along with them. It might be effective to jar, disconcert, or unsettle a reader at times.)

- 10d. I read all the interesting articles in a couple of magazines I had, and then I went back and read all the dull stuff.

The "I read" topic string wins. Instead of being the announced topic for the rest of the article, *Gone with the Wind* has now become just the first of a number of things our narrator managed to read. We are even more impressed now, not only with how much time he had for reading but with how voracious and capable a reader he must have been. After all, *Gone with the Wind* is a long novel, and the trip was by train to Colorado, not by goat-cart to Peru.

Where do we expect to go from here? We might well expect the topic string to continue, leading us on to even more of what he read; or we might be prepared for a topic change to the occupant of the current Stress position, the "dull stuff."

- 10e. I also took all the quizzes, a thing of which magazines were even fuller than now.

Quite neatly, this Topic position reaches back to both the Topic and Stress positions of the former sentence: (a) It continues the Topic string, expanding the "I read" into an interactive reading experience (quiz-taking); and (b) it changes the topic by categorizing the quizzes as part of the "dull stuff" -- perhaps, by declination, even the dullest of the dull stuff.

The paragraph is over. Where do we expect the next paragraph to take us? We would not be at all surprised if the author launched into an analysis of magazine quizzes. He has taken us across the country, read up a storm, and landed us at the end of the paragraph in a subject that is of no importance whatsoever unless it turns out to be the main concern of the approaching discourse. In other words, if this article is *not* about magazine quizzes, then the magazine quizzes are annoyingly and misleadingly located at the ending moment of this paragraph's structure.

The article indeed proceeds to investigate the nature of magazine quizzes and their reflection of American popular culture.

Watch now what happens if we lift one chunk of information in this paragraph and transport it to a different structural location. Note how our expectations change, making us think differently about where the next paragraph will take us.

- 10f. The summer I was 16, I took a train from New York to Steamboat Springs, Colorado, where I was going to be assistant horse wrangler at a camp. The trip took three days, and since I was much too shy to talk to strangers, I had quite a lot of time for reading. I read all the interesting articles in a couple of magazines I had, and then I went back and read all the dull stuff. I also took all the quizzes, a thing of which magazines were even fuller than now. I read all of *Gone with the Wind*.

The first two sentences remain the same as in the original. However, the next three arrive in a different order, which changes the way we see the author. He reads the interesting short stuff; he reads the dull stuff; he takes the quizzes; and then, finally prepared for the plunge, he takes on *Gone with the Wind*. The last sentence, being last, and being so much shorter and blunter than the others, convinces us it is the true climax of this paragraph's development. We firmly expect the next paragraph to launch into either his experience of reading *Gone with the Wind* or something connected to the process he has mysteriously outlined. This might be, for instance, an article about his great struggle with procrastination -- always leaving the more daunting task for later. In any event, if this paragraph is "well written," the article is *not* going to be about quizzes.

Here is another dewriting of the original paragraph:

- 10g. The summer I was 16, I took a train from New York to Steamboat Springs, Colorado. The trip took three days, and since I was much too shy to talk to strangers, I had quite a lot of time for reading. I read all of *Gone with the Wind*. I read all the interesting articles in a couple of magazines I had, and then I went back and read all the dull stuff. I also took all the quizzes, a thing of which magazines were even fuller than now. I was going to be assistant horse wrangler at a camp.

In this version, only the horse wrangling has been moved; but that small change has made a significant difference. The trip passes before us in the form of reading and quiz-taking activities, at the end of which is the arrival in Colorado for horse-wrangling purposes. Why is horse wrangling the closure point for a paragraph that is otherwise about frantic reading? Could it be that this bookish sort is going to have a tough time in the wake-up-and-smell-the-coffee Wild West? Or will he discover "real" meanings of life once he gets his nose out of a book?

Here is yet one more dewriting of the original:

- 10h. The summer I was 16, I took a train from New York to Steamboat Springs, Colorado, where I was going to be assistant horse wrangler at a camp. Since the trip took three days, I had quite a lot of time for reading. I read all of *Gone with the Wind*. I read all the interesting articles in a couple of magazines I had, and then I went back and read all the dull stuff. I also took all the quizzes, a thing of which magazines were even fuller than now. I was much too shy to talk to strangers.

The only change from the original is the location of the "too shy to talk to strangers." That piece of information had been buried in the middle of a sentence in all the other versions, thereby perhaps escaping our attention. It seemed to have functioned only as a supportive reason to justify all the reading and quiz-taking upon which we were invited to concentrate. In this version, however, all that has changed. The reading and quiz-taking

take on a kind of desperate quality as he goes to extreme lengths to entertain himself. We may not have noticed in the earlier version that both of these activities are decidedly solitary occupations; that fact is revealed to us by his resolving the paragraph with the admission of his shyness. The long delay in its arrival seems itself a manifestation of that shyness. Given the placement of "strangers" at the end of all this, what are we to expect of the next paragraph? Perhaps we might meet "her" -- the local version of Scarlet O'Hara.

There are no paradigms, no preset instructions that can help a writer decide where to take the reader next. That must be dictated by the writer's thought process. A writer can bend a narrative in any number of directions at any given moment. Readers tend to be willing to follow; but they must be given adequate warning where to turn next. As with sentences, beginnings and ends are the main places readers look for such help.

Non-narrative paragraphs also resemble sentences in the way they connect to each other. As we explored in some detail in Chapter 3, when forming a new sentence in a continuing discourse, there are two favored candidates for that new Topic position: Either (1) we can repeat the occupant of the previous Topic position -- thus continuing that occupant's story and forming a Topic String; or (2) we can repeat the occupant of the previous Stress position -- thus shifting stories and creating a Topic Change. Paragraphs are somewhat similar to sentences in this respect: They often benefit from linking backward either (1) to the occupant of the previous paragraph's Issue position, or (2) to its final sentence. Here are examples of both kinds of linkage, using once again the examples (3) and (4) we have seen before, this time augmented by the beginnings of their next paragraph:

3. I did not allow blindness to intimidate me. I set about memorizing the number of stairs in each staircase of the new house, creating a device for keeping them all straight. The fourteen steps of the front hall staircase summoned the word "fortunate" -- the way I felt about being able to have a new and better place to live: "Fourteen"; "fortunate." The seven steps to the upper level, where my CD player and all that wonderful music resided were my "seven" steps to "heaven." The ten stairs to the basement recalled the "ten steps" of St. John of the Cross, who tells us that "the way down," through denial and self-cleansing, are the best way to God. And the three steps of the front doorstoop could be distinguished from the two steps of the back doorstoop because to ascend in life is always a step more difficult than to descend.

Knowing the steps of my house gave me the courage to gain control of many other parts of my daily life. I learned to organize -- everything. If I kept the silverware in exactly the same partitions of its holder, I could depend on finding what I needed without anxiety. If I had one drawer for brown socks and another for blue, I was on my way to daily color coordination. . . .

The backward link of "Knowing the steps of my house" allows the second paragraph to flow with ease from the first in a steady stream. Part of the purpose of the first paragraph was to establish an example in such detail that succeeding examples could be constructed more economically. The two paragraphs together read as easily as putting one foot in front of the other.

4. All through the 1950s and well into the 1960s, his published articles glowed with patriotic zeal and communal self-satisfaction. They praised the country's stability, our national sense of progress, our international status on the rise, and the political resiliency that allowed us to survive the McCarthy Era and the Korean War effort. But in the late 1960s, everything changed, and his prose grew sour and darker. The Vietnam War depressed him. The widening "generation gap" made communication seem increasingly difficult, if not impossible. The assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King seemed to promise that the assassination of John F. Kennedy had not been an isolated event, but rather was the implanting of a national poison that was spreading and conquering. And with the Watergate scandal in the early 1970s, he seemed to give up hope altogether. He stopped writing.

In the earlier, brighter period, writing had been for him a source of energy. Each day had begun with a sense of promise -- a sense that the new day could build on the old with the feeling of progress. . . .

This new paragraph leaps lightly over all the depressing part of its predecessor and revisits the 1950s, with all its energy and hope. It also might offer a clue for where we will be going next:

First paragraph: 1950s and early 1960s good; late 1960s and 1970s bad

Second paragraph: Let us look again at the good period

Third paragraph: Let us look again at the bad period

Beginnings and endings once again stand out in the reader's mind far more than anything in the middle. Of course you *can* begin a new paragraph with linkage back to the middle of the preceding paragraph, but when you do, the reader is (at least) momentarily jolted by the appearance of unexpected information. For example, what if the paragraph that follows example (4) began with "The Korean War had been a challenge, to be sure." Although we might remember the Korean War having made an appearance in the previous paragraph, its reemergence comes as a surprise. To make this linkage, we have to leap backward, passing over all the unpleasant memories of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Once we have left our mental feet in that leaping process, our expectation would lead us to believe we will land in the previous Issue position, where he was upbeat about good things happening. Instead, we stumbled onto the Korean War -- something

he has supposedly overcome; but now it is presented as a lingering problem. We are lost. The writing has failed us. It raised expectations that were dashed, leaving us muddled.

How much explicit connection is needed at the beginning of a paragraph to link it to the previous paragraph? The answer is mildly annoying: You need as much connection as is necessary to make it clear to your reader how to proceed without insulting or delaying your reader by being unnecessarily explicit. It is always a judgment call, but the judgment should be made not in terms of what sounds good to the writer but rather in terms of what is needed by the reader. Readers need to be contextualized first, informed what action is taking place, and then presented with the stress-worthy material. Readers expect stressworthy materials to arrive at the end of a sentence, at the beginning or end of a paragraph, and toward the beginning and/or end of a whole document.

I repeat the three characteristics of good prose, which apply as well to paragraphs as they do to sentences:

1. Nothing arrives that the reader cannot handle at the moment of its arrival.
2. Everything leans forward.
3. Everything actually goes in one of the directions it had been leaning.

Summarizing Paragraph Structures

Your paragraphs should be shaped not to conform to some sort of Procrustean model but rather with a Protean need in mind. The shape of each of your paragraphs should reflect the shape of the development of its thought. We have encountered a fair number of paragraph shapes in this Chapter:

- Narrative paragraphs (with a hint of that narration in the Issue position)
- Non-narrative paragraphs with many possible organizations. Here is a table to bring the most common of these all together.

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Point</i>	<i>Coda</i>
1 sentence	first sentence	No
1 sentence	first sentence	Yes
1 sentence	last sentence	No
1 sentence	next-to-last sentence	Yes
2 sentences	second sentence	No
2 sentences	second sentence	Yes

Issue	Point	Coda
2 sentences	last sentence	No
2 sentences	next-to-last sentence	Yes
3 sentences	third sentence	No
3 sentences	third sentence	Yes
3 sentences	last sentence	No
3 sentences	next-to-last sentence	Yes

But we can add to these an infinite variety of paragraph shapes -- each of which is created specially for the occasion and is communicated to the reader right then and there. For example, we can put two points in the same paragraph -- as long as we say so right up front.

15. When we consider all the possibilities, we become convinced that there are only two plans of attack that make sense. (1) Either we do X. . . . That would lead us to prepare L and revise M and of course we would have to recondition N. (2) Or we could do Y, which entails. . . .

The paragraph is a long enough unit of discourse to allow us to send explicit instructions to our readers. As with anything having to do with writing, the primary piece of advice must be "Take your reader with you."

EXERCISE T

Here, once again, are the opening seven paragraphs of Lewis Thomas's *The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher*. You have seen them before, in the exercises at the end of the previous chapter and earlier in this chapter. This time, go through all seven in search of what you consider to be the issue and point statements. How many sentences does the issue require? (This is the task an earlier exercise in this chapter asked you to do.) Where is the point articulated? Compare your results for all seven paragraphs. Notice how many different paragraph shapes Thomas manages to create. The shape is always well suited to the function.

- A. We are told that the trouble with Modern Man is that he has been trying to detach himself from nature. He sits in the topmost tiers of polymer, glass, and steel, dangling his pulsing legs, surveying at a distance the writhing life of the planet. In this scenario, Man comes on as a stupendous lethal force, and the earth is pictured as something delicate, like rising bubbles at the surface of a country pond, or flights of fragile birds.
- B. But it is illusion to think that there is anything fragile about the life of the earth; surely this is the toughest membrane imaginable in the

universe, opaque to probability, impermeable to death. We are the delicate part, transient and vulnerable as cilia. Nor is it a new thing for man to invent an existence that he imagines to be above the rest of life; this has been his most consistent intellectual exertion down the millennia. As illusion, it has never worked out to his satisfaction in the past, any more than it does today. Man is embedded in nature.

- C. The biologic science of recent years has been making this a more urgent fact of life. The new, hard problem will be to cope with the dawning, intensifying realization of just how interlocked we are. The old, clung-to notions most of us have held about our special lordship are being deeply undermined.
- D. *Item.* A good case can be made for our nonexistence as entities. We are not made up, as we had always supposed, of successively enriched packets of our own parts. We are shared, rented, occupied. At the interior of our cells, driving them, providing the oxidative energy that sends us out for the improvement of each shining day, are the mitochondria, and in a strict sense they are not ours. They turn out to be little separate creatures, the colonial posterity of migrant prokaryocytes, probably primitive bacteria that swam into ancestral precursors of our eukaryotic cells and stayed there. Ever since, they have maintained themselves and their ways, replicating in their own fashion, privately, with their own DNA and RNA quite different from ours. They are as much symbionts as the rhizobial bacteria in the roots of beans. Without them, we would not move a muscle, drum a finger, think a thought.
- E. Mitochondria are stable and responsible lodgers, and I choose to trust them. But what of the other little animals, similarly established in my cells, sorting and balancing me, clustering me together? My centrioles, basal bodies, and probably a good many other more obscure tiny beings at work inside my cells, each with its own special genome, are as foreign, and as essential, as aphids in anthills. My cells are no longer the pure line entities I was raised with; they are ecosystems more complex than Jamaica Bay.
- F. I like to think that they work in my interest, that each breath they draw for me; but perhaps it is they who walk through the local park in the early morning, sensing my senses, listening to my music, thinking my thoughts.
- G. I am consoled, somewhat, by the thought that the green plants are in the same fix. They could not be plants, or green, without their chloroplasts, which run the photosynthetic enterprise and generate oxygen for the rest of us. As it turns out, chloroplasts are also separate creatures with their own genomes, speaking their own language.

A Note on Whole Documents

It may seem strange that in a book of this length I should spend only a few paragraphs on the question of reader expectations concerning whole documents. The reasons can be stated briefly.

(1) On the one hand, the possibilities for structuring and developing a whole document are geometrically more variable than those for structuring sentences or paragraphs. No two people would be at all likely to produce identical documents, even when they started with precisely the same materials. It is difficult, then, to talk in detail about how we as readers would expect whole documents to unfold on a regular basis.

(2) On the other hand, certain strong conventions for structuring and developing whole documents have been crisply communicated to writers by individual professional communities. There are great differences between the expected structures of a legal brief, article on literary criticism, and a federal grant proposal; but the courts, the academy, and the federal government each have let it be known what expectations they have of the gross structure of those documents. Composition courses at the college level need not steal their thunder. There will be plenty of time to learn these things later, on the job.

For example, medical journals in each separate subfield have well-articulated conventions for the submission of data and analysis. Those conventions may differ from subspecialty to subspecialty; but an individual cannot be accepted in that community -- that is, be published -- without demonstrating an ability to conform to those standards. Certain kinds of information belong in a section called the Abstract; other kinds are relegated to the Methods section; yet others appear in the sections on Findings; yet others belong to the Discussion sections. Tables and graphs have their place. The main point had better be announced up front and presented pictorially in a prominent location. Methods must not appear in places where argument should be taking place -- and vice versa. All this must be learned by the new scientific professional.

All that knowledge might be of no avail to the writer of a legal brief, a business memo, or an article for a journal of literary criticism. Each of those document types is founded on a similarly indigenous set of community expectations. Some are parallel to medical expectations; some seem parallel but are not; others could hardly be more different.

For example, a reader of a scientific article confidently expects that the main message of the article as a whole will be delivered at the outset; but a reader of an essay in literary criticism equally strongly expects that the punchline will appear somewhere between the two-thirds and three-quarters mark. Many a scientific article has been structured as follows:

Here is what we have found and why it is important.

Here is how we ran our experiments.

Here is the data we developed.

Here is what those data mean.

Here is a discussion about why we think what we found means what we say it means.

Many an article of literary criticism, however, has been structured as follows:

Critics have long said X.

Critics have been foolish to think that way.

Look at all the problems there are with what they have said.

Look what that leaves us yet to clarify and discover.

Now if you follow a different way of thinking, mine, here is what you would do.

If you do that, you will discover Y and Z.

Given this new way of thinking, you come to the following wonderful conclusions.

That was pretty good, wasn't it?

See you.

These conventions will be made clear to you early on in whatever career you choose. A professional company will quickly show you "how we do things here." Law school will teach you the component parts of a brief and a memo and a letter to a client. A government agency will show you what pieces of information have to be made apparent in which kinds of public documents. All of this is dependent on expectation; but the expectations will be local, not global.

Endnotes

1. I am borrowing this box arrangement, with a minor variation, from Joseph Williams.
2. Again I am borrowing a term from Joseph Williams.
3. Chesterton: I remember one splendid morning, all blue and silver, in the summer holidays, when I reluctantly tore myself away from the task of doing nothing in particular, and put on a hat of some sort and picked up a walking-stick, and put six very bright-colored chalks in my pocket. I then went into the kitchen (which, along with the rest of the house, belonged to a very square and sensible old woman in a Sussex village) and asked the owner and occupant of the kitchen if she had any brown paper.
Benjamin: The acquisition of books is by no means a matter of money or expert knowledge alone. Not even both factors together suffice for

the establishment of a real library, which is always somewhat impenetrable and at the same time uniquely itself.

Borges: Being blind has its advantages. I owe to the darkness some gifts: the gift of Anglo-Saxon, my limited knowledge of Icelandic, the joy of so many lines of poetry, of so many poems, and of having written another book, entitled, with a certain falsehood, with a certain arrogance, *In Praise of Darkness*.

Didion: I remember once, one cold bright December evening in New York, suggesting to a friend who complained of having been around too long that he come with me to a party where there would be, I assured him with the bright resourcefulness of twenty-three, "new faces." He laughed literally until he choked, and I had to roll down the taxi window and hit him on the back.

[All of these examples can be found in *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*, selected by Phillip Lopate. New York: Anchor Books, 1994.]

"Write the Way You Speak" and Other Bad Pieces of Advice

Our educational process does the best it can at every step of the way. Major parts of your college-level instruction are devoted to undoing much of what you have learned earlier. You may have been taught in high school that the main cause of the Civil War was the question of slavery and that Abraham Lincoln was a great man because he freed the slaves in his Emancipation Proclamation. In college you learn that the war had no single cause, that economic and political sovereignty counted more than anything else, and that Lincoln, great man though he was, never made it his agenda to free the slaves but rather to do whatever was necessary to keep the Union together. Remember that the Emancipation Proclamation was issued in 1863 -- halfway through the war. His timing, according to his own writings, was motivated not as much by the ethical issue of slavery but by the political necessity of the moment.

Does that mean that in high school you were misinformed? I think it means that in high school you were taught that which a high school student was likely to be able to process and use. The complex political issues of the retention of power would probably have been beyond your powers of intellectual synthesis. The same is true of much of what you might have been taught about writing. We need not blame anyone who might have given you any of the pieces of advice I attempt to unteach in this chapter. Most of this advice is based on something reasonable; most of it produces good effects -- in the context of a high school classroom.

But now you are older and more sophisticated. It is time to reassess some of the advice that was aimed at solving younger problems. I will not spend much time demonstrating what might have been the good intentions of these rules of thumb; learn what the other half of the story looks like and then decide for yourself how much of each pronouncement