How to Write a Paragraph

The Art of Substantive Writing

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Introduction

Most people realize that learning to write is "among the most important skills a student can learn." But far fewer realize that writing is also the key to the acquisition of content itself: "the mechanism through which students learn to connect the dots in their knowledge." Far too few realize that for students to learn, "they must struggle with the details, wrestle with the facts, and rework raw information and dimly understood concepts into language they can communicate to someone else." In other words, "if students are to learn, they must write." All these points are emphasized in a report recently issued by the *National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges (New York Times,* 4/25/03),which goes on to say that writing is "woefully ignored in most American schools today." Moreover, according to the same New York Times article, "a 2002 study of California college students found that most freshmen could not analyze arguments, synthesize information, or write papers that were reasonably free of language errors."

At present students are poor writers, not because they are incapable of learning to write well, but because they have never been taught the foundations of substantive writing. They lack intellectual discipline as well as strategies for improving their writing. This is true on the one hand because teachers often lack a clear theory of the relationship between writing and learning and, on the other, are concerned with the time involved in grading written work.

If we understand the most basic concepts in critical thinking, we can provide the grounds for a solution to both problems:

(1) a theory that links substantive writing and thinking with the acquisition of knowledge, and

(2) awareness of how to design writing assignments that do not require one-on-one instructor-student feedback.

This guide links with and reinforces other key guides, particularly How to Read a Paragraph and How to Think Analytically (see inside back cover). All three guides provide techniques that enhance student learning and foster the ability to communicate clearly and logically what one is learning.

The development of writing abilities, as well as all other intellectual abilities, occurs only through sound theory and routine practice. When students understand the relationship between learning and writing, and are engaged in routine writing practice using the tools of critical thinking, they are able to learn content at deeper and deeper levels, and gradually improve their ability to communicate important ideas.

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The Theory

The Premise of This Guide

Writing is essential to learning. One cannot be educated and yet unable to communicate one's ideas in written form. But, learning to write can occur only through a process of cultivation requiring intellectual discipline. As with any set of complex skills, there are fundamentals of writing that must be internalized and then applied using one's thinking. This guide focuses on the most important of those fundamentals.

Writing for a Purpose

Skilled writers do not write blindly, but purposely. They have an agenda, goal, or objective. Their purpose, together with the nature of what they are writing (and their situation), determines how they write. They write in different ways in different situations for different purposes. There is also a nearly universal purpose for writing, and that is to *say something worth saying about something worth saying something about.*

In general, then, when we write, we translate inner meanings into public words. We put our ideas and experiences into written form. Accurately translating intended meanings into written words is an analytic, evaluative, and creative set of acts. Unfortunately, few people are skilled in this work of translation. Few are able to select and combine words that, so combined, convey an intended meaning to an audience of readers.

Of course, if we are writing for pure pleasure and personal amusement, it may not matter if others do not understand what we write. We may simply enjoy the act of writing itself. This is fine as long as we know that our writing is meant only for us.

Among the various purposes for writing are the following:

- for sheer pleasure
- to express a simple idea
- to convey specific technical information
- to convince the reader to accept an important position or argument
- to challenge the reader to consider a new worldview
- to express what we are learning (or have learned) in a subject

People write in pursuit of many specific and varied agendas. Consider how the purposes would vary for the following writers:

- a media advisor writing political campaign literature
- a newspaper editor deciding how to edit a story to maintain reader interest
- a media consultant writing copy for an advertisement
- a chemist writing a laboratory report
- a novelist writing a novel
- a poet writing a poem
- a student writing a research report

Clearly, one's purpose in writing influences the writing skills one needs and uses. Nevertheless, there are some fundamental writing skills we all need if we are to develop the art of saying something worth saying about something worth saying something about. We call this substantive writing. And learning the art of substantive writing has many important implications for our development as thinkers. For example, it is important in learning how to learn. And, it is important in coming to understand ourselves. It can enable us to gain self-insight, as well as insight into the many dimensions of our lives.

Substantive Writing

To learn how to write something worth reading, we must keep two questions in mind: "Do I have a subject or idea worth writing about?" and "Do I have something of significance to say about it?"

Having recognized possible variations in purpose, we also should recognize that there are core writing tools and skills for writing about anything substantive, for targeting ideas of depth and significance. These tools and skills are the focus of this guide.

The Problem of Impressionistic Writing

The impressionistic mind follows associations, wandering from paragraph to paragraph, drawing no clear distinctions within its thinking and its writing from moment to moment. Being fragmented, it fragments what it writes. Being uncritical, it assumes its own point of view to be insightful and justified, and therefore not in need of justification in comparison to competing points of view. Being self-deceived, it fails to see itself as undisciplined. Being rigid, it does not learn from what it reads, writes, or experiences.

Whatever knowledge the impressionistic mind absorbs is uncritically intermixed with prejudices, biases, myths, and stereotypes. It lacks insight into the importance of understanding how minds create meaning and how reflective minds monitor and evaluate as they write. To discipline our writing, we must go beyond impressionistic thinking.

Writing Reflectively

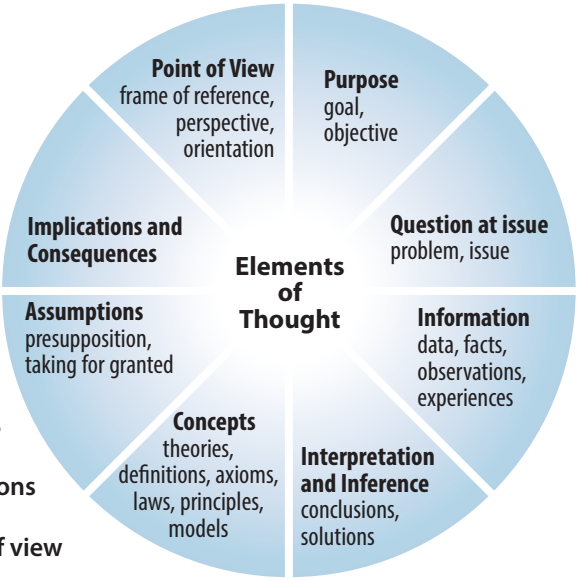
Unlike the impressionistic mind, the reflective mind seeks meaning, monitors what it writes, draws a clear distinction between its thinking and the thinking of its audience. The reflective mind, being purposeful, adjusts writing to specific goals. Being integrated, it interrelates ideas it is writing with ideas it already commands. Being critical, it assesses what it writes for clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, significance, and fairness. Being open to new ways of thinking, it values new ideas and learns from what it writes.

The reflective mind improves its thinking by thinking (reflectively) about it. Likewise, it improves its writing by thinking (reflectively) about writing. It moves back and forth between writing and thinking about how it is writing. It moves forward a bit, and then loops back upon itself to check on its own operations. It checks its tracks. It makes good

Thus, when you write, you inevitably write for a purpose, make inferences, and think within a point of view. At the same time, your readers have a point of view of their own. They have their purposes, their questions, their assumptions, and their beliefs. The better you are at understanding the perspectives of your readers, the better you can understand how to explain your reasoning to them. The better you understand someone else's system of thoughts, the better you can understand your own.

Thinking then:

- has purposes
- raises questions
- uses information
- utilizes concepts
- makes inferences
- makes assumptions
- generates implications
- embodies a point of view



When you can move back and forth effectively between what you are writing and what you want your writing to accomplish, you bring what you are thinking to bear upon what you are writing, and you bring what you are writing to bear upon what you are thinking. You change your writing when you recognize through your thinking that improvement is needed — and how it is needed.

How to Write a Sentence

Within a piece of written work, every sentence should stand in a clear relationship to other sentences. Each sentence, and indeed every word of every sentence, should support the purpose of the written piece.

An important part of writing with discipline is connecting sentences to the broader context within which they are located, seeing how they fit within the whole. For every sentence you write, then, you can ask:

- How does this sentence connect with the other sentences in the paragraph?
- How does this sentence relate to the organizing idea of this text as a whole?

Clarification Strategies

- **The ability to state a thesis clearly in a sentence.** If we cannot accurately state our key idea in a sentence using our own words, we don't really know what we want to say.
- **The ability to explain a thesis sentence in greater detail.** If we cannot elaborate our key idea, then we have not yet connected its meaning to other concepts that we understand.
- **The ability to give examples of what we are saying.** If we cannot connect what we have elaborated with concrete situations in the real world, our knowledge of the meanings is still abstract, and, to some extent, vague.
- **The ability to illustrate what we are saying with a metaphor, analogy, picture, diagram, or drawing.** If we cannot generate metaphors, analogies, pictures, or diagrams of the meanings we are constructing, we have not yet connected what we understand with other domains of knowledge and experience.

Sample Paraphrases

Consider the following sample paraphrases before we move on to more detailed paraphrasing:

He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetuate it. — *Martin Luther King, Jr.*

People who see unethical things being done to others but who fail to intervene (when they are able to intervene) are as unethical as those who are causing harm in the first place.

Every effort to confine Americanism to a single pattern, to constrain it to a single formula, is disloyalty to everything that is valid in Americanism. — *Henry Steele Commager*

There is no one "right way" to be an American. When everyone in America is expected to think within one belief system, when people are ostracized or persecuted for thinking autonomously, when people are labeled "UnAmerican" for independent thinking, the only legitimate definition of "true American" is annulled.

In a free society, standards of public morality can be measured only by whether physical coercion — violence against persons or property — occurs. There is no right to be offended by words, actions, or symbols. — *Richard E. Sincere, Jr.*

Ethics in a free society is determined by whether violence has occurred against a person or one's property. People do not have the right to be protected against being shocked by the life-styles of others.

Examples of confusing ethical principles with theological beliefs:

- Members of majority religious groups sometimes enforce their beliefs on minorities.
- Members of religious groups sometimes act as if their theological beliefs are self-evidently true, scorning those who hold other views.
- Members of religious groups sometimes fail to recognize that "sin" is a theological concept, not an ethical one. ("Sin" is theologically defined.)
- Divergent religions do not agree on what is sinful (but often expect their views to be enforced on all others as if a matter of universal ethics).

Examples of confusion between ethics and social conventions:

- Many societies have created taboos against showing various parts of the body and have severely punished those who violated the taboos.
- Many societies have created taboos against giving women the same rights as men.
- Many societies have socially legitimized religious persecution.
- Many societies have socially stigmatized interracial marriages.

Examples of confusing ethics and the law:

- Many sexual practices (such as homosexuality) have been unjustly punished with life imprisonment or death (under the laws of one society or another).
- Many societies have enforced unjust laws based on racist views.
- Many societies have enforced laws that discriminated against women.
- Many societies have enforced laws that discriminated against children.
- Many societies have made torture and/or slavery legal.
- Many societies have enforced laws arbitrarily punishing people for using some drugs but not others.

Sample Analysis

The main purpose of this article is to convince the reader that ethics should not be confused with other modes of thinking — specifically religion, social conventions, and the law.

The key question that the author is addressing is: How does ethics differ from other ways of thinking?

The most important information in this article consists of:

1. **Examples of confusing ethical principles with theological beliefs:** Members of majority religious groups often enforce their beliefs on minorities.