

Writing Effective Paragraphs

by

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The following are some general remarks on paragraph writing.

It is a generally accepted fact that the following are important in writing:

1. selection of facts
2. organisation of facts
3. selection of words; grammar.

Naturally, these operate simultaneously as a person writes, but for purposes of drilling and practice, each can be separated and focussed on in detail.

To begin with, the student should be encouraged to develop an ability to recognise good and bad writing, and “bad” writing would include poor selection and organisation of facts, poor choice of words and weak grammar. In this particular context, the student should also become familiar with the characteristics of a paragraph, which are:

1. the presence of a topic sentence (either at the beginning, middle or end);
2. the unity within the paragraph.

Here, good paragraphs can be rewritten to incorporate the qualities of “bad” writing. These can then be arranged, starting with the “bad” writing and progressing to the better paragraphs. These paragraphs are then presented to the students at class discussions. Each piece of writing is studied and assessed and comments made of the organisation, etc. In this way, an awareness of the qualities of good and bad writing can be developed, even before the students attempt any writing at all.

The next stage concerns the selection of facts. For practice in this, the students are given various topics and asked to jot down facts. Some useful topics for students of agriculture would be: “Malaysian Agricultural Activities”, “The Pineapple Industry”, “Cash Crops” and “The Green Book Plan”. In connection with these, the facts given are discussed as to their relevance and importance to the topic.

With regard to the organisation of facts, three methods may be utilised. The first of these involves drills

and exercises in joining two or more sentences. Transitional devices used within the paragraph (link words, referents, etc.) are emphasised. Readability and continuity of prose are focused on as well.

The second method is presenting the facts in a jumbled-up fashion, that is, the sentences are written down as (a), (b) or (c) and then (b) is placed before (a), etc. The student is then asked to rearrange the sentences into the most effective sequence. Here, attention is focused on the *topic* or key sentence, and the subsequent sentences which develop this key sentence. As a further exercise, the sentences are jumbled-up and then written into a paragraph. Students again must rearrange the sentences to produce a well-organised paragraph.

The last method is providing a starter. In this case, an opening incomplete sentence is given to the students and they are asked to complete it, first using the facts provided and then using their own imagination.

These three methods are used in three stages; method one at the early, beginning stages of the programme, method two at the intermediate stage and method three at the more advanced stage.

As the students move from guided or aided writing to free or creative writing, strict emphasis is placed on word choice and grammar. Dictionaries will come in handy as the students are encouraged to avoid repetition of the same word and to choose the most precise language. Drills, approximating "cloze" test exercises

can be carried out to provide further practice in word usage. Finally, features of correct grammar usage (such as tense, noun and verb agreement – both within the sentence and intra-sentence) are stressed. Sample exercises are given below to give some idea of the techniques mentioned.

Sample exercises

- (i) The sentences given below are not in proper, sequential order. Re-arrange them so that they form a clear and well-organised paragraph.

Only one spoonful is used on one acre of orchard, which approximately produces two-hundred thousand apples. We see the importance of this chemical as a regulator of plant growth. Growth-regulating chemicals are applied in minute amounts to control the growth and behaviour of crop plants. If this chemical was not used the grower could stand to lose 50% or more of the crop. Napthalene-acetic acid ($C_6H_5CH_2COOH$) is used to treat apple trees in the fall to prevent fruit drop and thus improve the quality.

- (ii) Complete the paragraph which begins thus:
Rubber has many uses
- (iii) Write a paragraph on the topic:
Fertilizers

The teaching techniques mentioned here have been found to be useful in developing better writing habits in students who follow the such a writing course one of the local universities.