CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD PARAGRAPH

Paragraphs constitute the basic unit of organization in an expository essay. They have the virtue of allowing the writer to concentrate on the central thesis one aspect at a time. While there is no simple formula for writing a good paragraph, the writer should know that expository or argumentative paragraphs, in support for one’s thesis, should adhere to certain principles to assure clear progression of thought. These principles, so helpful in writing paragraphs, are discussed below.

1. UNITY: a paragraph must have unity; that is, its sentences must stick to the dominant idea of the paragraph. An effective device for ensuring unity is the Topic Sentence which states the central idea of the paragraph. The Topic Sentence should appear near the beginning of the paragraph. It should foreshadow what’s to come and suggest the order in which details will be discussed. A paragraph will have achieved its purpose when it reaches the closing sentence. (Note: Some writers get sidetracked at the end of a paragraph by launching into a new topic. Let such a sentence introduce the following sentence.) Examine the paragraph which follows, noting how it attains unity by sticking to its topic:

Example 1:

Taking a few to outline before beginning to write an impromptu essay is time well spent. While outlining may seem to take time away from writing, such planning is an essential part of writing a good paper. It will produce writing that has thought behind it, writing that does not digress. Taking a few moments to outline an essay will impress the instructor, for he/she will note the organization that went into the writing. If it should happen that one runs out of time, having a jotted outline will give the student the opportunity to summarize points not covered. A brief outline, can aid immeasurably in helping one write a good impromptu essay.

2. COHERENCE: unity in a paragraph is not enough, for even if all sentences relate to the Topic Sentence, the way in which they are related may be muddled. Sentences must cohere; that is, the thought contained in one sentence should be clearly related to the thought of the following sentence. Coherence can be achieved by the use of certain devices, among them Transitional words and Phrases, Pronoun Reference, Repeated Key Terms or Parallelism. Primarily, coherence rests on clear logical progression of thought from one sentence to the next. Examine the paragraph which follows, noting how to underline words contribute to coherence:
Example 2:

I was accepted by Henry Ford Community College and started classes. Since my reading background was slight, and because I was not mature enough for difficult adjustments of student life, I was soon miserable. After a few weeks, I became so depressed that I considered dropping out. I think my English instructor sensed this, for he asked me in for a conference. He encouraged me by pointing out my excellent potential. Consequently, I decided to stay.

3. ADEQUATE DEVELOPMENT: some writers fail to make paragraphs complete by providing enough evidence to prove the topic sentence. While a short, emphatic paragraph is sometimes desirable, the brief, under-developed paragraph of 2, 3 or 4 sentences too often is a sign of an inexperienced writer. The inadequately developed paragraph may be cured by the inclusion of more details, not by padding out sentence, not by further generalizing or by the adding repetitious statements. The good paragraph needs specifics. Methods of developing the expository paragraph vary, but include the use of illustration, description, examples, definition, comparison and contrast, and analogy. Examine the paragraph which follows (written by an English 131 student) noting how it adequately develops its topic through use of details, but without undue length or complexity:

Example 3:

Each year legislators bring up the use of a national health care plan, so recently I asked a Canadian friend if he would tell me what he thought was the greatest advantage of their national health care plan. His reply was “Peace of mind”. This statement was made by the father of a young girl who had a heart defect, has had several operations, numerous tests, and who, a few years ago, had to undergo open-heart surgery. Fortunately for him and his family, all medical, hospital, and surgical expenses were paid by the Canadian Health Care Plan. He also mentioned all expenses were covered because the Canadian government regulated the rates for all types of medical care and, in most cases, these rates adhere to by the medical profession. If there is an additional charge, it is minimal, usually less than 10% of the total bill. His only concern was that the better medical professionals were emigrating to countries where there were no restrictions on fees because they wanted to increase their personal income.: still he felt quite a few dedicated doctors continue to remain in Canada. He certainly feels that the pluses of the Canadian Health Care Plan far exceed the minuses.
Exercise

To develop your skill with unity, coherence, and adequate development, write a paragraph (or more information if necessary) on one of the following topics:

1. The pressures on young people to go to college
2. How would you define an educated person?
3. The high cost of gasoline (clothing, etc)
4. Inflation
5. The expense of a college education
6. Your car.

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