1 Paragraphs in Your Fiction

- 1. To understand how paragraphs work in fiction
- To eliminate unnecessary words, phrases, clauses, sentences, or entire paragraphs
- To edit and revise sentences in the context of a paragraph or an entire body of writing

2 What is a paragraph?

Paragraphs are units of meaning, even in fiction.

In fiction, your paragraphs should serve a purpose and advance the story—plot, characterization, setting, etc.

If your paragraph isn't doing something to advance the story, cut it.

3 The Topic Sentence

Traditionally, paragraphs have a topic sentence and use <u>transitional devices</u> to maintain paragraph unity.

A topic sentence is a sentence whose main idea or claim controls the rest of the paragraph; the body of a paragraph explains, develops or supports with evidence the topic sentence's main idea or claim.

The topic sentence is usually the first sentence of a paragraph, but not necessarily. It may come, for example, after a transition sentence; it may even come at the end of a paragraph.

Many well-known, experienced writers effectively use topic sentences to bridge between paragraphs.

In fiction writing, a writer might not have a clear topic sentence, but all of the thoughts contained within that paragraph or "unit of meaning" should be related.

4 Example

Here is a perfectly meaningful paragraph (when following and leading into other paragraphs, of course):

"No."

The reader knows, just reading that, that the speaker is denying, refusing, or disagreeing to something in the preceding paragraph. Meaningful—and it links to the preceding paragraph.

5 Example 2

Why is this a paragraph?

But here's a paragraph (at least it is separate from other text on the page) without any real meaning:

There were many reasons why he couldn't go. But he didn't tell her that. He gazed out the window at the green lawn and sighed.

See, nothing happens in that paragraph—nothing advances. There were many reasons, but the reader doesn't learn any of them. He doesn't speak. He just gazes and sighs, and the grass is green, not blue, so the reader doesn't even get surprise to make the paragraph interesting.

So the first question when you look at your paragraphs is--- why is this a paragraph? What meaning does it impart? What does it contribute to the passage?

6

The second question is, what unifies it as a paragraph?

Even if the first sentence doesn't state what it's about, you should know what the paragraph is about so that you can start it and end it at the right point, arrange your other sentences logically, and throw anything out that doesn't belong.

7 Example 3

What unifies it as a paragraph?

There were many reasons why he couldn't go. He didn't have any money. He couldn't take time off work. But as he glanced over at Miriam, he realized that no reason was good enough. Her baby sister was getting married, and Miriam wasn't about to go to the wedding without a man on her arm—and if not him, it could be some rent-a-stud from an escort service.

The reader is still stuck with that lousy first line, alas. (Reasons why? Eek.) But at least the paragraph is unified, as it moves from the reasons he couldn't go to the reason he better go.

8 What is this paragraph ABOUT?

Tom mentally listed some of the reasons he couldn't go: He didn't have any money. He couldn't take time off work. But as he glanced over at Miriam, he realized that no reason was good enough. Her baby sister was getting married, and Miriam wasn't about to go to the wedding without a man on her arm—and if not him, it could be some rent-a-stud from an escort service.

"Tom" identifies the "actor" of the paragraph, adding to the unity because we know now that this paragraph is about Tom and his thoughts.



What else helps unity? Well, the repetition of the keyword "reason" helps unify.

Repetition is NOT a bad thing when it's keyword repetition, when the word is important, and the repetition is meant to unify.

10 Common Mistake

A mistake in paragraphing is to put at the end what ought to be the first sentence of the next paragraph.

Tom mentally listed some of the reasons he couldn't go: He didn't have any money. He couldn't take time off work. But as he glanced over at Miriam, he realized that no reason was good enough. Her baby sister was getting married, and Miriam wasn't about to go to the wedding without a man on her arm—and if not him, it could be some rent-a-stud from an escort service. He and Miriam had met the first day of law

school in their civil procedure class.

Those of you who have an "ear" for the rhythm of paragraphs will hear the discordance there at the end. You might not know why, but you hear that the paragraph has gone on too long. Honor that instinct. Figure out what's wrong—what's sticking out of the roundness of the unified paragraph.

11 Conclusion

Just keep in mind -- paragraphs are units of meaning: unified and meaningful. Your reader is going to feel and hear the paragraph as a unit (if you do it right). Paragraphs should be tightly focused and carefully structured.

Oh, and you might have noticed that paragraphs are considerably shorter these days. Our attention span is shorter, too. If you find your paragraphs going to half a page or more, then go back and analyze—what is the unit of meaning, and when does it change or shift?

That's where to start a new paragraph.