

## Parsing Paragraphs by Victoria Grossack

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In English, at least, the paragraph is a group of one or more sentences, best recognized by its physical appearance. In most published pieces a paragraph is signaled by an indentation at its beginning and by trailing spaces at its end. Or, more and more frequently these days, particularly in letters of business or on the internet, paragraphs may have no indentation at their beginnings. Instead there is a break between blocks of text.

No matter how paragraphs are displayed, the fact that they are formatted is essential. It is this formatting which creates a bridge between shape and meaning. Paragraphs and the breaks between them are important for your readers. Paragraphs help your readers keep their place in the story – both in terms of where they literally are on the page, and where they are in terms of the action.

You can make paragraphs either long or short. Long paragraphs – especially pages without any paragraph breaks whatsoever – can intimidate readers browsing through your book. Many people will put a book down if confronted by huge, unyielding blocks of text. Too many short paragraphs in sequence may also lose your readers, in that they will not be able to keep their place, either.

The lengths of paragraphs, like the lengths of your sentences, create a rhythm for your story. Longer paragraphs usually signal that the story is slowing down, while shorter ones indicate that the pace is picking up. Longer paragraphs also are a place to develop intricate action, detailed description, or even profound, complicated thoughts. Short paragraphs are where exclamations and rapid delivery of important information from you to your readers occur – but if you have too many of them in a row, your writing may seem staccato and your ideas shallow.

### When Do You Start a New Paragraph?

When should you start a new paragraph, and when should you keep writing in the one you're in?

The easiest answer is when you are writing dialogue. When you change speakers, you nearly always begin a new paragraph. In fact, the word *paragraph* comes from the Greek word *paragraphos*, a line marking a change in the speakers of dialogue (classical Greeks are famous for their plays, and so this would be very important).

However, unless you are also writing for the theatre, you will be writing paragraphs without any dialogue. In this situation, determining where to end and start paragraphs is more difficult.

A paragraph means a switch in the focus of your story. Here are some situations when you might want to end one paragraph and start another:

- You are writing about the actions of Carol in the one paragraph, and then start writing about Jim. If you are planning to devote several sentences in a row to Jim, you should probably start a new paragraph.

- You are changing the point of view within your story. I have thus far avoided discussing point of view in my columns, because it is a difficult topic. Although I believe that most scenes should be shown through a single point of view; many writers will not agree with me. So, I say, please have a little mercy and at least change paragraphs when you change the point of view.

- You are writing about one thing, and then you start writing about another. This is it in a nutshell. But how do you tell whether or not all your sentences are about the same thing, and not about another? Usually it is obvious, but occasionally it is not. This is where your *authority* as the *author* comes in; you are responsible for deciding whether the sentences belong together or not. Do you want your readers to associate these ideas together closely or not? Which way makes your meaning clearest?

## Inside Paragraphs

So far this article has concentrated on what you should consider when separating your paragraphs. But there is another important consideration regarding the structure of paragraphs for your story: how do you order your sentences within each paragraph?

For non-fiction, there seems to be more theory. Often, you should begin a paragraph with a topic sentence, i.e. a sentence which explains what you are writing about. The sentences which follow are detail sentences supporting the topic sentence. For example:

*The weather should be good for the picnic tomorrow. The temperature is predicted to be in the eighties, partly cloudy with a slight breeze. The humidity will be low, and the pollution index will also be low.*

Notice how the last two sentences go into more detail about the weather, supporting the assertion the first sentence in the paragraph.

This technique can help with your fiction writing, but there can be differences. In fiction, your paragraphs also need to move your story along. So, even when you begin a paragraph with a strong lead sentence, you may want to end with a bang as well.

Here's an example from my current endeavor:

*His sister's mocking tone infuriated him. Attempting to control his rage, Pelops rose to his feet; finding that the floor had steadied itself, he walked out onto the balcony. Looking out at the distant sea, he took a slow, deep breath. Finally he turned and spoke to Niobe. "Just because the gods have never spoken to you does not make it impossible."*

In the paragraph above (told from Pelops' point of view, a character whose incipient madness makes him believe that the floor was swaying rather than that his gait was unsteady), the first

sentence tells us how Pelops is feeling. The next two sentences show him in motion but also attempting to control his emotion. The fourth sentence is a transition sentence which the reader needs in order to follow the action of the story. The fifth sentence in the paragraph ties back to the first, as Pelops' statement makes clear why he is so angry; that he hates having what he interprets as religious experiences questioned. And the sentence, "*Just because the gods have never spoken to you does not make it impossible*" is delivering its own wallop, as the readers sit up and think, hey, does this guy *really* think that the gods are talking to him?

We've covered two different ways of organizing paragraphs. The first contains a lead sentence and is followed by sentences which support it. The second develops action or thought and moves the story along. There are probably other good ways to organize your paragraphs, but these are two that I have found useful.

## The Order of Your Paragraphs

The order of your paragraphs is another part of the structure that you need to consider. Which information should come first, which second, third, and so on? Here are a couple of suggestions:

Whenever you can, tell your story in sequence. Readers can be confused by flashbacks, so unless you have good artistic or dramatic reason, it's easier for them to understand when your story is told in the same way that things happen. Of course there are good dramatic reasons – still, you should be aware of what you are doing and only do it when necessary.

Put related paragraphs together. For example, if Steve is considering in one paragraph what he should get Betsy for Valentine's Day, maybe he should not be thinking the same thing a few paragraphs later – unless those thoughts need to be separated for the sake of your story. Also, it is possible for this suggestion to lead to bad writing. For example, you might want to intersperse description throughout your story, rather than put it in one block.

## Conclusion

Mastering the art of the paragraph takes most people a long time. I want to emphasize that it is, in many cases, an art – some of what I have written above should be considered guidelines as opposed to hard-and-fast rules.