

PSY 225 – Research Methods

Professor Gernsbacher's Lecture Video "Basic Recipe for Writing Paragraphs"

Here's an easy recipe for writing paragraphs. You might have learned this recipe before, but it's worth being reminded of it, or learning it anew.

It's a simple recipe, but like all good recipes, it can be a base for creating more sophisticated creations.

The first ingredient of the recipe is that each paragraph should begin with a

CLICK: a topic sentence. As you probably know, a topic sentence conveys the main idea or the topic of each paragraph. So, it makes sense that each paragraph must have a topic sentence – and most often that topic sentence appears as the paragraph's first sentence.

For example, let's look at

CLICK: these paragraphs modified from the Aims Dot edu essay on Why Learning How to Write an Analytical Essay is Important.

Let's zoom in on the paragraph about Writing During College. The first sentence of that first paragraph, the one that says,

CLICK: *The typical college student will be required to write a variety of essays throughout their college career*

is that paragraph's Topic Sentence. It's the sentence that tells us the main idea of the paragraph, and it's the first sentence of the paragraph.

CLICK: Similarly, let's scroll on to the next paragraph, the one about Writing in Graduate School.

That paragraph's first sentence,

CLICK: *Many students pursue other educational opportunities after acquiring their undergraduate degree, and writing analytical essays is a centerpiece of postgraduate study,*

is that paragraph's Topic Sentence. It also tells us the main idea of that paragraph. And when we

CLICK: scroll on to the next paragraph, the one about Writing in the Workplace, we see that that paragraph's first sentence,

CLICK: *Not only is writing an important academic skill, but it is also an important skill in the workplace because nearly all professions require some form of writing on the job.*

is also THAT paragraph's Topic Sentence. It also tells us the main idea of that paragraph. So, the first ingredient in every paragraph is a Topic Sentence, and each Topic Sentence should present that paragraph's main idea.

Not only is your Topic Sentence usually the first sentence of each your paragraphs, but also you should write your Topic Sentence FIRST, when you FIRST begin writing your paragraph.

CLICK: I know, when we talked about the Five Paragraph Model for writing an entire essay, we talked about writing the middle three paragraphs first. Then writing the

CLICK: The Introduction Paragraph, with its Thesis Statement and its Hook, and then writing

CLICK: The Conclusion Paragraph with its restatement of the Thesis Statement.

But, when you're working at the level of the paragraph, for example,

CLICK: when you're writing one of those middle three supporting paragraphs, or when you're writing just about any paragraph, it's best to write your paragraph in order.

And by that I mean,

CLICK: write your Topic Sentence FIRST.

As for what goes next, let's outline a paragraph from the Aims dot edu essay. Let's outline the paragraph about Writing During College.

First, we have the paragraph's Topic Sentence:

CLICK: *The typical college student will be required to write a variety of essays throughout their college career.*

Next, we see three supporting sentences,

CLICK: each of which provides an example, a piece of evidence, or a detail that supports the topic sentence, for example,

CLICK: *Sometimes, a student will be required to work on an essay assignment as homework.*

Which is one example of a situation when a typical college student will be required to write an essay during their college career. So, this sentence is an Example Sentence A. The next sentence,

CLICK: *Other times, a student will be assigned to write a longer essay for their Term Paper.*

That's an Example Sentence B. It provides another example to support the topic sentence that the typical college student will be required to write a variety of essays throughout their college career.

And the next sentence,

CLICK: *Occasionally, students are asked to write an essay in class with a limited amount of time.*

is the Example Sentence C. That sentence provides the last example to support the topic sentence that the typical college student will be required to write a variety of essays throughout their college career.

Then, the last step in the recipe for writing a paragraph is to write a

CLICK: Conclusion Sentence. The Conclusion Sentence of a paragraph is a bit like the Conclusion Paragraph of a five-paragraph essay in that its role is to wrap things up.

The Conclusion Sentence in a paragraph can re-emphasize the topic sentence, but using different words. Or the Conclusion Sentence can state some important consequence of the argument you've just made in your paragraph, for example,

CLICK: *Regardless of the assignment, understanding what makes for good writing can lead to creating a well-crafted essay in a shorter amount of time.*

What you DON'T want to do in your Conclusion Sentence is to use your Conclusion Sentence to start a new topic or to make a digression or to provide some other unimportant detail. You want to write a Conclusion Sentence that brackets your Topic Sentence and holds your paragraph together,

CLICK: just like a bottom hamburger bun holds your hamburger together.

In fact, if you Google Image search “paragraph structure,” you’ll see a ton of hamburger figures like this. In this hamburger metaphor, the top bun

CLICK: represents your Topic Sentence, which introduces your paragraph’s main idea;

CLICK: the tomatoes, the lettuce, and the meat patty, provide your three supporting examples, evidence, or details to flesh out your paragraph’s main idea; and the bottom bun is your Concluding Sentence that holds everything together.

CLICK: Here’s another image of the hamburger metaphor for paragraph structure. Again, the top bun represents your Topic Sentence, which introduces your paragraph’s main idea;

The tomatoes and lettuce, meat patty, and in this illustration, the mustard, provide your three supporting examples, evidence, or details to flesh out your paragraph’s main idea; and the bottom bun is your Concluding Sentence that holds everything together.

If you’re wondering what that cut out is in the hamburger’s upper left-hand corner, it’s the artist’s rendition of the paragraph’s

CLICK: indentation.

Cute, huh? And you might be thinking that the entire hamburger metaphor is also cute – maybe too cute. And you might be worrying that the recipe is too elementary. But here’s the deal: Even accomplished, professional writers structure their paragraphs according to this basic recipe.

For example

CLICK: William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White, in their classic book of advice to professional writers, titled “The Elements of Style,” perfectly describe the hamburger metaphor. They tell professional writers that

CLICK: “the most generally useful kind of paragraph ... follows this structure:

CLICK: the Topic Sentence, our top bun, comes at or near the beginning;

CLICK: the [Supporting] Sentences, our lettuce tomatoes, and meat patty, explain, establish or develop ... the Topic Sentence; and

CLICK: the Final Sentence, our bottom bun, either emphasizes the thought of the Topic Sentence or states some important consequence.”

You’ll also see that this basic recipe for writing paragraphs is used in all well written journal articles. For example, in an article published in the scholarly journal, *Memory*, you’d see the following paragraph.

CLICK: It begins with a topic sentence:

CLICK: *One of the puzzles of human behavior is how taking a substance that does nothing can cause something.*

The paragraph’s next sentence supports the Topic Sentence by providing an example:

CLICK: *Phoney painkillers can lessen our pain;*

And the next sentence continues to support the Topic Sentence by providing another example:

CLICK: *phoney alcohol can lead us to do things we might otherwise resist,*

And the next sentence continues to support the Topic Sentence by providing another example:

CLICK: *and phoney feedback can even cause us to shed body fat.*

Then, the paragraph's Conclusion Sentence does what it's supposed to do. It serves as the bottom hamburger bun that holds the whole paragraph together. And in this paragraph the Conclusion Sentence is

CLICK: *Perhaps Kirsch (2004, p. 341) said it best: [Quote] "Placebos are amazing." [Unquote]*

CLICK: Let's outline one more paragraph from scholarly writing that also illustrates how even accomplished writers still use the basic recipe for a paragraph. This paragraph is from an article published in the scientific journal named *Cognitive Psychology*.

The paragraph's topic sentence is

CLICK: *Spontaneous speech is filled with disfluencies – pauses, fillers (such as uh and um), word fragments, self-corrections, and repeated words.*

The paragraph's first supporting sentence is

CLICK: *Most disfluencies seem to reflect planning problems.*

Then,

CLICK: *When speakers cannot formulate an entire utterance at once, they may suspend their speech and introduce a pause or filler before going on.*

And then,

CLICK: *When speakers change their minds about what they are saying, they may suspend their speech and then add to, delete, or replace words they have already produced.*

So, we have a Topic Sentence and three Supporting Sentences that support that Topic Sentence. And the authors wrap up their paragraph with a Concluding Sentence:

CLICK: *Disfluencies have long been used as evidence of planning (e.g., Clark, 1996; Goldman- Eisler, 1968; Levelt, 1983, 1989; Maclay & Osgood, 1959; Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977).*

As you can see, the authors followed to a tee the basic recipe for writing a paragraph. By the way, the authors of this paragraph are Herbert H. Clark and Thomas A. Wasow, both of whom are professors at Stanford University. And Professor Wasow is a Professor in the Linguistics Department.

If Stanford Linguistics Professors follow the hamburger model, it's probably not too elementary for us to follow, too.

CLICK: Let me conclude with a basic rule to go along with the basic recipe. This basic rule is offered by the Purdue Writing Lab, and the basic rule is

CLICK: *"Keep One Idea to One Paragraph*

CLICK: *If you begin to drift into a new idea, it belongs in a new paragraph."*

CLICK: And that's because each paragraph should have only

CLICK: a Topic Sentence, three Supporting Sentences, and a Conclusion Sentence. That's the basic recipe!