

Shooting Straight about Paragraphs: They Are Not What We Say They Are

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Ask any class, “What’s a paragraph?” After a few moments, repeat the question, reassuring the students that this is not a trick question. The vast majority of students will look at you and see *English teacher*, scan their memory banks, and dutifully respond with the litany of “three to five sentences, develops a single topic or thought, supports a thesis”; some might think to add, “has unity and cohesion,” or some such. But I just will not accept that response any longer, even though we have taught the criteria like scripture for years. Find an example of that, without looking it up in your comp handbook, I ask my students. But perhaps we should take a look at this *convention*, see where it came from, and move forward in time to the paragraph’s present utilization, in various print and electronic media. I propose that we think about what a paragraph is by considering its *function*, what it does in a piece of writing, whether in a popular novel, a newspaper article, an e-mail, a business report, or a lofty piece of literary criticism. We might think about a paragraph as a *rhetorical dwelling*.

The first occurrence of the term “paragraph” appears in 1490, at which time it meant, “a short horizontal stroke drawn below the beginning of a line in which a break in the sense occurs,” coming into the language via French from Greek meaning a mark next to or alongside (“Paragraph,” *Oxford*, 1401); the meaning of arranging or dividing into paragraphs first appears

in 1799, though in 1601 the idea of a paragraph as a separate short notice appears (“Paragraph, *Oxford*, 1429). Thus the term or idea appears as a printer’s convention, though the concept of what exactly such marks indicate other than a change in sense, emerges in a brief secondary definition appearing in 1940: “a distinct section or subdivision of a discourse, chapter, or writing, whether of one or many sentences, that forms a rhetorical unit [a term I will revisit later] as dealing with a particular point of the subject, or as comprising the words of a distinct speaker, etc.” (“Paragraph,” *Webster’s*, 1193).

However, these mainstream origins and definitions are out of touch (perhaps blissfully so) with the permutations of composition studies, for the most part already in lockstep with the Johns Hopkins University paradigm of scientific scholarship, regardless of discipline. This scientific model, begun in application, I suspect most of us are aware, toward the close of the 19th century at Harvard and elsewhere in response to a literary exam failed by more than half of the applicants in 1874 (Richardson), is clearly revealed in a text published before the Great War: *A Study of the Paragraph*. Said text preserves, not to say mummifies, for us not only the contemporary definition we most frequently employ but the rationale behind it.

Helen Thomas, A.M., “Formerly Instructor in English, Lexington (Mass) High School, composed the book to make it available “in teaching college classes, in the endeavor to correct one of the greatest faults of college students’ compositions,—ignorance of proper paragraph construction” (Thomas 5). Even though Thomas admits that the construct of the paragraph is “an intangible, elusive subject,” she valiantly proceeds in her definition, relying on her forebears: “Rhetoricians have agreed that in every well-written Paragraph there lies a sentence that states the main thought; moreover, that every succeeding sentence bears a specific relation to the so-

called Topic Sentence” (7-9). This logical construct is bringing into coalescence the rhetorician and the Psychologist, the latter, according to Thomas, telling us that the “nature of the growing mind demands the concrete before the abstract” (9). She reminds us that our “duty” as composition teachers is clear: to supply “a concrete method as the only means to reduce to some kind of order a growing mind woefully chaotic and muddled” (10). We must reinforce the essential qualities of any writing, “*unity, coherence, and emphasis*” (sound hauntingly familiar?), and we neglect the “five-finger exercises, expecting [the student] to produce a symphony” (11). We forget “the nature of our pupils... forget we are working for the average mind, the mind that is seeking a straightforward, simple manner of expression. Ninety-nine cases out of one hundred consists of pupils of mediocre abilities...” (11).

For the simple benighted minds of our students, Thomas turns to the solid ground of science and mathematics, a “scheme” that “presents the Paragraph in the light of a Geometry Proposition”: “Given To Prove, Proof, Summary” (12,13). With such a method, we recognize that the paragraph, then, is like the cell’s relationship to the organism: “If ...an essay or composition is the complete development of its specific subject, then we can say that each paragraph is a complete development of its own subject” (18).

The method above Thomas then applies to both expository and narrative paragraphs, with amazing results. For example, a paragraph from Franklin’s *Autobiography* is presented:

Subject Sentence – “We landed in Philadelphia on the 11th of October where I found sundry alterations.”

Given: Benjamin Franklin landing in Philadelphia October 11th.

To Prove: - He found sundry alterations.

Proof: Sundry alterations.

Summary: Complete the work indicated.

The sample paragraph ran to about 200 words, 9 sentences, and not very well composed, but it supports her method. And through this method she substantiates her definition.

But all this was literally 100 years ago, the desperate struggles of a retired schoolmarm to help the hordes of mediocre minds with their five-finger exercises, though we know it remains the definition, and the unspoken rationale today.

We have chosen our definitions in a scholarly way, basing them on such definitive works as Edward P.J Corbett's *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, which begins by stating that "Paragraphing, like punctuation...[is] a typographical device for punctuating units of thought larger than the thought conveyed by a single sentence" (412). Corbett illustrates this point by quoting a long passage from Twain's "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses" without paragraph breaks, capitalization, or punctuation of any kind, telling us that we should be "grateful to those printers and grammarians who invented typographical devices to mark off meaningful segments of thought" (413). However, comparing paragraphing to full stops, capitalization or semicolons is a very weak analogy indeed. One is a space, the other delineates grammatical units. (But I will return to this point in a moment.)

The above text then reports on a composition analysis done by sections of an Honors Freshman class on F.L. Lucas's essay, "What is Style?", not surprisingly concluding that Lucas averaged 7.6 sentences per paragraph, in Corbett's words, "a fairly well-developed paragraph" (416). However, to reach these numbers, the students were told in their *choice* to "avoid short transitional paragraphs and any paragraphs containing two or more sentences of quoted material"

(415). Corbett did include a variety of student comments on the exercise, one pointing out, “Lucas’s average was slightly inflated because only ‘average’ paragraphs were counted” (418), the instructor guiding students to a definition of average.

Thus such definitions remain the rule today in our composition texts and our writing centers, as the *OWL* at Purdue University advises online that a paragraph “is a collection of related sentences dealing with a single topic,” with an effective paragraph containing “Unity, Coherence, a Topic Sentence, and Adequate Development.” Students are warned to “beware of paragraphs that only have two or three sentences” as “it’s a pretty good bet that the paragraph is not fully developed if it is that short.” This is a two-sentence paragraph of *theirs*, but never mind that.

Or consider The Writing Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which initially pays lip service to a definition of a paragraph from Lunsford and Connors as “a group of sentences or a single sentence that forms a unit.” However, immediately following, under “How do I decide what to put in a paragraph,” the student is told that “every paragraph in a paper should be...unified,” or “all of the sentences in a single paragraph should be related to a single controlling idea (often expressed in the topic sentence of the paragraph).” Every paragraph should also be “related to the thesis,” “coherent” and “well-developed.”

The online guide from University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, “Basic Paragraph Structure,” provides an even clearer directive, stating that in academic English paragraphs have three parts: “These parts are the topic sentence, body sentences, and the concluding sentence.” I could go on, though the predominance of such definitions is clear to most, with little to no change since Mrs. Thomas in 1912.

I have no problem in accepting a 100-year-old definition, if it were true and valid. As a teacher of composition, I dearly wish it were true, but as a professor of writing I cannot accept or endorse it, even as a definition of a dominant structure in 21st century Formal American Academic Writing in English Studies—we certainly need to delineate those restrictions.

Historically, the above definition can be found valid, but only with a careful selectivity. With a very cursory random search from my shelves, I note Shaftesbury's paragraphs in his *Characteristics* averaging six to ten sentences per, Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* having Chapter V as a single paragraph of well over 700 words, Chapter VIII *beginning* with several paragraphs not over 100 words each (248-249; 12-13, 22-23). Our 20th century critic Maynard Mack's introductory paragraphs run 8-10 sentences and 400 words on average (viii-ix). Samuel Taylor Coleridge's paragraphs in *Biographia Literaria* are wonders in themselves. Poe's short stories of horror? "The Pit and the Pendulum" *begins* with a paragraph of 17 sentences, 400+ words, followed by another of 16 sentences and 300 words (246-247). Or Annie Dillard's "Living Like Weasels" gives us 4-5 sentence paragraphs but the paragraphs are anywhere from 40-130 words (306-307). And what would we say about the following *paragraph* of Elmore Leonard's, from *Freaky Deaky*: "Donell said, 'Oh you sneaky. We talking about the bomb, now you have us back on the other conversation. You looking for somebody was here Saturday could be a witness, huh? Testify against Mr. Woody'" (146-147). It is four "sentences."

One might argue that such paragraphs are apples and oranges, but even in the world of academic prose, some scholars have increasingly strong reservations. As Knoblauch notes in the *Journal of Advanced Composition*, "As we try to move across sentence boundaries into questions of form within...paragraphs, and paragraph sequences, the reliability of structural

pronouncements, the likelihood that they will be truly encompassing, deteriorates substantially. Hence, whatever the degree of objectivity, our conclusions will always be liable to sabotage because of latent deficiencies in analytical method” (1). In other words, there are other voices in the wilderness, or perhaps rebels loose in the lab, rejecting the extant definitions. Richard Larson’s summary of growing scholarship suggests that even in academic prose a paragraph need not have a topic sentence or focus on a single idea or even a “distinguishing structural feature than some set of diversely connected sentences, that it maybe forms accidentally” (qtd. in Knoblauch 2). Knoblauch suggests that we may wish to “celebrate some artificial notion of the formal propriety of ‘good’ paragraphs, but we do not compose *in order to* fulfill structural principles; [instead] they may be the products of our efforts to make order ...but are seldom preconceived guides to the discovery of order” (3).

One of the recurring misconceptions in attempting to define a paragraph is, as in Corbett’s case, to consider it analogous to a sentence or other *grammatical* structure, when in fact a paragraph is not a grammatical structure at all. As Brooks and Warren mentioned in *Modern Rhetoric* long ago, a paragraph constitutes a “unit of thought,” a division set off for “convenience, though not a strict necessity” (316). Reminding us that “only common sense and the requirements of the particular occasion can determine how long a paragraph ought to be,” and may in fact be a “matter of taste,” the authors suggest that the paragraph is *a* way of signaling thought, a rhetorical structure rather than a grammatical one, pointing out that the writing remains exactly the same in structure and grammatical form whether the indentation, skipped line, or paragraph symbol is present or not.

Freed from the notion of a grammatical unit, which always may be clearly identified and judged as formal or informal, correct or incorrect, the paragraph loses even more of its artificially imposed strictures. I suspect most of us already recognize that to define a paragraph as a series of 3-5 sentences developing a topic sentence and having unity, coherence, and completeness is as much as to say that an animal may be defined as a creature of 5-7 pounds with black and white barred feathers and a red comb on its head that lays white eggs and may be consumed at such establishments as Church's and KFC.

I think very few of us would argue with the notion that paragraphs are rhetorical units. However, what definition of a paragraph would encompass not only our cherished 21st century formal academic prose, but 18th century fiction, the fiction of Elmore Leonard and James Joyce, the freshman essay, the business letter, the blog or e-mail, to say nothing of Web-writing?

There are some new online sources out there, Guy Kawasaki telling us that to be better bloggers and writers we do need to "give a shitake" about paragraphing, Dennis Cass's blog claiming to "redefine the paragraph," though the latter simply rehashes old ground on the "grafs" as he calls them, still looking for at least three sentences and a P.O. (Primary Objective)—nothing new here except for his calling attention to working on "music and energy." In "Web Writing that Works!" the paragraph takes a step *back*, the writer insisting that the topic sentence should always come first.

But let us consider the above call for music and energy; after all, fiction and journalism are *compositions*, too. From the one-word piece of dialog, "No!" set off as a paragraph to the 800-word convoluted monster in legal or academic discourse, those of us who write and are conscious readers may feel the conductor's baton in each indentation. As sentence structure and

length and sound are part of the music or cacophony of a piece of writing, paragraphs set the pace, the speed of the read. The staccato dialog of a popular John Grisham novel moving us rapidly down with 15 to 20 paragraphs per page keeps us excited, consuming each chapter like cheap candy, until we reach the end—and need to buy another. The heavy-bellied paragraphs of academia hold us by the patched elbow and have us listen to an exhaustive lecture on a minute point to the degree that we are convinced that the writer must be right, or will just accept the point so we can rest.

In either extreme, the writer says, “Stay here, now move on, stay here, now here, listen for a while here,” etc. Paragraphs are spaces or indentations that indicate *duration*, short or long, for a one-word expostulation or for a ten-minute diatribe. And we adjust that *duration* according to our purpose, but also according to our audience and publishing situation, even changing paragraph *sizes* (without changing a single word or punctuation mark) when publishing in a one-column or a two-column magazine, or when moving our composition from hard copy to e-mail. As writers, we ask our readers to *stay* on this word or on this passage for a duration.

Perhaps we might consider an instrument automotive mechanics sometimes employ when measuring and adjusting an engine’s timing—the instrument is called a “dwell meter,” measuring how long an engine dwells or stays in a certain position of its cycle. In this sense, to dwell means not only to live but “to exist in some place or state... to fasten one’s attention” coming from Middle English *dwellen*, “to delay, linger, remain, reside” (*American* 406). The paragraph, then, may be defined as a *rhetorical dwelling*, adjustable as situation and rhythm necessitates.

At some point in our teaching and our thinking, we should be able to discuss the concept of paragraphing without mentally shouting at our students with a Jack Nicholson face, “You can’t handle the truth!” The concept of a paragraph as a flexible rhetorical dwelling may help.

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