The Train of Thought in Writing

HEM Sras[1]

College of Law, The University of Cambodia, Northbridge Road,

Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Abstract

This paper provides a further explanatory account regarding the use of the two kinds of paragraph for academic writing proposed by Hem (2017): one where each paragraph covers a complete idea; the other where it forms a logical transit between adjoining paragraphs. Current academic writing often uses complete-idea paragraphs, which can often result in these being extremely long. This can make it difficult to read, understand, and capture the reader's attention, as well as affecting the overall appearance of a piece of writing. To avoid this, it is suggested to use logical transits as an alternative way for paragraph writing. This is expected to facilitate and increase students' critical thinking, and creative writing skills in preparing an academic essay or paper.

I. Introduction

Many long paragraphs can be seen in academic writing today. These may affect initial perceptions of a paper, causing difficulty for the reader to get to grips with the report and grasp the implications. Thus it is generally recommended that overly long paragraphs should be avoided.

In a previous paper, Hem (2017) described two approaches for writing a group of paragraphs, which he termed the 'complete idea' and the 'logical transit' strategies. The present paper expands on the concepts developed there, including to propose some flexible rules for writing proper

[1] dean_col@uc.edu.kh

paragraphs in an academic essay or paper. The aim is to help others to organize their trains of thought whilst avoiding the writing of long paragraphs.

II. Features and Challenges of Contemporary Academic Writing

Contemporary academic writing tends to use clear and concise language, especially in essay or paper writing (Zinsser, 2001; Durant and Fabb, 2005; McKerihan, 2015). To help achieve this, it is suggested that the writer uses short sentences and paragraphs in order to help the reader to quickly capture the meaning of what has been written (Kane, 2000; Zinsser, 2001; Starkey, 2004; Durant and Fabb, 2005; Sant, 2008; Hartley, 2008). Thus, various suggestions have been made for writing to achieve such purposes.

With regard to sentence usage, scholars suggest using short, simple sentences rather than compound, complex, compound-complex, or passive ones (Kane, 2000; Zinsser, 2001; Hartley, 2008; Bailey, 2011; Murray, 2011; Greetham, 2019). Short, simple sentences can provide an easily understood, clear meaning to the reader, while longer sentences lead to progressive lack of clarity (Durant and Fabb, 2005; Kamler and Thomson, 2006; Hartley, 2008; Murray, 2011; Evans, Gruba, and Zobel, 2014; Greetham, 2019).

To this end, some scholars have suggested that writing a short sentence can be based on word counts or the number of lines in a sentence. Thus a sentence has been suggested to comprise between 20 and 30 words (Bak, 2003; Hartley, 2008). However, monitoring word counts is difficult while writing. Instead, using the number of sentence lines is better. A sentence should be up to three lines, except for some cases (Hem, 2017). Both approaches have the same purpose: to achieve short sentences with a clear meaning to the reader.

Besides using short sentences, many academics also suggest writing short paragraphs (Eunson, 2012; Evans *et al.*, 2014; Folse, Muchmore-Vokoun, and Solomon, 2014). However, there are different views in terms of the length of a paragraph. For example, a page is considered too long for a paragraph; thus, it is suggested to separate into two or more paragraphs (LearningExpress, 2006; Hartley, 2008). More narrowly, Eunson (2012) suggests writing a paragraph based on word count of about 50 to 150 words. As mentioned above, counting the words is difficult. Thus Hem (2017) suggested using a number of sentences as a determiner for an appropriate paragraph length, based on about three to five sentences on average, as developed further below.

Broadly, two types of paragraph have been recognized: (1) the one-sentence paragraph; and (2) the group-sentence paragraph.

The one-sentence paragraph is a standalone self-contained unit to drive home the writer's message. For example, Kane (2000:89) notes that "a single sentence or even a word may serve as an emphatic paragraph." Likewise, Lunsford and Connors (1995, cited by Owusu, 2019: 54)[2] state that a paragraph can be "… a single sentence that forms a unit". The present author concurs with this but has noted that the one-sentence paragraph can exist only in some 'introductory' or 'concluding' paragraphs, not 'explanatory' ones (Hem, 2017: footnote 12). Thus a one-sentence paragraph, especially an emphatic word, is generally not appropriate in academic writing, although it can work in newspaper, conversational, novel or other non-academic styles. In academic writing, authors are expected to develop ideas and explain them with data to support and expand on these.

The generally recognized alternative, the group-sentence paragraph refers to a paragraph comprising of a group of sentences that describe a main idea or topic (Kane, 2000; Zemach and Rumisek, 2005; Robitaille and Connelly, 2007; Oshima and Hogue, 2007; Wingersky, Boerner, and Holguin-Balogh, 2009; Connelly, 2012). It is composed of a topic sentence, supporting sentence(s), and a concluding one (Zemach and Rumisek, 2005; Robitaille and Connelly, 2007; Anker, 2009). However, writing group-sentence paragraphs can result in overly long ones where authors try to add information to make them complete and self-contained.

Whilst the present author also concurs with the usefulness of group-sentence paragraphs, he has suggested that the concluding one is optional, based on the idea of whether a paragraph represents a complete idea or a logical transit (Hem, 2017), an aspect which will be developed further below.

III. Groundwork for the Train of Thoughts in Writing

A clear train of thought is essential in preparing a piece of academic writing. This should be based on a 'thesis': a statement of the main message that the writer of an essay, paper or other document wants to get across to the reader (Woehlke, 2010; Eby, 2011; Sharp, 2011; Folse *et al*., 2014).

---

[2] And also by https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/paragraphs/ (accessed December 12, 2019).

1. Role of the Thesis Statement in Constructing a Train of Thought in Writing

For present purposes, the thesis statement which identifies the overall aim(s) of an essay, research paper or other piece of academic writing will be termed its 'central thesis'. This is established in the introduction (Jones and Farness, 2002; Sharp, 2011; Blakesley and Hoogeveen, 2012; Eunson, 2012; Folse *et al*., 2014). It can be written within one or several sentences depending upon the complexity of the topic to be covered. However, many scholars suggest to write it in a succinct, condensed form as the 'thesis statement' (Lai, 2013; Folse *et al*., 2014).

This paper considers that, apart from the central thesis, each paragraph may have its own particular sub-theme – here referred to as the 'paragraph thesis' – typically referred to as the 'topic sentence' of the paragraph (Birch, 1993; White and Weinberg, 2002; Oshima and Hogue, 2007; Anker, 2009; Murray, 2011; Eunson, 2012; Folse *et al*., 2014). The paragraph thesis can be considered as serving as a 'mini-thesis' or 'sub-thesis' of the central thesis as defined here. In this sense, an essay or paper consists of many paragraph theses (mini- or sub-theses) which serve to support the central thesis.

A statement of the mini-thesis can be located at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of a paragraph. However, for easy finding and understanding when skimming the text, it is suggested that it should generally be to put at the beginning as the first sentence in the paragraph (Howe and Willoughby, 2005; Zemach and Rumisek, 2005). This would be appropriate for a complete idea paragraph (see below), especially for a short piece of writing like a standalone essay. However, for a long piece of writing, the position of a mini-thesis statement can vary based upon the logical link and flow of ideas from a paragraph to another, which will be illustrated below.

The overall form of a piece of writing's thesis can be either 'stated' or 'implied' (Folse *et al*., 2014). A stated thesis is one where there is a clear statement of the main aim at the beginning of the piece of work, which also introduces the 'explanatory ideas' which are to be explored in the rest of the text. Basically, the number of the explanatory ideas determines the number of paragraphs in the body, especially for a short essay. On the other hand, whilst an implied thesis also starts with a statement of the main aim, the nature of the explanatory ideas develops progressively in the rest of the text: the reader can only understand the prospective explanatory ideas once they have completed reading this.

These two kinds of overall organization play a central role in deciding how to structure a piece of academic writing. However, before considering how to best put them into practice one needs to look at the two basic types of paragraph – complete idea and logical transit (Hem, 2017) – mentioned above at the end of Section II. This is expanded upon in the next Section.

2. The Two Ideas of Paragraph Writing Methods and Their Usage

As noted at the end of Section II, there are two ways for constructing a paragraph in the broader context of the rest of an academic document (Hem, 2017).

The first of these is the so-called the 'complete-idea paragraph'. This refers to a paragraph in which the main idea (the mini-thesis) is completed without the need to continue onto another one (Hem, 2017). Thus the writer tries to complete it by adding relevant, supporting ideas to make it complete: however, as noted above, this can make for overly long paragraphs.

The use of the complete-idea approach is easy to apply, especially in the standard five-paragraph essay, with an introduction, three body paragraphs and a conclusion (Hem, 2019). Thus if the writer uses the stated thesis approach, the three explanatory ideas can be covered in the introductory paragraph. Each of these will become the mini-thesis for a body paragraph, where the writer can expand, describe, illustrate or explain, each with supporting sentences and a concluding sentence.

The other type is termed the 'logical-transit paragraph'. In this, each paragraph can stand alone, but logically develops upon the ideas of its predecessor and in turn forms the basis for the ideas in the following paragraph(s).

As mentioned above, the better choice for capturing the reader's attention and getting a quick understanding is the stated thesis approach. The introductory paragraph tells the reader the points to be considered in the body paragraphs, so that sometimes the reader may be able to skip or skim the latter by reading the explanatory ideas in the introduction. Thus the reader saves time, only needing to go back to check where necessary after reading the concluding paragraph. In contrast, the implied-thesis approach requires the reader to read the body paragraphs in order to see the complete picture.

However, to further emphasize a point raised above, complete-idea paragraphs often result in these being long, as can be seen in some contemporary writings. This affects the aspect of a paper and

is difficult to understand and capture the reader's first attention to reading it. Thus, this paper suggests using a logical transit idea as an alternative paragraph in writing, especially in a long piece of work: the complete idea of one large paragraph can be split over two or more logical-transit paragraphs.

Furthermore, the use of different paragraph styles should not be strictly bound by a rigid formula. It is up to writers to apply these where appropriate without following any specific structure or format. This is especially the case in longer, more, complex pieces of writing such as research papers, theses or books. Nevertheless, recommendations for writing paragraphs in individual sections of these are similar to when writing a standalone essay.

The two kinds of paragraph ideas are expected to be used at different levels in teaching the art of academic writing. Current essay writing at general education schools, including some freshman composition, is based on the complete-idea paragraph approach. This essay writing develops a central thesis by several supporting paragraph theses (mini- or sub-theses). The body paragraphs' mini-theses are fully developed by supporting sentences, including giving evidence or examples, *etc*. Later on, the use of the implied thesis statement can be introduced, where the three explanatory ideas are implied in the introductory paragraph and considered in the body paragraphs (Hem, 2019).

The following section will focus on strategies for preparing pieces of writing which are based on the logical-transit approach and the need for paragraphs to lead one into the next in a reader-friendly fashion.

IV. Methods for the Logical Transit of Ideas in Paragraph Writing

This section will showcase various ways for achieving a smooth flow in writing when using a transit-based approach to the organization of successive paragraphs in an essay or a particular section of a larger body of text.

Whilst the mini-theses of subsequent paragraphs in a 'stated' piece of writing refer back to the original introductory paragraph, logical-transit paragraphs follow upon and progressively develop a central thesis which is implied (rather than explicitly stated) in the first paragraph, as noted above in Section III.2. There is the logical progression of ideas from one paragraph to the next without affecting the composition and the meaning of each. There is thus the need to make sure that the

logical chain of ideas is coherent, with bridging sentences, to support the final paragraph's conclusions. The following provides some suggestions for the possible transit of ideas between paragraphs.

Each successive paragraph builds on the implied central thesis with an 'introductory idea', typically a mini-thesis. This is followed by sentences which expand on this idea to explain and provide support for it. As mentioned above, the reader cannot know in advance the main ideas described in the body paragraphs of a text based on the implied thesis statement. Thus there is the need for a logical link of ideas between successive body paragraphs: it is important to have bridging sentences to allow the logical development of the implied thesis statement over successive paragraphs' mini-theses to ensure a smooth flow of ideas from one to the next.

However, regarding the central thesis itself, there is the need to keep it short (Hem's [2017] Rule of Paragraph Writing). Thus if this paragraph is too long, it can be split with an 'introductory thesis paragraph' to define the rest of the work. Moreover, if the stated thesis has more than three explanatory ideas, it would be better to rewrite it as a standalone introductory implied-thesis paragraph instead: each explanatory idea will become a mini-thesis for developing one of the following body paragraphs.[3]

Similarly, if a body paragraph becomes too long, the same principles can be applied *mutatis mutandis*. This can be rewritten as a nest of logical-transit paragraphs, with a key idea identified as the introductory thesis in the first of these and expanded upon in subsequent paragraph(s). However it is essential to ensure that there are logical links between them. The last paragraph in the nest should include a conclusion about what has been considered.

In short, the logical transit method can avoid too long paragraphs in academic writing. However it is important that there is clear continuity of the train of thought so that it is easy for the reader to quickly capture the meaning.

---

[3] Where there are three explanatory ideas, either a stated or implied thesis approach may be followed. If there are two explanatory ideas, it is better to use the stated thesis approach with an introductory thesis statement as a standalone paragraph and then the two explanatory ideas are considered in turn in separate paragraphs; or, alternatively, the first explanatory idea can be included within the introductory thesis statement paragraph.

V. Conclusions

There are two main approaches for writing a paragraph – the complete idea and the logical transit – depending on the way an argument is being presented as a smooth train of thought. Both methods require students to develop their critical thinking and creative writing skills to form their own arguments on a (assigned) topic using either a stated or an implied thesis respectively. Then they can organize their thoughts regarding the central thesis of a particular topic with supporting evidence based on their own understanding and personal experiences.

Typically, introductory academic writing is taught based on complete-idea paragraphs. This is reasonable for essays by high school students and those in general education courses at college: their work is based on rhetoric rather than more detailed analyses supported by citations (Hem, 2017, 2019). However this can result in very long paragraphs, especially for research papers at higher levels. Thus mastery of complete-idea paragraphs based on a stated thesis-statement is only a basic stepping stone for discussing more complex ideas at college level.

This paper suggests using a logical transit approach as a way for paragraph writing to avoid this problem. It also allows the more advanced writer to develop their train of thought to support their structural arguments with a review or synthesis of a field which adds something new or clarifies a particular topic (Hem, 2017, 2019). However, the fact that such writing typically is based on an implied thesis-statement means that students need to have clear understanding of the topic so that they can maintain logical links and a flow of ideas in their work: they need to ensure that prospective readers can capture their ideas quickly as food for thought.

In this way, students can be guided to develop their critical and logical thinking skills through writing academic essays and papers. This will better prepare them for their continuing time in formal education and lifelong learning thereafter.

More generally, it can be suggested that implied and stated mini-theses, can be used alternately when appropriate in order to avoid repetition and boredom in writing and reading.

References

Anker, S. (2009) *Real Essays with Readings* (3rd ed.). Bedford: St. Martin's.
Bailey, S. (2011) *Academic Writing: A Handbook for International Students*. Routledge.
Bak, N. (2003) *Guide to Academic Writing*. University of the Western Cape.

Birch, A. (1993) *Essay Writing Made Easy: Presenting Ideas in All Subject Areas*. Pembroke Publishers Limited.

Blakesley, D., and Hoogeveen, J. L. (2012) *Writing: A Manual for the Digital Age* (2nd ed.). Cengage Learning.

Connelly, M. (2012) *Get Writing: Paragraphs and Essays*. Cengage Learning.

Durant, A., and Fabb, N. (2005) *How to Write Essays and Dissertations: A Guide for English Literature Students*. Routledge.

Eby, E. (2011) *The College Student's Guide to Writing a Great Research Paper*. Atlantic Publishing Company.

Eunson, B. (2012) Academic Writing: The Essay. In *Communicating in the 21st Century* (3rd Edition, pp. 224–253). John Wiley and Sons.

Evans, D., Gruba, P., and Zobel, J. (2014) *How to Write a Better Thesis* (3rd ed.). Springer Science and Business Media.

Folse, K. S., Muchmore-Vokoun, A., and Solomon, E. V. (2014) *Great Writing 4: Great Essays*. Heinle Cengage Learning.

Greetham, B. (2019) *How to Write Your Undergraduate Dissertation* (3rd ed.). Macmillan International Higher Education.

Hartley, J. (2008) *Academic Writing and Publishing: A Practical Handbook*. Routledge.

Hem, S. (2017) How to Write a Proper Paragraph in Academic Writing. *Cambodian J. Int'l. Stud.* **1**, 155–172.

Hem, S. (2019) Defining Essays Based on Purposes and Contexts. *Cambodian J. Int'l. Stud.* **3**, 109–119.

Howe, B. M., and Willoughby, H. A. (2005) *Introduction to Academic English Writing* . Ewha Womans University Press.

Jones, P., and Farness, J. (2002) *College Writing Skills* (5th Ed.). Collegiate Press.

Kamler, B., and Thomson, P. (2006) *Helping Doctoral Students Write: Pedagogies for Supervision*. Routledge.

Kane, T. S. (2000) *The Oxford Essential Guide to Writing*. Berkley Books.

Lai, W. L. (2013) Introducing a Logical Thinking Approach to Teaching Academic Writing: Why is Logical Thinking Education Needed in Academic Writing. *NU Ideas* **2**, 1–9.

LearningExpress. (2006) *Write Better Essays in Just 20 Minutes a Day*. LearningExpress.

Lunsford, A., and Connors, R. (1995) *The St. Martin's Handbook—Annotated Instructor's Edition* (St. Martin). New York, USA.

McKerihan, S. (2015) *Clear and Concise: Become a Better Business Writer*. Black Inc.

Murray, R. (2011) *How to Write a Thesis*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).

Oshima, A., and Hogue, A. (2007) *Introduction to Academic Writing* (3rd ed.). Pearson Education. Inc.

Owusu, E. (2019) Are Paragraph Theories Array of Impressions? *Language Teaching Research Quarterly* **14**, 53–68.

Robitaille, J., and Connelly, R. (2007) *Writer's Resources: From Paragraph to Essay*. Cengage Learning.

Sant, T. (2008) *The Language of Success: Business Writing That Informs, Persuades, and Gets Results*. AMACOM Div American Mgmt Assn.

Sharp, S. (2011) *Mastering the Thesis Statement*. Untreed Reads.

Starkey, L. B. (2004) *How to Write Great Essays*. New York: LearningExpress.

White, N., and Weinberg, F. (2002) *Get Ready! for Social Studies: Book Reports, Essays and Research Papers*. McGraw Hill Professional.

Wingersky, J., Boerner, J. K., and Holguin-Balogh, D. (2009) *Writing Paragraphs and Essays: Integrating Reading, Writing, and Grammar Skills*. Cengage Learning.

Woehlke, J. (2010) *Express for Writing Workshops* (2nd ed.). Lulu.com.

Zemach, D. E., and Rumisek, L. A. (2005) *Academic Writing: From Paragraph to Essay*. Edumond.

Zinsser, W. (2001) *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction* (25th Anniversary Edition). HarperCollins.