

The Thinker's Guide to

How to Write a Paragraph

The Art of Substantive Writing

*How to say something worth saying
about something worth saying something about*

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Based on *Critical Thinking Concepts & Tools*

Companion to *How to Read a Paragraph*

The Foundation for Critical Thinking

Introduction

Most people realize that learning to write is “among the most important skills a student can learn.” But far fewer realize that writing is also the key to the acquisition of content itself: “the mechanism through which students learn to connect the dots in their knowledge.” Far too few realize that for students to learn, “they must struggle with the details, wrestle with the facts, and rework raw information and dimly understood concepts into language they can communicate to someone else.” In other words, “if students are to learn, they must write.” All these points are emphasized in a report recently issued by the *National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges* (*New York Times*, 4/25/03), which goes on to say that writing is “woefully ignored in most American schools today.” Moreover, according to the same *New York Times* article, “a 2002 study of California college students found that most freshmen could not analyze arguments, synthesize information, or write papers that were reasonably free of language errors.”

At present students are poor writers, not because they are incapable of learning to write well, but because they have never been taught the foundations of substantive writing. They lack intellectual discipline as well as strategies for improving their writing. This is true on the one hand because teachers often lack a clear theory of the relationship between writing and learning and, on the other, are concerned with the time involved in grading written work.

If we understand the most basic concepts in critical thinking, we can provide the grounds for a solution to both problems:

- (1) a theory that links substantive writing and thinking with the acquisition of knowledge, and
- (2) awareness of how to design writing assignments that do not require one-on-one instructor-student feedback.

This guide links with and reinforces other key guides, particularly *How to Read a Paragraph* and *How to Think Analytically* (see inside back cover). All three guides provide techniques that enhance student learning and foster the ability to communicate clearly and logically what one is learning.

The development of writing abilities, as well as all other intellectual abilities, occurs only through sound theory and routine practice. When students understand the relationship between learning and writing, and are engaged in routine writing practice using the tools of critical thinking, they are able to learn content at deeper and deeper levels, and gradually improve their ability to communicate important ideas.

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The Theory

The Premise of This Guide

Writing is essential to learning. One cannot be educated and yet unable to communicate one's ideas in written form. But, learning to write can occur only through a process of cultivation requiring intellectual discipline. As with any set of complex skills, there are fundamentals of writing that must be internalized and then applied using one's thinking. This guide focuses on the most important of those fundamentals.

Writing for a Purpose

Skilled writers do not write blindly, but purposely. They have an agenda, goal, or objective. Their purpose, together with the nature of what they are writing (and their situation), determines how they write. They write in different ways in different situations for different purposes. There is also a nearly universal purpose for writing, and that is *to say something worth saying about something worth saying something about*.

In general, then, when we write, we translate inner meanings into public words. We put our ideas and experiences into written form. Accurately translating intended meanings into written words is an analytic, evaluative, and creative set of acts. Unfortunately, few people are skilled in this work of translation. Few are able to select and combine words that, so combined, convey an intended meaning to an audience of readers.

Of course, if we are writing for pure pleasure and personal amusement, it may not matter if others do not understand what we write. We may simply enjoy the act of writing itself. This is fine as long as we know that our writing is meant only for us.

Among the various purposes for writing are the following:

- for sheer pleasure
- to express a simple idea
- to convey specific technical information
- to convince the reader to accept an important position or argument
- to challenge the reader to consider a new worldview
- to express what we are learning (or have learned) in a subject

People write in pursuit of many specific and varied agendas. Consider how the purposes would vary for the following writers:

- a media advisor writing political campaign literature
- a newspaper editor deciding how to edit a story to maintain reader interest
- a media consultant writing copy for an advertisement
- a chemist writing a laboratory report
- a novelist writing a novel
- a poet writing a poem
- a student writing a research report

Clearly, one's purpose in writing influences the writing skills one needs and uses. Nevertheless, there are some fundamental writing skills we all need if we are to develop the art of saying something worth saying about something worth saying something about. We call this substantive writing. And learning the art of substantive writing has many important implications for our development as thinkers. For example, it is important in learning how to learn. And, it is important in coming to understand ourselves. It can enable us to gain self-insight, as well as insight into the many dimensions of our lives.

Substantive Writing

To learn how to write something worth reading, we must keep two questions in mind: "Do I have a subject or idea worth writing about?" and "Do I have something of significance to say about it?"

Having recognized possible variations in purpose, we also should recognize that there are core writing tools and skills for writing about anything substantive, for targeting ideas of depth and significance. These tools and skills are the focus of this guide.

The Problem of Impressionistic Writing

The impressionistic mind follows associations, wandering from paragraph to paragraph, drawing no clear distinctions within its thinking and its writing from moment to moment. Being fragmented, it fragments what it writes. Being uncritical, it assumes its own point of view to be insightful and justified, and therefore not in need of justification in comparison to competing points of view. Being self-deceived, it fails to see itself as undisciplined. Being rigid, it does not learn from what it reads, writes, or experiences.

Whatever knowledge the impressionistic mind absorbs is uncritically intermixed with prejudices, biases, myths, and stereotypes. It

lacks insight into the importance of understanding how minds create meaning and how reflective minds monitor and evaluate as they write. To discipline our writing, we must go beyond impressionistic thinking.

Writing Reflectively

Unlike the impressionistic mind, the reflective mind seeks meaning, monitors what it writes, draws a clear distinction between its thinking and the thinking of its audience. The reflective mind, being purposeful, adjusts writing to specific goals. Being integrated, it interrelates ideas it is writing with ideas it already commands. Being critical, it assesses what it writes for clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, significance, and fairness. Being open to new ways of thinking, it values new ideas and learns from what it writes.

The reflective mind improves its thinking by thinking (reflectively) about it. Likewise, it improves its writing by thinking (reflectively) about writing. It moves back and forth between writing and thinking about how it is writing. It moves forward a bit, and then loops back upon itself to check on its own operations. It checks its tracks. It makes good its ground. It rises above itself and exercises oversight. This applies to the reflective mind while writing — or reading or listening or making decisions.

The foundation for this ability is knowledge of how the mind functions when writing well. For example, if I know (or discover) that what I am writing is difficult for others to understand, I intentionally explain each key sentence more thoroughly and give more examples and illustrations. I look at what I am writing from the readers' point of view.

The reflective mind creates an inner dialogue with itself, assessing what it is writing while it is writing:

- Have I stated my main point clearly?
- Have I explained my main point adequately?
- Have I given my readers examples from my own experience that connect important ideas to their experience?
- Have I included metaphors or analogies that illustrate for the reader what I am saying?

If I realize that my potential readers are likely to be unsympathetic to my viewpoint, I try to help them connect primary beliefs they

The Work of Writing

Writing, then, is a form of intellectual work. And intellectual work requires a willingness to persevere through difficulties. But perhaps even more important, good writing requires understanding what intellectual work is and how it relates to writing. This is where most students fall short. Here is an illustration: Creating a paragraph well is like building a house. You need a foundation, and everything else must be built upon that foundation. The house must have at least one entrance, and it must be apparent to people where that entrance is. The first floor must fit the foundation, and the second floor must match up with the first, with some stairway that enables us to get from the first floor to the second.

Building a house involves the work of both design and construction. Each is essential. No one would expect students to automatically know how to design and construct houses. But sometimes we approach writing as if knowledge of how to design and write a paragraph or a paper were apparent to all students.

Questioning as We Write

Skilled writers approach writing as an active dialogue involving questioning. They question as they write. They question to understand. They question to evaluate what they are writing. They question to bring important ideas into their thinking. Here are some of the questions good writers ask while writing:

- Why am I writing this? What is my purpose? What do I want the reader to come away with?
- Is there some part of what I have written that I don't really understand? Perhaps I am repeating what I have heard people say without ever having thought through what exactly it means.
- If something I have written is vague, how can I make it clearer or more precise?
- Do I understand the meaning of the key words I have used, or do I need to look them up in the dictionary?
- Am I using any words in special or unusual ways? Have I explained special meanings to the reader?
- Am I sure that what I have said is accurate? Do I need to qualify anything?

Continued →

- Am I clear about my main point and why I think it is important?
- Do I know what question my paragraph answers?
- Do I need to spend more time investigating my topic or issue?
Do I need more information?

If a person tries to write without understanding what writing involves, the writing will likely be poor. For example, many students see writing as a fundamentally passive activity. Their theory of writing seems to be something like this: "You write whatever comes to your mind, sentence by sentence, until you have written the assigned length."

By contrast, the work of substantive writing is the work of first choosing (constructing) a subject worth writing about and then thinking through (constructing) something worth saying about that subject. It is a highly selective activity. Five intellectual acts required for developing substance in your writing are:

- Choose a subject or idea of importance.
- Decide on something important to say about it.
- Explain or elaborate your basic meaning.
- Construct examples that will help readers connect what you are saying to events and experiences in their lives.
- Construct one or more analogies and/or metaphors that will help readers connect what you are writing about with something similar in their lives.

Non-Substantive Writing

It is possible to learn to write with an emphasis on style, variety of sentence structure, and rhetorical principles without learning to write in a substantive manner. Rhetorically powerful writing may be, and in our culture often is, intellectually bankrupt. Many intellectually impoverished thinkers write well in the purely rhetorical sense. Propaganda, for one, is often expressed in a rhetorically effective way. Political speeches empty of significant content are often rhetorically well-designed. Sophistry and self-delusion often thrive in rhetorically proficient prose.

A *New York Times* special supplement on education (Aug. 4, 2002) included a description of a new section in the SAT focused on a "20-minute writing exercise." The prompt those taking the test were asked to write on was as follows: "There is always a however." One might as justifiably ask a person to write on the theme, "There

Clarification Strategies

- **The ability to state a thesis clearly in a sentence.** If we cannot accurately state our key idea in a sentence using our own words, we don't really know what we want to say.
- **The ability to explain a thesis sentence in greater detail.** If we cannot elaborate our key idea, then we have not yet connected its meaning to other concepts that we understand.
- **The ability to give examples of what we are saying.** If we cannot connect what we have elaborated with concrete situations in the real world, our knowledge of the meanings is still abstract, and, to some extent, vague.
- **The ability to illustrate what we are saying with a metaphor, analogy, picture, diagram, or drawing.** If we cannot generate metaphors, analogies, pictures, or diagrams of the meanings we are constructing, we have not yet connected what we understand with other domains of knowledge and experience.

Sample Paraphrases

Consider the following sample paraphrases before we move on to more detailed paraphrasing:

He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetuate it. — *Martin Luther King, Jr.*

→ People who see unethical things being done to others but who fail to intervene (when they are able to intervene) are as unethical as those who are causing harm in the first place.

Every effort to confine Americanism to a single pattern, to constrain it to a single formula, is disloyalty to everything that is valid in Americanism. — *Henry Steele Commager*

→ There is no one "right way" to be an American. When everyone in America is expected to think within one belief system, when people are ostracized or persecuted for thinking autonomously, when people are labeled "UnAmerican" for independent thinking, the only legitimate definition of "true American" is annulled.