

Four Key Features of a Good Paragraph

and

How to Get Them in Paragraphs Built on Coordinate or Subordinate Sentences

	With Coordinate Sentences	With Subordinate Sentences
<p>Unity</p> <p>Paragraph discusses one topic only.</p>	<p>Use parallel structure (same method of development)</p>	<p>Use nonparallel structure (different methods of development).</p> <p>Have each sentence make a relevant comment on the preceding sentence</p>
<p>Completeness</p> <p>Paragraph says all that it is intended to say.</p>	<p>Include enough and only enough examples</p>	<p>Develop each subtopic enough</p>
<p>Coherence</p> <p>Sentences move clearly from one idea to the next without gaps.</p>	<p>Discuss like things in like ways (esp. using repetitive or parallel structure)</p>	<p>Link each sentence to the preceding sentence by some verbal link. Ensure that no sentence looks as if it is coordinate with others in the paragraph.</p>
<p>Emphasis/Order</p> <p>Sentences reveal an order that readers can see and follow.</p>	<p>Simply repeat the basic structure itself.</p> <p>Order sentences from less to more emphatic statements.</p>	<p>Order sentences clearly: e.g., From general to specific, From whole to parts, From cause to effect, From more to less conclusive, From abstract to concrete, From plural to singular (or reverse)</p>

[Look at any edition of Trimmer and McCrimmon's *Writing with a Purpose* (Houghton Mifflin) for further discussion.]

Diagram the following paragraphs, using the procedures used above.

Making your work clear involves considerations of audience. Who is it supposed to be clearer to? Who will read what you write? What do they have to know so that they will not misread or find what you say obscure or unintelligible? You will write one way for the people you work with closely on a joint project, another way for professional colleagues in your subspecialty, still another for professional colleagues in other specialties and disciplines, and differently yet for the "intelligent layman." [Becker, p. 18]

Students (and others) often, as I said earlier, talk about “using” this or that approach—“I think I’ll use Durkheim.”—as though they had a free choice of theories. In fact, by the time they begin to write about their research, they have made many seemingly unimportant choices of details that have foreclosed their choice of a theoretical approach. They decided what questions to investigate. They picked a way of gathering information. They chose between a variety of minor technical and procedural alternatives: who to interview, how to code their data, when to stop. As they made these choices from day to day, they increasingly committed themselves to one way of thinking, more or less firmly answering the theoretical questions they thought were still up for grabs. [Becker, p. 138]

That’s the good side of the literature. The bad side is that paying too much attention to it can deform the argument you want to make. Suppose there is a real literature on your subject, the result of years of normal science or what, by extension, we call normal scholarship. Everyone who works on the topic agrees on the kinds of questions to ask and the kinds of answers they will accept. If you want to write about the topic, or even use that subject matter as the material for a new topic, you will probably have to deal with the old way even though you think it quite foreign to your interests. If you take the old way too seriously, you can deform the argument you want to make, bend it out of shape in order to make it fit into the dominant approach. [Becker, p. 146]

So what does all this have to do with risk? For me, sitting down to write is risky because it means that I have to open myself to scrutiny. To do that requires that I trust myself, and it also means that I have to trust my colleagues’ responses that make it possible for me to trust myself. So I have dreams of self-doubt and personal attack by one of my closest and most trusted friends. [Pamela Richards, in Becker, p.113]

But it’s the complexity of risk, its dual nature, that allows me to dream of being attacked by a friend and of writing like Lillian Hellman, both in the same night. As I write more and more, I begin to understand that it’s not all-or-nothing. If I actually write something down, I’m liable to win a bit and lose a bit. For a long time I worked under the burden of thinking that it was an all-or-nothing proposition. What got written had to be priceless literary pearls or unmitigated garbage. Not so. It’s just a bunch of stuff, more or less sorted into an argument. Some of it’s good, some of it isn’t. [Pamela Richards, in Becker, p. 120]

REFERENCE LIST

- Becker, Howard. 1986. *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Trimmer, Howard and James McCrimmon. 1988. *Writing with a Purpose*. Dallas: Houghton Mifflin.