Writing Paragraphs and Constructing Your Argument

No argument is perfect. All arguments have weaknesses, like missing or contrary evidence or plausible alternative interpretations. Some writers tend to sweep these things under the rug, afraid that if they call attention to them they're encouraging the reader to reject the whole argument. But such an all-or-nothing attitude isn't the right tack to take in essay-writing. It's understood that academic essays make arguments, not proofs.

Instead, you can achieve the apparently paradoxical effect of strengthening your argument by conceding its limits. Disarm the opposition ahead of time, and your reader is likely to trust you and your argument more:

It may at first seem paradoxical to suggest that a company can increase its profits by putting other values above the bottom line. How can it not hurt revenues to give workers more family leave and increase spending on employee benefits?

Another example, from an essay arguing that Shakespeare was influenced by Machiavelli:

Admittedly, there is no direct evidence that Shakespeare read Machiavelli.

One more, from an essay praising Thomas Jefferson's political thought:

Clearly, judged by modern standards, Jefferson would be called a racist.

Let's look at one example in a bit more detail. Here's how a writer, arguing that NATO's 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia caused massive and unjustifiable environmental damage, seeks to defuse the objection that Yugoslavia's environmental problems predate the bombing. The whole paragraph is quoted so we can observe the structure:

In fairness, every international team doing environmental assessments in Yugoslavia has had difficulty distinguishing preexisting damage to soil and water systems from new toxins linked to the war. Long before the bombing, the Danube's viability was under siege from both industrial polluters to the north and from 50 years of lax environmental oversight in Yugoslavia and the former Eastern Bloc nations. Scientists taking core sediment samples after the war have found toxins dating from the '60s, '70s and '80s—including contaminants related to the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident. But the NATO bombing unquestionably made the situation worse. Preexisting pollution is no reason to dismiss the environmental fallout from the war; it only makes the case for a cleanup more urgent.

Joan McQueeney Mitric, "The Environment as Prisoner of War." Op-ed article, Washington Post (July 9, 2000), B1, B4.

The writer does something inexperienced writers don't realize they can do: rather than avoiding the complicated argument of figuring out when pollutants date from, she takes on the argument, even laying out its data in some detail (the mention of toxins dating back to the 1960s). But notice the sound structure: at the end she reasserts her argument (in the penultimate sentence, beginning But...). And in the final sentence she actually uses the preexisting damage argument to buttress her own case for the need for environmental cleanup. Over the course of the paragraph she nimbly turns an apparent weakness in her argument into a strength.

By the "middle" of the paper I mean the main section, after you've introduced your topic and stated your argument. The middle is where you actually make the argument, step by step. The

middle is a minefield, where every step could shatter the delicate bond between your intended argument and your reader's understanding and sympathy.

Mediocre writers assume they'll be understood and blame the reader when they're not. Good writers realize that making a sustained argument and holding a reader's attention is as hard as juggling while walking a tightrope. The reader doesn't have your strategic, bird's-eye view of the whole essay. He's stuck on the ground, slogging through a morass of words, sentence after sentence, never knowing where the trail is leading and what lies over the next ridge or on the next page.

Thus as you write you need to keep thinking about your reader. Where will he think the argument is taking him, step by step? What needs emphasis or repetition? What must be explained, and what can be left implicit because it's obvious or has already been mentioned? What questions need to be answered? What objections need to be anticipated? Have you done all you can to weave together a coherent and sensible argument?

Paragraphs

The key building block of essays is the paragraph. A paragraph represents a distinct logical step within the whole argument. That step may be big or little; it may take one or ten sentences to lay out—but the key is that it is one step.

Thus there's no point in laying down as a rule (as one sometimes hears) that paragraphs should be four or five sentences long. That's probably a decent guideline for most paragraphs in student writing, but in good writing you'll find longer paragraphs and shorter paragraphs—some as short as a single sentence, if that's all it takes for that particular thought (use one-sentence paragraphs sparingly, but don't flinch from them when they're what you need).

Paragraphs are discrete steps in one's argument, but that doesn't meant that every step in the argument must fit within a single paragraph. Some complex thoughts may require so much space to explicate that the resulting paragraph would be two pages long. In such cases, break into smaller units, looking to subdivide along some sensible and clear scheme.

The basic idea is simple but crucial: When you write a paragraph, you should know what it is meant to do. If your answer is simply, "Well, this paragraph helps explain my topic," then you haven't thought deeply enough. How does this particular paragraph contribute to the argument? What logical step does it make? Where does it fit in the overall chain?

Topic sentences

Readers like to know why they're reading a particular passage as soon as possible. That's why topic sentences placed at the beginnings of paragraphs are a good habit. A topic sentence, as its name implies, states the paragraph's topic—it need not state the paragraph's particular argument about that topic. That means that questions can make good topic sentences.

Here, fairly at random, are several good topic sentences, all placed at the beginnings of paragraphs:

A popular audience for science, and for technology, blossomed in Europe and America in the 19th century. [Examples follow.]

The third and final area of Theban expansion was by sea in the Aegean. Here again the enemy was Athens. . . . [Detailed incidents follow.]

When we see a play, what is it that we see? [An answer follows.]

A special subcase of realist theories deals with the balance of power. According to this version. . . . [Elaboration follows.]

There's no iron rule that topic sentences must come at the beginning of paragraphs, but if you keep in mind that you're writing to be understood, you'll tend to put them there. That's what readers are used to, and that's what they find easiest to follow.

Constructing paragraphs

Paragraphs should be constructed with some sense of internal order, whether through time, or space, or some other logical way or arranging information. Again, you have a lot flexibility in choosing an ordering scheme—as long as you choose something that will make sense to the reader.

It's common for writers to produce paragraphs that don't hang together, partly because we think as we write and don't always go back and revise thoughtfully. Here's an example, from an essay on Machiavelli's opinion about Christianity. This paragraph is really pasted together from two pieces (marked by italics):

Christianity was not always weak and without vigor and war. When it was a new religion it extinguished the old, Paganism, in order to become the only one. In this, according to Machiavelli, Christianity behaved as every new religion does. The Christians burned the works of poets, threw down statues, and forbade Pagan teachings. Their mistake in this overthrow was to keep the language of the Pagans, Latin. The Christians translated the Gospels into Latin, and Christian political leaders wrote their civil codes in Latin. So, although they had blotted out all of the Pagan ceremonies and teachings, all was not forgotten. The works of great Pagan thinkers were still studied because the language was not extinguished along with the rest of Paganism.

When the reader reaches the italicized portion, he gets a bit confused. The topic is the same, true—the early history of Christianity. But two distinct argumentative points are being made: (1) Christianity was once a fierce religion, and (2) Early Christians erred in not eradicating the Latin language. Each of these points deserves its own paragraph.

The best test for deciding whether a paragraph hangs together is to read its topic sentence and see if it reasonably covers everything you discuss in the paragraph.

Linking paragraphs

In a good essay, each paragraph should have some logical connection to the one before it. When your reader moves from one paragraph to the next, he knows that he has reached a new step in the argument. But that's all he knows. Is this new step another in the same direction, or is it a change? You have to guide your reader with appropriate signposts. One powerful type of signpost that many students think they can't use in essays is a direct question. When you want to move from one part of the argument to the next, it can be useful to start by asking a question that refers to what you just said but gives you room to move on: What does this mean? or Why does Plato think the noble lie is necessary? or What evidence is there for this interpretation? Good sharp questions can guide your reader through your argument.

Another way to link paragraphs is simply to write in such a way as to force the reader to recognize the link. Here's how one writer started a paragraph. Notice that it only makes sense in

context, and that the writer was confident enough not to repeat material from the previous paragraph or make the link too explicit:

The strange outcome was that the oil and energy crisis abated.

A less confident writer would have inserted a reference along these lines:

The strange outcome of the several years of economic crisis afflicting Western and Arab states was that the oil and energy crisis abated.

When a writer lacks confidence in her essay's coherence, she'll be tempted to say things like this:

Earlier it was mentioned that . . . as commented on earlier . . . as stated earlier . . . as stated before . . as I wrote before

These are awfully weak constructions. In the same camp is the word also, which is vastly overused as a connector at the beginnings of sentences, where it rarely sounds very good:

Also, Touchstone tries to get out of marrying Audrey.

Also, the data show that the reaction slows down as the temperature falls.

These nervous pointers (their subtext is Have I lost your attention yet? Have I confused you yet?) are poor substitutes for good organization. Planning your argument and crafting coherent paragraphs that proceed step by step should make you feel able to dispense with such things. If on occasion you feel you have to use such a pointer, use a more conventional phrase like as noted above.

Transitions and pointers

Just as in crafting an essay you must fit its paragraphs together so they work with each other to make a smooth and well-developed argument, when you craft each paragraph you need to make sure the sentences work together. Paragraphs typically show some kind of development or movement, whether that movement is spatial (a physical description that, for instance, moves from left to right), temporal (a chronological description that, for instance, moves forward in time), or logical (a causal analysis that, for instance, explains how an action produced a result). In all of these cases, if you stick to your plan for the paragraph (remembering to amend the plan if your ideas evolve while you're writing), you'll find it fairly natural to write a sequence of sentences, one logically following another.

Problems arise when a writer turns in a new direction, but fails to signal carefully enough. Here, for instance, a writer relies on also to mark a turn from the advantages to the disadvantages of her topic, with poor results:

A competitive culture can be useful in motivating employees and reaching performance goals. But sometimes competition adds too much stress, and harms employees' ability to work effectively. Also, if employees become too wrapped up in beating their coworkers, where does customer satisfaction fit in?

The writer wants to list some problems pertaining to her topic, but she does so sloppily. A better approach here is to insert a general sentence alerting the reader to the argument's turn, and follow it up with specifics:

A competitive culture can motivate employees to reach performance goals. But competition has its downsides, too. If it creates too much stress about reaching goals, it can harm employees' ability to work effectively. And if employees become too wrapped up in beating their coworkers, they might neglect the overriding goal of customer satisfaction.

The new second sentence acts as a roadmap, preparing the way for specific points.

A useful way to help your reader follow the logical movement within a paragraph (or between paragraphs, for that matter) is to use transitions to mark turns in the road, and pointers to remind him where he's going. Using transitions and pointers can help you keep a paragraph—and the whole essay—organized and easy to follow. Here are common transitions and pointers:

and then so on the other hand
or before and so against this
also after consequently at the same time
furthermore still often nevertheless
because similarly frequently in short
since likewise sometimes in the same way
for though at times finally
if another but in other words
indeed for instance yet last of all
in fact for example however first, second, etc.
all in all therefore although on the contrary
now thus despite this

Pronouns and relative adjectives

Another linking strategy is to make use of words that help us keep our sense of direction—pointers and transitions. Some of the most useful pointers and transitions are also some of the least appreciated by students: pronouns and adjectives to show possession and relation, like he, his, this, which, they, and it. The definition of a pronoun is a word that can stand in for a noun. It always points to some noun or thing called the antecedent (ante is a Latin word meaning before: the antecedent goes before the pronoun). Relative adjectives are similar: they show relation or ownership (my book, his argument, its strengths).

Pronouns and relative adjectives perform the invaluable function of calling your reader's attention to some noun you have already used without requiring you to use it again. This is an economical way of reminding your reader of your argument. Many students tend to see these simple words as too humble for college writing, and prefer to invoke the full weight of a name or other noun. But a humble pronoun can sharpen a sentence:

ORIGINAL REVISION
Even after Antony remarries, Cleopatra is still an integral part of Antony's life. Even after Antony remarries, Cleopatra is still an integral part of his life.

(Further revision might try to build around an active verb.)

Here's another example, a paragraph about Moses that sinks under the weight of its repetitions of its proper names, the Israelites and Moses:

The Israelites were unhappy with Moses and wished he would leave them alone. When God sent the ten plagues, Pharaoh was forced to let the Israelites go. The Israelites then eagerly and willingly followed Moses from Egypt. The Israelites would not have been so willing to follow Moses if God had not intervened and shown that he supported Moses. The Israelites also showed how easily they would turn their backs on Moses when they were being pursued by the Egyptians. They panicked and again cursed Moses for bringing them out of Egypt.

Reading this is like trying to run in snowshoes. Here's a possible revision, which besides showing how useful pronouns can be also suggests some other ways to improve the passage's flow::

The Israelites did not immediately accept Moses' vision. But once Pharaoh relented and let them depart, they eagerly followed Moses. However, when the Egyptians pursued them they at once lost faith in Moses, and cursed him for bringing them out of Egypt to die in the wilderness.

Note the other changes made in this passage, all contributing to a quicker and livelier read (things like using active verbs, building clauses around their logical actors, and ending on the obvious point to emphasize).

Another example of stiffness due to fear of pronouns:

ORIGINAL REVISION
Hamlet fights with his identity while trying to fulfill the ghost's demand for revenge. Hamlet loves to learn and ask questions about everything. But Hamlet's search for knowledge eventually conflicts with his sense of duty. Hamlet fights with his identity while trying to fulfill the ghost's demand for revenge. He loves to learn, and ask questions about everything. But his search for knowledge eventually conflicts with his sense of duty.

Are you starting to see how pronouns and relative adjectives can help your prose sound freer? Here's a list of some useful relative and demonstrative adjectives and pronouns. All are perfectly acceptable in academic papers; all are "formal" in any reasonable sense:

this which them many
that he him most
these she her several
those it all some
who they few none

Pronoun pitfalls
Pronouns, recall, refer to antecedents, to nouns that have gone before. A mistake you see in a lot of writing is to use a pronoun whose antecedent is unclear, or that lacks an antecedent altogether. In this passage, the pronoun they isn't set up well:

Machiavelli feels that Paganism favored freedom. They praised glory and war, unlike Christians. More inclined to fight fiercely, they were better able to defend freedom.

The writer here thought that referring to Paganism established the idea of Pagans. But it doesn't, and readers will be a bit confused and then irritated at having to make this connection themselves. The revision is simple:

Machiavelli feels that Paganism favored freedom. Unlike Christians, Pagans praised glory and war. More inclined to fight fiercely, they were better able to defend their freedom.

How can you tell when it's okay to use pronouns and when you should repeat the noun? Four rules of thumb:

1. Make sure it's clear what the antecedent is.

2. Use the noun, not a pronoun, if there's some confusion about what the antecedent would be:

ORIGINAL REVISION
Leonardo studied in Florence in the famed workshop of Andrea del Verrochio. He had been trained as a goldsmith, and this proved to be a major influence on Leonardo's work. Leonardo studied in Florence in the famed workshop of Andrea del Verrochio. Verrochio had been trained as a goldsmith, and this proved to be a major influence on Leonardo's work.

If the nouns differ in some obvious way—one is plural, for instance, and the other singular—then you usually don't need to worry.

3. As long as there's no uncertainty, you can go quite a long way within a passage before repeating the noun.

4. Finally, do use the noun instead of the pronoun at significant turning points in passages—the beginnings (and often the ends) of chapters, sections, and paragraphs. Get used to using pronouns within logical units, and using their antecedents at beginnings and ends.