6.1: What Is a Paragraph?

Simply, a paragraph is a collection of sentences made up of words. Words, sentences, and paragraphs are the building blocks of good writing. The keys to a “good” or effective paragraph are unity, coherence, and adequate development through a variety of organized details that create a full exploration or analysis of the paragraph’s focus. In effective paragraphs, the sentences are related and the details flow in a natural or logical sequence.

What Makes a Good Paragraph?

Unity is achieved by focusing each paragraph on a single idea, often called the controlling idea. This controlling idea is usually established in the topic sentence. The topic sentence works like a mini-thesis for the paragraph and guides the content of the paragraph. Beginning writers should consider making the first sentence of each paragraph the topic sentence; more advanced writers can manipulate the placement of the topic sentence to the middle or end of the paragraph, or simply imply the topic through a unified focus and coherence.

Coherence makes the paragraph flow and is created by bridges. Think about what bridges do: they join cities and islands; they connect places to one another. These bridges also connect sentences and ideas, helping the writer avoid “sentence stacking.” Sentence stacking happens when bridges are lacking and sentence structure is not varied.

Two types of bridges can be employed:

- Logical bridges carry the same idea over from sentence to sentence.
- Verbal bridges link ideas using repeated key words, synonyms, pronouns, and transitions.

Here is an example of a paragraph of stacked sentences that lacks logical and verbal bridges:

My dogs are named Cooper and Calli. Cooper is a Golden retriever and Akita mix. He is a male. Calli is a shepherd.
Husky and wolf mix. She is a female. Calli was rescued from the pound. Cooper was purchased from a breeder. They are close in age. They play together all the time.

Revised to incorporate bridges and varied sentence structure, the paragraph would read as follows:

*My dogs, Cooper and Calli, are best friends. Cooper, a male retriever and Akita mix, came from a breeder. On the other hand, Calli, a shepherd, husky and wolf mix, was rescued from the pound. Because they are close in age, they play together all the time.*

Still, the paragraph lacks *adequate development.* Adequate development is achieved through details, including facts, description, examples, quotes, analysis, explanation, and evaluation. A more developed paragraph would read like this:

*My dogs, Cooper and Calli, are best friends. Cooper, a male golden retriever and Akita mix, came from a breeder. On the other hand, Calli, a shepherd, husky and wolf mix, was rescued from the pound. Because they are close in age, they play together all the time. For example, the two dogs hunt for mice that are attracted by the seed in the chicken coop in the back yard. They also play in the kiddie pool I fill with water every morning. Being a golden retriever mix, Cooper should be more attracted to the water, but Calli is the one who is always wet from laying in the pool.*

The paragraph, however, has no closure. It just “stops.” A lead in and a final sentence are still needed:

*Cooper keeps Calli active and fit with their constant play. They are truly bonded.*