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Module: Written Expression

Level: 1st year LMD

Lesson: The paragraph

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A **paragraph** is the essential unit of thought in writing. It is a group of sentences that all relate to a single topic. Paragraphs can include many different kinds of information and serve different purposes; for example, some paragraphs describe people or places, other paragraphs explain how to do or to make something, narrate a series of events, compare or contrast two things, or describe causes and effects.

Although it may consist of a single sentence, it is usually a group of sentences that develop one main point or controlling idea. The form of a paragraph is distinctive: the first line is **indented**.

Certain conventions or rules govern the construction of a paragraph. The reader expects a paragraph to be **coherent** (organized/ideas flow smoothly using transitional words and phrases), **developed** (with its sentences well explaining or qualifying the main point) and **unified** (with all its sentences relevant to the main point/topic). The paragraph has **3 main parts**: *the topic sentence, the supporting sentences, and the concluding sentence*.

1. The Topic Sentence: It is usually the first sentence of the paragraph and states its main idea. It is not really detailed, but introduces an overall idea that will be discussed later in the paragraph.

For example, suppose that you want to write a paragraph about the natural landmarks of your hometown. The first part of your paragraph might look like this:

My hometown is famous for several amazing natural features. First, it is noted for the Wheaton River, which is very wide and beautiful. Also, on the other side of the town is Wheaton Hill, which is unusual because it is very steep. The third amazing feature is the Big Old Tree. This tree stands two hundred feet tall and is probably about six hundred years old. These three landmarks are truly amazing and make my hometown a famous place.

The paragraph does not only name **the topic/ the subject**, but it limits it to one or two areas that can be developed completely in the space of one §. The specific area is called **the controlling idea**.

Topic Sentence = topic + controlling idea

Caffeine has several harmful effects on health.

Topic

Controlling Idea

Students who are studying abroad may face many difficulties.

topic

controlling Idea

Practice: Find *the subject* and *the controlling idea* of the following topic sentences:

- New York has a fascinating mixture of European and Asiatic traditions.
- New York is a fun place to be on New Year's Eve.
- To be an effective teacher requires certain characteristics.
- Having a first child is difficult because of the significant adjustments in your life.
- There are many reasons to stay home on New Year's Eve.
- India celebrates Christian, Hindu, and Islamic holidays.
- The colours of the U.S flag have unique symbolic meanings.
- American education has five stages.
- Weeds can ruin a vegetable garden.
- Independence Day is an important day in any country.
- There are many reasons to visit San Francisco.
- Planning a good wedding requires several steps.
- Ramadan has 10 important days within the month of fasting.
- Four factors establish Elvis Presley as the greatest entertainer of the twentieth century: appearance, signing ability, style, and influence.

* The subject and controlling idea of a paragraph **must not be too general nor too specific**. It must be limited enough to be discussed in a single §.

e.g. France is an interesting country. → **too general** (there is too much to say about this topic)

→ **revised:** France has some spectacular mountains.

Pollution is dangerous. → **too general**

→ **revised:** The effects of pollution results in human diseases.

- Facts are not effective topic sentences because they are clear. There is nothing to add.

e.g. International Women's Day is March 8.

Twenty-five people attended the company's Halloween party.

2. Supporting Sentences : They come after the topic sentence and develop it: they explain the topic sentence by giving reasons, examples, facts, statistics or quotations.

We can see that **the second sentence** in the paragraph above gives some explanation for the fact that Wheaton is a famous town and similarly with **the third and fourth sentences**. They are called **supporting sentences** because they "support," or explain, the idea expressed in the topic sentence.

Whenever possible, you should include enough details in your paragraph to help your reader understand exactly what you are writing about. In the above paragraph, three natural landmarks are mentioned, but we do not know very much about them. For example, we could add a sentence or two about Wheaton river concerning HOW wide it is or WHY it is beautiful. Consider this revision:

My hometown is famous for several amazing natural features. First, it is noted for the Wheaton River, which is very wide and beautiful. **On either side of this river, which is 175 feet wide, are many willow trees which have long branches that can move gracefully in the wind. In autumn the leaves of these trees fall and cover the riverbanks like golden snow.** Also, on the other side of the town is Wheaton Hill, which is unusual because it is very steep. **Even though it is steep, climbing this hill is not dangerous, because there are some firm rocks along the sides that can be used as stairs. There are no trees around this hill, so it stands clearly against the sky and can be seen from many miles away.** The third amazing feature is the Big Old Tree. This tree stands two hundred feet tall and is probably about six hundred years old. These three landmarks are truly amazing and make my hometown a famous place.

3. **The Concluding Sentence:** it is the last sentence of the §. It signals its end and gives the reader important points to remember. It restates the main idea of the § using different words. In the above §, the last sentence: *These three landmarks are truly amazing and make my hometown a famous place* **is the concluding sentence.**

Let's practise: Read and examine the sample paragraphs below

Sample Paragraph 1:

There are three important qualities necessary in a good boss. The most important quality is fairness. If the boss is fair, workers can feel that if they do a good job, their work will be appreciated, and their efforts will be rewarded. The second most important quality is leadership. The boss should be an example and a teacher. This allows workers to learn from a boss so that they can increase their job skills and get promoted. The third most important factor is that the boss acts with consistency. That way the workers know what to expect each day. They know how will be treated and what their share of workload will be. I would hire a boss with these qualities for myself.

Topic sentence:
 Topic support 1:.....
 Supporting details:.....

 Topic support 2:
 Supporting details:.....

.....
Topic support 3:

Supporting details:.....
.....

Concluding sentence:

Is this paragraph unified?

Sample Paragraph 2:

Problems in Big Cities

All around the world living in big cities creates serious problems for people. The first problem is air pollution. For example, in Istanbul, many people have cars and cars are one reason why the air is polluted. Secondly, traffic is an important problem for the people living in big cities. Nowadays there are more and more cars on roads, and this causes traffic jams in many parts of the cities. For this reason, many inhabitants waste their time in traffic, and they are negatively affected by this situation. To sum up, air pollution and traffic jams are two important problems that people living in big cities have.

Sample Paragraph 3:

Bicycles are popular today in many countries for three reasons. First, most of the people use bicycles to exercise. To illustrate, in Holland, people think riding a bicycle is a better way of keeping fit and staying healthy than other sports. The second reason is money. Generally bikes are not expensive to buy, and they are quite cheap to fix. Finally, they are suitable for city life. In cities, many people prefer bikes to cars because unlike cars, with a bicycle, they never have to wait in traffic. In brief, having a bicycle is beneficial for people for different reasons.

Practice: Choose the best topic sentence for each group of supporting sentences.

1) _____ . I usually go skiing every weekend in the winter even though it is expensive. I love the feeling of flying down a mountain. The views are beautiful from the top of a mountain and along the trails. Even the danger of falling and getting hurt can't keep me away from the slopes on a winter day.

- a) Skiing is expensive. b) Skiing is my favourite sport. c) Skiing is dangerous*

2) _____ . I enjoy summer sports like water skiing and baseball. The weather is usually sunny and hot, so I can go to the beach almost every day. Gardening is my hobby and I spend many summer days working in my garden. Unfortunately, the days pass too quickly in summer.

3) _____ . One thing you must consider is the quality of the university's educational program. You also need to think about the school's size and location.

Finally, you must be sure to consider the university's tuition to make sure you can afford to go to school there.

4) _____ . One reason is that jogging is a cheap sport. I can practise it anywhere at any time with no need for a ball or any other equipment. Another reason why I prefer jogging is that it is friendly to my heart. I don't have to exhaust myself or do excessive efforts while jogging. Finally, I prefer this sport because it is safe. It isn't as risky as other sports like gymnastics, racing or horseback riding. For all these reasons, I consider jogging the best sport of all.