Commentary:

This experiment is worth conducting not only with teachers, but also with students. A favorite section we like to use is affectionately referred to as “Queen Victoria.” It can be found in Teaching Expository Writing by William F. Irmscher (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1979) or The Sentence and the Paragraph by Alton Beckner (Champaign, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, n.d., p. 35). The piece, written by Lytton Strachey, is about the English Constitution. Strachey wrote the piece as one paragraph.

The English Constitution—that indescribable entity—is a living thing, growing with the growth of men, and assuming ever-varying forms in accordance with the subtle and complex laws of human character. It is the child of wisdom and chance. The wise men of 1688 molded it into the shape we know, but the chance that George I could not speak English gave it one of its essential peculiarities—the system of a Cabinet independent of the Crown and subordinate to the Prime Minister. The wisdom of Lord Grey saved it from petrification and set it upon the path of democracy. Then chance intervened once more. A female sovereign happened to marry an able and pertinacious man, and it seemed likely that an element which had been quiescent within it for years—the element of irresponsible administrative power—was about to become its predominant characteristic and change com-

For the past few years, for reasons that will soon become apparent, I have asked students in one of my courses to take part in a small, informal experiment. Each student receives a duplicated copy of the same 500-word expository passage. The passage, I explain, has been transcribed verbatim from Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s Fundamentals of Good Writing (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1950), pp. 290–291, departing from the original in only one respect: the original passage was divided into two or more paragraphs; the copy contains no paragraph indentations. Their task is simply to decide into how many paragraphs they think it should be divided and to note the precise point (or points) at which they would make their divisions.

The exercise usually takes fifteen minutes or so, and we spend another ten or fifteen analyzing the results, which are invariably intriguing. We discover that some students have divided the passage into two paragraphs, others into three, still others into four or five. What is more, nearly all of these possible divisions seem justifiable—they “feel right.” Most surprising of all is the fact that only five students out of the more than 100 who have tried the experiment have paragraphed the passage precisely as Brooks and Warren originally did.

These results are hardly earthshaking, I realize. They prove, if they prove anything, only that different students have different intuitions about paragraphing and that many of these intuitions turn out to be equally acceptable, equally “correct.” But perhaps a few facts I have so far neglected to mention will make this discovery less trivial that it may at first appear.

First of all, the students who took part in the
exercise were not college freshmen; they were teachers of English. Secondly, most of them were committed to the theory, promulgated by many handbooks, that the paragraph is a purely “logical” unit of discourse. They believed, that is to say, that a paragraph is a group of sentences developing one central idea. They believed that good paragraphs always (or usually) contain identifiable topic sentences which always (or usually) occur toward the beginning of the paragraphs. They believed that a well-developed paragraph is “a composition in miniature.” They believed accordingly, that good English teachers should concentrate on teaching their students to write good paragraphs, because good paragraphs are really good essays writ small.

My purpose in having them try my little experiment was to induce them to question the adequacy of the theory they had accepted. If, as the handbooks declare, a paragraph represents a “distinct unit of thought,” why is it that we can’t recognize a unit of thought when we see one? If every paragraph contains an identifiable topic sentence, then why don’t all of us identify the same topic sentence? If good paragraphs are really compositions in miniature, why do some of us, given a passage not marked off into paragraphs, find in it two mini-compositions, while others find three or four or five? Aren’t compositions—even miniature ones—supposed to have clear beginnings, middles, and conclusions?

Too many of us, I suspect, have based our teaching of the paragraph on a theory whose origins we do not know and whose validity we have not tested. Like the poet’s neighbor in Frost’s “Mending Wall,” we go on repeating our fathers’ sayings without ever going behind them.

Behind the logical (or “organic”) theory of the paragraph lies a history replete with facts that cast doubt upon its authenticity. That history, as Paul C. Rodgers, Jr. has told us, begins a little more than a hundred years ago with Alexander Bain, a Scottish logician.1 The fact that Bain was a logician, not a teacher of rhetoric, is itself of first importance; for he conceived the paragraph as a deductive system, a collection of sentences animated by unity of purpose, a purely the direction of its growth. But what chance gave, chance took away. The Consort perished in his prime, and the English Constitution, dropping the dead limb with hardly a tremor, continued its mysterious life as if he had never been.

Watching teachers and students mark where they would paragraph the selection gives the same types of results that Stern chronicles. So often teachers and students paragraph and have little metacognitive reasons behind this paragraphing. Most paragraph intuitively.

When writing a paragraph, teachers in Stern’s classes and other writing institutes do not follow the rule that they teach their students. Their response is, “But students must first learn how to do it by the rules before they can break them.” Rather than re-examining the rule, their approach is to promulgate the rule.

There exists the possibility that answers to questions such as Stern’s could vary between cultures and experiences. A unit of thought in a culture that values brevity will be radically different from the thought in a culture that values indirect and implied meaning. A case in point: Growing up in the Panhandle of Texas, language experience in our family was different from the language experience in a family from the Northeast. A typical childhood exchange would have included certain avoidance of the real issue. In fact, so often, we talked around the problem, without ever directly assaulting the situation.

In contrast to the language of my paternal family was the language of my maternal grandfather. Born and raised in Scotland, he was a man of few words. He, like Bain, dismissed anything not logical. Both grandparents raised animals for food consumption and as a child, I thought feeding the animals was a treat. Often I would
adopt and anthropomorphize a chick or a bunny. When it was time for grandmother to wring the neck of the pullet, she would say something like, “I have to get dinner” or “You like my fried chicken, don’t you?” On the other hand, my grandfather would say, “Don’t get attached. I will have to kill the rabbit for food.”

The point is that life and language affect the way we perceive structure and function. When communicating with my grandmother, I could be more lyrical. With my grandfather, I made my point and accepted his reply knowing there would be no lengthy discussions.

Soon, Rodger’s observation will read, “for placing twenty-first century paragraph rhetoric . . . ”

What is more, Bain appears to have constructed his deductive model by a purely deductive procedure. Making no empirical analysis of actual paragraphs, he simply transferred to his collection of sentences the classical rules governing the individual sentence—rules, now discredited, which defined the sentence as a group of words containing a subject and predicate and expressing a “complete and independent thought.” Bain’s paragraph, notes Rodgers, “is simply a sentence writ large,” that is, an extension by analogy of logic-based grammar.

Others—John Genung, Barrett Wendell, and George R. Carpenter among them—subsequently refined Bain’s theory without questioning its assumptions, reducing Bain’s original six principles of paragraph construction to the now familiar triad of Unity, Coherence, and Emphasis, and tacking on the added notion that the paragraph is the discourse in miniature. Bain’s influence is thus responsible, Rodgers observes, “for placing twentieth-century paragraph rhetoric in a deductive cage, from which it had yet to extricate itself.”

The work of extrication has been quietly going forward, however. The most recent empirical testing of Bain’s theory, and the most damaging to it, was undertaken by Richard Braddock in 1974. Braddock’s study, completed shortly before his untimely death, took specific aim at two of Bain’s assertions: that all expository paragraphs have topic sentences and that topic sentences usually occur at the beginnings of paragraphs. Braddock’s method of research and his findings call into question not only Bain’s century-old paragraph theory but also, as I shall try to show, the procedures and generalizations of such “new” rhetoricians as Francis Christensen and Alto L. Becker.

Braddock began by making a random selection of essays published in The Atlantic, Harper’s, The Reporter, The New Yorker, and The Saturday Review. Almost immediately, he ran into trouble, finding it extremely difficult to define the very item he was looking for—the topic

See Chapter 6.
sentence. “After several frustrating attempts to underline the appropriate T-unit where it occurred,” Braddock reported, “I realized that the notion of what a topic sentences is, is not at all clear.”6 In an effort to define this central term, he developed an entire catalogue of “types” of topic sentence: the simple topic (the kind handbooks say all paragraphs should contain); the delayed-completion (a topic stated in two T-units, not necessarily adjacent); the assembled (not actually a sentence at all, but a composite, gummed together from fragments of several sentences running through the paragraph); and the inferred (a “topic sentence” nowhere explicitly stated by the writer, but construed by the reader).

But even after thus extending—one might say stretching—the definition of “topic sentence,” Braddock found that a considerable proportion of the paragraphs in his sample contained no topic sentence of any type. In some instances, a single topic sentence governed a sequence running to several paragraphs; in others, the indentions seem “quite arbitrary.” All told, fewer that half the paragraphs contained a simple topic sentence even when topic sentences of the delayed completion type were included, the total came to little more that half (55%). How many paragraphs began with topic sentences? Fewer than one out of seven (13%) in all the paragraphs Braddock analyzed.

These findings, Braddock noted with quiet understatement, “did not support the claims of textbook writers about the frequency and location of topic sentences in professional writing.”7 Although scientific and technical writing might present a different case, with respect to contemporary professional exposition the textbooks’ claims were “just not true.”8

Braddock’s study thus effectively disposes of the hand-me-down Bainalities of the textbooks. But it does more that: as I have already suggested, Braddock’s empirical method and his findings cast some doubt upon certain conclusions reached by Francis Christensen and A.L. Becker, and upon the evidence those conclusions are based on.

In his “Generative Rhetoric of the Paragraph,” Professor Christensen proposes, as did...
Alexander Bain, “that the paragraph has, or may have, a structure as definable and traceable as that of the sentence and that it can be analyzed in the same way.”9 From this premise he moves rather swiftly to conclusions hardly distinguishable from Bain’s:

1. The paragraph may be defined as a sequence of structurally related sentences.
2. The top sentence of the sequence is the topic sentence.
3. The topic sentence is nearly always the first sentence of the sequence.10

Although he subsequently allows for exceptions (some paragraphs have no topic sentence; some paragraphing is “illogical”), there is no mistaking that Christensen’s second and third “rules” are essentially those which Braddock found to be false. Unlike Braddock, Christensen seems to believe that the term topic sentence is self-explanatory, requiring no precise definition. In support of his claims, Christensen cites the “many scores of paragraphs I have analyzed for this study.”11 He does not tell us how these paragraphs were selected or from what sources; he tells us only that in the paragraphs he analyzed “the topic sentence occurs almost invariably at the beginning.”12 Had he detailed his procedures as he did in his study of sentence openers,13 we would have reason to be more confident of his conclusions. But he doesn’t. The evidence underlying his statements about the paragraph is soft and rather vague.

A.L. Becker’s “Tagmemic Approach to Paragraph Analysis,” viewed in the light of Braddock’s study, seems similarly flawed. Like Christensen, Becker applies to the paragraph the instruments of sentence-analysis, with the purpose of “extending grammatical theories now used in analyzing and describing sentence structure . . . to the description of paragraphs.”14 He cautions at the outset that he intends to examine the paragraph from only one of three possible perspectives—the “particle” perspective—and that his description will necessarily be somewhat distorted because it suppresses the “wave” and “field” aspects of paragraph structure. But
this disclaimer hardly prepares us for his subsequent assertion that there are “two major patterns of paragraphing in expository writing,” and only two: the TRI (Topic-Restriction-Illustration) pattern and the PS (Problem-Solution) pattern. Becker continues:

Although there are more kinds of expository paragraphs than these two, I would say that the majority of them fall into one of these two major types. Many expository paragraphs which at first appear to be neither TRI or [sic] PS can be interpreted as variations of these patterns. . . . There are also minor paragraph forms (usually transitional paragraphs or simple lists)—and, finally, there are “bad” paragraphs, like poorly constructed, confusing sentences.

Again, one is left in doubt as to the evidence on which these generalizations rest. Surely, in preparing his study, Professor Becker cannot have read all expository paragraphs; how, then, can he justify a claim concerning a “majority” of them? What were his sampling procedures? Were “bad” paragraphs included in his total count, or were they summarily rejected as unworthy of consideration? To these and other questions he provides no answers. We know only that his findings conflict sharply with Braddock’s, and that, in Becker’s case as in Christensen’s we find somewhat disguised by modern terminology, the century-old claim that a “good” paragraph begins with a topic sentence and develops the idea stated by the topic sentence.

If we are ever to rid ourselves of Bain’s lingering legacy we must, it seems clear, abandon his exclusively sentence-based, “particle” approach to paragraph description, an approach that treats the paragraph as if it were an isolated, self-contained unit, and imposes upon it a rigid set of logical and quasi-grammatical rules. We must adopt an approach that describes not only the internal structure of a paragraph but also its external connections with adjoining paragraphs and its function in the discourse as a whole. What we need, Paul Rodgers proposes, is “a flexible, open-ended discourse centered rhetoric of the paragraph”:

Use TRIPSQA to ratiocinate a paragraph (see “Application,” at the conclusion of Chapter 6), rather than as a way to write up to a paragraph.

William Irmscher had his students replicate Braddock’s research. They found much the same. Braddock is so well respected as a researcher that the National Council of Teachers of English awards outstanding research in his name each year. The Braddock Award is coveted and worthy of his legacy.

It has been thirty-one years since Stern called for an adoption of an approach to paragraphing that describes the internal and external functions of a paragraph, and still texts have not changed.
All we can usefully say of all paragraphs at present [Rodgers explains] is that their authors have marked them off for special consideration as stadia of discourse, in preference to other stadia, other patterns, in the same material. Paragraph structure is part and parcel of the discourse as a whole; a given stadium becomes a paragraph not by virtue of its structure but because the writer elects to indent, his indentation functioning, as does all punctuation, as a gloss upon the overall literary process under way at that point.17

Paragraphing, Rodgers here suggests, is governed by rhetorical choice rather than by logical or grammatical rule. Like the structure of a sentence or that of a fully developed essay, the structure of a paragraph arises out of an ethos and a pathos as well as out of a logos—out of the writer’s personality and his perception of his reader as well as out of his perception of the structure of his subject matter. The logic and “grammar” of a given paragraph are conditioned—sometimes powerfully—by what may be termed the psychologic and socio-logic of a particular rhetorical occasion.

As every experienced writer knows, paragraphing helps establish a tone or “voice.” (Editors know this, too. That is why they frequently re-paragraph a writer’s prose to bring it into conformity with their publication’s image.) Short paragraphs appear to move more softly than long ones; short paragraphs lighten up the appearance of a page, whereas long ones, containing the identical information, give the page a heavier, more scholarly look. Just as he adjusts his sentences and his diction, the writer may adjust his paragraphs, deliberately or intuitively, to achieve a variety of rhetorical effects—formality of informality, abruptness or suavity, emphasis or sub-junction.

Paragraphing practices are also governed by changes in fashion and social convention. Today’s paragraphs are considerably shorter than those of fifty or a hundred years ago. “In books of the last century,” Paul Roberts reminds us, “a paragraph often ran through several pages, but...
the modern reader wants to come up for air oftener. He is alarmed by a solid mass of writing and comforted when it is broken up into chunks. In consequence of this change in literary fashion, nineteenth century rules of “logical” paragraphing dubious in their own day, are outmoded now. What might once have appeared as a single paragraph is today routinely broken up into smaller units which, taken together, comprise what William Irmscher has labeled a “paragraph bloc.” Indeed, when Richard Braddock observed that one topic sentence frequently governed the entire sequence of paragraphs, he was suggesting that contemporary professional writers use blocks rather than single paragraphs as logical units much of the time.

In sum, today’s paragraph is not a logical unit and we should stop telling our students it is. It does not necessarily begin with a topic sentence; it does not necessarily “handle and exhaust a distinct topic,” as the textbooks say it must do. It is not a composition-in-miniature, either—it is not an independent, self-contained whole, but a functioning part of discourse; its boundaries are not sealed but open to the surround text; it links as often as it divides. Shaped by the writer’s individual style and by the reader’s expectations as well as by the logic of the subject-matter, the paragraph is a flexible, expressive rhetorical instrument.

Perhaps some day it will be possible to teach paragraphing by rule and formula, though I frankly doubt it. In any case, the rules and formulas that govern the paragraphing practices of professional writers have yet to be discovered. Let us, therefore, focus our students’ attention on what they have to say—on the arguments they want to present, the points they want to make—and not on the number of indentations they should use in saying it. Let us make them think about the topics they plan to discuss rather than about the “correct” location of their topic sentences. Let us, in other words, make our teaching discourse-centered. If the whole does in indeed determine the parts, their paragraphs should improve as their essays mold them into form.

We must also stop telling students to begin a paragraph with such statements as, “I’m going to tell you a story about . . .” or “This is about . . .”

Stern, and many scholars like him, keep saying the same thing over and over—we must teach, in context, all that is to be learned. Students will learn how to paragraph if paragraphing is taught within the writing process.
Notes


4. Ibid., p. 408.


6. Ibid., p. 291.


8. Ibid., p. 298.


10. Ibid., pp. 57–58.

11. Ibid., p. 58.

12. Ibid.


15. Ibid., p. 34.

16. Ibid., p. 36.

