

Designs on writing (3)

In her final article on helping learners to improve their writing by approaching it as a design process, Debra Myhill looks at the challenge that paragraphing poses. How do we use these blocks of text to achieve a coherent sequence of ideas?

We all teach young writers how to use paragraphs, and exhort recalcitrant writers to remember to use them. In some cases, we may even suggest that a young learner cannot achieve Level 5 without paragraphs in their writing. But I sometimes wonder if our teaching emphasis is on their presence, rather than on the multiplicity of ways they can be used. Like all other aspects of writing, paragraphs are part of the design process, with their own choices, challenges and creative possibilities.

The National Curriculum requires that at KS2 children should be taught *'the purposes and organizational features of paragraphs and how ideas can be linked'*, whilst at Key Stage 3 children are taught about *'paragraph structure and how to form different types of paragraph'*. A writer achieving Level 5 will create text in which 'simple and complex sentences are organised into paragraphs' and for GCSE, one of the assessment focuses is the ability to *'organise ideas into sentences, paragraphs and whole texts using a variety of linguistic and structural features'*. Whilst not being detailed or specific, these references to paragraphing do highlight two key elements, linking and organization. In this article, I should like to flesh out these elements a little, using examples of children's writing from an ESRC study we have recently completed.

Development in paragraphing

Although at Level 5 children are expected to be organising their sentences into paragraphs, this is really only the beginning of a developmental trajectory. It does seem that the first stage in beginning to understand how to paragraph is viewing paragraphs simply as a tool for text division. Our analysis of Y8 and Y10 writing ranging from Level 4 to GCSE A* showed a variety

of patterns of text division into paragraphs, from using no paragraphs at all to very effective paragraphing. Broadly speaking, there were three developmental stages in between:

- Random paragraphing
- Repeated use of single sentence (or very short) paragraphs
- Unsustained paragraphing.

Random paragraphing was common in the work of weaker writers in the study who, it was evident, were aware of the need to use paragraphs but lacked understanding of when a division was appropriate. Thus it became an arbitrary and random decision, unconnected to the organisation of ideas and with no linkage between paragraphs, as in Example 1 below.

The repeated use of single-sentence, or very short, paragraphs was a surprisingly dominant pattern and occurred not only in the weaker writers but in writers who otherwise wrote effectively. (I exclude examples of single sentence paragraphs which were clearly used for emphasis or effect, denoting a

In a performance of 'The most Lamentable comedy and most Cruel Death of pyramus and Thisbe' by William Shakespeare, performed on 13/02/04 by yr8 students at Stakehead College, Mr Gold played the part of pyramus and Annie played the part of Thisbe. Gordon was the wall, Kristen was moonshine and Luke was the Lion. The prologue was spoken by Max.

The story is about Thisbe and pyraus in love and then they killed themselves.

The production was well received and much enjoyed by the audience. The main character were brave and hilarious and they were well supported by the audience and brave who acted well and strong.

- The most nostable scene was when pyramus stabled him Shelve.
- The well enjoyed part and manly amususing moments.

Example 1

Teenagers today have an easy life

I disagree with this statement because I think teenagers have a bit more of a harder life than some people think. Here are some examples of why I think this.

Some teenagers get peer pressure, exams and tests. Sometimes during test they panic and then they worry that they won't do well.

Some teenagers get annoyed with parents or other adults and the adults claim that teenagers are rude, selfish, answer back, ungrateful, lazy and messy.

Example 2

sophisticated writer — of which more later.) The single sentence paragraphing pattern may be an example of 'over-learning': writers who sub-divide their text too often and mistakenly do this at the end of every sentence. This tendency is compounded by the use of long, complex sentences which create several lines of text. However, single sentence paragraphing was also attributable to a lack of development, particularly in argument pieces: the writer correctly sub-divided into paragraphs for a change of topic, but did not provide an elaboration of the point made before moving on to the next. The extract above (Example 2) is a typical example of this.

In some pieces of writing paragraphing was present in some parts of the text but was not sustained. One group who exhibited this pattern were, perhaps not surprisingly, the weaker writers who were still learning how to sub-divide their text and who, typically, began with paragraphs and then appeared to forget about them, as in Example 3 (above right).

Significantly, however, unsustained use of paragraphing was also a feature of able writers writing longer texts. There was a strong connection between length of text and writing ability, with weak writers tending to write very short texts and able writers writing at length. But in the longest texts, both narrative and argument, some able writers appeared to lack confidence in managing paragraphing, and they too occasionally reverted to continuous unparagraphed text. More commonly, though, they drifted between very effective paragraphing in parts of their text and less controlled, overlong paragraphs elsewhere.

Topical organisation

Of course, paragraphs are much, much more than mere text division devices. Learning how to make paragraphs really work as a way to organise and structure your text, and to act as an appropriate signpost to your reader, is an important design skill. There are two design elements in using paragraphing deftly to support topical organisation:

1. Within-paragraph topical organisation: organising material so each paragraph introduces and develops ideas coherently.
2. Across-paragraph topical organisation: organising the paragraphs so there is a logical and coherent order to them, moving the reader from the start to the end of a piece.

Within-paragraph topical organisation is often achieved through the use of a topic sentence plus connectives within the paragraph. As might be expected, better writers were more likely to use a topic sentence than less confident ones but, more

I am writing to tell you that placing elderly people in care homes is wrong. It is believed by most people that it's the family's responsibility to care for the elderly. Reasons why this is thought is that the younger generation owes it to the older generation, as they cared for them whilst they were growing up. Surely most people would want to care for their elderly family members.

An argument against my point of view could be that the younger generation don't have the time, space or money for their elderly family members. Surely you disagree! Sometimes paying for the care homes works out much more expensive and if you care about your elderly enough you'll make time and space. Also most elderly people don't wish to be cared by strangers or live away from home. Placing elderly in care homes can make the end of a person's life unhappy, and alone. Stand up against care homes and make sure elderly people get the respect, love and care deserved. Families should stand together and support each other when support is needed. How do you think elderly feel when left alone in care homes away from loved ones? Support the older generation in the same way you wish to be treated by your younger generation. Caring for the older generation is family's responsibility.

Example 3

significantly, they wrote longer paragraphs and elaborated more on the key point of the paragraph. The common use of PQA (Point-Quote-Analysis) or PEE (Point-Evidence-Example) in literary essays is a helpful way to foster within-paragraph topical organisation, but this is not always evident in other text types. And whilst being taught to use a topic sentence at the start of each paragraph may be a helpful initial scaffold in learning about clear signposting, it can be restrictive for able writers, sometimes leading to heavy, over-deliberate signposting.

There are various ways to organise the topic within a paragraph: for example, in Example 4 (above right), several paragraphs start by counterpointing a teenage and an adult perspective, with the topic sentence first in some, later in others.

If anything, it was the across-paragraph organisation which was the least confidently addressed in the writing we investigated. Whilst it was very clear in almost all but the weakest writing that the text moved from a start point, through a middle, to an end point, the 'middle' was a rather ambiguous entity! This was particularly true in non-narrative writing, as narrative writing usually had an underlying chronology which supported across-text organisation. The difficulty with many 'middles' was that the paragraphs could have been re-arranged in any order without making much difference to the overall impact, almost as though each was a free-standing, mini-essay.

Although, as would be expected, the trend was for organisation to improve with ability, able writers writing long essays also had difficulty with middles. These writers often had much to communicate, and a range of points to make, with elaborating evidence; but they were less assured in thinking about ordering

I am writing this piece of writing, to discuss the topic of, 'Teenagers have an easy life! I do not believe that teenagers have an easy life. Being a teenager myself, I know how hard life can be.

School provides much difficulty for teenagers, because of homework, tests and relationships. Adults argue that teenagers just go to school and come back, whereas adults have to worry about bills and mortgages. However, this is completely untrue . . .

Adults also argue that teenagers don't have to worry about relationships and marriage. They do not know what they are talking about! Teenagers often have relationships, in or out of school, and it can be very distressing for them when they break up with a boy friend or girlfriend or when they like someone that doesn't like them back . . .

Teenagers also have a hard time with hormones, which can make them grumpy and unsure of their own personalities. Adults say that teenagers don't appreciate things that make their lives easy, and that they are moody and obnoxious. They are wrong! . . .

We then come to adopted or orphaned children. This can lead to lots of emotional problems. Adopted children often feel like they weren't wanted, and so feel worthless, hating themselves for this . . .

Example 4

their arguments across the text. Indeed, we found a phenomenon which was almost exclusively the domain of the able writer — the 'afterthought' paragraph! This came towards the end, whilst logically it would have been better following an earlier paragraph, because the writer had probably thought of whilst re-reading the text before writing the conclusion.



In less successful pieces of writing, paragraphs can often be re-arranged without much affecting the overall impact.

Exploring paragraph design in the classroom

1. Compare how different texts signal and develop a topic within a paragraph by giving pairs two or three different texts and inviting them to highlight the topic sentence in blue, and the supporting development in red. (A text in which the topic sentence is the final one in the paragraph is particularly interesting, as this is an unusual technique.)
2. Investigate across-paragraph organisation in a sequencing task. Using a text with strong textual organisation, cut it up into its separate paragraphs and invite learners to re-sequence them and explain why they were able to do this. What were the signposts that led to their decisions?
3. Explore the range of linking devices used across a set of paragraphs, in a text-marking activity. Give a list of possible linking devices with a colour code as a prompt, and ask for each device to be highlighted in its appropriate colour. This will demonstrate that linking operates in far more varied ways than just through the use of connectives.
4. Compare how linking is achieved in a narrative and in an argument piece. Are there different patterns?
5. Homework task: Look at writing outside the school context to find examples of over-use of the single sentence or very short paragraph. (Local newspapers can be a good source!)
6. Offer a range of models of unusual ways of paragraphing: single sentence paragraphs for emphasis, a sequence of short paragraphs to create tension, etc. Invite consideration of their impact.
7. Encourage able writers to experiment with narrative techniques which are non-chronological, such as flashback, starting in media res, dual narratives etc. This requires much greater attention to paragraphing and across-text organisation than a chronological narrative, and frequently transforms an ordinary narrative into something quite different.

Linking strategies

Of course, not only is logical ordering of ideas across the text through paragraphing important, but so also is signalling linkages between paragraphs. With the KS3 Framework emphasis on connectives, we do now have a cohort of children who know a lot about connecting words and phrases, such as *firstly*, *however*, *in contrast* and so on. But we may also be engendering a cohort who think these are the *only* way to make connections between paragraphs! We found that weaker writers used a more limited range of linking strategies than able writers,

Definitely without a doubt the younger generation should keep their older relatives in good care at home, than rather put them in a home where they no noone and maybe uncomfortable.

The reasons the younger generation should offer them to stay at their house is because they looked after their children 24/7 since they were babies to old teenagers so the younger generation should pay them back by letting them live at their house.

Another reason why the younger generation should let the old generation stay at their house is that the older generation become physically frail and need help from younger more stronger people to do things.

Thirdly, because people get older and they cannot always make the right decisions for themselves so they need younger people to make the wisest decision.

Also the older generation may not have a lot of family left, so they would appreciate it if the young generation spent time with them and kept them company.

Finally the younger generation should set an example of helping the older generations then people may follow and help their older generation.

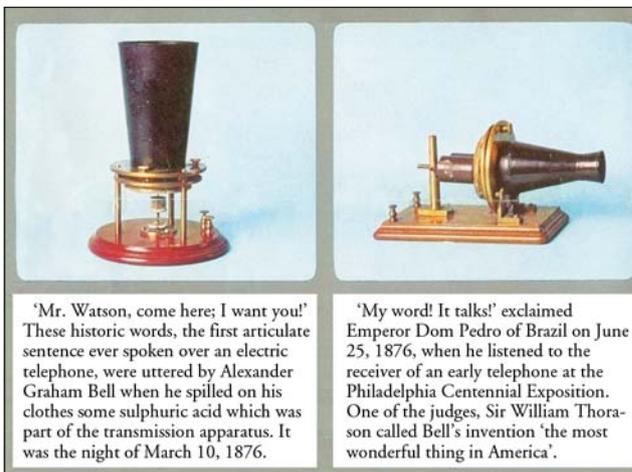
So surely the younger generation need to help and look after their older generation and take care for them to make sure they don't feel uncomfortable and alone.

Example 5

and often did not establish any clear links at all. And even able writers would benefit from extending their design repertoire. A useful range of links, excluding the adverbial, is given below:

- **Repetition of a word or phrase:** one of the most common ways to link between paragraphs
- **Repetition of a proper noun:** a particularly common way to maintain coherence and connectivity in narrative
- **Use of contrast:** creating a link through moving in a totally different direction; use of opposites/antithesis
- **Synonym:** creating variety through using a synonym, rather than repeating the word or phrase required
- **Hyponym/hypernym:** creating variety by moving from the general (hypernym) to the particular (hyponym) or vice versa e.g. tree, then oak; or fox, then creature.
- **Pronoun (anaphoric):** using a pronoun to refer back to a noun mentioned earlier
- **Determiner:** using 'this' or 'that' in particular to refer back to an idea already mentioned

A word of caution! Whilst introducing writers to adverbial connectives or sentence openings is undoubtedly a supportive strategy, we need to make sure these don't become straitjackets, or used mechanistically. In the piece above (Example 5, reproduced in its entirety), the writer has marshalled a list of arguments to support her viewpoint, but the use of connectives at the start of each (short) paragraph is rather formulaic and emphasises a listing tendency (particularly 'thirdly' and 'finally'). The 'middle'



'Mr. Watson, come here; I want you!' These historic words, the first articulate sentence ever spoken over an electric telephone, were uttered by Alexander Graham Bell when he spilled on his clothes some sulphuric acid which was part of the transmission apparatus. It was the night of March 10, 1876.

'My word! It talks!' exclaimed Emperor Dom Pedro of Brazil on June 25, 1876, when he listened to the receiver of an early telephone at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition. One of the judges, Sir William Thorsen called Bell's invention 'the most wonderful thing in America'.

Linking by repetition. The first two paragraphs of this 'Telephone Story' poster begin with reported speech.

five paragraphs could be put in any order and the connectives do little to link ideas other than to order them. A writer like this needs support in developing her ideas into more sustained arguments, and in increasing her repertoire of linking devices.

Creative paragraphing

Finally (to use one of those over-used adverbials!), when writers are confident in designing paragraphs to organise and link their ideas effectively, they are freed up to use paragraphs in less conventional and more creative ways. The single sentence paragraph to hook the reader into a piece of writing was a strategy used by several of our writers, but one writer went further and used a sequence of single sentence paragraphs to great effect. Writing in role as a WW1 soldier, he used single sentence paragraphs, repeating 'Walk!', paralleled each time by a narrative description of what is happening, for a creative evocation of the horror of the scene. And as readers, we are left wondering whether the insistent repetition of 'Walk!' is his own interior monologue, focusing him on moving forwards, or the echo of a sergeant-major's instruction, compelling him to obey.

Walk!
The bullets came.
Walk!
One fell.
Walk!
More fell.
Walk!
More fell.

Endnote

Paragraphs are powerful things! If we are encouraging children to see writing as a design activity, with choices available to them each time they put pen to paper, then paragraphs are fundamental to the design repertoire for textual organisation, central to the structural design of a text.

Debra Myhill is Professor of Education at Exeter University and subject leader for English. Her publications include *Better Writers* (Courseware) and *Talking, Listening, Learning: Effective Talk in the Primary Classroom* (Open University).