

On the Papers

THE POINT OF A PARAGRAPH AND WHERE TO FIND IT

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE ENGLISH PARAGRAPH, PART IV

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“The issue states what the paragraph will concern, while the point lets you know why the paragraph was written.” I have been exploring English paragraph structure for three essays in this series, trying to explain how a paragraph’s “issue” (1) may take one, two, or three sentences to state, and (2) is a different concept from the paragraph’s “point.” In this fourth essay, we turn our attention to *where* in a paragraph the reader expects to encounter its point.

Must every paragraph have a point? No. Many a fine and necessary paragraph merely narrates: “This happened; then that happened; etc.” We can call these “narrative paragraphs.” They exist so that enough of a story may be told in order for the writer later on to be able to make a point.

Aside from narrative paragraphs, do all other paragraphs have to state a point explicitly? It is most often—not always—a good idea to state a point instead of merely implying a point. Sometimes it is impolitic or unnecessary or unkind to be blunt

enough about a point to state it in a single sentence; but if you care that your reader understand your point, you are best to articulate it explicitly and concisely.

But you have to go further than that. It is not enough to drop your point just *somewhere* in your paragraph; you would do well to place it in a structural location where readers are most likely to look for it. With all the reader expectations I have been exploring through the previous 21 articles in this series, I have been able to locate for you a specific and unique place where readers look for certain kinds of information. Whose story is this sentence? Look to the grammatical subject. What is going on in this sentence? Look to its verb. What is the most important piece of information in this sentence? Check out any moment of full syntactic closure—at a colon, semicolon, or period. Paragraphs, however, are different, where the placement of their point is concerned. This is the only reader expectation that comes equipped with a fallback expectation: If

it’s not here, then go look there. Both the “here” and the “there” depend on the nature of a paragraph’s structure.

Think of a paragraph having two main structural locations, with an interesting third thrown in every once in a while. The first location, starting at the paragraph’s beginning, can be considered the issue position. It is not a thing, but rather a place. It is where you should state the paragraph’s issue. (For a discussion of the length and content of the concept of “issue,” see *What’s at Issue?: The Construction of the English Paragraph, Part II*, 42 LITIGATION 16 (Summer 2016).) As that article demonstrates, people will read a paragraph as being about whatever shows up in the issue position. You can get away with just implying, not stating, a point; but you cannot get away with not stating an issue as explicitly as possible. The opening one, two, or three sentences will be considered the issue whether you wish it so or not. Let the wrong information inhabit that location, and your reader will be lost, constantly looking for the wrong thought development.

Following the statement of the issue, the next structural location we could call the discussion position. You’ve put the issue in front of us; now tell us whatever we need to know about it—before you want us to take the mental breath provided by the space between paragraphs.

The third, tantalizing, occasionally useful structural location takes its place as the final sentence of a paragraph. We can call it the “coda.” It has many uses: It can offer an opportunity to repeat the point; it can provide another example or quotation, perhaps unnecessary, but of which you have become so enamored that you cannot bear to leave it out; it can turn the rest of the paragraph on its head; or it can introduce a bit of wit or humor, disruptive had it appeared in the midst of heavy thinking, but well earned and something of a delight when it comes after the hard work of thought development has been completed.

That is the shape of a non-narrative paragraph: The issue position, filled with an issue of one, two, or three sentences; the discussion position, extending as long or short as it need be for the thought to be completed; and, on special occasions, a coda, with its emphatic, surprising, or entertaining function. Where, then, does the point arrive? The answer is not nearly as concise as it is for other reader expectations.

Here is the technical definition of expected point placement: Readers expect the point to be either (1) the last sentence of the issue or (2) the last sentence of the discussion.

Here is the cognitive definition, which is easier to understand: Readers expect to encounter the point either (1) just before the discussion of it begins or (2) just as the discussion of it is ending.

Miss Grundy, our secondary school English teacher, taught us that every paragraph must begin with a “topic sentence,” whose purpose was to state the issue/point of the paragraph. In the eighth grade, our issue was always our point, requiring no more than one sentence to state. “I like the spring because of the pretty birds.” That was it. Summon three examples of birds (robins, cardinals, and blue jays); give each a sentence of its own (“I like the spring because of the blue jays”); and then repeat your topic sentence at the end as your “conclusion”—“I like the spring because of the pretty birds.” Such a corset-like paragraph structure cannot possibly be expansive enough for legal writing. Legal writing requires a more complex structural possibility: “The issue states what the paragraph will concern, while the point lets you know why the paragraph was written.”

Where do we expect the point to arrive in sophisticated prose? The question might be better asked by substituting *when* for *where*. Thought is fluid. Sentences enter our reading minds not as bricks, which must be pasted together to construct an edifice, but rather as flowing water, gathering in our mind as a pool,

with each subsequent sentence flowing into its predecessors, enlarging the pool, and perhaps changing its shape. (We don’t want the shape to change after we’ve read three sentences. By then, the issue should have been shaped and captured.) Here then are all the locations in which we might expect the point to appear:

- In a one-sentence issue paragraph, the first sentence (the last of the issue)
- In a one-sentence issue paragraph, the last sentence of the discussion
- In a two-sentence issue paragraph, the second sentence (the last of the issue)
- In a two-sentence issue paragraph, the last sentence of the discussion
- In a three-sentence issue paragraph, the third sentence (the last of the issue)
- In a three-sentence issue paragraph, the last sentence of the discussion.

And should a paragraph happen to end with a coda, then the point can reasonably be located as the penultimate sentence, that sentence being the end of the

discussion. With such a variety of structural possibilities, the point might effectively appear as the first, second, third, last, or next-to-last sentence in a paragraph. It is not so much a *where* as it is a *when*; it is expected to come *as* the issue is ending or *as* the discussion is reaching completion.

I will devote a future article to exemplifying these different placements. (Quoting paragraphs takes up so much space!) Rest assured: Paragraph shape and structure tend to vary widely in the hands of any clear, forceful writer. I happen to have on my desk Mr. Justice Murphy’s dissent in the (in)famous case of *Korematsu v. United States*, the Supreme Court case from 1944, upholding the military’s decision to relocate all Japanese into concentration camps. His dissent contains 12 paragraphs. Here is a table that lists each paragraph’s issue length and point placement. Miss Grundy, hide your eyes.

Just look at the variety of structure. I am sure Mr. Justice Murphy did not sit there, consciously choosing different issue lengths and point placements for the sake of variety or elegance; instead, he was trying to make his prose fit the needs of his content. Differently shaped thoughts demand differently shaped paragraphs. There is much more to be said—in subsequent articles. ■

The 12 Paragraphs of Justice Murphy’s Dissent in *Korematsu v. United States* (323 U.S. 214 (1944))

Paragraph	Number of Sentences in Issue	Point at End of Issue	Point at End of Discussion?	Coda?
1	one		Yes	
2	one	first sentence		
3	three	third sentence		Yes
4	two	second sentence		
5	three		Yes	
6	one		Yes	
7	one	first sentence		
8	two	second sentence		
9	one		Yes	
10	one		Yes	
11	three	third sentence		Yes
12	one		Yes	