

## Blueprints for Building a Well Organized Paragraph

An Adult Studies Center Workshop Presented for Centenary University

### Principle Strategies and Techniques Presented

#### *Opening Premise*

In academic circles, you will typically hear that a strong essay or research paper should follow a structured, instructive pattern. It should begin with an interesting hook to catch the reader's attention, lay out its subject matter interestingly, present a convincing thesis (an argued proposition), develop that thesis throughout its pages (the "body" of the paper), and then conclude with a more developed, rounded version of that thesis. While all papers vary in terms of quality, it is relatively easy for new scholars to implement the basic writing-pattern of Hook → Introduction → Thesis → Body → Thesis-Conclusion. However, papers of *all* quality-levels consist of paragraphs, which are essentially the links in the chain of the paper itself. Therefore, if the links of this chain are weak or malformed, the chain itself may break under the stress of scrutiny. The purpose of this workshop is to strengthen the chain by strengthening its individual links.

#### *The "Topic Sentence" defined:*

Just as a thesis sentence should govern the direction and purpose of a paper, a topic sentence should govern the direction and purpose of a paragraph. For present purposes, consider the topic sentence as the thesis sentence of your paragraph. It is the indispensable anchor that your paragraph cannot survive without. It is what is colloquially referred to as the "main point," and the answer to the question of "What do you mean by that?" which is asked by befuddled readers who want their befuddlement resolved.

*Always apply the important question of "What do I mean by that?" to your own writing.*

Whenever you edit your own topic or thesis sentences for clarity's sake, ask yourself the question: "What do I mean by that?" If the paragraph you're focusing on cannot answer that question, then this is a sign that your thesis or main idea needs clarification.

*The implied topic sentence can hold great aesthetic and instructive power, but it can be difficult to pinpoint and use effectively.*

Some paragraphs contain *implied* topic sentences. These paragraphs are often narrative in nature, and you usually won't be able to hunt down and highlight their topic sentences with 100% accuracy. Observe the handout that features the paragraph-excerpt from Scott Russell Sanders' essay, "The Inheritance of Tools." This is the very first paragraph of Sanders' essay, which reads a lot like a short story. The paragraph does a good job of establishing the essay's

overall tone and characters, but its narrative power makes identifying its main idea a bit trickier than identifying the main idea of Pollan's more instructive paragraph. Therefore, in order to find Sanders' main idea, you will have to construct it yourself from the specific details that Sanders provides for that very purpose! The good news, however, is that once you *have* creatively fleshed out this implied main idea, your discernment will be sharper for it. Additionally, you will have a better sense of how to select details that imply the unsaid – that chamber meaning “between the lines,” so to speak.

*During your editing process, make use of transitioning words.*

The old writing-adage holds true: “There are no good writers – only good rewriters.” The top-notch writings assigned in collegiate syllabi are not the fruits of master-writers with the Midas touch. They are the fruit of good writers who became great through consistent rewriting and editing. With this in mind, keep your Transitioning Words handout at the ready as you engage your own rewriting process. As good as freewriting is, it often produces writing with imperfectly connected ideas.