

Writer's Edge

By Ingrid Sapona

Welcome to Writer's Edge – a column by Ingrid Sapona, owner of Good with Words. In her column, Ingrid will write about ways of improving your communication skills. Many of you already know Ingrid – she's been working with the CICBV and CBVs for more than 10 years and is the creator and presenter of the popular seminar: Valuation Reports and Opinions: Your Stock In Trade – Are they as clear as can be?

In Praise of Paragraphs

When was the last time you thought about paragraphs? Based on the editing assignments I've had lately, I get the sense that many business writers don't spend a lot of time focusing on them. That's a shame, as they really are critical to clear writing.

What is a Paragraph?

Merriam-Webster's definition of paragraph is quite straightforward: "a subdivision of a written composition that consists of one or more sentences, deals with one point or gives the words of one speaker, and begins on a new usually indented line"¹. As is often the case, I am in awe at the elegant simplicity of the definition and when I read it I think, "Gee – that pretty much covers it." But, really, there's lots more that makes paragraphs special and worthy of attention.

Why Paragraphs are Important to Writers

Paragraphs are the building blocks writers use to present information. By carefully grouping sentences together, the writer sorts his or her thoughts. And, by carefully ordering the paragraphs, writers lay out their ideas for their readers.

Another helpful way of thinking about the paragraph is it's the refuge against writer's block. Though the prospect of writing an entire document might be overwhelming, if you look at it as just a series of paragraphs, it's much easier to begin. Simply jot down a thesis sentence and then craft a paragraph around it by writing other ideas that relate to, support, or even contradict, the thesis sentence. Then, before you know it, you've written a number of paragraphs and ideas are flowing.

How to Craft Paragraphs

There are two key things to pay attention to when crafting paragraphs.

The first thing is that all sentences in the paragraph should relate to the topic sentence. (The sentence setting out the main thesis is usually referred to as the topic sentence.) In grammar school you probably learned that the topic sentence is always the first sentence. That, of course, is not a hard-and-fast rule, though no harm has ever befallen a writer who steadfastly applies that technique.

Since content drives the length of a paragraph, there are no rules about the proper (or best) length for paragraphs. But, it's a good idea to review long paragraphs to verify that every sentence relates to the topic sentence. If there are sentences that don't support the thesis, you should take them out of the paragraph. But don't despair – chances are they logically fit into another paragraph, or they might be a point that you should further develop in a whole new paragraph.

The second thing to pay attention to when crafting a paragraph relates to the ordering of the sentences within it. Sentences in a paragraph can be ordered in a variety of ways: chronologically,

1 www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/paragraphs

by stating a problem and then a solution, by argument/counter-argument, cause/effect, and so on. The ordering you choose is up to you – but after you've organized the sentences, re-read the paragraph and ask yourself whether the ordering will make sense to the reader.

Why Paragraphs are Important to Readers

Paragraphs are important to readers for a number of reasons. One key role paragraphs play for the reader is that they present ideas in digestible chunks. Well-crafted paragraphs group ideas for readers, helping them comprehend the information you're presenting.

Also, the fact that paragraphs make the page more welcoming to readers isn't just about aesthetics. Anyone who's ever read Nobel Prize winner José Saramago's **Blindness**, a book written with no periods and paragraphs that are often an entire page long, can attest to the fact that without breaks, text on a page is tremendously off-putting (regardless of whether it's fiction or non-fiction). Readers who see a number of shorter paragraphs under a given heading feel some relief, knowing they can tackle the information one paragraph at a time.

A Journalist's Trick

Though I indicated earlier that content dictates paragraph length, the truth is, the writer dictates paragraph length. In journalism school I was constantly frustrated when an instructor would look at a paragraph and – without even reading it – would put a slash about half way through it and then inserted the dreaded ¶ symbol, indicating I should start a new paragraph. Well, you know what? Nine times out of 10 the instructor was right – the long paragraph could easily be made into two paragraphs.

The seemingly random, after-the-fact, breaking of paragraphs is a technique I apply all the time. I eye-ball it, finding a place to break it – then I reread the paragraph to see whether a break actually works there. Sometimes you have to play with it a bit to make it work – perhaps paraphrasing the topic sentence, or re-arranging some of the sentences between the two paragraphs – but that's not hard and it's worth the effort. Give it a try – I guarantee your readers will appreciate it and you'll be rewarded because they'll find it easier to understand what you've written.

Conclusion

Poorly crafted paragraphs reflect badly on the writer. But more importantly, they frustrate and confuse readers. Time spent analyzing your paragraphs will help you clarify your thoughts and will make your document easier to read.