

An Analysis of Effective Paragraphs and Ways of Developing Paragraphs

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Abstract—This paper aims to analyze qualities of effective paragraphs and ways of developing paragraphs. Through the analysis, it is hoped that English learners can know more about paragraphs so that they can write more impressive and effective paragraphs.

Index Terms—unity, coherence, ways of developing paragraphs

I. THE DEFINITION OF A PARAGRAPH

A paragraph is a discourse unit smaller than the complete essay but larger than the sentence, building around one central thought or a single topic (Wang, 2003). In other words, if one begins a new paragraph, it means that he or she will introduce a new topic or thought to the readers.

II. QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE PARAGRAPHS

As for an effective paragraph, it should possess at least two qualities, that is, unity and coherence.

A. Unity

“Unity demands singleness of purpose. A paragraph usually allows the writer to develop only one major thought, around which all the sentences in it hang together, and towards which they all contribute something. This major thought, also called the controlling idea, may be one aspect or one stage of development of a larger topic. Thus, a paragraph with a single major thought is said to have unity” (Wang, 2003, p. 109).

The following paragraph (example 1) written by a student certainly centres around one single topic: there are some disadvantages of enrollment expansion in Chinese universities.

Example 1:

Today I want to talk about the disadvantages of enrollment expansion in Chinese universities. Firstly, the enrollment expansion means that more and more college students will enter into universities every year. However, in colleges and universities, the facility and teaching staff are limited, which will not be beneficial for teaching and cultivating talents. Secondly, many colleges and universities have expanded their enrollment but fail to guarantee the quality of education. And it is regarded by some people that this kind of education policy is not reasonable because colleges and universities always teach students a lot of theoretical knowledge rather than some practical skills. Finally, since there are a lot of college students will graduate from colleges, the job competition is becoming more and more severe. It can be seen that every year in graduation time, the job fair is just like a battlefield because hundreds of students are fighting for the same job.

However, the following paragraph (example 1) written by another is not unified:

Example 2:

Today I want to talk about the phenomenon of enrollment expansion in Chinese universities. As we all know, the enrollment expansion gives many high school graduates valuable chances to further their study in universities. And through this opportunity, they can learn more knowledge and acquire a lot of skills. However, because of enrollment expansion, the teaching resources of many universities are very limited and can not meet the demand of students. At the same time, many college graduates will face unemployment problems because they can not find ideal jobs after graduation.

In example 2, the paragraph is not unified because it includes more than one idea. So it can be separated and revised into the following three paragraphs:

Today I want to talk about the advantages and disadvantages of enrollment expansion in Chinese universities.

The advantages of enrollment expansion are very obvious. As we all know, the enrollment expansion gives many high school graduates valuable chances to further their study in universities. And through this opportunity, they can learn more knowledge and acquire a lot of skills.

However, the enrollment expansion also has its own disadvantages. Because of enrollment expansion, the teaching resources of many universities are very limited and can not meet the demand of students. At the same time, many college graduates will face unemployment problems because they can not find ideal jobs after graduation.

Another unified paragraph is listed here:

Example 3:

One day, I bought a big case because my wardrobe was too small to place more clothes. I put it on the balcony and then went out. It happened that one of my roommates washed her clothes at that time. When I came back, I found that all my clothes in that case got wet. Then I got very angry and had a quarrel with that roommate.

B. Coherence

To produce a unified and smooth paragraph, in addition to unity, another quality is coherence. By coherence, it means that the well-connectedness of words and sentences in a paragraph achieved proper arrangement and the use of certain words (Wang, 2003). "A paragraph is said to be coherent when all the sentences in it stick together and all the ideas in it develop smoothly from start to finish, so that as the reader is being led along he or she is aware of when he or she is going" (Wang, 2003, p.116).

Although coherence is an essential quality of an effective paragraph, some writers still write incoherent paragraphs such as the following:

Frank goes the same morning routine every weekday. He has breakfast and watched the morning news on TV. He brushes teeth and washed face. At seven he is awakened by an alarm clock and gets up. At eight he drives his car to his office. He walks in his garden for 15 minutes.

In the above-mentioned paragraph, it can be clearly seen that it has only central idea, that is, Frank goes the same morning routine every weekday. Therefore, we can say that this paragraph is unified. However, it is not coherent because the sentences in this paragraph are not arranged logically. To be specific, it does not follow time order and it lacks necessary transitions. Thus, we can revise the paragraph as the following:

Frank goes the same morning routine every weekday. At seven he is awakened by an alarm clock and gets up. Then, he brushes teeth and washes face. After that, he has breakfast and watched the morning news on TV. Then, he walks in his garden for 15 minutes. At eight he drives his car to his office.

III. WAYS OF DEVELOPING PARAGRAPHS

A. Development by Time

1. The usage:

When people want to recount an event or tell a story, they can use time order or chronological arrangement.

2. Transitional words and expressions:

While, when, as, before, then, later, earlier, after, during, formerly, meanwhile, at the same time, immediately, in the end, at once, eventually, finally, lastly, in conclusion, in the first place, in the second place, in the last place...

3. Organization:

Generally, earlier things are mentioned before later things.

4. Example:

The English translation of ancient books has a long history. As early as in the seventeenth century, some foreign sinologists began to translate Chinese literary classics, and they thought that the translation of classics can help the West to understand China better. In the early nineteenth century, Morrison, an England translator began to translate Chinese cultural classics. He is the first scholar who systematically introduced China's classic culture to the West. From 1861 to 1886, a famous modern sinologist in England, James Leger, translated the ancient Chinese classics "The Four Books" and "The Five Classics" systematically. In 1878, Giles, an English scholar, translated "The Strange Tales from Liaozhai". And in 1898, he translated "The Ancient and Modern Poems Election", which introduced Chinese ancient poetry culture to the West. In 1919, the British sinologist Waley translated "Chinese Poetry Translation". After that, he translated "Journey to the West" and he named it as "Monkey". His translation is faithful to the original, and because of his exquisite translation, the famous classic of "Journey to the West" is well known in the Western world. In 1920, another English sinologist David Hawks translated the complete translation of "The Dream of the Red Mansion", and this is the world first English translation of "The Dream of the Red Mansion". In the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China, the famous translators in ancient China Gu Hongming and Su Manshu also translated many Chinese classics. For example, Gu Hongming translated the "Analects of Confucius" and "Golden Mean". In the twentieth century, Lin Yutang, a modern Chinese writer and translator, wrote many books in English, such as the biography of historical figure "Wu Zetian", and the novel "The Wisdom of Life". In modern times, the famous translators Yang Xianyi, Dai Naidie couple translated many ancient Chinese classics (Shi, 2015).

B. Development by Process

1. The usage:

It is usually used to explain how to do something step by step. Generally, in a process paragraph, people can use the present tense, the indefinite pronoun "you" and imperatives sentences.

2. Transitional words and expressions:

First, second, third..., firstly, secondly, thirdly, finally..., the first step, the second step, the next step, the final step, the last step..., primarily, prior to, initially, to begin with, as soon as, before, after...

3. Organization:

In the topic sentence, people always use conditional sentences, such as “If you want to want to become an excellent speaker in public, you can follow some steps.” As for the supporting materials, people can present it in time order or describe it step by step. In the concluding sentence, the writer can tell the result or make a comment of the result of the process.

4. Examples:

Example 1:

If you want write a good composition, you can follow the following steps. Firstly, you should have a central idea. Secondly, you should accumulate some materials to support your central idea. Such as, you can use some typical, specific and relevant examples to prove your thesis. In addition, if you have more than one examples, you should arrange these examples logically. Lastly, you can offer a conclusion to your composition.

Example 2:

If you want to become a public speaker, there are some steps you can follow. First of all, you should select an interesting topic so that your audience can focus on your speech. Secondly, you should write and recite your speech thoroughly. Thirdly, you should dress appropriately so as to give a good impression to the listener. During the speech, you should establish eye contact with your audience. Besides, you should deliver your speech in a good manner. Next, you should pay attention to your pronunciation, intonation, vocal variety, pitch, volume, gesture and body movement. At last, when you are going to end the speech, you should signal your audience and say thank you to them.

C. *Development by Space*

1. The usage:

When people wants to describe the spatial order of a certain place, they can develop a paragraph by space.

2. Transitional words and expressions:

Near, nearby, below, above, beyond, under, here, there, surface, vertical, midpoint, adjacent, parallel, edge, around, behind, inside, outside, interior, exterior, next to, close to, opposite to, in front of, at the back, on top of, at the same place, in the middle of, on the left, on the right, parallel to...

3. Organization:

In the topic sentence, people will generally select an angle that he or she is going to describe. And the supporting details can be arranged according to certain order, such as from right to left, up to down, side to side, near to far, center to side, north to south, and so on. In the concluding sentence, people can make comment of the description.

4. Example:

In the middle of the park, there is a garden. The flowers in the garden are all in full bloom. Two little girls are playing games along the garden. In one corner of the garden stood their parents, who were watching the blossoms with great interest. In another corner of the garden two young lovers were posing for a picture. In front of the garden, a group of people had gathered together to listen to the soft music.

D. *Development by Examples or Generalization*

1. The usage:

In a paragraph, if the writer uses some specific and typical examples, the general or abstract statement will be clear, vivid, interesting and easy to understand.

2. Transitional words and expressions:

For example, for instance, in other words, in one instance, to illustrate, in other words, to substantiate, as an illustration, in substantiation, as follows, according to statistics, consider...as an example, take...as an example, let me cite...as an example...

3. Organization:

In terms of organization of this kind of paragraph, it can be classified in two ways. The first is “from general to specific” order, which means that the paragraph begins with a topic sentence, and then supporting details are mentioned to support the opening statement. The second way of organization is “from specific to general” order, which means that the paragraph starts with the details, and the general statement such as the topic sentence comes at the end of the paragraph.

4. Examples:

Example 1: From general to specific

It is useful to learn a foreign language. First, learning a foreign language is a great advantage for people when they are looking for a job because a lot of companies now are paying more and more attention to the language ability of their employees. Second, when people are learning a foreign language, they are also learning some information and the culture of that foreign country, which will broaden their horizon at the same time.

Example 2: From specific to general

Learning a foreign language is a great advantage for people when they are looking for a job because a lot of companies now are paying more and more attention to the language ability of their employees. Besides, when people are learning a foreign language, they are also learning some information and the culture of that foreign country, which will broaden their horizon at the same time. Therefore, it is useful to learn a foreign language.

E. *Development by Comparison and Contrast*

1. The usage:

Generally speaking, when people want to list the similarities between two or more persons or things, people will use “comparison” to develop a paragraph. However, if they want to show the differences between persons or things, they can apply “contrast” to describe them. In writing, people can use both comparison and contrast because they can compare two things that are similar in some ways and different in others.

2. Transitional words and expressions:

For comparison: similarly, as, like, alike, both, likewise, resemble, just as, furthermore, similar to, in the same way, almost the same as, in like manner, in addition to, have...in common, to be parallel in, at the same rate as, common characteristics...

For contrast: but, unlike, although, however, while, nevertheless, on the contrary, on the other hand, in contrast to, on the opposite side, be different from, once..., now..., the former..., whereas the latter..., in opposition to...

3. Organization:

Generally, in a comparison or contrast paragraph, the topic sentence tells the two things to be compared or contrasted.

As for the way of organization, it can be further divided into the following two: the first is “block comparison” or “block contrast”, which means that one thing is examined completely, and then the other; the second is “alternating comparison” or “alternating contrast”, which means that the two things are examined point by point at the same time.

In this way of developing paragraphs, the concluding sentence can restate the topic sentence or offer a summary.

4. Examples:

Example 1: block comparison

Sally and Ann are good friends, and they have a lot in common. Sally likes reading books, she spends a lot of time reading novels in a day. At the same time, Sally likes playing sports, and jogging is her favourite exercise. Sally has a pet dog, she likes it very much, when she is jogging, the dog will follow her. Sally also loves travelling. She has gone to many places, such as Beijing, Qingdao and Nanjing. Ann likes reading too. Every day she reads three to four hours. Ann is a sports fan, she also likes jogging every evening. Similar to Sally, Ann has a pet dog too. And the pet also accompanies her when she is jogging. In addition, travelling is also Ann’s hobby, she likes to experience different folklores and customs of different places.

Example 2: block contrast

Life in senior high school and that in university are totally different. In senior high school, students have a lot of classes to attend and a lot of homework to do every day. Therefore, they do not have enough time to play sports and relax themselves. And students in senior high school have a fixed classroom to study, so they don’t need to change and find classrooms. Besides, teachers are ready to help students in life and study. In other words, whenever students are in trouble, they will turn to their teachers for help. However, in university, students have less classes to attend and few homework to do, so they have a lot of time and much freedom to do something they want, such as they can join different clubs in college or do a part-time job. And college students have no fixed classrooms so they have to change and find another room for another class. In addition, university students are adults, so they have to make their own choices and decisions without any teachers’ help.

Example 3: alternating comparison

Sally and Ann are good friends, and they have a lot in common. Sally likes reading books, she spends a lot of time reading novels in a day. Ann likes reading too. Every day she reads three to four hours. Sally likes playing sports, and jogging is her favourite exercise. Ann is also a sports fan, she likes jogging every evening. Sally has a pet dog, she likes it very much. When she is jogging, the dog will follow her. Similar to Sally, Ann has a pet dog too. And the pet will also accompany with her when she is jogging. Sally loves travelling. She has gone to many places, such as Beijing, Qingdao and Nanjing. Travelling is also Ann’s hobby, she likes to experience different folklores and customs of different places.

Example 4: alternating contrast

Life in senior high school and that in university are totally different. In senior high school, students have a lot of classes to attend and a lot of homework to do every day. Therefore, they do not have enough time to play sports and relax themselves. However, in university, students have less classes to attend and few homework to do, so they have a lot of time and much freedom to do something they want, such as they can join different clubs in college or do a part-time job. Students in senior high school have a fixed classroom to study, so they don’t need to change and find classrooms. But college students have no fixed classrooms so they have to change and find another room for another class. Besides, senior high school teachers are ready to help their students both in life and study. In other words, whenever students are in trouble, they will turn to their teachers for help. However, university students are adults, so they have to make their own choices and decisions without any teachers’ help.

F. *Development by Cause and Effect*

1. The usage:

In daily writing, when people give their opinion on a certain topic, they can give reasons to support it. If they begin with a cause, they will go on explaining its resulting effects. While if they begin with some effects, they are going to state the cause responsible for them. And this kind of cause-effect writing, is also called causal analysis.

2. Transitional words and expressions:

So, thus, hence, therefore, because, because of, due to, owing to, since, accordingly, as a result, so that, so as to, result in, be responsible for, occur from, have an effect on, thanks to, the reason for, the cause of, seeing that, it follows that...

3. Organization:

There are two ways of organization in cause and effect paragraphs. The first is from cause to effect, which means that the writer will first state a cause and then mention or predict the effects. The second is from effect to cause, which means that the effect will be stated first, and the causes will be examined in the rest of the paragraph.

4. Examples:

Example 1: from cause to effect

Nowadays, more and more fertile land is taken up by new buildings. As a result, many farmers can not find jobs. And the grain output can not be guaranteed. However, it also brings positive effects. For example, the living standard of farmers is improved and it's beneficial for modernization.

Example 2: from effect to cause

I choose English as my major because of two reasons. First, To learn English is good for finding a job because nowadays a lot of employers require that the employees should be qualified in English. Second, it's useful to learn English because it is a world and universal language.

G. *Development by Classification*

1. The usage:

Develop a paragraph by classification means to sort things into different categories according to their characteristics.

2. Transitional words and expressions:

Divide, classify, sort, distinguish, classes, aspects, types, categories, kinds, sources, methods, factors, divisions, parts, regions, times, eras, origins, characteristics, qualities, ...fall into...categories, ...can be divided into...

3. Organization:

In a good classification paragraph, different parts should be parallel. That is to say, parallelism is essential to a good classification.

4. Examples:

Example 1:

According to different ways to spend their spare time, college students can be classified into four groups. The first group of students usually spend their spare time in studying so they may stay in the classroom and library all day. The second group of people will take part in a lot of activities such as join a certain club, play sports or simply make an appointment with their friends. The third group of students are spending their time in doing part-time jobs. They may be tutors who teach primary students or even waiters who work in a restaurant. The last group of students will kill their time by doing something in their dormitory, such as they may wash their clothes, clean their dormitory or simply sleep for several hours.

Example 2:

According to the purpose of doing a part-time job, students can fall into three groups. The first group of students want to earn money by doing a part-time job. In this way, they can buy something they want and release the economic burden of their parents. The second group of students want to learn something more about the society and apply what they have learned in college into practice. The last group of students want to gain some practical skills such as how to deal with personal relationship and work under pressure, which will benefit them in their future job.

H. *Development by Definition*

1. The usage:

To avoid confusion or misunderstanding, people can write a definition paragraph by defining a word, term or concept which is unfamiliar to some readers.

2. Transitional words and expressions:

To define, to clarify, to explain, in clarification, in definition, in explanation, in other words, that is to say...

3. Example:

Everyone has different understanding about happiness. As for me, happiness is easy to get. For example, it can be a cake made by my mother. It can be a present bought by my father. And it can be a kiss from my son.

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper mainly includes four parts. The first part is an introduction. The second part analyzes the qualities of unity and coherence in effective paragraphs. The third part introduces several ways to develop a paragraph. And the last part is conclusion. By analyzing the qualities of effective paragraphs and ways of developing paragraphs, English learners can know more information about paragraphs, thus they can write more impressive and successful paragraphs.

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