

ANALYZING A PARAGRAPH

“Why analyze a paragraph,” you say, “when I’ve got to take exams over whole chapters and books? Paragraphs are kid stuff!”

Paragraphs, of course, are the individual thought units of those chapters and books. You must understand the idea communicated by one paragraph before you can make good sense of the total chapter. The following suggestions review some old, familiar principles and apply them to the complex paragraphs found in college-level reading assignments.

Types of Paragraphs

- Introductory—“openers” that get your attention
- Definitive—define terms, present new thoughts and new themes
- Transitional—summarize previous material and introduce new themes or information
- Illustrative—give examples and details, make comparisons
- Concluding—give conclusions, summaries, etc.

Major Patterns of Paragraphs

- Communicating time sequence (chronological, step-by step, etc.)
- Communicating space sequence (describing scenes, stage-settings, etc.)
- Communicating one thesis or fact with examples and details (opinion-reason, question-answer, conclusion-proof, problem-solution)
- Communicating in descending order of importance (presenting the most interesting or provocative information first)
- Communicating in ascending order of importance (building to most important information)
- Communicating by dividing a topic into its natural subdivisions
- Communicating by comparing or contrasting two or more topics

Look for one of these common patterns to help you quickly grasp the general structure of the paragraph. Of course, not all paragraphs are written and organized well. Often, you must reorganize sentences and bring order to the paragraph

Comprehending a Complex Paragraph

- A. Read the first sentence. If necessary, invert it to the order of a simple sentence (subject-predicate-object). Reduce the sentence to the fewest words that carry the most meaning—in other words, rewrite it as you would a telegraph.
- B. If the first sentence doesn’t tell you much about what is in the rest of the paragraph but simply “points” toward another sentence, then go on to the next sentence. When you find the sentence that does contain essential information, strip it down.
- C. When the main sentence (most likely the first) has been stripped, strip each remaining sentence to find the important subpoints that expand the main idea and amplify its meaning. Don’t be distracted by sentences that merely repeat ideas previously expressed.
- D. When the main sentence and the supporting ones have been stripped, you should have remaining at least a mental outline of the paragraph.
- E. Check the last sentence. Does it summarize and confirm your general impression? Some (but not all) last sentences act as summarizes or even as main ideas.
- F. Make use of clue words and phrases—“therefore,” “on the other hand,” “but,” “however,” “not,” and “in other words.”

These suggestions emphasize the importance of noting the basic thought in a paragraph. It becomes the job of the mature reader to separate systematically that basic thought from the more superfluous sentences that only restate or amplify the main idea.