



## Writing Technicalities

### Learning Outcomes

**By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:**

- ✓ How to improve sentence construction and paragraph development.

# Writing Technicalities

## Building Paragraphs

### Emphasis

The most emphatic position in a sentence is the ending. The emphasis tells the reader which are the important words or ideas in a sentence.

Consider the following versions of the same sentence:

- “The deadline is December 30th for applications for overseas assignments.”
- “December 30<sup>th</sup> is the deadline for applications for overseas assignments.”

You can also use bullets, italics, bolding, or all capital letters to make your point stronger. Use these effects sparingly, however; overusing **visual emphasis effects** can actually lessen the impact if you use too much of it.

Sometimes we want to de-emphasize bad news or painful responses by using general words rather than vivid words, burying the bad news in the middle of a sentence, or putting it in a dependent clause. (Example: “We have a plan that will allow you to meet your immediate needs on a cash basis since we cannot issue you credit at this time.”)

No matter what kind of news you are delivering, it is important to include the four C’s, and to keep your message professional and polite.

### Sentence Unity

Unified sentences contain thoughts that are related to only one idea.

For example, look at this sentence: “Our insurance plan is available in all provinces and you may name anyone as your beneficiary.”

A better way to write this would be as two sentences, “Our insurance plan is available in all provinces. Furthermore, you may name anyone as your beneficiary.”

### Sentence Structure

There are three types of sentences: simple, compound, and complex.

**Simple** sentences express one idea. They have a noun or pronoun and a verb. A sentence is simple as long as it remains one clause, containing one predicate. “John laughed” is a complete two-word sentence. We could add modifiers or prepositions and the sentence would still be simple.

A **compound** sentence has two or more main clauses, each containing a subject and a predicate, each describing an action complete in itself. The clauses in the compound sentence are joined by a connective (and, but, or, nor, for, or so), by a semi-colon, or by a colon.

If however, one part of the sentence depends on the other (if the one is the cause of the other, for instance) we have a **complex** rather than a compound sentence.

Here are some examples:

- John hit the ball. (**Simple**)
- Little Johnny in the third grade hit the ball out of the park. (Still **simple**)
- Little Johnny in the third grade hit the ball out of the park and it broke the window in his grandmother's house. (**Compound**)
- Little Johnny, who had been practicing all summer, hit the ball out of the park and it broke a window in his grandmother's house, which was located directly behind the park. (**Complex**)

Keep most sentences short in order to keep them clear. There's nothing wrong with having a long sentence every now and then, but work to keep the average length of your sentences to fewer than **17 words**. Vary the length of your sentences to make your writing more interesting. Read your work aloud so that your message is not getting lost in short, clipped sentences (which can sometimes sound aloof or even rude).

### **Paragraph Size**

One excellent guideline to follow is to **limit each paragraph to one idea**, unless you are linking related thoughts. If you are comparing the old and the new, for example, it makes sense to bring them together in one paragraph. Otherwise, stick to one idea.

Complicated information, or a discussion of several ideas, generally needs to be broken up into separate paragraphs to be easily understood.

Keep paragraphs short when possible. While paragraph length depends on content, creating paragraphs that are concise will help to frame your ideas or arguments and present them well. A good rule to follow is to question the sensibility of paragraphs over 12 lines. An **average length of 9 lines** generally makes for good readability in business writing.

Ordering a paragraph is a challenge for many writers. There are several methods that you can use:

- General to specific, or specific to general
- Least important to most important, or vice versa
- Spatial (for example, describing a room from left to right)
- Chronological
- Question and answer
- Pros and cons

## Test Your Knowledge

### Other Techniques

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### Proper Paragraphs

1) When I was a young boy I dreamed of being a firefighter or a police officer. As I grew older, I saw myself training as a paramedic, rushing to accident scenes to save lives. Gradually, however, I realized I had the talent to work with figures and ended up as a chartered accountant. Now I find myself yearning for the adventure I never had.

**Ordering Method:** \_\_\_\_\_

2) In any painting project there are some important steps to follow, such as choosing a color that is complementary to its surroundings, taping off the areas that should not be painted, preparing the surface by sanding or filling holes, and most importantly, choosing the proper painting tool in order to do a professional job.

**Ordering Method:** \_\_\_\_\_

3) There is a lot to be said for living in the country. Usually it is a quieter place to live, with less traffic and fewer people around. Property taxes are usually lower, because we pay for fewer services. The air is fresher without pollution from car exhausts and manufacturing plants and we can see the stars at night. However, there is that long commute to work since we aren't on a bus route, and we have to drive back to the city if we want to take in a movie or a concert. Now I am responsible for my water and my garbage disposal and we always wait longer than urban people for electricity to be restored after a storm.

**Ordering Method:** \_\_\_\_\_

4) Generally I prefer outdoor sports that let me just get away from it all. I like to feel the wind in my hair and the smell of salt water in my nostrils. For me, that means a day of sailing or perhaps some deep sea fishing.

**Ordering Method:** \_\_\_\_\_

## More on Paragraphs

Paragraphs also must also have unity, coherence, and emphasis.

### Unity

In good paragraphs, the emphasis is on oneness: one theme with which the writer focuses the readers' attention. This theme should be stated in the first sentence of the paragraph.

### Coherence

Coherence is achieved by carefully organizing your thoughts/material and then using mechanical devices such as:

- **Parallelism** of similar (terrorize/tyrannize) or contrasted (on the other hand) structure and words.
- **Repetition** (during one/during another) forces the reader to recall what came before and focuses their attention. Recall Winston Churchill's "We will fight them" speech.
- Use demonstrative adjectives (this, that, these, those) to refer to the concept that is the theme of the paragraph. In an opening sentence, if you referred to one evening, in the next, you would say "that day" to point back to the evening (emphasis!!!).

The most important part of coherence is using **transitional terms** to bridge thoughts together by:

- Adding one point to another (also, besides, in addition, further)
- Showing similarity (likewise, in other words)
- Showing cause and effect (since, as a result, consequently)
- Showing differences (yet, nevertheless, despite, on the other hand, conversely)
- Expressing emphasis (chiefly, primarily, more important, mainly)

### Emphasis

A little while ago we discussed how the most important part of a sentence is the end. Paragraphs are the same, in that the **ending is slightly more important than the beginning**. Strong writing throughout the paragraph is important, however, because although weak closing sentence can fail to wrap up the entire paragraph, a paragraph will not always recover from a weak opener.

One very effective way to get emphasis is to **vary both sentence length and paragraph length**. While there is no optimum length, most effective paragraphs can say what they need in six or seven sentences, but should rarely exceed nine or ten.

**Complicated information**, or a discussion of several ideas, generally needs to be broken up into separate paragraphs to be easily understood.

## Rhythm

You should also vary the length and structure of your sentences so the pace of your writing doesn't become too monotonous or too choppy.

Sometimes you may want to use long sentences to develop rhythm or to take a lilting or rolling approach. In the following paragraph, however, the ideas unfold too slowly. Note that the sentences are similar in both length and structure.

"The Unicorn Corporation will close its plant in North Branch next fall. The closing will occur because of monetary cutbacks. The closing will put 500 people out of work. Monetary cutbacks will also close a plant in South Branch. Next fall, 200 employees will be laid off and another 200 reassigned."

This example also demonstrates a different problem where the information is overly compressed and the reader must retain a lot of information.

"Next fall, because of monetary cutbacks, the Unicorn Corporation will close plants in North Branch, where 500 people will be put out of work, and in South Branch, where 200 employees will be laid off and 200 will be reassigned."

## Voice

There are two voices: active and passive.

The **active voice**:

- Is direct (The manager pressed the button on the photocopier.)
- Reduces length
- Clarifies the sentence
- Produces a crisper, more vital style

The **passive voice**:

- Is indirect (The button on the photocopier was pressed by the manager.)
- Reverses the normal subject-verb-object pattern
- Includes some form of the verb be, followed by a past participle (was pressed)
- Usually considered weak, obscure, wordy, and lacks vigor

**Examples:**

- Passive: "Be assured that action will be taken." (What action will be taken, and by whom?)
- Active: "I assure you that I will act."

If you find yourself using past participles like:

- Was given
- To be accompanied
- Had been shown
- Will be measured
- Is being removed

Then stop and consider whether an active structure might not be more effective. However, if you are writing to break bad or unpleasant news, the passive voice is less direct and will weaken the link between you and the **bad news**. The passive voice focuses on actions rather than personalities; it helps you be impersonal and tactful.

**Test Your knowledge**

**The photocopier is out of toner.**

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**I have a car but I do not drive it to work.**

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**I need some picture hooks if I am going to get all these frames hung today.**

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**Further Reading:**

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