

n the Papers

FIVE VARIETIES OF POINT PLACEMENT: THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE ENGLISH PARAGRAPH, PART V

GEORGE J. GOPEN

The author is Professor Emeritus of the Practice of Rhetoric at Duke University.

In previous articles in this series on paragraph structure, I have claimed that if a paragraph is born to make a point, that point should most often be articulated explicitly, in a single sentence. The placement of that point sentence is crucial: Readers expect to find it either (1) as the last sentence of the paragraph's issue (and that issue can be one, two, or three sentences) or (2) at the end of the discussion that flows from that issue. This article explores when each of these two point placements works best.

Where point placement is concerned, we can recognize five distinct paragraph types.

Type 1: Opening Paragraphs

The opening paragraph of a document is unique. Readers have remarkably rigid expectations of what to find where. They almost always expect that the point will be articulated in the final sentence.

It makes sense. As a reader, you do not want to hear the writer introduce herself in a sforzando, followed by a decrescendo: "HERE IS MY POINT. This is what I sound like. We'll be spending some time together. Hi there." They want to meet the reader in exactly the opposite order of introduction: "Hi there. We'll be spending some time together. This is what I sound like. Are you ready for my point now? HERE IT IS."

The opposite, unexpected order produces an experience something like when you walk into a movie theater five minutes after the show has started. You anxiously try to take off your coat and to settle into your seat without spilling the popcorn. How much nicer it would have been to get there with time to spare, to take off your coat at leisure, to settle comfortably into your seat, and then to pop a few kernels of the popcorn into your mouth to give you the Proustian sense that the movie experience can now start.

Save the point for the end of opening paragraphs. Your readers will appreciate it.

Type 2: Final Paragraphs

The same holds true for final paragraphs: Put the point at the end. It will please your readers, who want to finish your text by experiencing a significant feeling of closure. If you do it backwards, it feels backwards:

"So you see, I WIN! Because I have generated all these persuasive concepts. And I've done it by putting together all these individual details."

No, your reader wants a sense of crescendo to the final chords:

"So, from all these individual details, I've put together all these persuasive concepts, **as a result of which, I WIN!**"

Type 3: Medial Paragraphs

We can refer to all paragraphs other than openers and closers as medial paragraphs. For them, the reader's default value expectation is that the point will tend to appear at the end of the issue, before the discussion begins. Most of the time, readers want to flow forward with your thoughts in this orderly fashion: (1) Here's the issue, up front, where I expect it to be; (2) at the end of the issue, I find the point that will be discussed; and (3) now I am ready for the discussion of this point.

You are safer in putting your point toward the beginning because busy readers, trying to get as much as they can as fast as they can, will tend to dip a toe in the paragraph's water to see if it is worth their while to swim through it. We skim in exactly this way. Because many of your readers may well choose not to read the whole paragraph, you are best to put that point up front, while you still have your audience.

Type 4: Dramatic Medial Paragraphs

What if a medial paragraph would benefit from the drama created by the discussion

leading inexorably up to a climactic moment? That can be done: issue; discuss, discuss, discuss; crescendo-ing up to the POINT. But if you wish to avail yourself of such a progression, you should take the three following concerns seriously:

- Insofar as possible, the reader should be made aware at the end of the issue that the point has not yet been made.
- The reader should feel the pressure building as the paragraph builds toward the delivery of its point, urging readers to stay the course.
- The discussion must be understandable without the point having been made in advance.

Type 5: Complex Dramatic Medial Paragraphs

What if the paragraph would benefit from a dramatic build to the point at its end, but the reader could not understand the discussion without having encountered the point beforehand? In that case, put the point both at the end of the issue and at the end of the discussion.

When to Override Expectations

Those five types will cover most of your needs. However, a paragraph is a large enough unit of discourse for you to be able to override these default value reader expectations. For example, you can make two points in a paragraph if you wish; but your reader must be led to expect there will be two:

In dealing with such a conflict, two separate concerns must be considered. The first of these is. . . . [Three more sentences.] The second concern, equally important, is. . . .

Knowing what your readers generally expect will lead you to understand when you have to take matters into your

own hands. We have a name for such explicit reading instructions: We call them metadiscourse.

Metadiscourse is discourse about discourse. I began the second paragraph of this essay with a helpful map of metadiscourse: “Where point placement is concerned, we can recognize five distinct paragraph types.” When the reader needs such guidance to form an expectation concerning the shape of the text, metadiscourse is of great help. When it annoys your readers by treating them like unobservant clods, metadiscourse is a very bad thing indeed: “Each of these types will be presented with its own rubric.” aargh! I can see that, thank you.

Question

Why are opening and closing paragraphs such exceptions to the predominant expectation that the point will appear just before its discussion begins? The answer is simple: At the end of a first or last paragraph, you can count on your readers still being with you. Almost no one gives up on a text midway through the first paragraph: They *now* that the point will be waiting for them in the final sentence.

Almost no one will quit midway through a final paragraph: Having come so far, they wish to experience the satisfaction of reaching the final moment, the moment of closure. No concertgoer wishes to leave with 90 seconds remaining in the featured piece—even when disgusted by the performance to that point.

There is yet another reader expectation attached to the point appearing at the end of opening paragraphs—and it is the single most rigid reader expectation of them all: Readers presume that the last sentence of the opening paragraph will state not only the point of that paragraph but also the “contract” the writer is extending to the reader as to what the document as a whole will produce. We can call that sentence the contract sentence. My colleagues Joseph Williams

and Gregory Colomb demonstrated this dramatically but never published the results of their experiment.

Here is what they did: They took a handful of graduate student essays that had all received the grade of *C* and made a revised version of each by changing only the contract sentence. They substituted there a sentence that, though reasonable and well written, did *not* give the reader a sense of what the text as a whole would address. They then sent packages of essays—each containing half originals and half revised versions—to English professors across the country, with a small honorarium, asking them to grade the essays and to offer two or three sentences of support for their grades. If the original versions received *C* or *B*, with suitable praise for the content and the expression; but all the revised versions received *B*, *C*, or even *D*, with complaints about poor thought development, unfocused issues, and substandard writing. In gain, this is the most rigid of all reader expectations.

One exception: If your text requires multiple paragraphs to introduce the rest of the document, the contract statement should be the last sentence of the final introductory paragraph. When that is the case, you will aid the readers greatly if you give them an obvious visual clue that the introduction will take more than a single paragraph. Use a quadruple space before the next paragraph, or a row of asterisks, or a rubric—anything so readers can tell immediately they are being presented with a multi-paragraph introduction.

As with sentences, paragraphs carry within them a reader’s manual in the form of their structure. Instinctively, we know where to look for what.