

Rhetorical types

In reading a second (or, third) language, it is extremely important to be aware of how paragraphs and articles are structured. Once our students are intermediate or advanced, they are ready to learn something about the structure of paragraphs and essays.

Why? There are two reasons: First, it improves their overall reading strategies and thus their comprehension. It helps enormously when reading to get the general meaning of a paragraph — even when some of the details are not clear.

Second, when they later begin to do their own writing, it helps their organization, because the notions of paragraph and essay structure are already familiar, making the transition from reading such material to writing such material all that much easier.

Sometimes the students learn about paragraph and article structure from an exercise that focuses on it. For example, the reading “The pet dog” focuses in part on how a newspaper article is organized. Similarly, the reading using Bertrand Russell’s speech ‘What I Have Lived For’ focuses in part on essay organization.

Sometimes the students’ awareness of the structure can come from having them outline a particularly well-organized reading.

And, sometimes it comes just from having had the teacher point it out often enough when it is present in a piece that the students are reading.

One obvious source for examples of well organized paragraphs and essays are nature and science books. In these books, the organization is often extremely clear and these make excellent intermediate and advanced readings.

Another source are older composition textbooks in which the authors illustrate different rhetorical types by using examples from outstanding writers. Many times these paragraphs need adaptation, but these short passages not only make excellent advanced readings but also are a good way to illustrate paragraph and essay organization.

One final source, but a source of mixed quality, are the countless composition textbooks found largely unused on many of our own bookshelves. If the model paragraphs have been written by the authors themselves, use them only with great caution. About half of these are both badly written and extremely boring. If these bore us to tears, they are completely useless in the classroom.

The other half, however, includes many useful and interesting paragraphs and model essays, usually taken from authentic sources, in which the organization is clear and which are interesting to read.

There are many ways of making students aware of paragraph and essay organization, but one way is by using strips stories. For example, with Bertrand Russell’s five-paragraph essay ‘What I Have Lived For’, cut the title off. Then, cut the essay into the five paragraphs. Divide the class into pairs, and hand out all five paragraphs to each pair of students. Tell them to find out the correct organization of the paragraphs. For this essay, it should be relatively easy. Tell the students to be prepared to justify their organization, as knowing why one particular answer is right is than more important than the answer itself.

Two selections — this time paragraphs, not essays — ready to be organized are given below. Remember that each of these is a single paragraph, with a topic sentence plus supporting sections that occur in a certain order.

The titles did not come with the original paragraphs. The titles have been placed at the beginning of each paragraph to let the readers know what to expect in the paragraph, assuming that they pay attention to the title, something that usually depends on whether they have been taught to or not.

The first is a paragraph from Rachel Carson's *The Sea Around Us*. It has been edited quite a bit to make it more readable for intermediate readers. Notice that even if the reader does not understand every word, it is still quite possible to find the basic organization. Occasionally, in fact, students have developed the false belief that it is not possible to read a passage for basic understanding unless they know each and every word; this paragraph is a good example of one in which the organization is clear without every word necessarily being understood.

Rachel Carson's paragraph "The Whales" starts with her topic sentence, which summarizes the paragraph and outlines its organization by dividing the world's whales into three groups: the plankton-eaters, the fish-eaters, and the squid-eaters. Next, each kind of whale is discussed, beginning with the first kind mentioned in the topic sentence, followed by the second kind mentioned in the topic sentence, and ending with the last kind mentioned in the topic sentence.

The James Thurber paragraph 'Courtship' serves two purposes: it amuses us as it makes fun of human behavior and it illustrates the use of problem-solution organization. Again, this paragraph has been edited to make it easier to read.

The arrangement is a problem-solution organization. The first section states the problem — the courtship problems faced by the male fiddler crab. The next three sentences discuss a solution that would not work, that is, this section points out that the male fiddler crab cannot solve his "courtship" problem by behaving like a cave man. The next section discusses the solution that the male fiddler crab has chosen. And, the next to last section, evaluates how successful this solution is. Finally, Thurber concludes by generalizing about the courtship problems of all species.

This essay is unusual both because of Thurber's writing skill and because of his sense of humor, but the organization is quite typical: state a problem, (optional) discuss consequences, (optional) discuss solutions that do not work well, present the writer's solution, evaluate the solution just presented.

This type of presentation is extremely common in television commercials. Take a mouthwash commercial, for example. The problem is bad breath, with its consequence: no social life. The solution, of course, is to use Brand X mouthwash.

Instructions: Cut the following paper up into six parts: a title plus five sections. The title and the five sections are part of one paragraph. Figure out the correct way to organize the paragraph and put your five sections in the right order.

“Courtship”

As in the case of the males of all species, however, he gets out of bed next morning, splashes some water on his face, and tries again.

By nightfall on an average courting day, a fiddler crab who has been standing on tiptoe for eight or ten hours waving a heavy claw in the air is in pretty tired and discouraged .

He has one enormously large and powerful claw, usually brightly colored, and you might suppose that all he had to do was reach out and grab some passing female fiddler crab. The very earliest fiddler crabs may have tried to do this, but, if so, they got slapped for their pains. A female fiddler crab will not tolerate any caveman stuff; she never has and she doesn't intend to start now.

In courtship, the male fiddler crab has less difficulty than some animals, but it can hardly be said that everything is easy for him.

To attract a female, a fiddler crab has to stand on tiptoe and wave his bright colored claw in the air. If any female in the neighborhood finds him interesting — and you would be surprised how many do not — she comes over and talks to him for a minute or two before going on with her business. As many as a hundred females may talk to him for a minute or two before losing interest and going on about their business.

Instructions: Cut the following paper up into five parts: a title plus four sections. The title and the four sections are part of one paragraph. Figure out the correct way to organize the paragraph and put your five sections in the right order.

“Whales”

Fish-eating whales may find food over a somewhat wider range of ocean, but they are restricted to places where there are enormous populations of schooling fish. The blue water of the tropics and of the open ocean basins offers little food for either of these groups.

The plankton-eating whales can exist only where there are lots and lots of small shrimp to supply their enormous food requirements. This forces most of them to live in Arctic and Antarctic waters and the high warm latitudes.

The sperm whale has taken deeper waters for his hunting grounds; his food is the deep-water population of squids, including the giant squid, which lives at depths of 500 meters or more. The head of the sperm whale is often marked with long stripes, which consist of a great number of circular scars made by the suckers of the squid. From this evidence we can imagine the battles that go on, in the darkness of the water, between these two huge creatures—the sperm whale with its 70-ton bulk, the squid with a body as long as 10 meters, and writhing, grasping arms extending the total length of the animal to perhaps 17 meters.

Whales have divided the sea's food among them, separating themselves into three groups: the plankton-eaters, the fish-eaters, and the squid-eaters.