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How to Write a Paragraph – A How to Guide Curriculum Map

The aim of these lessons is to help students write various types of paragraphs from grades five through to first year of secondary school.

The resource contains many work sheets which can be used individually by students or in groups. Many of these work sheets are most useful if completed by pairs of students. It is also advisable for students to discuss the ideas generated by the work sheets in larger groups.

Much of this resource is written from a student perspective, so that teachers may give students the pages which they need or students can use the lessons to write their compositions at home.

Topics Include:

Teacher Note: What is a Paragraph Overview

Lesson One: Exercises in Unity?

Lesson Two: Exercises in Topic Sentence

Lesson Three: Exercises in Coherence

Lesson Four: Exercises in Concluding Sentence

Lesson Five: Types of Paragraphs

- Exposition, Narration, Description

Lesson Six: Using the Writing Process

- Prewriting, Writing the First Draft, Editing and Revising, Writing the final copy



USING THE WRITING PROCESS

The writing process is not new to schools in North America. Today, students learn to use the writing process as soon as they begin to learn to write. Much of what is said here, then, will be nothing new to teachers of writing. However, perhaps isolating the procedure on the next few pages will help teachers to teach and students to learn.

The writing process consists of four major steps:

- prewriting
- writing the first draft
- editing and revising
- writing the final copy

Steps 2 and 3 may be repeated as many times as necessary; the student may write, edit and revise successive drafts until he or she is satisfied with the work. D.H. Lawrence, the distinguished novelist, wrote seven drafts of his masterpiece, Sons and Lovers, and was still not completely satisfied.





USING THE WRITING PROCESS (Continued)

PREWRITING

It is very difficult to sit down and write effectively without doing any preplanning. Many educators consider the first stage of the writing process to be the most important.

Prewriting consists of four parts:

- Brainstorming
- Research
- Selection of ideas to be used
- Prewriting Plan.

1. BRAINSTORMING

The first stage of the writing process, after choosing the topic, is the brainstorming stage. The purpose of this stage is to use what the student already knows to begin to compile information which will be used for the final draft.

At the brainstorming stage, the student writes down on a piece of paper any information which pertains to the topic as these ideas come into his or her mind. The student may use mind-mapping techniques if these are easier.

The next four pages show sheets which may be used for brainstorming each of the three types of paragraphs in this resource:

- the exposition
- the narrative
- description.

Teachers may use these sheets or devise their own. It is important, however, that students be given some guidance to teach them techniques for brainstorming. The teacher should not assume that students already know how to do this.



USING THE WRITING PROCESS (Continued)

PREWRITING

BRAINSTORMING AN EXPOSITION

TOPIC: What do you intend to explain?

Fill in the chart with as much information as you know.

Who is involved?	What is involved?
Where did it take place?	When did it take place?
How did it happen?	What events occurred?



USING THE WRITING PROCESS (Continued)

PREWRITING

BRAINSTORMING A NARRATIVE (Part 1)

Fill in the chart with your first ideas.

List five possible settings for a story (time and place):

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Briefly describe five possible characters who interest you (name and short description):

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

List five possible events which could occur to one or more of these characters in one or more of the settings you have listed:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.



USING THE WRITING PROCESS (Continued)

PREWRITING

BRAINSTORMING A NARRATIVE (Part 2)

Fill in the chart with ideas chosen from completing part 1.

List the setting you will use for your story (time and place):

Describe the setting:

Choose the central character for your story. State his or her name and provide a short description of the character's appearance and personality:

List other characters you may use:

Choose an event which will occur. List the sequence of events which will take place:



USING THE WRITING PROCESS (Continued)

PREWRITING

BRAINSTORMING A DESCRIPTION

TOPIC: What or whom do you intend to describe?

In the center of this page, do a mind-map, starting with what the person, place or object that you intend to describe looks like. If you are describing a person, add a section on the personality.



USING THE WRITING PROCESS (Continued)

PREWRITING

2. RESEARCH

Research may not be required in the types of student writing presented in this resource. Certain assignments may only require brainstorming.

However, research may be required for any of the following reasons:

- The student is writing an exposition on a topic unknown to him or her, a topic which is not considered common knowledge, such as *The Wright Brothers* or a country which he or she has never visited.
- The student is writing a short story set in a particular place or time and needs to know more about that place or time.
- The student is writing a factual description about someone or something with which he or she is not familiar.

Teachers often assume that students know how to research. Quite often, students simply copy information from an encyclopedia. They need to be taught how to do research well. The teacher should stress the following techniques:

- Students should read the encyclopedia, textbook or whatever source and then try to express the ideas in their own words. This will check to see that students are really understanding what they have read.
- Students should prepare a list of relevant questions (or the teacher may provide such a list). The kinds of questions asked in the brainstorming sheets on pages 47 to 50 of this resource could be helpful. Alternatively, students could ask simple questions such as: **Who? When? Where? How? Why?**
- Students should be cautioned not to write down every word they read. As they put the ideas into their own words, they should also select the information that seems to be important and only write that down.
- Students should note the source of all information they are writing down. Particularly in the higher grades, students will need to provide these sources with their finished writing.



USING THE WRITING PROCESS (Continued)

PREWRITING

3. SELECTION OF IDEAS TO BE USED:

After completing the brainstorming and research, the student should have many ideas for the paragraph. Now is the time to start selecting the ideas which will actually be used and to organize them in some logical form.

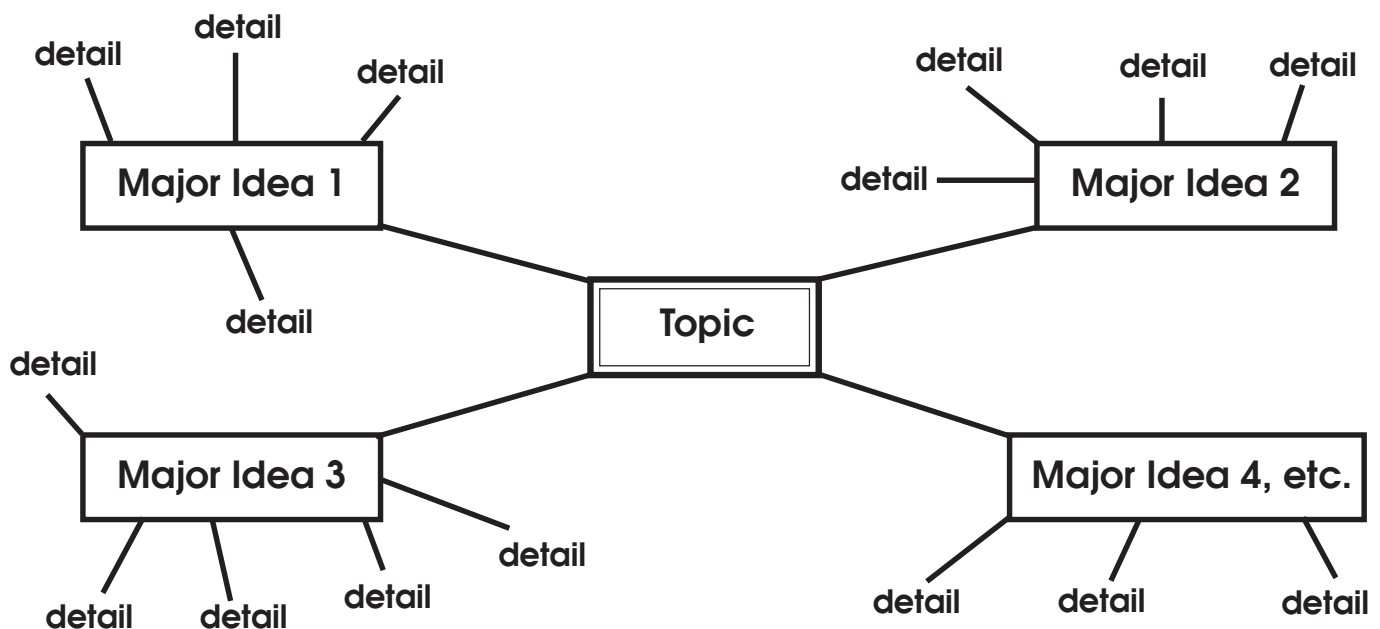
Perhaps the easiest way for students to do this is to follow this pattern:

- Group the ideas that are similar. Each grouping will eventually form one part of the paragraph.
- Eliminate any ideas which do not seem to be useful. If the paragraph seems very long, perhaps even useful ideas may have to be eliminated. Select the most important ideas to use in the first draft.
- If there are parts which need more detail, add the detail at this stage.

4. PREWRITING PLAN:

The Prewriting Plan may be the most important step in any piece of writing. If it is done well, the prewriting plan shows the entire composition on one sheet of paper. (Students should use larger sheets of paper for long or more complicated pieces of writing, but shorter pieces should fit on one 8½" by 11" sheet.)

An example of a prewriting plan is shown below.





USING THE WRITING PROCESS (Continued)

WRITING THE FIRST DRAFT

Most beginning writers need to work on content and organization; style will come later; and mechanics can be helped by proofreading, editing or using one of many computer programs. The steps in the Prewriting stage will help to provide adequate content for the essay. What follows is a simple pattern which should help the student to organize the paragraph. The pattern can be changed to meet the requirements of the specific writing task.

Various patterns can be developed for beginning each form of writing. The requirements of a particular piece of writing will determine the pattern to be used. It is important that the writer catch the interest of the reader at the beginning of the piece; it is also important in an exposition or a description to provide some kind of overview in the topic sentence as a guide for the reader.

1. Begin with a sentence which catches the reader's interest. In a narrative this may mean starting in the middle of the action. In a description or exposition, the opening may be a quotation or an interesting idea related to the topic. The idea of the opening sentence may be developed or explained in several sentences which follow it.
2. In a story develop the paragraph as necessary; be sure to include necessary background information in the first few sentences. In an exposition or description, state the overall topic in a single sentence.
3. Provide all the details of the plot (in a narrative) or the explanations, examples, descriptions in other forms of writing.
4. Conclude an exposition or description by restating the topic in a new way. When writing a narrative, end the paragraph in a way which is satisfying for the reader. Avoid the I woke up ending.



USING THE WRITING PROCESS (Continued)

EDITING AND REVISING

Editing and revising are not merely proof-reading. Rather they comprise a very important step in the writing process at which stage the student will do a thorough evaluation of his or her writing and will receive feedback from peers or parents. Students need to be taught **how** to edit; they should not simply be expected to know how to do it. Unless students are taught how to edit, peer edits will consist of comments like “Good work” or “Check spelling”--and these comments are of little practical use in improving a piece of writing.

Students should begin to learn how to edit in the later grades of elementary school, and continue to learn how to edit through secondary school. The editing directions which follow are designed for elementary school and early secondary school students. More complete editing suggestions will be found in *How to Write and Essay*, SSR1-08.

Students often have more difficulty editing their own work than editing someone else’s work. It is, therefore, good practice for students to peer edit, not only to help the other student to improve, but also to learn how to improve their own writing.

Editing works best if the student keeps in mind the four categories--**Content, Organization, Style and Mechanics**. Each of these categories will be examined briefly in the following pages. There are various activities, particularly in the Mechanics section, which will help students learn how to edit their own and their classmates’ work.

Peer editing should be looked at in two ways: A good peer edit not only helps the writer, but also the editor. Students perhaps learn more from editing someone else’s writing than from editing their own. Perhaps this knowledge gained from editing other students’ work will eventually carry over to their own writing.



USING THE WRITING PROCESS (Continued)

EDITING AND REVISING

EDITING FOR CONTENT

The teacher should always make perfectly clear to students what the expectations of an assignment are. These expectations will normally highlight what is expected in terms of content. Teachers should provide students with a clear editing sheet for any particular assignment, if the teacher expects students to edit their own or each other's work for content.

Bearing that in mind, the teacher may use what follows as part of the editing sheet for a paragraph.

Editing and Exposition or a Description:

1. Have all the relevant questions been answered in the pieces of writing. Relevant questions may include:
 - Who?
 - What?
 - Where?
 - When?
 - Why?
 - How?
2. Has sufficient detail been provided by the writer? If so, provide examples of good detail. If not, where in the paragraph could more detail be added? Do you have any suggestions that may add detail to the paragraph?
3. Are there parts of the paragraph which you do not understand? Is this lack of understanding caused by the way the paragraph is written or by the omission of important information? If important information is missing where could it be added?
4. Is the paragraph interesting? Does it have an interesting opening and an interesting conclusion? Are the middle sentences interesting? If so, which ones? If not, which ones?



USING THE WRITING PROCESS (Continued)

EDITING AND REVISING (Continued)

EDITING FOR CONTENT

Editing a Narrative:

1. **Opening:**
 - Does the story open in an interesting way?
 - Are there better ways to begin the story? If yes, what are they?
2. **Plot:**
 - Does the plot move at an appropriate pace?
 - Does it reach a climax?
 - Is there a satisfying conclusion to the plot?
3. **Setting:**
 - Has the writer provided enough detail about time and place so that the reader gets a “feel” for the setting?
4. **Characterization:**
 - Do the characters exhibit real emotions and behavior?
 - Are the characters only names without personality or appearance? If yes, where might the writer describe or develop the characters in the story? What character traits might be appropriate?
5. **Theme:**
 - What is the story about?
 - Does the message come through clearly? If yes, where does this occur? If no, what could the writer do to make a clearer message?

Sections 3 and 4 on *Editing an Exposition or a Description* (page 11) could also be used here.



USING THE WRITING PROCESS (Continued)

EDITING AND REVISING (Continued)

EDITING FOR ORGANIZATION

A Check List of Questions to Ask:

1. Does the opening sentence catch the reader's interest? Why or why not?
2. Is there a clear topic sentence for the paragraph?
 - If so, which sentence is it?
3. Does the paragraph possess unity; that is, does each paragraph discuss only one main idea?
4. Is the paragraph coherent; that is, does the paragraph flow smoothly with a logical arrangement or order?
5. Are transitions used to provide coherence?
6. Is there a concluding sentence?
 - If so, does it do an effective job in finishing the paragraph?
 - In an exposition or description, does the concluding sentence sum up the topic of the paragraph?
 - In a narrative, does the concluding sentence provide a satisfying ending to the story?



USING THE WRITING PROCESS (Continued)

EDITING AND REVISING (Continued)

EDITING FOR STYLE

Style is the most sophisticated of the four components of the writing process and is developed through writing programs to and including the university level. Students at elementary school can begin their study of style through writing and editing.

We often use the word *style* in reference to fashion, as in *style of clothes*. A person with style is said to possess a knowledge of the latest trends, a certain flair. In writing, style refers to the way the writer uses language to create specific effects or to reach certain goals.

Thus, style is the use of words and the arrangement of words to form sentences.

Questions to Ask about Style:

1. Does the writer use effective and precise nouns and verbs in the composition? Which are particularly good examples? Which nouns and verbs are particularly vague or colorless?
2. Are adjectives and adverbs used effectively? Are they overused? Might some of them be replaced with more colorful nouns and verbs?
3. Does the writer use imagery? Is the imagery effective? Does the writer use old and worn out similes and metaphors? Does the writer create new and original similes and metaphors?
4. Does the writer use the sounds of words effectively? Do the sounds of words present an appropriate tone?



USING THE WRITING PROCESS (Continued)

EDITING AND REVISING (Continued)

EDITING FOR MECHANICS

Mechanics in writing refers to some of the most basic components of language programs in the elementary school--spelling, grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure.

Not all students have the same problems with mechanics. Some are good spellers; others are not. Some have persistent problems with certain aspects of grammar; others have a good grammar sense. Some students speak and write in sentences; others always speak and write in incomplete or run-on sentences. While the school curriculum provides basic instruction in all these aspects of mechanics, some students will need constant reminders of the areas they can improve.

There are many aids available for students who have weaknesses in mechanics. Spell-Check on computers is a valuable aid, but requires a knowledgeable proof-reader. Grammar checks on computers are more difficult to use, since much of the way we write depends on personal preference.

Although there are many individual differences, generally students seem to have difficulty with only a few areas of mechanics. Those which students often need to focus on are:

- common errors in spellings
- the use of the apostrophe
- the use of a consistent verb tense
- agreement of pronouns and antecedents
- the use of the semicolon (usually covered in secondary school).

Only the first two (common errors in spelling and use of the apostrophe) are dealt with in this resource.



USING THE WRITING PROCESS (Continued)

EDITING AND REVISING (Continued)

EDITING FOR MECHANICS (Continued)

Common Errors in Spelling:

Many students have no difficulty in spelling and are able to see their errors clearly when they edit their writing. Others have a great deal of difficulty. There are, however, words which students consistently misspell and students need to be aware of these. A writer can easily improve spelling if he or she is on the lookout for specific words which cause problems. Following is a list of words that appear incorrectly spelled in many students' writing:

- **receive:** The "*i before e*" rule has too many exceptions to be considered a rule. Generally, "*ei*" will follow the letter "*c*", and students need to bear this in mind when writing words like **receive**, **deceive**, **conceive**, **ceiling**.
- **achieve:** There are many words which follow the rule such as: **achieve**, **friend**, **piece**, **chief** and **relieve**.
- **separate:** Note that the letter "*a*" follows the "*p*".
- **definite:** Note "*ite*", not "*ate*".
- **their, they're, there:** **Their** is possessive, meaning "belonging to them". **They're** is the contraction for "there are". **There** means "in that place".
- **occurred, occurring, referred, referring, preferred preferring:** These words double the letter "*r*" before adding "*ed*" or "*ing*". Note also **occurrence** doubles the "*r*", but **reference** and **preference** do not.
- **dependent, independent:** These adjectives are spelled "*ent*". **Dependent** with an "*a*" is a noun often seen on income tax forms to mean "someone who is dependent".
- **words beginning with a prefix such as "un", "re", or "mis":** Simply add the prefix to the word, as in **unnecessary**, **recommend** or **misspell**.

Activity on Spelling:

Create your own **spelling collage**, using a piece of bristol board. Make a list of words you misspell. When a word appears on the list three times, put it on the bristol board collage.



USING THE WRITING PROCESS (continued)

EDITING AND REVISING (Continued)

EDITING FOR MECHANICS (Continued)

The Use of the Apostrophe:

Some students have difficulty using the apostrophe correctly. The rules which follow are very simple. Many writers try to complicate these rules by making exceptions to them, but these rules can cover every major example of the apostrophe.

Uses of the Apostrophe:

- Possession in Nouns
- Contractions

The apostrophe is used to show **possession or ownership**. Originally possession was shown in Anglo-Saxon by the addition of the letters “*es*” to a noun. The “*e*” was later omitted and the apostrophe was used in its place.

The apostrophe is also used to show the omission of letters in **contractions**. Contractions are two words shortened into one word by omitting letters. Some common contractions are *didn’t* (the letter “*o*” is omitted), *who’s* (meaning *who is*), *they’re* (meaning *they are*).

Using the Apostrophe to Form Possession:

Singular nouns form possession by adding ‘s to the noun. Follow this rule and you will always be correct, even if the noun ends in *s*. Some examples:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| • Boy= singular noun | Boy’s= belong to the boy; |
| • Mr. Smith = singular noun | Mr. Smith’s = belongs to Mr. Smith |
| • Brutus = singular noun | Brutus’s = belonging to Brutus |
| • Dickens = singular nouns | Dickens’s = belonging to Dickens |

Plural nouns ending in *s* form possession by adding ‘ to the noun. Example:

- | | |
|---------------------|------------------------------|
| • Boys= plural noun | boy’s= belonging to the boys |
|---------------------|------------------------------|

Plural nouns not ending in *s* form possession by adding ‘s to the noun. Some examples:

- | | |
|--------------------------|--|
| • Children = plural noun | children’s = belonging to the children |
| • Data = plural noun | data’s = belonging to the data |
| • Women = plural noun | women’s = belonging to the women. |



USING THE WRITING PROCESS (Continued)

EDITING AND REVISING (Continued)

EDITING FOR MECHANICS (Continued)

The Use of the Apostrophe (Continued):

Writers who follow the rules on page 61 will **never be wrong** in forming possession. There are writers and grammarians who complicate these rules by saying that if the singular noun ending in “s” is pronounced “es” then one adds ‘s; if the word is not pronounced *es* then add only the apostrophe; *Jesus’ sake* (meaning for the sake of Jesus) would then be pronounced *Jesus sake*, but *Jesus’s sake* would be pronounced *Jesuses sake*. This kind of usage is often found in hymns or prayers using poetry, but for the most practical purpose it unnecessarily complicates a simple rule of the English language (and really there are not very many simple rules that apply, are there? So why complicate it?)

Using the Apostrophe with Pronouns:

The apostrophe is **never used with personal pronouns to form possession**; it is used only to form contractions. Here are some examples:

- *who’s* = who is; the possessive is *whose*
- *their’s* does not exist; the possessive is *theirs*
- *our’s* similarly does not exist; the possessive is *ours*

Indefinite pronouns, however, **use the apostrophe to form possession**. Indefinite pronouns are words like *one*, *everyone*, *anyone*, etc. Here are some examples:

- *everyone’s* job
- *one’s* own work

These simple rules will govern the use of the apostrophe. Many students have difficulty with the concept because they either confuse the meaning of the term possession or they are overwhelmed by the number of seeming exceptions. If the teacher stresses that there are no exceptions, then the task becomes easier for students to learn.



USING THE WRITING PROCESS (Continued)

EDITING AND REVISING (Continued)

EDITING FOR MECHANICS (Continued)

The Use of the apostrophe (Continued):

Activity on the Use of the Apostrophe:

1. Form the possessive of each of the following words:

- | | |
|--------------|-------------------|
| a) the boy | b) Judy |
| c) Mr. Jones | d) Americans |
| e) My mother | f) Japan |
| g) Tomatoes | h) Michael Jordan |
| i) Brothers | j) Tennessee. |

2. Four words in the following sentence contain incorrect apostrophes. Four other words are missing required apostrophes. In groups of two or three, decide which are the four incorrect words and which four words need apostrophes. Be prepared to support your answers.

In his work Dickens often writes about evil society. He knows about debtors prison because his father spent some time in a prison. He knows also about the evils' of the workhouse, where people who are very poor have to live in order to eat. Oliver Twist is a character who's life begins in a workhouse, but Oliver is adopted by a rich family. However, Dickens does not believe that life is easy. Oliver is kidnapped by Fagin and his boys who are pickpockets'. The boys steal from people but they arent sorry for it. The pickpockets' job is really to support Fagins lifestyle by providing him with articles he may sell. An acquaintance of Fagin named Nancy tells Olivers new parents where they can find him, Nancy's boyfriend, Bill Sykes, kills' her. Finally, Fagin and Bill Sykes are punished for their crimes. Dickens novel, Oliver Twist, clearly shows problems in society.



USING THE WRITING PROCESS (Continued)

WRITING THE FINAL COPY

If a student has followed all the steps in this resource, writing the final copy of the paragraph will be simple, because all the work has been done. A student who wrote the first draft on a word-processor has been able to make revisions quite simply. Now all that needs to be done is to put the program through spell-check and format it to fit the pages.

What follows is a check-list for the final copy of the paragraph:

- Be sure that the paragraph is double-spaced and that adequate margins have been left on all sides.
- Use the accepted format for footnotes and bibliography if these are required.
- Add a title page. Some teachers like students to put their writing into duotangs because these add a touch of formality to the assignment; other teachers do not like duotangs because they add more bulk. Since the teacher has to carry the work home or to another room to begin the arduous job of marking, he or she may resent the bulk caused by duotangs. The student should check with the teacher before submitting the paragraph.
- Proofread the paragraph carefully. Even a good spell-check program will not be able to catch typographical errors.