

## Writing Guidelines Marshall Brown

Good expository writing should be informative and interesting. Avoid the temptation to be or to sound impressive. A very occasional use of technical jargon (e.g., words like "deconstruction" or "orientalism") can inform readers of contexts of your thought. Jargony abstraction is defensive armor. Be yourself! Tell your readers what they need to know. Omit inessentials. (For instance, don't quote a whole sentence if only two words matter; just quote the two words.) Take pride in your writing. It's not enough to say something true; if you don't say it well, people won't want to read it, or won't remember it.

Paragraphs are the major building blocks of an argument. They must be substantial components of reasonable length. Normally, they should run 250-400 words. With rare exceptions (such as, maybe, the first paragraph) paragraphs of fewer than five sentences are unacceptable. Short paragraphs fragment the argument; it's like building a structure out of chips rather than out of bricks. And paragraphs much over 400 words are too big to chew.

**Title.** There are two components to an essay: text and title. A good title is half the battle. The first rule of writing applies with special force to titles: make it informative and interesting; but if it's impressive, it will immediately put your readers to sleep.

An informative title identifies the subject matter and maybe the approach. "Fontane's Names" would be the first type. It doesn't give away much, and it doesn't help you organize your thoughts, but at least it doesn't get in the way. (Note that I would title the essay "The Names in *Effi Briest*" if I thought that novel somehow unique, but I'd use the shorter title even for an essay on EB if I considered EB representative of Fontane.) "The Art of Fontane's Names" moves toward the second type, since it hints at the nature of your interest in his names. "Fontane's Names: A Deconstructive Approach" is the impressive version of the second type, but avoid subtitles if you can. "Fontane's Deconstructive Names" is better. But then deconstruction is a catch-all these days, and sounds predictable. I'd go for a less impressive, ordinary word that hints at your individual angle in preference to a jargon word that only names your affiliation. Better would be "Fontane's Comic Names," which forecast a discussion of humor by way of scrutinizing the name; even better might be a less generic adjective. I might opt for "Fontane's Funny Names." Not too many titles have "funny" in them. Suddenly, I wake up.

A title is interesting if it gives a shape to the investigation. Basically, an interesting title is a dialectical title. It names or hints at a problem with different sides to be scrutinized. In a title, the word "and" can be dialectical. "Names and Characters in *Effi Briest*" forecasts an investigation with several sides: what are the names, how do they fit the characters, but also where are the misfits or the surprises, and what are the issues in the adjustment of name to person, word to thing. A lot of semiotic issues are tactfully raised by this unthreatening, yet potentially rewarding title. Negatives are, of course, always dialectical. "Fontane's Unrealistic Names" might be an excellent title. From the very title, you know where the essay is going. With the novel at all in mind, you could write excellent pages on this topic even if you had never thought of it before. That's what makes a good title from the author's perspective. You will survey the names, examine which ones are realistic, which ones symbolic, which ones comic, and out of that you will develop reflections on the nature of Fontane's enterprise in relation to the

novels of his century. And this is a good title from the reader's perspective because it's short and easy to penetrate, and because it gently flatters the reader by implying that you share some basic familiarity and sophistication in thinking about realism. Finally, many words have more than one side and are dialectical in themselves, or can be made so. "Funny" works that way for me. It means comic, but it also, more colloquially, means odd, abnormal. The range of meanings gives the word life, and it gives a span to my discussion. Look for title words you can bring to life.

"The Art of Naming in Relation to the Structure of Character in Fontane's *Effi Briest*: A Deconstructive-Semiotic Investigation into the Systemic Theory of Fontane's Novel." Now there's a bad title! Impressive but bad. Bad because impressive. Note the subtle badness of naming Fontane even once, let alone twice. You are talking down to readers by implying they don't know who wrote EB. (And, of course, "systemic theory" is not just jargon, but misused jargon. That's unsubtle badness.)

**Paragraphs.** Once you have a title, you need to have a text. The key to good writing is the paragraph. The first sentence identifies the topic. A topic sentence is not a "thesis statement." If you have a "thesis statement," it should be the paragraph conclusion. Begin with a topic; end with what the body of the paragraph has taught you about the topic. If you begin with a thesis statement, you will probably repeat it, or at best vary it, in the conclusion. If your last sentence echoes the first sentence, say less in the first sentence. Otherwise there isn't enough drama.

The body of the paragraph will amass and arrange the information to generate an interesting conclusion. That means two things. 1) There should be information. If the topic isn't productive of information, it probably isn't a good topic. Information doesn't always have to be material facts. In our field, information will often be textual observations. A philosopher's theoretical paragraph might be filled with informational perspectives on its key terms: discussing the meanings of words is a kind of information. 2) The information should be interestingly arranged. It should lead somewhere, so you should pay attention to the sequence of information. Ideally, every sentence should advance over the preceding sentence. If the information merely reinforces earlier information, condense so that several reinforcing bits are accumulated in the same sentence. The presentation, that is, should have a rhythm. Don't, for instance, alternate a sentence of quote with a sentence of paraphrase. Don't paraphrase quotes at all. Instead, highlight by pointing out what's interesting about them. If they have to be rephrased, then they are boring quotes. Your reader will skip over them. They are too long. If the paragraph is too short (at first or after revision), and if it shouldn't just be combined with a neighboring paragraph, then you need to do more work, looking for more evidence to vary and enrich the argument. Here is one of the situations where writing is hard work, without easy answers.

I have one other way to think about the rhythm of paragraphs. Begin by naming a general feature; that's the topic. Proceed to an array of specific evidence. Then conclude with an abstraction. Plural nouns are characteristic of the first sentence, -tion words of the conclusion. Do not begin paragraphs with narration; location words ("in chap. 16") mark specifics and belong in the paragraph body, not at the start. End paragraphs with quotes only exceptionally, for special effect. Quotes are not abstractions; and even if they are conclusions, they are someone else's conclusions, not yours.

To sum up, the body of a paragraph examines the topic to build toward an insight. See further the discussion of little words below.

Paragraphs work best as building blocks rather than as passageways. Keep them separate. The first sentence doesn't need to summarize the state of the argument (the awful "If X..., yet Y" structure, or the trite "not only..., but also"): if the reader can't remember what you have just said, you haven't said it well enough. And the last sentence doesn't need to lead into the next paragraph; instead, it should be a memorable point of arrival. Don't be afraid to jump from one paragraph to the next.

**Structure.** Ideally, it should be possible to read off the opening sentences of the paragraphs as a summary of the argument. Much of the work of revising a good draft consists of repositioning paragraphs, clarifying relationships among them, upgrading some of the discussions and downgrading others. When you skim, you jump from paragraph to paragraph. Help your readers do that, and then they'll want to read inside the paragraphs as well.

**The start.** The essay should open with a framing introduction. To be sure, many essays successfully open with an intriguing observation. That can work, if the problem is framed early on, rather than right at the start. But don't drift from observation into discussion without saying what the essay is about. And whether the essay is framed in the first paragraph or perhaps in the second, the frame should say what the topic is and why it's interesting. Often the best framing is in terms of a hermeneutic problem: "Fontane was an avowed realist, yet his names often fall into the patterns of allegorical comedy." Note that the paragraph framed by this contradiction can readily be filled with information about Fontane's principles and practices, or perhaps about the theory of realism. See too the discussion of small words below. Do not include a general or background introduction. When writing for sophisticated readers, it is wrong to introduce them to the author, the age, or (normally) even the book. Do introduce them to the topic, but only to that.

**The end.** A scientific report begins with a problem or, more often a task, describes procedures, charts results, proceeds to its conclusion. A humanistic essay follows much the same pattern, though with some important differences, such as a less mechanical view of procedures. After the conclusion, the scientific report always has a section entitled "Discussion." So should you. Your conclusion should come before the end of the essay, followed by a paragraph or two of discussion about why the conclusion is interesting or where it does or might lead. **A good discussion makes the difference between a good essay that can be filed away and an interesting essay that leaves you thinking.** After filling out short paragraphs, the conclusion is the other place where writing is hard work. An interesting conclusion takes thought. If you do the work, your reader will bless you; if you don't, the reader has to do it, or else look for another essayist who is more interesting. (Note that this paragraph has its conclusion in the middle, in bold face; then a discussion follows.)

**Little Words.** They are the key to good paragraphs, and hence the key to the key to good writing. Contrast words are the essence of dialectic. In a 10-page paper, begin by putting the word "But" (or a synonym--"yet," "however," etc.) at the top of p. 7, build up toward it and out beyond it, and you'll have a fine essay. The same principle applies to paragraphs: put "but" two-thirds of the way through, and build from there. "But" is always interesting because it identifies a discovery or at least a distinction, something that makes you distinctive. For that reason, it's generally more interesting to refer to good critics in disagreement than in agreement. (Don't bother referring to bad critics at all.) Note how I used "yet" in my sample framing sentence

above, to give it energy. In an actual paragraph, I'd probably begin with just the first half ("Fontane was an avowed realist") and save the "yet" for the middle of the paragraph.

Conversely, "and" ("also," "similarly," "moreover," etc.) are always uninteresting. Sometimes, for a foundation, you want a heap; and so sometimes you may heap up background information with similarity words. But be wary of them. Privilege other kinds of logical connectives instead, especially in the body of the paragraph. Use dissimilating connectives as you move from one piece of evidence to the next. Not always "but"--too much interest loses focus. Sometimes "next," sometimes, "more often," sometimes "in particular," and so forth. Even within the paragraph, there should be a logical structure, and there should be a hierarchy of levels of importance. Then the evidence will be meaningfully arranged and will lead somewhere. If you have followed me this far, it should be obvious that the conclusion sentence should not begin with "but" or another contrast. If you have "however" in your last or next-to-last sentence, the paragraph is tippy. Rebalance the argument.

One other magic little word is "really." Put "really" into your conclusion paragraph before you begin. "Really" coordinates with "seems, but." It highlights the novelty of your argument. Fontane seems to be a realist. "Really," though, as my argument has shown, he is shot through with traditional comic elements. That's a conclusion. Then, of course, you need the discussion paragraphs that say what you learn about Fontane from getting straight how he really works.

**Style.** Just as "and" is boring, so are all repetitions. Don't repeat quotes. Don't repeat words from quotes (except to begin a detailed analysis of the word). And don't repeat other words. If you have repeated "the reader," you probably don't need to. (Actually, you hardly ever need to refer to "the reader," just to the text. That will save you the dilemma of worrying about the reader's sex.) If you introduce many quotes with "says," don't; just quote, leaving the note or the context to identify the source. If you use "and" a lot, you probably are using too many word pairs--too many synonyms to say one thing in two slightly different ways. If you repeat key words, you are probably hammering away; save them for framing or climactic moments. Revision mostly starts with pruning; say less and you'll say it better, or at least you'll be able to see better where you haven't said enough or have said it in the wrong order. The ideal is to say as much as possible, clearly, in the fewest possible words. Economize.

There are a lot of boring little words. I'm on a crusade right now, for instance, against "ways in which." Say "how," or, very often, shorten the whole sentence. Or there's "site," which has become a meaningless reflex in much American academic writing. These words are the Hamburger Helper of exposition, the filler that occupies space without nourishment or taste. **The worst little words**, though, are "**this**" and related deictics ("that," "the former," "such," etc.). "This," used attributively, marks the repeat or varied repeat of the noun it modifies. If you begin a paragraph with "this," you are bridging back, and your reader is encouraged or even forced to look or think back instead of proceeding ahead. Don't repeat, say less, and you'll say it clearer. Used absolutely, "this" is vague, ambiguous, and cloudy. It always forces the reader back, and often without being clear what it looks back toward. Deictic absolutes are often a recourse when you haven't thought through just what you mean to say. Stay brief, but be precise. (And, yes, I know I have used some deictics above. I've edited others out. You won't be perfect either. But try.)

Steer clear of first-person pronouns. Typically, they will go along with verbs of

statement. Steer clear of statement verbs. Brighten up all your verbs. Avoid "is...that" formulas in particular. Don't say "we notice that X," just say "X." Don't say, "in my essay I will attempt to argue that Y." Just say "Y." We know it's in your paper. We know it's what you will attempt to argue because this sentence comes near the beginning, and that's where you give a preliminary statement of your intentions. Position does the trick. Similarly, don't begin your last paragraph with "in conclusion," or "in short." Such formulas can be useful in oral presentation, because the listeners can't see where you are. I promise you, I've already counted the pages well before I get to your phrase, "in conclusion," so I know I'm nearly off the hook.

Finally, you can save lots of words by an artful use of colons, which are the most underrated punctuation marks. Use colons to signal consequences or, sometimes, elaborations. Instead of "the result of all this is that," just put a colon.

**Finally.** Write an essay you want me to read, one that I will find intellectually interesting or challenging. If it disagrees with me persuasively, so much the better. If it is boring, if you don't have fun with it, if it dissolves into a puddle of water, or if I do as I am reading it, then it may still have many virtues which I will do my best to acknowledge, but it will not have achieved its main aim.

Writing is an art, not a science, so there can be multiple guidelines and approaches. Prescriptions (such as the ones I have also given) are useful for exercise, but after you have scaled the wall you can throw away the ladder and just fly, happily mixing metaphors as you go. That's why it's so much more useful to get comments on your own writing than generalities.

Still, I'll conclude with a brief prescription--a throwaway, if you like: Don't think of a paragraph as demonstrating a point. If you think of the paragraph that way (briefer, better: "If you do"), you will state the point at the beginning, give evidence that supports it, and restate it at the end. The evidence will all converge and will typically be linked by "also" words. Writing in that spirit is solid, not lively. Instead, think of the paragraph as developing a topic or an idea. Or as examining it from different sides. Use the evidence to take you beyond the initial premise or deeper into the topic, not to confirm it.