

In pursuing unity of thought and of feeling, the paragraph must contain nothing extraneous. The writer must omit the odd fact which happens to be true, but which is irrelevant to the topic. The odd fact violates unity and distracts the reader.

Read the following paragraph to see whether any detail(s) violate the unity of the paragraph:

We never had enough time to eat lunch in high school: half of the time I'd get a stomachache from hurriedly wolfing down the food. The food was lousy, anyway, and the kitchen help resented the minimum wage. We complained to the administration, but it didn't do any good. We were often held up in getting into the cafeteria because the lunchroom helpers were slow in getting the tables and the food ready. The, if you were one of the people who got in toward the end, you would have to wait a long time in line. Sometimes the jocks, who acted as lunchroom police, would hold you up, too, trying to bully you into buying a football schedule.

We must remain alert to maintain unity of subject in our paragraphs, because the associations in our thought, which can lead us to new ideas and perceptions, can also lead us into irrelevance. When we begin to write about a subject, our mind drifts from one thought to another, by personal association. This random, uncensored thinking can be useful for gathering material. But we must take care that it not lead to rambling disorganization. Because the reader does not share our private memories and feelings, he cannot see the connections we make--and we fail to make contact. Here is an example from a student's paper:

All the recent concern over the slaughter of whales whose species are nearly extinct has reminded me of my childhood interest in whales and other wild animals, especially animals who prey. I was particularly fascinated by the killer whales, which travel in packs like wolves often attacking larger whales. They will tear off the lips and tongue first, their favorite parts. But man has been almost solely responsible for the dangerous depletion of some of the whale populations, such as the blue whale. Still, I can remember the fear that animals like puff adders, tarantulas, and sharks could inspire in me as a child. So I wonder if, in certain cases, we aren't being hypocritical for blaming the people who actually live in lands inhabited by animals like tigers and wolves for killing them. We might be just as frightened and irrational as they are. But that still doesn't make it right.

The thoughts in this paragraph make connections for the writer, but not for the reader. The writer jumps from the threat to whale populations to his childhood interests, then to the habits of killer whales, then to questions of man's rational and irrational fears of predatory animals. To write a unified paragraph, he would have to decide what the topic of his paragraph ought to be and then stick to that topic. We cannot expect readers to be patient with a rambling, disorganized paragraph, nor can we expect them to read our minds and recognize an order that is personal to us.

With these thoughts in mind, re-read your descriptive papers to see whether each paragraph is unified, whether each one has a clear purpose (hopefully stated in a topic sentence at the beginning of the paragraph) and details that illustrate that purpose. Then, for homework, I would like you to write a paragraph-by-paragraph outline of your paper, indicating, first, what the point of each paragraph was (or was supposed to be) and, second, what details you used to carry that point across. An example of such an outline might look like this:

Paragraph 1 (after Introduction): In Westmoreland, the activities one can partake in are diverse, and they reveal something of the disparity of living standards in the town as well.

Detail 1: The visitor can enjoy the aroma of the stockyards.

Detail 2: He can watch the rich sit at their clubs, drinking gin next to pools of chlorine, beside flat golf courses.

Detail 3: He can walk up the sides of ugly buildings on dry Sundays.

Detail 4: He can listen to the medley of rock-station radios in several parks.

Detail 5: He can try sleeping for a week or so, until he is able to leave.

Analyze the following paragraph for unity.

This place that I have entered just now seems to be an oasis of peace and harmony in a bustling city. To my left and right there are two typical park benches in red with wrought-iron legs. The paint is chipped, but the four old ladies that sit on the bench to my right don't seem to mind. They talk to each other or just enjoy the sun shining on their winter white faces. The other bench is occupied by a middle-aged couple discussing something. As I continue down the path, I see an empty bench, and the garbage can next to it is slowly overflowing and some litter is already lying on the ground. I decide to sit on this one, since some of the other 3 or 4 benches along the path are already occupied by all sorts of people enjoying the sun, contemplating or talking to each other.

Development: Order and Clarity

If we do not want to irritate or confuse the reader, our information or argument must be orderly. Things must follow each other with a sense of purpose. Purpose makes clarity. We cannot say, "Oh, I forgot to say...." or leave out steps in our progress. We must move in an orderly way, from earlier to later, or from less to more important, or from periphery to center, or from smaller to larger, or from larger to smaller. Sometimes we will want to move from center to periphery, from present to past. But we must not scatter our sequence--from larger to smaller to larger to larger to smaller to largest to larger to smallest to large. We may want A B C D E F. On occasion we may want Z Y X W V, but never A Q I X L D.

Analyze the order in which details are presented in this paragraph:

The birds often flock in huge numbers on trees, sometimes breaking limbs off. They may bury a car parked below them in white dung. Starlings can be a terrible nuisance. The dark purplish-black pests may tear up a whole lawn in the process of searching for worms and insects, particularly as winter approaches and live food gets scarce. Their antics can drive a homeowner out of his tree. In large enough numbers, they can create a din of voices that blocks out all other sounds in the area. Their cries are strident and irritating.