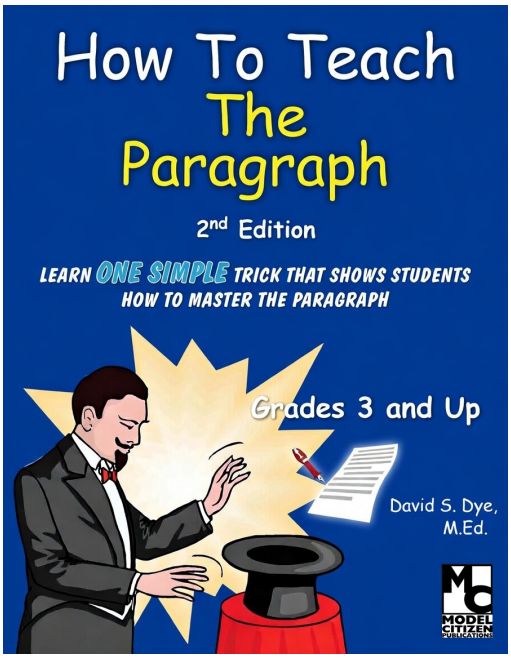
How To Teach
the Paragraph

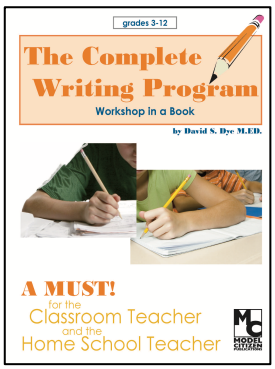


From David Dye's Writing Workshop:
The Complete Writing Program

Introduction:

If they can write a strong, well-organized paragraph, they can write anything!

In my writing workshops I present these lessons to show teachers how to teach the paragraph. I've run into teachers who have taken my workshop years in the past who continue to praise this technique. It's quick, powerful, and effective. Best of all, if you are using *The Complete Writing Program* (available at CreateBetterWriters.com), the quick learners move on to bigger and better things, leaving you time to reinforce this essential skill with the rest of your class.



The paragraph is the foundation of great writing. If your students can write an intelligent, well-organized paragraph, they can write anything. As a matter of fact, if you use this method to teach the paragraph, you can literally teach the essay and research report in minutes. Yes, they will need time and practice to gain confidence, but using these strategies will make transitioning to larger writing assignments incredibly easy.

Overview

Here, I will review the steps. At times, two or three steps can be done in a day. Follow each step at your class's pace. Take your time if you must; this is a crucial skill. After the overview, I will explain the steps in greater detail.

Paragraph Writing – Overview

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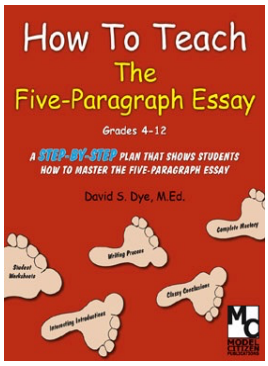
Part I – The Basics

Step 1 – Assessment: Students Write a Paragraph.

I've taught third through eighth grade and, with every grade, I begin with the paragraph. The key to any piece of writing is to gather the information, decide what is important and what isn't, and finally, to organize the information. Once that is done, the writing is the easy part. With this system, the students will learn one easy "trick" to do all of this. The beauty of this system is that, once they've mastered these skills with the paragraph, the "trick" will only need minor adjustments, and the students will be able use these skills to write essays, research reports, narratives, and any other genre of writing. If you continue with *How to Teach the Five Paragraph Essay* and *The Complete Writing Program*, you will see how easy it is for your students to transition almost effortlessly to the essay, story writing and much more.



On the first day of school, ask students to write a paragraph about something that they did over the summer. This is a nice, broad topic and allows you to spot key mistakes right away. Will the students write about several different activities or just one? Will they stick to one main idea? How many sentences will they write? The only help I give them is to say that I am checking to see if they know how to write a paragraph. "Whatever you think a good paragraph should be, show me!" is all I say.
You may want to repeat the process on the second day. Maybe they were rusty from the long summer break. You can have them write another paragraph about something else that they did over the summer.

Finally, take the students' second paragraphs and use them to create an inventory of skills for each student. Use a class roster to check off if each student had a topic sentence, closing sentence, at least four supporting details, and stuck to one main idea. You will use this information later to show them how close (or far) they are to writing strong paragraphs. It also provides a great piece of information at parent conferences and IEPs.

Step 1 Summary:

A. Give a paragraph pretest.
B. Make a checklist: Do the students know how to write a topic / closing sentence?
Do the students use supporting details?
Do the students stick to One Main Idea?

Step 2 – Learning the Five Parts:
Let the students try to guess the five parts of a good paragraph.

A Good Paragraph
1. One Main Idea
2. Topic Sentence
3. 5-7 Sentences
4. Closing Sentence
5. Indent; Spelling and Punctuation

Write the numbers 1 – 5 on the board. Have the students write numbers 1-5 on their papers. Let the students try to guess the five parts of the paragraph. Make a game out of it. Offer five raffle tickets or a small prize to the student who can name **the #1 part of a paragraph.** (The list is in order of importance.) Offer four raffle tickets for the student who guesses the second item and so on. As the students correctly name an item on the list, write it on the board in its proper sequence, and have the students copy it on their list. If the students say "Topic Sentence", put it next to number two and repeat this for all five steps. The class will have fun, and it will get them thinking about everything they've ever been taught about writing. This is a great time of review, even if they don't discover all five. For the classes that aren't coming close, give as many hints as you can until they get it.

When finished, heavily emphasize that a paragraph is about ONE MAIN IDEA. Do call and response over and over: "What is a paragraph about?" The class will respond, "ONE MAIN IDEA". Look each student in the eyes and ask, "What is a paragraph about?" The student responds, "ONE MAIN IDEA". Ask them during math, on the way to lunch, and when you see them on the playground. It should become a reflex, like when a doctor taps your knee with that little hammer. A paragraph is about ONE MAIN IDEA!

Step 2 Summary:

A. Number 1 – 5 on the board.
B. Have the students number 1-5 on their papers.
C. Let the students try to guess the five parts of the paragraph.
D. As the students guess correctly, write the items on the board in the correct sequence.

Step 3 – Memorize the Five Parts of a Paragraph

First, ask the class, "Who can name one item on the list without looking?" Next ask, "Who can name two items without looking?" Keep going until someone can name all five. If you're giving out a prize of some kind (Jolly Ranchers, Raffle Tickets, etc.) the kids will be studying frantically while another student is answering.

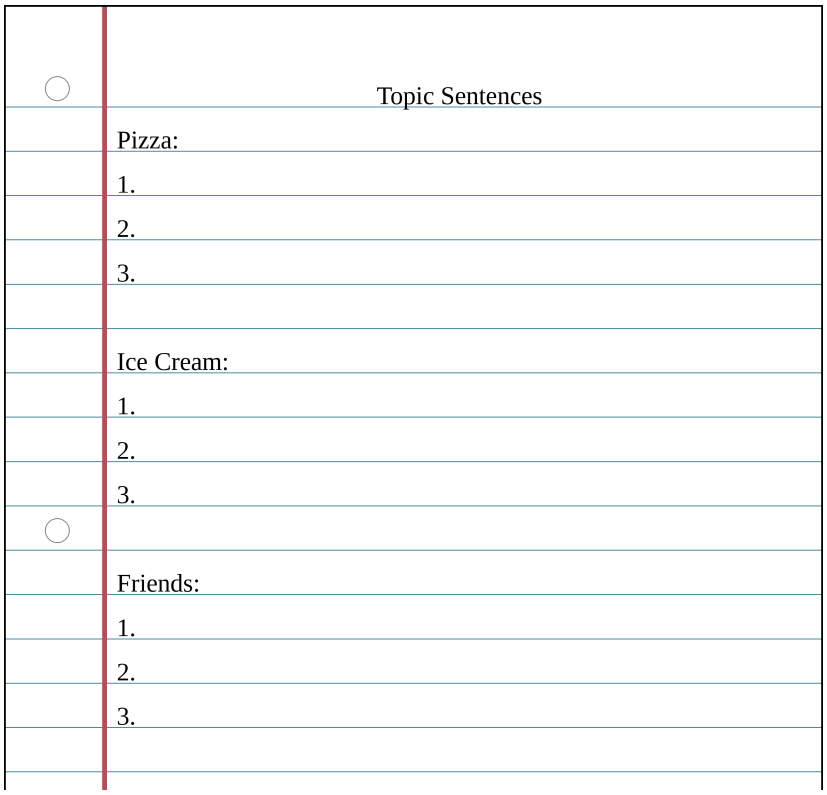
Part II – Improving the Paragraph

After teaching the paragraph for so long, I've discovered many subtle tricks to reinforce the writing of topic sentences, closing sentences, supporting sentences, and prewriting. I do it throughout the day with many other lessons across many different subjects so I rarely teach these as independent lessons. Teachable moments just seem to present themselves while teaching other subjects. As you get better at teaching paragraph, essay, and report writing, this may happen for you as well. The steps that follow may be straightforward writing lessons. However, with some creativity, you might be able to see how these can be done with a science, history, art, or any other type of lesson.

Steps 7 and 8 will be most appropriate for grades three through five. The older students seem to catch on without them. Use the Steps 7 and 8 below if your students seem to need an extra push when completing the paragraph or if you are teaching a class with special needs. It is definitely worth the time and trouble. Remember, once the students have mastered the paragraph, they have a strong foundation for all types of writing.

Step 7 – Topic Sentences

Any given topic can have thousands of main ideas. Suppose you ask your students to write about pizza. How many different main ideas could they come up with for this? 1. How to make a pizza; 2. Their favorite pizza place; 3. History of pizza; 4. Best times to eat pizza; 5. Different kinds of pizza…



All these main ideas would make good paragraphs. Teach the students to narrow their focus to one specific main idea. The flip side to this is that the students must be careful not to make their

Step 9 – Paragraph Assessment

Students check each other for the five parts of a paragraph.

From now on, whenever the students write paragraphs, have them check each other for the five parts of a good paragraph. They can use this worksheet (located at the end of this document) to give each other a score. By checking each other's writing for the five parts of the paragraph, they are reinforcing the five parts for themselves and seeing other paragraphs modeled by other students.

Paragraph Assessment

1. This paragraph has a topic sentence:
   1 2 3 4
2. This paragraph has 5 to 7 sentences:
   1 2 3 4
3. This paragraph has a closing sentence:
   1 2 3 4
4. The paragraph sticks to one main idea:
   1 2 3 4
5. The paragraph is indented:
   1 2 3 4

When they score, a four indicates that the step was done very well. A three is passing, but it could have been better. A two and one would tell the writer that they could have done much better. The students can use this scoring sheet to conference with each other and to help explain why they gave their scores. A benefit of this worksheet is that you might hear students repeating your lessons from the previous steps as they conference. Your words become more powerful when they come from your students to each other. I highly recommend that you assess a few paragraphs together as a class to help model these steps.

Thank you for previewing

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