

Paragraphs for Middle School

A Sentence-Composing Approach

A Student Worktext

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THE SENTENCE-COMPOSING APPROACH

*The more the writer knows about his or her tools and the more practice in using them,
the more expert the student writer becomes at using those tools in crafting words,
phrases, sentences, paragraphs.*

—Constance Weaver, *Grammar to Enrich & Enhance Writing*

THE SENTENCE-PARAGRAPH LINK 1

Sentences unfold one part at a time. Paragraphs unfold one sentence at a time. In this section, authors become your invisible teachers in an apprenticeship in the sentence-composing approach to building better sentences for better paragraphs.

BUILDING BETTER SENTENCES

BEST SENTENCES 3

A sentence must have a subject (topic) and a predicate (comment about the topic). Best sentences always have something even more important: sentence parts that are tools to build better sentences like those written by authors.

IMITATING SENTENCES 14

Imitating how authors build their sentences focuses on how they write and helps you write in similar ways. It is like filling in pictures in a coloring book. When you color a picture, you're given the shape for the picture, and you add your own colors. When you imitate a sentence, you're given the shape for the sentence, and you add your own words.

SENTENCE-COMPOSING TOOLS 26

Writing is carpentry with sentences and paragraphs. Like any craft, it is only as good as the plans, materials, and tools you use. Here you will learn, practice, and use tools that foster elaboration in paragraphs. All of them are used frequently by your mentor-authors, who will guide you in learning how to use them in your own writing.

TOOL PLACES 48

Putting things in the right places requires skill, whether in your room, your locker, or your sentences. When you learn where authors place their sentence-composing tools, in your sentences you'll skillfully put things in the right places.

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This place is up front, in the beginning of a sentence.

THE S-V SPLIT 68

This place is between the subject and its verb.

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This place is way back, at the end of a sentence.

THE MIX 104

This place is several different places in the same sentence.

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They're all here: openers, S-V splits, closers, and mixes.

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Sentences need clear boundaries to tell your readers where one sentence ends and the next sentence begins. In this section, you'll study how careless writers sometimes go "out of bounds" by writing too much sentence, or too little. You'll learn to detect, eliminate, and avoid three sentence boundary problems: the fragment, the comma splice, and the run-on.

BUILDING BETTER PARAGRAPHS

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A paragraph contains two or more sentences linked because they are about the same topic. Best paragraphs always have something else: sentence-composing tools like the ones used by authors.

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Learning how authors add details and imitating what they do will strengthen your writing. Here, you'll partner with authors to create well-built paragraphs by using the sentence-composing tools you learned earlier and achieve one of the most important qualities of good writing: elaboration.

IMITATING PARAGRAPHS 161

Activities here help you learn how to compose better paragraphs by imitating the experts. Model paragraphs by authors give you a blueprint for composing your own well-built paragraphs.

UNSCRAMBLING PARAGRAPHS 181

Good paragraphs arrange content in ways that make sense to your readers. Unscrambling paragraphs to produce a meaningful arrangement is good practice for composing coherent paragraphs.

BUILDING PARAGRAPHS 192

In these activities, you'll practice creating and placing additions effectively within paragraphs to make them stronger.

YOUR INVISIBLE TEACHERS 206

Over four hundred sources are the basis for the activities in *Paragraphs for Middle School: A Sentence-Composing Approach*. Included are model sentences and paragraphs from hundreds of authors—your silent mentors, your invisible teachers.

WITH GRATITUDE

Thanks to the hundreds of authors within—your mentors in this apprenticeship in sentence composing for better paragraphs—for modeling good writing and showing you the way to better writing through imitation to creation.

To help you achieve mastery as a writer, you'll find lots of activities within these pages for practicing how good writers build strong sentences and paragraphs. You'll imitate how they do it, and eventually—as a result of practicing what they do—build strong sentences and paragraphs on your own.

PRACTICING: To achieve mastery the student must read widely and deeply and must write not just carefully but continually, thoughtfully assessing and reassessing what he or she writes, because practice, for the writer as for the concert pianist, is the heart of the matter.

—John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*

THE SENTENCE-PARAGRAPH LINK

Much of good writing is a process of addition. Good writers say more. Often, students don't write better because they don't have the tools for elaboration.

A major goal of *Paragraphs for Middle School: A Sentence-Composing Approach* is to provide tools for elaboration within sentences and paragraphs.

Contrast these two paragraphs to see the dramatic difference in elaboration the underlined tools make:

BASIC PARAGRAPH

A twelve-year-old boy sat up in bed. There was a sound coming from outside. It was a huge, heavy rush. It was coming from directly above the house. The boy swung his legs off the bed. The yard was otherworldly. The boy stood on the lawn.

ELABORATE PARAGRAPH

In the predawn darkness, in the back bedroom of a small house in Torrance, California, a twelve-year-old boy sat up in bed, listening. There was a sound coming from outside, growing ever louder. It was a huge, heavy rush, suggesting immensity, a great parting of air. It was coming from directly above the house. The boy swung his legs off the bed, raced down the stairs, slapped open the back door, and loped onto the grass. The yard was otherworldly, smothered in unnatural darkness, shivering with sound. The boy stood on the lawn, head thrown back, spellbound.

Laura Hillenbrand, *Unbroken*

The underlined parts are the result of the author's use of sentence-composing tools that create additions for elaboration. Here's good news:

You can own the same tools authors use to build sentences to add elaboration for their paragraphs.

Paragraphs for Middle School: A Sentence-Composing Approach teaches imitation of real sentences and paragraphs, worthy models by hundreds of authors. With this approach, with only a single sentence or paragraph as a manageable model, and with frequent imitation through varied activities, you can succeed, often astonishingly, in writing sentences and paragraphs like those of authors.

Words are the raw materials of writing. All sentences are made up of words. All paragraphs are made up of sentences. What makes the writing of effective writers different from the writing of ineffective writers? The answer is how those words, sentences, and paragraphs are shaped and styled.

In this worktext, *Paragraphs for Middle School: A Sentence-Composing Approach*, you'll see how over four hundred authors shaped and styled their sentences and paragraphs, and, through the many activities using those sentences and paragraphs, how you can similarly shape and style your own sentences and paragraphs. Those authors are your invisible teachers.

Through their sentences and their paragraphs, those hundreds of authors are ready to teach you the essential link between good sentences and good paragraphs.

*I threw words all over the place
and none of them landed right.*

—Pat Conroy, *My Reading Life*

Learn everything you can from your teachers, visible and invisible, as they go about the important work of teaching you how to build better sentences and paragraphs. If you do, your words will land right.

UNSCRAMBLING PARAGRAPHS

In the scrambled paragraph that follows, sentence parts and sentences are out of order. Readers, confused, only know that the paragraph says something about a monster. In the unscrambled version, sentence parts and sentences are in order, and readers can easily understand the paragraph.

SCRAMBLED PARAGRAPH

(1) To glow like barbecue coals her eyes began. (2) A shriveled hag with big wings and claws she was and full of yellow fangs a mouth, and about to slice me to ribbons she was. (3) Wasn't human she. (4) Melted into large, leathery wings her jacket. (5) Turning into talons, her fingers stretched. (6) Happened the weirdest thing.

UNSCRAMBLED PARAGRAPH

(1) The weirdest thing happened. (2) Her eyes began to glow like barbecue coals. (3) Her fingers stretched, turning into talons. (4) Her jacket melted into large, leathery wings. (5) She wasn't human. (6) She was a shriveled hag with big wings and claws and a mouth full of yellow fangs, and she was about to slice me to ribbons.

Rick Riordan, *The Lightning Thief*

The two versions have exactly the same words, but the scrambled version is almost meaningless, a jumble of words, while the unscrambled version is meaningful, a description of a horrible transformation of a woman into a menacing birdlike monster.

In good sentences, like those in the unscrambled version, sentence parts have a clear relationship to each other. In good paragraphs, sentences also have a clear relationship to each other. These activities focus on those

clear relationships of sentence parts within sentences, and sentences within paragraphs.

Zoom in now on how to achieve clear relationships within and among a paragraph's sentences.

ACTIVITY 1: NARRATIVE PARAGRAPH

A narrative paragraph tells either a true or a fictional story. Each list that follows, when unscrambled, will become one of the sentences in a narrative paragraph from Larry McMurtry's novel *Lonesome Dove*. In McMurtry's paragraph, the main character Augustus steps out onto a porch and sees two pigs eating a rattlesnake.

Unscramble and punctuate the lists to produce the four sentences in the paragraph. In each list, the sentence part that begins the sentence is capitalized.

Important: Type or write out the list of four unscrambled sentences from the following activity. In the next activity, you need that list to arrange the sentences into a meaningful paragraph.

1a. by the neck

1b. and the shoat had the tail

1c. The sow had it

2a. when it ran into the pigs

2b. just been crawling around

2c. It had probably

2d. looking for shade

3a. on the porch

3b. not a very big one

3c. When Augustus came out

3d. were eating a rattlesnake

3e. the blue pigs

4a. were over

4b. They were having a fine

4c. and its rattling days

4d. tug-of-war with it

The four unscrambled sentences are not in the order of the original paragraph, so arrange them in a way that makes the most sense. Write out and punctuate the paragraph.

ASSIGNMENT FOR NARRATIVE PARAGRAPH

From an electronic or a print source, find an image showing action. Pretend that the action is part of a story you are writing, and narrate that action in a paragraph, zooming in so details are easy to see.

ACTIVITY 2: INFORMATIVE PARAGRAPH

An informative paragraph educates the reader on a particular topic. Each list that follows, when unscrambled, will become one of the sentences in the paragraph developed by examples from Rachel Carson's *The Edge of the Sea*. Carson's paragraph illustrates how the seas around us change in unpredictable ways.

Unscramble and punctuate the lists to produce the six sentences in the paragraph. In each list, the sentence part that begins the sentence is capitalized.

Important: Type or write out the list of six unscrambled sentences from the following activity. In the next activity, you need that list to arrange the sentences into a meaningful paragraph.

1a. the edge of the sea

1b. and indefinable boundary

1c. remains an elusive

1d. Always

2a. Today

2b. tomorrow a little less

2c. a little more land may belong to the sea

3a. It rises or falls as the glaciers melt or grow

3b. or as the earth's crust along the continental margins warps up or down
in adjustment to strain and tension

3c. as the floor of the deep ocean basis shifts under its increasing load of
sediments

4a. For no two successive days

4b. precisely the same

4c. is the shore line

5a. is never at rest

5b. but the level of the sea

5c. in their eternal rhythms

5d. Not only do the tides advance and retreat

- 6a. the sea has been an area of unrest
- 6b. All through the long history of Earth
- 6c. and where the tides have receded, and then returned
- 6d. where waves have broken heavily against the land

The six unscrambled sentences are not in the order of the original paragraph, so arrange them in a way that makes the most sense. Write out and punctuate the paragraph.

ASSIGNMENT FOR INFORMATIVE PARAGRAPH

Write an informative paragraph about how storms happen: for example, a tornado, a hurricane, a lightning strike, a tsunami, or some other devastating natural event. Research your topic before drafting your paragraph to learn more about that particular kind of storm.

ACTIVITY 3: PROCESS PARAGRAPH

A process paragraph describes how something occurs. Each list that follows, when unscrambled, will become one of the sentences in a paragraph from William Pène du Bois' award-winning story *The Twenty-One Balloons*. In his whimsical paragraph, the author explains how traveling in a balloon to school can be delightful.

Unscramble and punctuate the lists to produce the seven sentences in the paragraph. In each list, the sentence part that begins the sentence is capitalized.

Important: Type or write out the list of seven unscrambled sentences from the following activity. In the next activity, you need that list to arrange the sentences into a meaningful paragraph.

1a. can happen

1b. On your way

1c. many delightful things

2a. climb into the basket

2b. untie the ropes

2c. You get up early in the morning with your school-books

2d. look in the direction of the school building

2e. and fly off

3a. just once

3b. and take you fifty miles out into the country

3c. The wind will blow you in the wrong direction

3d. away from school

3e. and nobody can bother you in a balloon

3f. and you might decide to play hookey

4a. and you'll never get to school

4b. will be calm

4c. The wind

5a. is the best

5b. particularly between home and school

5c. Balloon travel

- 6a. from your home to school
- 6b. In a balloon
- 6c. particularly if you want to travel
- 6d. is a wonderful way to travel

- 7a. and change your mind
- 7b. onto the roof of the grandstand
- 7c. Then, too
- 7d. you might fly over a ball park on the way
- 7e. as you make a quick descent
- 7f. you can drop a line and do some fine fishing
- 7g. or if you pass any lakes on the way to school

The seven unscrambled sentences are not in the order of the original paragraph, so arrange them in a way that makes the most sense. Write out and punctuate the paragraph.

ASSIGNMENT FOR A PROCESS PARAGRAPH

Describe a fantasy process, like the one in the model paragraph, or, if you prefer, a real process. If you choose a fantasy process, use your imagination to explain it. If you choose a real process, first research that process to learn more about how it works. End your paragraph with a sentence that emphasizes the importance of the process you've described.

ACTIVITY 4: DESCRIPTIVE PARAGRAPH

A descriptive paragraph creates a movie in the reader's mind. Each list that follows, when unscrambled, will become one of the sentences in a descrip-

tive paragraph from Neil Gaiman's novel *The Graveyard Book*. In Gaiman's paragraph, the narrator describes a particular grave, where a ghoul lurks.

Unscramble and punctuate the lists to produce the six sentences in the paragraph. In each list, the sentence part that begins the sentence is capitalized.

Important: Type or write out the list of six unscrambled sentences from the activity that follows. In the next activity, you need that list to arrange the sentences into a meaningful paragraph.

1a. is all too often impossible to read

1b. than other gravestones, too

1c. and the name on the stone

1d. It may be colder

2a. or so scabbed with fungus and lichens

2b. If there is a statue on the grave

2c. as to look like a fungus itself

2d. it will be headless

3a. is one

3b. in every graveyard

3c. There

4a. belongs to the ghouls

4b. in every graveyard

4c. One grave

- 5a. that is the ghoul-gate
- 5b. want to be somewhere else
- 5c. If the grave makes you
- 6a. and a feeling when you reach it of abandonment
- 6b. water-stained and bulging
- 6c. Wander any graveyard long enough
- 6d. with cracked or broken stone, scraggly grass or rank weeds about it
- 6e. and you will find it

The six unscrambled sentences are not in the order of the original paragraph, so arrange them in a way that makes the most sense. Write out and punctuate the paragraph.

ASSIGNMENT FOR DESCRIPTIVE PARAGRAPH

Write a descriptive paragraph about an unusual place: a junkyard, an overgrown lot, an abandoned house, an alley, or someplace else. Begin your paragraph with a sentence that previews the place, as in the model. Describe all the details that make the place unusual. Also, end your paragraph with a sentence that summarizes the paragraph, as in the model.

ACTIVITY 5: EXPLANATORY PARAGRAPH

An explanatory paragraph explains an idea or fact, often through illustrations. Each list that follows, when unscrambled, will become one of the sentences in an explanatory paragraph from Jacqueline Kelly's *The Evolution of Calpurnia Tate*. The paragraph applies Darwin's theory of the survival of the fittest to explain why certain grasshoppers are eaten by birds, but others are not.

Unscramble and punctuate the lists to produce the five sentences in the paragraph. In each list, the sentence part that begins the sentence is capitalized.

Important: Type or write out the list of five unscrambled sentences from the activity that follows. In the next activity, you need that list to arrange the sentences into a meaningful paragraph.

1a. the ones the birds pick off

1b. to grow big

1c. The greener ones

1d. don't last long enough

2a. gobbling them up

2b. hide nearby

2c. and taunt their less-fortunate brothers

2d. The birds spend their days

2e. while the yellow grasshoppers

3a. because they are more fit to survive

3b. hidden by the parched yellowed grass

3c. Only the yellower ones survive

3d. in the torrid weather

4a. to spot

4b. are just too easy

4c. The bright green grasshoppers

- 5a. that are born a bit yellower
- 5b. The grasshoppers
- 5c. to begin with
- 5d. because the birds can't see them
- 5e. live to an old age in the drought
- 5f. in the parched grass

The five unscrambled sentences are not in the order of the original paragraph, so arrange them in a way that makes the most sense. Write out and punctuate the paragraph.

ASSIGNMENT FOR EXPLANATORY PARAGRAPH

Write an explanatory paragraph about something in nature: light in a lightning bug, transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly, change of leaf color in the fall, emergence of flowers from bulbs in the spring, or something else. First research that process to learn more about how it works. Finish the paragraph with a sentence summarizing the explanation.

*Sentences are the bricks as well as the mortar,
 the motor as well as the fuel.*

One in front of the other marks the way.

—Jhumpa Lahiri, “My Life Sentences”



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