

Shaping Paragraphs

You can shape your paragraph to put the chunks of information in an order that is logical and emphasizes the points you want a reader to remember. [video: 4 sample headings appear on screen] You make each idea memorable by putting the right information in the beginning, middle, and end. [video: The fourth heading leaves the screen, the remaining sample headings are renamed “Beginning”, “Middle”, and “End”.] Readers pay attention to beginnings [video: “Beginning” pulsates] and ends [video: “End” pulsates] of things and they lose attention or patience in the middle [video: “Middle” pulsates] of a section, paragraph, even a sentence. Take advantage of the reader’s natural inclination and put important information where you know your reader will look for it: at the beginning and the end. [video: “Beginning” and “End” pulsate] This isn’t cheating or manipulating your reader; you are merely responding to every reader’s natural instincts. [video: image of 5 people with a mind map containing the words “Beginning”, “Middle”, and “End” appearing above their heads.] Use those instincts to bring home your points with minimal effort for the reader. [video: the image with the sample headings reappears with the headings: “Bring”, “home”, “your”, “points”.]

Beginnings

[video: samples headings of “Beginning”, “Middle”, and “End” appear on screen; “beginning” heading is zoomed in on] In each paragraph, examine the topic sentence (it should be the first or second sentence of the paragraph). [video: a paragraph has its topic sentence labeled] The topic sentence should tell readers what’s coming up and why they are reading about it. [video: image of a woman holding a sign with “What’s Coming Up” on it and a man with a sign with “Why Read About it” on it] Use your topic sentence to orient your readers to a paragraph’s context and to deliver your controlling idea. [video: a paragraph is labeled with “Paragraph’s Context” and “Controlling Idea”]

Don’t waste your first sentence on non-essential information. [video: a paragraph has its topic sentence labeled with “Non-essential Information”] If you started a paragraph in the Feld advice letter with, “Fifteen years ago, the legislature passed important legislation protecting tenants, including those tenants who had pets”, the reader asks, “So what?” [video: man with a speech bubble asking “So what?”]

Don’t waste your first sentence repeating information you just gave in the heading. Tell the reader something new that develops the idea in the heading. [video: a heading and a topic sentence appear and then “New” appears on top of them] Repetition just creates clutter.

If you write, “In *A.v B.*, the first case to deal with the issue of protection of an individual’s privacy, Justice Chow stated, ‘blah, blah, blah’”, you’ve just lost the reader who is asking themselves, “Why am I reading about this case and what this judge said?” [video: man with a speech bubble asking “Why am I reading this?”]

It is rare that a good topic sentence starts with something like, “In *Gordon v Miller*, the court said, ‘The contract can be enforced because any consideration is sufficient.’” Instead, flip it.

Start with your point and tell the reader how the law supports it: “Contracts will be enforced where there is valid consideration. In *Gordon v. Miller*, the court reviewed the token consideration of two dollars and concluded that any amount the parties agreed to is sufficient.”

Middle Sentences

Keep the reader focused by making sure the middle sentences develop your idea and do not stray into new topics. [video: image of three stacked banners labeled “Beginning”, “Middle”, and “End”. Beside the “Beginning” label is an image of a man in suit avatar, beside “middle” label is an image of gears, and beside “End” label is an image of a bag with a dollar sign on it. The “middle” label is zoomed in on.]

Last Sentences

Because readers naturally remember best what comes last, use the last sentence to synthesize or emphasize the paragraph’s idea. [video: a paragraph labeled “Beginning”, “Middle”, and “End”.] The reader then leaves the paragraph with your point firmly in mind. [video: man with a thought bubble that reads “Your Point”] Use the end position to tell readers something you want them to remember as they head into the next paragraph. Do you want to emphasize the key point? A synthesis? Or the conclusion? [video: image of 3 people who each have a thought bubble that reads “Key Point”, “Synthesis” and “Conclusion”.]

Don’t waste the paragraph’s final sentence. [video: the last sentence of a paragraph is blocked out]

Don’t place trivial information there. [video: “Trivial Information” appears in the last sentence position] It’s too important a position. [video: “Important Position” appears in the last sentence position] You will create an “impostor” that confuses the reader into thinking, “Ah, this is something the writer wants me to take note of”, when it was not a point you wanted to emphasize at all. [video: “This is something the writer wants me to take note of.” appears in the last sentence position]

Don’t point to the next paragraph’s topic. [video: an arrow appears after a paragraph and points to the next paragraph] How often have you seen a paragraph end like this “Next, I discuss whether the consideration was delivered.” This technique is common in academic writing, but it is not an effective use of the stress position in legal writing. [video: the sentence “Next, I discuss whether the consideration was delivered.” is crossed out]

Don’t just repeat the topic sentence. Repetition does not make the point more firmly. I’ll say that again: repetition does not make the point more firmly, at least in writing. Repetition just bores the reader. [video: a man asleep at his computer]