Writing Good Paragraphs

Characteristics of a Good Paragraph

• A good paragraph tells a story with organized ideas that have a clear relationship with each other. The basic components of a good paragraph are as follows:

- Topic sentence
  - Is placed at the beginning of the paragraph (a paragraph may also need a second topic [or summary] sentence at the end)
  - States either the general topic or the specific point of the paragraph
- Supporting sentences
  - Relate to the subject of the topic sentence
  - Are logically organized

Example

> There are 3 different theories regarding the slow relaxation of the catch muscles of mollusks. *(topic sentence*) One theory holds that catch is due to some unusual property of myosin in these muscles that produces a slow rate of detachment.[12] *(states first theory)* In this theory, paramyosin would have no special role beyond that of providing the scaffolding on which the myosin is positioned. *(detail for previous sentence)* The second theory holds that the tension is developed by the actin-myosin interaction but is maintained by paramyosin interactions.[13] *(states second theory)* Because the thick filaments are of limited length, interaction would have to occur through the fusion of thick filaments.[14] *(detail for previous sentence)* A third theory, to which I subscribe, pictures a structural change in the paramyosin core that affects the rate of breaking of myosin-catch links at the filament surface.[15] *(third theory)*

• Good paragraphs have continuity: the smooth flow of ideas from sentence to sentence (and from paragraph to paragraph). Ask yourself the following questions:

- What is the point of each sentence?
- What does each sentence contribute to the story?

Techniques of Continuity

• Repeat key terms (words or phrases that name important ideas in the manuscript)

- Be consistent with the use of key terms from sentence to sentence (eg, if you start with "restenosis," use "restenosis" throughout)

- Use category terms plus “this” or “these” to avoid too much repetition (eg, “quantitative cell-based bioassay” becomes “this bioassay” or “this procedure”)

  Avoid: Digitalis increases the contractility of the mammalian heart. This change in inotropic state is a result of changes in calcium flux through the muscle cell membrane.

  Revision: Digitalis increases the contractility of the mammalian heart. This increased contractility results from changes in calcium flux through the muscle cell membrane.

- Keep a consistent order
  - If 2 or more items are listed in a topic sentence, explain them in supporting sentences in the same order
  - Avoid interrupting the sequence of explanations with other information

Example

To determine the distribution, size, and shape of ganglion cell bodies in the tracheal neural plexus, we examined individual cell bodies in their entirety at 100 to 400x with a compound light microscope. To assess distribution, first, each ganglion cell body was classified… To assess the size and shape of each ganglion cell body, the major and minor axes of the cell body were measured…

- Keep a consistent point of view
  - Sentences about the same topic should have the same subject

  Avoid: Propranolol had variable effects on the hypoxemia-induced changes in regional blood flow. In the cerebrum, the increase in blood flow caused by hypoxemia was not significantly altered by propranolol. However, in other organs, such as the gut and the kidneys, and in the peripheral circulation, propranolol caused a more severe decrease in blood flow than did hypoxemia alone.

  Revision: Propranolol had variable effects on the hypoxemia-induced changes in regional blood flow. In the cerebrum, propranolol did not significantly alter the increase in blood flow caused by hypoxemia. However, in other organs, such as the gut and the kidneys, and in the peripheral circulation, propranolol caused a more severe decrease in blood flow than did hypoxemia alone.

- Put parallel ideas in parallel form
  - Parallel sentences have the same patterns. Parallel form is effective for presenting similar or contrasting information

Example

> We were able to see that most ganglion cell bodies (72%) are located... and only a small proportion (28%) are located along the longitudinal nerve trunks. Furthermore, we were able to see...

- Signal the subtopics of a paragraph by using transition words like “first,” “second,” and “finally”