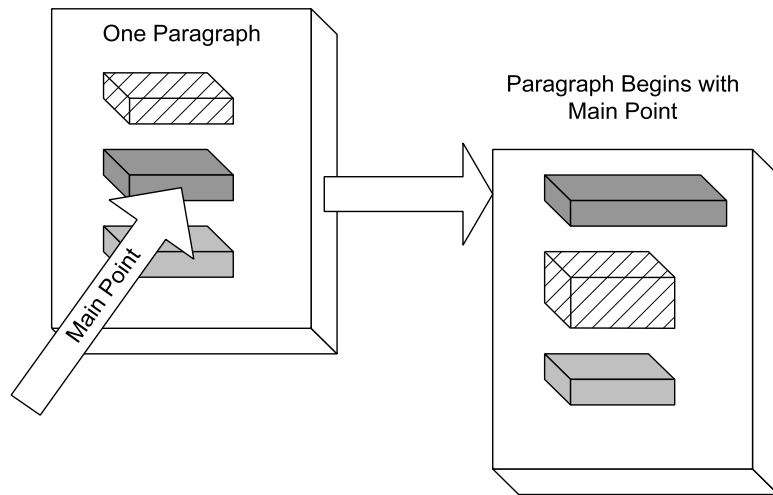


Put the Idea of the Paragraph First



BACKGROUND |

"It got my attention right away. This is a good site. Boom. It gets to the point."

—Test subject,
in Morkes and Nielsen, 1997

Make the point faster than on paper

On paper, readers usually expect to find the point at the end of the introduction to the paragraph or at the end of the paragraph. Of course, in high school, our English teachers yammered on about putting a "topic sentence" first, but that seemed too hard to do, so we often just mentioned the topic in the first line and postponed saying anything about the topic for quite a while. We did not lead off with an idea—just a subject.

Slow intros work OK on paper because readers can hold their breath for a few sentences as the writer leads up to the main point of the paragraph. In fact, traditional writers often take more than one sentence to introduce the topic of a paragraph, and readers have come to expect that the key idea will appear at the end of that introduction.

But on the Web, users have less patience. They want the point right away—not just the topic of the paragraph, but the real, substantive idea. Not a noun—a sentence.

A writer has to make her message clear at the beginning of each paragraph, and not try to keep the reader in suspense. (Abeleto, 1999)

Even if you state your point at the end of the paragraph, you have to tip your hand at the start, to orient the impatient Web user and to establish the coherent theme for that individual paragraph.

Several participants, while scanning text, would read only the first sentence of the paragraph. (Morkes and Nielsen, 1997)

The topic sentence is a more or less fictitious entity.

—Harold Martin,
The Logic and Rhetoric of Exposition

Picking up the point from the first sentence lets a guest decide to skip the whole paragraph—always a mercy. And if the guest chooses to read on, knowing the main point makes the rest of the paragraph clear.

If someone actually reads the paragraph...

Research on reading printed text shows that people generally understand and remember paragraphs best when the paragraphs start off with a main point.

In fact, if users start off with your main idea and choose to read your whole paragraph, they will probably understand what you are saying better than they would if you had just thrown the main idea in somewhere in the middle.

When presented at the beginning, the main point offers a hook on which readers can hang all the other details, in a mental hierarchy (main idea at the top, others hanging off of it).

Using that framework as they work their way through the paragraph, readers can verify how each new topic fits into that structure. Result: they remember what you say longer.

They want to see the POINT up front.
(Williams, 1990)

And this demand to know the main point right away grows more intense on the Web.

In the matter of ideas, the public prefer the cheap and nasty.

—Charles S. Peirce,
in Popular Science Monthly, 1878

Business readers are skimmers; many go weeks at a time without reading a paragraph all the way through.

—Weiss, 1991

Revise—be bold

Back when you were writing the first draft, you may not have found out what you really thought until you got to the second or third sentence, or even later. Just revise to move that idea forward.

Politeness may restrain you. Get over it. Even though you may feel you are being abrupt, even rude, putting the main point first is a kindness.

EXAMPLES

Before

You may be surprised to learn that there are many different kinds of shampoos made up especially for your dog. Yes, you can make your pet's coat shinier with one shampoo, get rid of fleas and ticks with another, moisturize with another. But all of these shampoos have one thing in common. They aren't as strong as human shampoos. How come? Dogs' skins have a different amount of pH than human skin, so they need less acid in their shampoos, to cut through the oils that build up on the surface of the skin. Human shampoos irritate dogs' skin and make their coat dull and stiff.

Before

Sometimes, we go through a lengthy period of preparation, during which we gather information, think about the problem, and, perhaps, try out some preliminary solutions. You have probably observed yourself doing this on various projects. Much early work on the way we think was similarly based on **self-observation**. In 1926, for example, Wallas published his classic, *The Art of Thought*, in which he summarized his reflections on the way he himself thought that he thought—and backed up those introspective analyses with autobiographical narratives by other people. He saw four major phases to thinking. You might be interested to

After

Dogs need their own shampoo—not yours. Your shampoo could irritate your dog's skin and make the coat dull and stiff. Why? Dogs need **less acidic shampoo** than humans use to cut through the oils building up on the skin surface.

Dog shampoos address **different problems**.

- Want to make your pet's coat shinier? Use a whitener shampoo.
- Want your pet to smell good? Use an aromatic shampoo.
- Want to get rid of fleas and ticks? Try our anti-pest shampoo.

After

Much early work on the way we think was based on **self-observation**. In 1926, for example, Wallas published his classic *The Art of Thought*, in which he summarized his reflections on the way he himself thought that he thought—and backed up those introspective analyses with autobiographical narratives by other people. He saw four major phases to thinking:

- 1) **Preparation** during which you gather information and make some preliminary attempts to solve the problem.
- 2) **Incubation** during which you put aside the

know that after the **preparation** phase came:

1) **Incubation**, during which you put aside the problem to work on other things, or sleep

2) **Illumination**, when the solution appears in a flash.

3) **Verification**, during which you check the solution carefully to make sure it works.

problem to work on other things, or sleep.

3) **Illumination** when the solution appears in a flash.

4) **Verification**, during which you check the solution carefully to make sure it works.

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...

TO HAVE FUN

How well does this guideline apply?

You can let the point slide a bit when writing to amuse. People still expect to see some sign of an idea at the end of the introduction to an article, but that could take two or three sentences before they demand a main point.

TO LEARN

Definitely put the idea up front. Alerting the students to your idea in advance means that they understand and remember it better.

TO ACT

The instruction is your main idea. Put it first, and cut away everything else.

TO BE AWARE

A bit of rambling may be forgiven, but make sure that your main idea really does appear toward the beginning of the paragraph.

TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE

If you want to be understood quickly, follow the guideline, even if it means rewriting before you post.

See: Abeleto (1999), Barstow & Jaynes (1986), Bricklin (1998), Brusaw et al (1997), Dee-Lucas and Larkin (1990), Frisse (1987), Horton (1990), Kieras (1978, 1980), Lorch and Lorch (1985), Mayer (1992), McKoon (1977), Morkes & Nielsen (1997), Nielsen (1997b), Spyridakis (2000), Van Dijk and Kintsch (1983), Williams (1990).

For your review only.

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theprices@theprices.com

The Prices
918 La Senda Lane, NW'
Albuquerque, NM 87107

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