chapter 8 |

Idea #4:
Build Chunky Paragraphs!
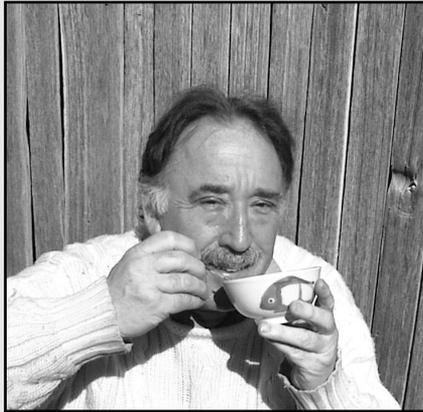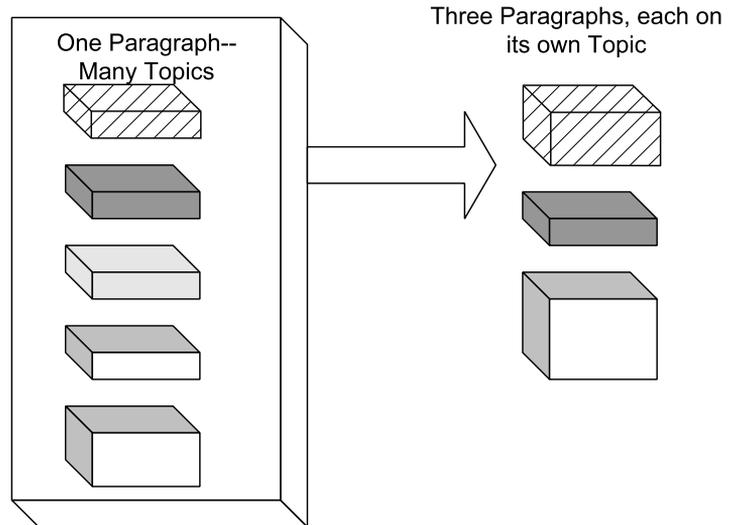
Design Each Paragraph Around One Main Idea

One Paragraph--
Many Topics

Three Paragraphs, each on
its own Topic

Make each paragraph distinct

Paragraphs set off chunks of prose visually. Since each paragraph looks like a different object, write it that way.

On the Web, people see much less text than a book page can show, so each paragraph seems more prominent. Also, on the Web, users are looking harder for clues about the content of each object before deciding to read, so they tend to expect that each new paragraph will offer a different point.

Do what your guests expect. Organize each paragraph around a different purpose.

Answer a particular question

Each paragraph (or series of short paragraphs) should answer a different question from the user, providing one main type of information. Think catalog. The user asks a series of questions and the site responds with a series of paragraphs.

What's the name of this product?	Product name
What good is it?	Feature (and related benefit)
What gear does it work with?	Compatible hardware
Is it available?	Availability flag
How much does it cost?	Pricing

If you devote each paragraph to a particular purpose, you fit into an object-oriented world, where the tags indicate the purpose of the content and its place within the larger structure. Think of something you've just written and ask yourself what kind of tags might delimit the paragraphs, answering user questions such as:

What does this mean?	Tag: Definition
What is your unique proposition?	Tag: Pitch
Can you prove that?	Tag: Evidence
Can you give me some numbers?	Tag: Statistics table
What's the general rule?	Tag: Guideline
What do I do next?	Tag: Procedure step

One point per paragraph.
—Bricklin, 1998

Create one sentence that sums up the paragraph's point

For most readers, a paragraph seems to hang together as a unit if it includes a sentence that states the gist of the paragraph—the core point.

> Readers will expect to find in each paragraph... a sentence that will be the logical, argumentative, expository center, a sentence that you could send as the telegram capturing your central idea. (Williams, 1990)

Make all the sentences coherent

To reinforce the main point of a paragraph, sprinkle other sentences with terms that a reader would normally associate with your main idea. Then organize those themes into one or more sequences, building toward the end of the paragraph.

Readers expect a paragraph to contain at least one set of words

that are conceptually related to your main idea. For instance, if your main point is that recording the exact location of fossils helps archeologists determine the chronological history of a dig, then readers expect to see words such as *bones, shovels, levels,* and *time periods.* Because these subordinate topics are associated with the main idea, readers see the paragraph as holding together.

But don't multiply synonyms for the same subject. If you really mean *bones,* use *bones* over and over. Repetition signals that you are still discussing the same subject, which may seem boring to you, but eliminates confusion. Too many thesaurus terms make the reader wonder whether you are talking about subtly different subjects, making the paragraph explode.

Proceed from familiar to unfamiliar topics

As one sentence moves toward the next, put familiar information into the first part of the sentence, and launch into the new idea, the unexpected twist, the interesting turn—at the end. Then start the next sentence with that new idea. By creating a chain of familiar ideas leading up to new ones, you propel the reader forward from the known to the unknown.

> A reader normally expects coherence and takes it for granted that there is a connection between sentences that occur sequentially in a speech or in writing. (Quirk, 1972)

Look at your paragraph as a structure

As you write, sense the way your paragraph is shaping up. Let your attention move from the individual word to the whole sentence, from the currently unfolding sentence to the purpose of the paragraph—so you work from the bottom up—and from the top down. The more you're aware of the structure of the paragraph and its goal, the more your language will reveal that overarching shape.

After you've written a draft of a paragraph or two, take another look and edit to surface the patterns of thought that tie one sentence to the next. Perhaps you have been moving from the old to the new, from the problem to the solution, from the most common

A paragraph is in fact a whole composition in miniature.

—J. G. R. McElroy, quoted in Young, Becker, and Pike, *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change*

Every idea is an incitement. It offers itself for belief, and if believed, it is acted on unless some other belief outweighs it or some failure of energy stifles the movement at its birth.

—Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Gitlow vs N.Y.,* **1925**

to the least. Any organization will do, as long as you insert words that signal that structure, such as *first*, *next*, and *finally*. You're increasing the drama by polishing the story.

> Paragraphs have plots, patterns that organize sentences into a whole unit. (Young, Becker, and Pike, 1970)

Simplify by throwing out other ideas

If you really want to get two points across, put them in separate paragraphs. In the blurry, hectic experience of skimming through your text, people guess what your paragraph is about, based on the opening, and if that topic does not interest them, they move on. Even if they do decide to read, they may miss the second point because they are focusing on the original idea and overlooking anything else.

> Each paragraph should contain one main idea. Use a second paragraph for a second idea, since users tend to skip any second point as they scan over the paragraph. (Sun, 2000)

Press Enter to start a new paragraph. Use lots of short paragraphs, each dealing with a distinct topic—that is best for e-mail, Web pages, or discussions.

Ideas are, in truth, forces. Infinite, too, is the power of personality. A union of the two always makes history.

**—Henry James,
on Charles W. Eliot**

Ideas won't keep. Something must be done about them.

**—Alfred North Whitehead,
*Dialogues***

EXAMPLES

Before

We balance out the acidity, thickness, and taste, when we put together a coffee blend for a mild, bold, rich, or casual impression. We bring together beans from different countries, each with its own flavor. Of course, sometimes we serve coffees that are "single-origin" because all the beans come from one country, in one season. We think these beans are tangy enough to stand on their own. So you can see that we brew both single-origin and

After

We serve both **single-origin** and **blended** coffees. How come? Like grapes, coffee beans change their aroma, acidity, body, and flavor from year to year, and from one climate to another.

We brew some coffees that are "single-origin" because all the beans come from **one country** in one season. We think these beans are tangy enough to stand on their own.

blended coffees. Why do we do that? Like grapes, coffee beans change their aroma, acidity, body, and flavor from year to year, and from one climate to another.

And we serve blends of coffees bringing together beans from **different countries**, each with its own flavor. In this way, we balance out the acidity, thickness, and taste, for a mild, bold, rich, or casual impression.

Before

Recovering from wounds in World War I, Moholy-Nagy asked himself whether he had the privilege of becoming a typographer, sculptor, or other kind of creative person just for himself, when everyone's skills were needed to solve the problems of simple survival. No more subjective painting, he decided. In 1919 he said, "The personal indulgence of creating art has contributed nothing to the happiness of the masses." Moholy-Nagy came to believe in design for social change.

After

Moholy-Nagy came to believe in design for **social change**. Recovering from wounds in World War I, he asked himself whether he had the privilege of becoming an artist for himself, when everyone's skills were needed to solve the problems of simple survival. No more subjective art, he decided. In 1919 he said, "The personal indulgence of creating art has contributed nothing to the happiness of the masses."

Before

Please use the original box if you still have it, when sending us back a product. For a refund, you must return the product in good condition, including any accompanying disks, books, and batteries. As stated earlier, we offer a money-back guarantee for 30 days from the time you receive the product. To return a product, please use the Return Address Sticker that came with the original package, so we can credit your account, or call us to get the correct address and code. (505 555-1212).

After

We offer a money-back guarantee for 30 days from the time you receive the product. For a refund, you must:

1) Return the product in good condition, including any accompanying disks, books, and batteries. (Please use the original box, if you still have it.)

2) Use the Return Address Sticker that came with the original package, so we can credit your account. Or call us to get the correct address and code so you get credit. (505 555-1212).

AUDIENCE FIT

| If visitors want this...	How well does this guideline apply?
TO HAVE FUN	People out for entertainment sometimes like long tangled paragraphs, enjoying the rich prose, without restlessly asking, "What's the point?"
TO LEARN	Critical. One idea at a time helps the mind absorb the argument.
TO ACT	Critical. Each instruction deserves its own paragraph, and explanations belong in their own paragraphs, quite separate.
TO BE AWARE	If simplicity is a virtue for you, follow the guideline.
TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE	In e-mail and discussion groups, focusing each paragraph on a single idea helps people see what you mean. Nonstop rants, without paragraphing, are just self-indulgent.

See: Bricklin (1998), Bush and Campbell (1995), Dragga and Gong (1989), Morkes & Nielsen (1997), Nielsen (1997a, 1997b), Quirk (1972), Sammons (1999), Sun (2000), Weiss (1991), Williams (1990), Young, Becker, and Pike (1970).

Put the Idea of the Paragraph First

One Paragraph

Main Point

Paragraph Begins with Main Point
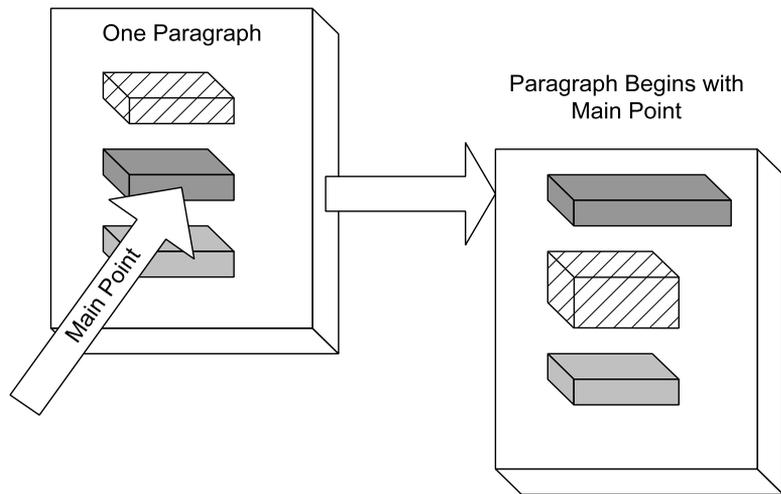
"It got my attention right away. This is a good site. Boom. It gets to the point."

—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.

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

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

> 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.

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 <u>shinier</u> with one shampoo, get rid of <u>fleas and ticks</u> with another, <u>moisturize</u> 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 <u>whitener shampoo</u>.
- Want your pet to smell good? Use an <u>aromatic shampoo</u>.
- Want to get rid of fleas and ticks? Try our <u>anti-pest shampoo</u>.

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...	How well does this guideline apply?
TO HAVE FUN	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).

If You Must Include the Context, Put That First
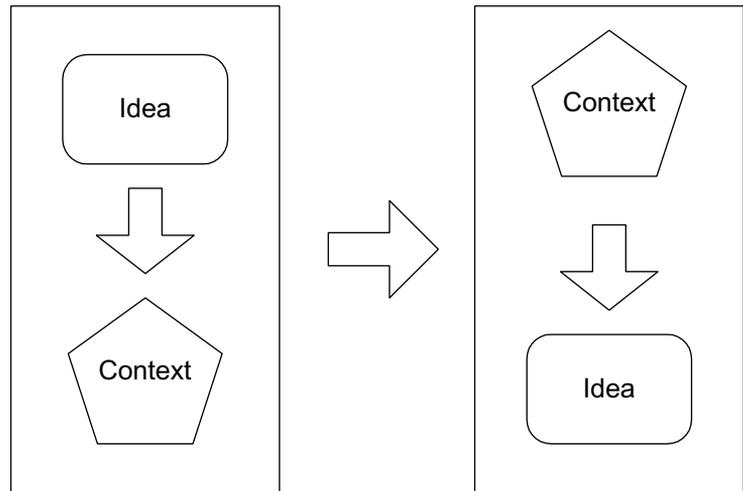
BACKGROUND |

Connect the dots

As you write, proceeding from one sentence to another within a paragraph, or from one paragraph to another, you may need to signal the way you are organizing the sequence—how one idea follows from another. If so, slip the logical connection in quickly, starting the sentence (or paragraph) with words like:

- *Also*
- *Therefore*
- *Next*
- *For example*
- *As a result*
- *In conclusion*

Words like these will answer the question, "What's the connection between what I just read, and this new information?"

You are stressing the way you are organizing the sequence of ideas by:

- Adding one to another (*plus, in addition, moreover*)

- Moving forward in time (t*hen, last*)
- Enumerating a sequence (*first, second, third*)
- Comparing or contrasting (*similarly, by contrast*)
- Tracing causes (*thus, as a result*)
- Explaining (*in other words*)
- Summarizing (*in short*)

Quick phrases like these clarify the relationship between one sentence and the next, between one paragraph and the next.

Point back to earlier ideas

Even though you are eager to get to your next idea, you may need to start off by reminding your readers of an idea you mentioned earlier, just to set the context.

> Give your readers a familiar context to help them move from the more familiar to the less familiar, from the known to the unknown. (Williams, 1990).

If you fear your users may not grasp how one sentence flows out of the previous one, or how one paragraph follows another, begin with a reminder of old or familiar information, echoing words you used in the previous sentence or paragraph.

If you follow this given-new order, research shows that your users will:

- Process the new sentences more quickly than sentences that do not hark back to ideas mentioned earlier. (Albrecht and O'Brien, 1993; Suh and Trabasso, 1993)
- Remember the ideas more often. (Trabasso and van den Broek, 1985)
- Retain the new information longer. (Clark and Haviland, 1977; Just and Carpenter, 1980)
- View the sequence as relatively coherent. (Spyridakis, 2000)

Drop transitions that refer to missing text

Because you cannot tell where people come from, avoid starting a page with generalizations such as, "As we have seen," or,

Be not the first by whom the new are tried,

Nor yet the last to lay the old aside.
—Alexander Pope,
An Essay on Criticism

"Following up on that thought... ."

Your context is only as large as your current page. If you fear some people will not understand the topic or may not share your assumptions, create another page of background and link to it early in the paragraph, so people who want the context can go find it, while others, who could care less, can skip past the link.

EXAMPLES

Before

As we have just seen in our page about problem hair, long tresses can pull thin or fine hair down, revealing almost-bare patches. Get a short haircut, if your hair is just naturally fine, or you will have areas where your hair is thinning out. Add **volume** to each shaft of hair, too.

After

If your hair is just naturally fine, or you have areas where your hair is thinning out, get a **short haircut**. Long tresses can pull the hair down, revealing the almost-bare patches. Next, add **volume** to each shaft of hair so each hair looks thicker and stays in place all day.

Before

Meet smooth, **progressive resistance**, as you go "uphill," or increase the difficulty level.

We use a special **hydraulic turbine**, which has none of the noise of a fan trainer. TV or music will get through now. Our very large flywheel makes your cadence **even and fluid**, too. To make indoor training fun, drop your bike onto our solid steel frame, and pedal away.

Order our Indoor Trainer. It makes your workout way cool.

After

To make indoor training fun, drop your bike onto our solid steel frame and pedal away. Your bike's wheels meet smooth, **progressive resistance**, as you go "uphill," or increase the difficulty level.

The resistance comes from our special **hydraulic turbine**, which has none of the noise of a fan trainer. Our **silent** trainer always lets you hear the TV or music as you work out.

As you pedal, your cadence will be **even and fluid**, too, because we use a very large flywheel, so you don't feel any hurried shifts or jerks. Our Indoor Trainer makes your work out way cool.

Order our Indoor Trainer.

Before
Earthquake supplies

Get a space heater or wood-burning stove, and plenty of fuel, plus fire starters such as matches. Store blankets and sleeping bags, and many layers of warm clothing, in case the power and gas lines are out. If the earthquake destroys your house, you'll need shelter, so get a tent rated for the worst weather in your area (winter storms, summer heat), large enough for your whole family.

After
Be prepared for an earthquake.

If the earthquake **destroys your house**, you'll need shelter, so get a tent large enough for your whole family.

- The tent should be rated for the worst weather in your area (winter storms, summer heat).

- To heat your tent, get a space heater or wood-burning stove, and plenty of fuel, plus fire starters such as matches.

If your **house is OK**, but the power and gas lines are out, you need a way to keep warm.

- For comfortable warmth while sleeping, store blankets and sleeping bags.

- To stay comfortable during the day, prepare many layers of warm clothing, including thermal underwear.

AUDIENCE FIT

| If visitors want this...	How well does this guideline apply?
TO HAVE FUN	People want lush context, not less. They enjoy spotting several themes operating within a paragraph or article. Just make sure you highlight your idea within the forest.
TO LEARN	People learn better when the teacher starts with the familiar, and moves to the unfamiliar. Same here.
TO ACT	In instructions, assume people have done the previous step. That's the main context. At the start of a step, limit yourself to saying where to operate, or why—briefly.
TO BE AWARE	All is context, no?
TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE	Keep the context-setting to a minimum. Like a person who takes forever to set up a joke, you may bore people if you lose yourself in setting the scene or laying out your rationale before you ever get to the point.

See: Albrecht and O'Brien (1993), Clark and Haviland (1977), Just and Carpenter (1980), Spyridakis (2000), Suh and Trabasso (1993), Trabasso and van den Broek (1985), Walker (1987), Williams (1990).

Put Your Conclusion or News Lead in the First Paragraph of the Article

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        1              ⟵ News Lead

        2              ⟵ Key Facts

        3          ⟵ Least Important Details
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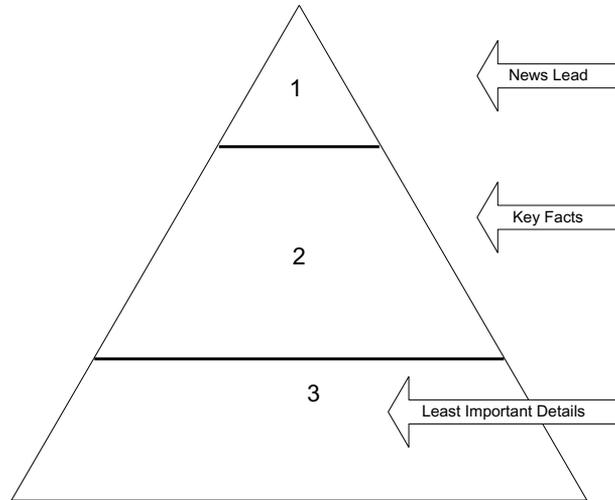
BACKGROUND |

Start with the summary or conclusion

When you think, the conclusion comes last. But when you write for the Web, you need to move that conclusion—or summary of the news—up to the front of the article.

Guests wonder whether your article is worth reading.

> You have to let readers know right away what's in it for them. (Amy Gahran, in Silva, 1998)

Anticipate your conclusion.
—Abeleto, 1999

By putting your main idea into the first line of the first paragraph, you let people figure out whether the rest of the article is relevant to them and whether the topic is what they were after.

> Begin each product description with information that

distinguishes that product from others and enables customers to recognize quickly which products do and don't meet their needs. (IBM, 1999)

Like the lead sentence in a news story, the short conclusion gives users the gist of the page. That will be enough for most guests.

It was more than three times as common for users to limit their reading to a brief, as opposed to reading a full article. (Nielsen, 2000b)

Putting your main point first lets people skip the evidence that led you to that conclusion, if they aren't interested. But if they care, they can stick around.

A Web site has only two to three seconds in which to grab and retain the user's attention. Therefore, the first page—and the first items that appear on that page—must make a positive first impression. (America Online, 2001)

Write the first sentence last

You may be used to building up to a conclusion through careful argument, so stating the idea right away seems bald. Here's the trick:

Write the beginning last. (Bricklin, 1998)

Just write your draft the usual way, and when you finally figure out what you are saying, grab that paragraph or sentence and move it forward.

Life is very nice, but it lacks form. The aim of art is to give life some shape.

—Jean Anouilh

Form is not something added to substance as a mere protuberant adornment. The two are fused into a unity. ... They are the tokens of the thing's identity. They make it what it is.

—Benjamin Cardozo

Before

In a recent study, we challenged our participants to set up a candle so it would light up the whole desk area, a task that demanded people find a way of attaching a candle to a screen behind the desk. We gave 15 participants some candles, tacks, matches, and boxes, without anything inside; we gave another 15 participants the same materials, but put the candles in one box, the tacks in another, and the matches in another. The first group, having never seen anything inside the boxes, felt free to put a candle inside a box, attaching the box to the screen by hot wax. The group who saw the boxes as containers for the supplies never realized they could use a box as a platform. They were stuck with the limiting idea that the boxes could act only as containers.

Thus, a person may get fixated, adopting the point of view so vividly presented by a demonstration or display, and never letting go. Our study proves that although a diagram, display, or demonstration may help someone understand a solution or function, that very success can limit the person's imagination when dealing with another problem.
195 words.

After

A diagram or demonstration may help someone understand a solution or function, but limits the person's imagination when dealing with another problem. The person may get fixated, adopting the point of view so vividly presented, never letting go.

In our study, we challenged our participants to set up a candle so it would light up the whole desk area, a task that demanded that people find a way of attaching a candle to a screen behind the desk.

> 1) We gave 15 participants some candles, tacks, matches, and boxes, without anything inside.
>
> 2) We gave another 15 participants the same materials, but put the candles in one box, the tacks in another, and the matches in another.

The first group, having never seen anything inside the boxes, felt free to put a candle inside a box, attaching the box to the screen by hot wax.

But the group who saw the boxes as containers for the supplies never realized they could use a box as a platform. They were stuck with the limiting idea that the boxes could act only as containers.
186 words.

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...	How well does this guideline apply?
TO HAVE FUN	Not necessary, but acceptable. Making your point right away ensures that your guests will be able to follow your article. But when entertaining, you're entitled to draw out the introduction quite a while. Put the news at the end of your intro.
TO LEARN	General ideas need a brief intro, but not a lot. Highlight them right away, and then expand on them.
TO ACT	Say what the goal or purpose is, right off, in the title and any introduction.
TO BE AWARE	Not so easy, and not so necessary. You can build up to your point if people have a general idea where you are going. Just don't take more than a paragraph or so to get there.
TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE	Always best, if you want to be understood. On the other hand, if you prefer to start off by venting, go ahead and make your point by repeating yourself a dozen times. (No one will be listening).

See: Abeleto (1999), America Online (2001), Bricklin (1998), Deese and Kaufman (1957), Frase (1969), Freebody and Anderson (1986), IBM (1999), Isakson and Spyridakis (1999), Levine (1997), Morkes & Nielsen (1997), Nielsen (1997b, 1999f, 2000b), Silvia (1998), Spyridakis (2000).