

The Art of the Paragraph

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Jonathan Morrow

Anyone can write a paragraph, but not everyone knows how to write one that other people want to read.

You've seen it:

You open a book, and the whole page is one long block of text.

Each sentence in the paragraph makes exactly the same point, said in a slightly different way, and you wonder why they didn't just say it *once* and be done with it.

Every paragraph is the same length (five lines, maybe?), whether it makes sense or not, and it gives the piece a monotonous rhythm.

The paragraph makes a point without telling you why that point is important, and you can't help thinking, "So what?"

Like a little island, the paragraph doesn't connect to any ideas that came before it or after it, and it seems vaguely out of place.

We all hate paragraphs that make these mistakes. Those of us who are in the National Society of Writing Snobs ([raise your hand, if you're a member](#)) even get a weird sort of thrill from pointing them out.

Yet, somehow, they keep showing up.

Not just in the work of third graders, but in the writing of people who call themselves professionals, including yours truly.

It's like Bill Murray and Richard Dreyfuss in the movie [What about Bob?](#) — every time you think they're gone, you open the door, and there they are again, grinning and happy to see you.

The question is: what are you going to do about it?

It's okay to *write* a bad paragraph, but publishing one will only endanger your [bond with your readers](#). Before showing your writing to anyone, you should always go back through and check your paragraphs to make sure they are in tip-top shape.

Here are some questions to guide you:

1. Does it pass the Guy Kawasaki test?

You know how we all have blogging mentors who we look up to?

Well, Guy Kawasaki is one of mine. Three years ago, he wrote a post [passing on some of his blogging wisdom](#), and one of his pieces of advice stuck with me:



... Imagine that there's a little man sitting on your shoulder reading what you're writing. Every time you write an entry, he says, "So what? Who gives a shiitake?" If you can't answer the little man, then you don't have a good blog/product.

It's true. Every time you write a paragraph, stop for a moment and see if it passes the "Who gives a shiitake?" test. If you don't have a good answer, then delete your paragraph and start over.

2. Is it a two-headed baby?

Babies are adorable. Two-headed babies, on the other hand, are something you would see on the cover of National Enquirer. It's just . . . wrong.

Paragraphs work the same way.

A good paragraph has one head. In other words, it has one point, one idea, and all of its sentences work together to support that one idea. Do it right, and it's adorable in its simplicity.

If you try to stuff more than one idea into a paragraph, however, you'll transform it into a monster. Grown men will shy away from it. Small children will burst into tears. English teachers will clutch their chests and fall over dead.

Okay, maybe not. But you *will* confuse readers, and that's serious business. Don't do it.

3. Is there an echo in here?

Some writers have what I call an "Echo Problem."

They start with an idea, and then every sentence in the paragraph echoes the same idea, although in a slightly different way. For example:

I hate green beans. Every time I think of them, I feel nauseous. Green beans are the absolute worst. If you put any green beans on my plate, I won't eat them.

This paragraph only has one idea: *I hate green beans*. Every sentence in the paragraph just echos the same idea. They're unnecessary.

When you write a paragraph like this, it feels like you're expounding on your original point. But you're not. All you're really doing is adding fluff and boring the reader.

A good rule of thumb is to read every sentence in your paragraph and ask yourself, "Could I remove any of these sentences and retain the same meaning?" If you can, then by all means, get rid of them. It'll make your writing tighter.

4. Are you writing in a monotone?

Ever listened to a speech, and the speaker used exactly the same vocal inflection from beginning to end?

It's annoying, and it's not just because humans are predisposed toward rhythmic language. When we're listening, we also depend on the speaker to use vocal inflections to tell us what's important. For instance, if they're speaking quickly and then suddenly start drawing out their words, we know to pay attention. The

change in inflection means something important is happening.

Makes sense, right? But did you know it's also possible for your *writing* to be a monotone?

Paragraphs are the vocal inflections of the written word. Good writers vary the length of their paragraphs to show the reader what's important. Some paragraphs will be 3-5 sentences, but every once in a while, they'll throw in a one-sentence paragraph in order to emphasize a particular point. It stands out, and it tells the reader to pay attention.

Try it for yourself.

5. Are there on-ramps and off-ramps?

So far, we've talked about the paragraph (singular), but it's time we dedicate some time to *paragraphs* (plural).

Lots of beginning writers treat paragraphs like little islands unto themselves, floating in the great ocean of ideas without any connection to anyone or anything. It's jarring. Sometimes you can see how the paragraphs relate to one another, but sometimes you're also left scratching your head.

It's far better to look at paragraphs as if they are towns along a highway. Yes, they are separate, but they also have on-ramps and off-ramps that make it easy for people to get back on the highway and get to where they're going. Similarly, good paragraphs use connector words and grammar to help the reader move on to the next idea.

We could do a whole post on this topic (and probably will, in the future), but the best rule of thumb is to look at each of your paragraphs and see if it's possible to understand them without reading any of the others. If it is, think about adding some connecting on-ramps and off-ramps. It'll make your writing more readable.

Are these rules that you *must* follow?

No, they're just guidelines.

The point is to consciously think about your paragraphs and the way they affect your readers. Next to sexy topics like [headlines](#), [link building](#), and [SEO](#), it's easy to forget about them.

But don't. Like most things, it's the little nuances of your writing that add up to create a profound impact on the reader. Your paragraphs are one of those nuances, and if you're serious about your writing, it's important to learn how to use them.

About the Author: Jon Morrow is Associate Editor of Copyblogger and Co-founder of [Partnering Profits](#). Get more from Jon on [twitter](#).