
Understanding Paragraphs

I.S.P. Nation

Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand

Introduction

When teaching reading we can direct learners' attention to what is being said or to how it is being said. An important advantage of directing attention to how something is being said is that learners are then giving attention to language features that will occur again and again. That is, today's learning will make tomorrow's reading more effective. Davies and Widdowson (1974: 172) put this same idea in another way. They say that when we teach reading we should be teaching learners to understand texts, not just *a* text. Thus, the reading teacher should be interested in features of reading texts and strategies for dealing with them that are generalizable. In another article (Nation, 1979) I have described some of these features and strategies which include pronoun reference, lexical cohesion, guessing words from context, and comprehending complex sentences. In this article I want to look at the skill of making sense of a paragraph which includes what is sometimes called finding the main idea.

First we will look at the system which lies behind the organization of a paragraph and then we will look at ways in which this knowledge can be used to help learners of English deal with texts.

The structure of paragraphs: knowledge for the teacher

A text conveys the writer's ideas, and if it is well-written, it conveys them coherently. That is, the sentences in the text fit together in a meaningful way. They fit together in a way which provides a structure for the paragraph and in certain types of paragraph this structure indicates what ideas the writer considers to be most important. A mature reader is able to see this structure and interpret it. It is conveyed to the reader by the conjunction relationships between sentences and groups of sentences in the paragraph.

Table 1 is a list of these relationships. Most often they are not marked, so the reader has to work out the relationship by considering the information in the sentences. Where the relationship is marked, a variety of markers can be used. Often they are conjunctions, but they can also be adverbs, preposition groups, nouns or verbs. Table 1 contains examples of markers. The term *conjunction relationship* does not imply that a conjunction is used, but refers to the relationship between two or more sentences or clauses (Halliday and Hasan, 1976: Chapter 5).

There are two classes of relationships, those in which the sentences involved carry equal weight, and those in which one sentence is given more prominence. In Table 1, the first four relationships involve items of equal weight. These two classes give rise to two types of paragraphs, those consisting mainly of items of equal weight, and those containing a topic sentence. Let us now look briefly at some examples of these two classes of conjunction relationships. The most frequent relationship where items carry equal weight is the time or arrangement relationship. Each sentence describes a step in a procedure or

Table 1. A basic list of conjunction relationships

Relationship	Markers	Meaning	Most important part
1. Inclusion	and, furthermore, besides, also, in addition, similarly	A and B should be considered together	AB =
2. Alternative	or, nor, alternatively	A and B represent alternatives	AB =
3. Time; Arrangement	when, before, after, subsequently, while, then; firstly, finally, in the first place	A and B actually occurred with this time or sequence relationship; or A and B are arranged in this sequence by the writer	AB =
4. Explanation	in other words, that is to say, I mean, namely	B restates or names A	AB =
5. Amplification	to be more specific, thus, therefore, consists of, can be divided into	B describes A in more detail	A
6. Exemplification	for example, such as, thus, for instance	B is an example of A	A
7. Summary/ Conclusion	to sum up, in short, in a word, to put it briefly	B summarizes A	B
8. Cause-Effect	because, since, thus, as a result, so that, in order to, consequently	A is the cause of or reason for B	B
9. Contrast	but, although, despite, yet, however, still, on the other hand, nevertheless	B is contrary to the expectation raised by A	B
10. Exclusion	instead, rather than, on the contrary	B excludes A	B

1. Notes:

- (1) AB = means that the items in the relationship are of equal weight.
- (2) Most of the relationships involve only two parts. However, *inclusion*, *alternative* and *time and arrangement* may involve more than two.
- (3) The *exemplification* relationship could be included in the *amplification* class, but because it is usually clearly marked, it has been made a separate class.

in a series of occurrences, or lists points in a description. Here is an example:

The aether was flowing through the laboratory like a river past its banks. The light-wave was divided by partial reflection at a thinly silvered surface, into two parts . . . When the two waves reached their proper turning-points they were sent back to the starting point by mirrors.

(Hawkins and Mackin, 1966: 137)

The reader must give equal weight to each part of the description and build up a picture of how the experiment was conducted. Where items in a conjunction relationship are not of equal weight, the reader has to assign a weighting to the appropriate item in the relationship in order to see how the writer organized the paragraph. In an amplification relationship, the most prominent item usually appears first. Then the following sentence deals with all or part of the first sentence in more detail. Here is an example:

A very famous experiment on these lines was tried in America in the year 1887. The swimmer was a wave of light, which we know swims through the aether with a speed of 186,330 miles a second.

(Hawkins and Mackin, 1966: 136–137)

The second sentence gives more detail about the first sentence. From an organizational point of view, the first sentence is the topic sentence in the paragraph. It is a general statement which is fleshed out by the rest of the paragraph.

In a contrast relationship the second item in the contrast is more important than the first. For example, in the sentence *You're a good student, but you've made a lot of mistakes* the overall effect is negative because of the negative message of the second part of the contrast relationship. In *You've made a lot of mistakes but you're a good student* the overall effect is positive because of the positive message of the second part of the contrast relationship. Here is an example from Hawkins and Mackin (1966: 139).

This explanation was proposed by Fitzgerald, and at first sight it seems a strange and arbitrary hypothesis. But it has been rendered very plausible by subsequent theoretical researches of Larmor and Lorentz.

In this example, the contrast is marked by *But*, and the prominent idea is that the explanation is plausible—the second part of the contrast.

Now we will look at an analysis of a whole paragraph to see how the conjunction relationships determine the structure of the paragraph. Finally we will examine how conjunction relationships can be used in helping learners cope with paragraphs.

A sample analysis

(1) The ear is perhaps a difficult organ to understand. (2) One reason for this is that the works are buried deep in solid bone and they are not symmetric like the eye. (3) Cut an eye in half and everything can be seen. (4) Try to imagine a bicycle dropped into a bath of concrete which then sets hard. (5) If you did not know what a bicycle looked like it would be very difficult to work out its structure just by cutting the block of concrete in half. (6)

Another reason for difficulty is that the ear is not just one sense but three. (7) Confusion is added because, in ordinary language, we refer to the flap on the outside as the ear. (8) To a biologist, the flap is a very small part of the ear.

The first sentence *The ear is perhaps a difficult organ to understand* is the topic sentence of the paragraph. We can confirm our intuition about this by examining the conjunction relationships. Sentences (1) and (2) are in a cause-effect relationship, (1) is the effect and (2) is the cause. The relationship is marked by *One reason for this*. In a cause-effect relationship, the effect is usually more important than the cause, so sentence (1) is more likely to be the topic sentence than sentence (2). Sentence (3) is a restatement or explanation of sentence (2). We could insert a phrase like *In other words* or *That is to say* between them. Sentences in an explanation relationship are of equal importance, although the shortest or more general of the sentences could be given more weight. Because sentence (3) is equal to sentence (2), sentence (1) still remains the key sentence. Sentences (4) and (5) are in a cause-effect relationship, with sentence (5) being the effect. These two sentences are in an inclusion relationship with sentence (3). That is, sentences (4) and (5) are another attempt at explaining sentence (2). Sentences in an inclusion relationship are of equal importance. We could put the word *similarly* at the beginning of sentence (4) to mark this inclusion relationship. Because (4) and (5) are equal to (3), sentence (1) still remains the most important sentence. Sentence (6) is in a cause-effect relationship with sentence (1). The relationship is marked by *Another reason*. Sentence (1) is the effect and therefore is more important. Sentence (7) is in an inclusion relationship with sentence (6). The word *added* could be regarded as marker of this relationship, although another marker like *moreover*, *furthermore* could be put at the beginning of sentence (7). Sentences (7) and (8) are in a contrast relationship. The markers *But* and *However* could be put at the beginning of sentence (8). So sentence (8) carries more weight than sentence (7). In the text the contrast occurs only between sentences (7) and (8), so sentence (1) still remains the topic sentence because the group of sentences (2), (3), (4) and (5), sentence (6) by itself, and the group of sentences (7) and (8) are three causes or reasons for sentence (1) which is the effect.

Every coherent text involves conjunction relationships like those described above. In some texts, depending on the types of relationships, they result in one sentence—the topic sentence—being given more weight than the others, in others the paragraph consists of items of roughly equal importance. The role of the topic sentence partly depends on the type of conjunction relationship it is involved in. For example, the topic sentence is likely to contain the most important piece of information in the paragraph if it is part of an exemplification relationship, a summary relationship, a cause-effect relationship, or a contrast relationship. If the topic sentence is part of an amplification relationship, it will not usually carry a great deal of information in itself but will provide a generalization which prepares the reader for what is to follow.

The topic sentence is most often the first sentence in a paragraph. Occasionally it is the final sentence and very rarely it occurs between these two. There is a connection between the type of conjunction relationship involved and the position of the topic sentence. It is most likely to be at the beginning of the paragraph if it is part of an

amplification or exemplification relationship. If it is part of a contrast or summary relationship, it is most likely to occur finally.

Paragraph analysis and the learner

Mature readers have no need to consciously perform the kind of analysis described above. They are intuitively aware of the conjunction relationships and their weighting and they make judgements based on this as they read. In this way they see the organization of a paragraph and are able to locate the topic and make decisions about the relative importance of parts of the paragraph. If learners have difficulty in making these decisions intuitively, the teacher can guide them in several ways:

1. The teacher can explain where the main idea in a paragraph occurs by using the kind of analysis applied to the passage about the ear. Often a diagrammatic presentation is useful. To gain advantage from this, the learners should be familiar with the relationships and their weightings as set out in Figure 1. The learners need not be very proficient in recognizing the relationships in a text but should be able to follow the teacher's analysis of a paragraph. They should be able to decide whether the paragraph has a main idea, or is just a set of equally weighted sentences. The easiest way to develop a familiarity with the various relationships is to begin with marked relationships because the marker provides some clue to the relationship. Some marked relationships however are not straightforward and care is needed. Some markers are ambiguous. *Thus*, for example, can mark cause-effect, exemplification, and amplification. *While* can mark time or contrast. Some markers are misleading. *On the contrary* marks exclusion not contrast. *All the same* marks contrast and not inclusion.

Once learners have mastered marked relationships involving two sentences or clauses, they can move to marked relationships where one of the parts of the relationship consists of several sentences. A study of unmarked relationships is made easier by getting the learners to suggest markers that could be put between sentences. However, unless learners have a special interest in language study the effort of learning the relationships can be a heavy task and it may be better to use one of the following approaches.

2. The teacher can guide the learners towards finding the topic sentence or seeing the structure of the passage by careful questioning. The kinds of questions used would include *What kind of paragraph is this? Which sentence do you think is more important, sentence (1) or sentence (2)? What words tell us how sentence (2) is related to sentence (1)? What words could you put between sentence (2) and sentence (3)?* With this approach the learners need not be familiar with the list of conjunction relationships but would rely on analogy and intuition.

3. An extremely effective and powerful classroom exercise with a reading text is to get the learners to put the text away and then show them the first sentence of the first paragraph. They then have to guess what the rest of the paragraph is about and they have to explain the clues that were in the first sentence that enabled them to guess. After guessing and justifying they look at the text. In at least 80% of the cases there is enough information in the first sentence to allow a reasonably accurate prediction to be made. Here are some examples of first sentences and the clues they contain. Notice that although in some of the examples the first sentence does not contain the main idea, it is still possible

to predict what will come next. Notice also that predicting what will come next is to a large degree predicting the conjunction relationship between the first sentence of the paragraph and the following ones.

- (a) It might be argued that the process of perceiving in older children and adults is so rapid and accurate as to be quite dissimilar from that of little children; and in particular that there would be no time for all the processes of classification described in the last chapter to take place before objects are fully identified.

(Vernon 1962: 31)

The clues in this sentence are *might be argued* and the contrast between *older children and adults* and *little children*. Predictably the next sentence begins with *However* and contains the main idea. The second item in a contrast relationship is more important than the first.

- (b) A large number of experiments has been carried out in these various ways, to investigate the perceptual processes of adults.

(Vernon 1962: 31)

The clues are the indefinite or general noun groups *a large number of experiments* and *the perceptual processes of adults*. We expect that these will be dealt with in more detail and in fact they are. Notice that although this is the main organizing sentence in the paragraph, it does not give a lot of information. The relationship is an amplification relationship.

- (c) In everyday life situations where objects can be clearly seen there will be corroboration between a variety of different types of information as to the nature of the objects.

(Vernon 1962: 32)

Once again the indefinite noun groups provide the important clues—*everyday life situations*, *corroboration*, *a variety of different types of information*. We expect that these will be elaborated in more detail and the following sentences talk about the congruence of shape, colour, texture, spatial position . . . Once again the relationship is an amplification relationship with general indefinite noun groups in the first sentence being explained in more detail. This is the most common type of arrangement for paragraphs which have a topic sentence.

- (d) To the man in the street it may appear idle to discuss the manner in which he perceives the world around him.

(Vernon 1962: 11)

In this sentence one clue is similar to that in example (a). It occurs in the verb group *may appear*. In addition the introductory phrase *To the man in the street* places a limitation on the applicability of the following statement. It leads us to expect a contrast. In fact, the following sentences provide reasons for *the man in the street's* beliefs. The contrast does not occur until two paragraphs later. This predicting exercise provides interesting and useful class discussion of a text and develops a very useful reading skill. If a reader can make a good prediction of what will follow the first sentence, reading the rest of the paragraph becomes an easier task. This prediction involves making use of the clues that signal conjunction relationships.

4. It is possible to teach learners a simple strategy to guide decisions about the main idea of a paragraph.

- (1) Decide what kind of paragraph it is. Is it one which has a main idea or is it just a set of equal steps?
- (2) If it is a paragraph with a main idea, decide where the main idea is.
- (3) Check your decision in the following ways:
 - (i) Look for any markers near the main idea. If there is not a marker try inserting a suitable word. Make sure that the weightings given in the list of relationships give weight to the sentence you have chosen.
 - (ii) Look for clues in the sentence itself. For example if you have chosen the first sentence as the main idea see if it contains general noun groups that are elaborated on in the following sentences.

The learning of this strategy is best accompanied by class discussion. Making decisions about the main idea of a paragraph is excellent preparation for taking notes from a text during intensive reading.

Conclusion

In this article I have been deliberately vague about the meaning of important terms like *paragraph* and *main idea*. Because I am interested mainly in helping learners deal with a written text I have just used a formal definition of a paragraph. However a study of the conjunction relationships between sentences may provide a more useful definition of a paragraph. An analysis of the conjunction relationships in a text provides a picture of the organization of the text. This can also be used as a basis for evaluating the writer's skill in organizing and presenting the material. If parts of a text are unrelated to what has preceded, or the topic sentence is not in a salient position, or the paragraph divisions do not correspond to the grouping shown by the conjunction analysis, then we may think the writer's job has not been well done. A study of texts with this type of critical approach leads on naturally to the idea of organization in the learners' own composition.

What I have called the main idea or topic sentence does not always contain the most important information in a paragraph. Its main function is organizational. The basic argument in this paper is that the signalled or unsignalled conjunction relationships between the sentences in a paragraph determine the structure of that paragraph. Moreover, these conjunction relationships can be used to give one sentence more importance in the structure of that paragraph. If we are able to see this structure, then our interpretation of the ideas in the paragraph will more closely match the interpretation intended by the writer. Competent readers do this intuitively. If learners have difficulty doing this, then the suggestions that I have made may help overcome this difficulty.

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Abstract/摘要

谈谈如何理解段落

阅读课教学如能引导学生了解文章的语言表达方式,那么就能使学生掌握篇章表达方式的一般规律和语言特点,有利于他们今后的阅读。本文所谈的就是其中的一个侧面,即段落的组织结构规律以及如何理解段落大意。

英语的段落结构有二种主要类型,一类段落中含有一个主题,另一类段落则由一组同样重要的句子所组成。这二类段落的区分取决于段落中各句之间的连接关系。在某些连接关系中,各句分量相当,不分主次。这类连接关系主要表达句子间的层递、选择、阐释及时间顺序等组合关系。另一类连接关系则表达句子间的对比、扩展、因果等组合关系,这些句子的分量各不相同。例如,在对比关系中,对比的第二部分比第一部分更为重要。这类分量不同的连接关系便构成了含有主题的段落。

熟练的读者能本能地区分不同的段落连接关系,并能掌握段落的重点,因此有意识的段落分析对他们来说是不需要的。但是,如果学生还不能做到这一点,他们就需要教师的指导。教师可以采用下列几种方法帮助他们。

1. 教师可以通过分析句子间的各种连接关系,使学生分清二种不同类型的段落,把握段落的重点。
2. 教师可以通过提问的方式引导学生找出段落中的主题句或理解段落的结构。
3. 教师可以采用一种非常有效的课堂练习,让学生看一个段落的第一句,然后叫学生猜测后面的句子大约会讲什么并说出他们所作猜测的依据。如果学生能正确地猜出,那么他们阅读这些句子就容易了。
4. 教师还可以教学生一种简单易行的方法来推测并确定段落的主题。

正确理解段落的结构不仅有助于掌握段落的中心,而且也能使学生对篇章的整体有一个全面的认识,有助于他们在自己的写作中正确地谋篇布局。

I.S.P. Nation
Victoria University of Wellington
Wellington, New Zealand