

SID Laurea Triennale

English 1

The writing skill:
PARAGRAPHING

Contents

- Examples of common misunderstandings about paragraphing in the essay genre.
- Distinguishing 'reader-friendly' from 'reader UNfriendly' textual organisation in prose writing
- What a paragraph is
- How a paragraph is typographically distinguished on the page
- The topic sentence
- Examples of paragraphs by experienced prose essay writers
- Examples in other text types – news reports, propaganda - which may use much shorter paragraphs



"I can't read a word of this essay of yours. Excellent work."

On the next slide you will read part of the introduction to a paper submitted by a Master's student for publication in the DISPES journal, *Polyarchies* or *Poliarchie*.

The submission was rejected on grounds of the lack of any analysis or significant contribution to existing research.

However, the aesthetics of the very first page suggest an immature, inexperienced writer.

Can you see why?

Gli Stati Uniti, Cuba ed il problema della legittimità dell'*embargo* nell'era di Trump

I. Introduzione

La vittoria di Donald Trump ha determinato un significativo cambiamento nell'essenza ed immagine della politica interna ed estera statunitense, caratterizzandosi attraverso un chiaro e concreto messaggio nazionalista, che prescinde dai valori fondamentali della democrazia e dei diritti umani.

Inoltre, dal suo insediamento alla Casa Bianca, il presidente Trump ha posto in essere un numero considerevole di *executive order*, nei confronti di Cuba stessa, ma soprattutto in materia di immigrazione e sicurezza interna, con l'obiettivo di prevenire eventuali atti terroristici negli Stati Uniti.

In questo clima, in cui la protezione dei propri interessi economici e valori si è imposta su politiche di cooperazione e dialogo con i vicini americani, promosse in precedenza anche da Barack Obama, gli Stati Uniti hanno ridefinito, parallelamente alle ideologie presidenziali, la propria posizione nel continente e ristabilendo nuovi equilibri globali.

E' chiaro, infatti, che l'equilibrio regionale è stato alterato, soprattutto in relazione alle nuove forme di apertura politico/diplomatica, iniziate durante l'amministrazione precedente.

Ci riferiamo in modo particolare alle relazioni tra Stati Uniti e Cuba, che, con il presidente Obama, vennero riattivate, dopo ben 58 anni di tensioni ed incomunicabilità, a causa dell'*embargo* totale, imposto sull'isola, da parte statunitense.

Inoltre, Cuba rappresenta, in questo momento storico, un grande punto interrogativo per il continente americano, in quanto la "dittatura comunista" si sta approssimando al suo termine, a causa, prima, della morte del leader rivoluzionario Fidel Castro e, in secondo luogo, in virtù dell'abbandono del potere di Raúl Castro, nel febbraio 2018, aprendo così una prospettiva incerta sull'evoluzione definitiva del governo e futuro dell'isola.

The paragraphing in the text on the previous slide is faulty. It is not clear what criteria are being followed in the textual organisation. Why does the writer

- go to a new line every sentence?
- leave a blank line between the first three sentences and the fourth, and then between the fifth and the sixth?

The example texts on the next slides are also inadequate from the paragraphing point of view.

The power supply to Western households should be randomly switched off for one day, once a week.

Given the growing concern regarding climate change and pollution, the first outcome would be to lower carbon emissions for the day, resulting in a temporary relief for the planet. The effectiveness of this initiative should not be doubted, considering that for 52 days (1/7th of the entire year) western households carbon footprint would be significantly reduced. Other aspects are even more closely related to us: we should learn to cope and get over our technology addiction by taking advantage of this days, conceiving them as a self-empowering opportunity; not being tempted by screens and technology related distractions will be beneficial to people's attention spans, specially to kids/students which are often affected by low attention span issues. Additionally, as everyone which has experienced power cuts can confirm, events of this type tend to bring families and communities together leading to a sharing that would hardly take place in another context. And lastly, while generally people are required to leave cities for it, you could now lift your head and gaze at the stars that perhaps you even forgot were there.

This would change the world: change our thoughts and change our future.

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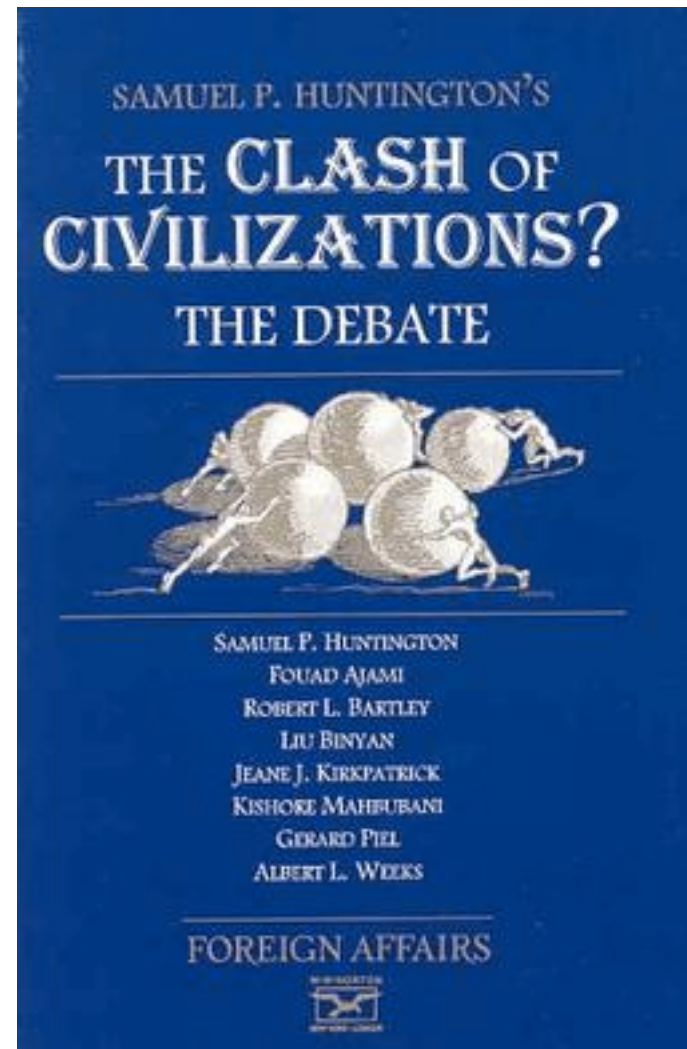
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This would change the world: change our thoughts and change our future.

On the first of the previous two slides, it was not clear why the initial and concluding sentences had been detached from the whole and presented as separate paragraphs in themselves.

On the second of the previous two slides, there seems to be no consistent rule for starting on a new line.

Consider the next 3 versions A, B and C of the same text, an excerpt from Samuel Huntington's famous 1993 essay *The Clash of Civilisations*. Which version is the most reader-friendly? Why?



VERSION A

CIVILIZATION IDENTITY will be increasingly important in the future, and the world will be shaped in large measure by the interactions among seven or eight major civilizations. These include Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and possibly African civilization. The most important conflicts of the future will occur along the cultural fault lines separating these civilizations from one another. Why will this be the case? First, differences among civilizations are not only real; they are basic. Civilizations are differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, tradition and, most important, religion. The people of different civilizations have different views on the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing views of the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy. These differences are the product of centuries. They will not soon disappear. They are far more fundamental than differences among political ideologies and political regimes. Differences do not necessarily mean conflict, and conflict does not necessarily mean violence. Over the centuries, however, differences among civilizations have generated the most prolonged and the most violent conflicts. Second, the world is becoming a smaller place. The interactions between peoples of different civilizations are increasing; these increasing interactions intensify civilization consciousness and awareness of differences between civilizations and commonalities within civilizations. North African immigration to France generates hostility among Frenchmen and at the same time increased receptivity to immigration by "good" European Catholic Poles. Americans react far more negatively to Japanese investment than to larger investments from Canada and European countries. Similarly, as Donald Horowitz has pointed out, "An Ibo may be . . . an Owerri Ibo or an Onitsha Ibo in what was the Eastern region of Nigeria. In Lagos, he is simply an Ibo. In London, he is a Nigerian. In New York, he is an African." The interactions among peoples of different civilizations enhance the civilization-consciousness of people that, in turn, invigorates differences and animosities stretching or thought to stretch back deep into history. Third, the processes of economic modernization and social change throughout the world are separating people from longstanding local identities. They also weaken the nation state as a source of identity. In much of the world religion has moved in to fill this gap, often in the form of movements that are labeled "fundamentalist." Such movements are found in Western Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as in Islam. In most countries and most religions the people active in fundamentalist movements are young, college-educated, middle-class technicians, professionals and business persons. The "unsecularization of the world," George Weigel has remarked, "is one of the dominant social factors of life in the late twentieth century." The revival of religion, "*la revanche de Dieu*," as Gilles Kepel labeled it, provides a basis for identity and commitment that transcends national boundaries and unites civilizations.

VERSION B

CIVILIZATION IDENTITY will be increasingly important in the future, and the world will be shaped in large measure by the interactions among seven or eight major civilizations.

These include Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and possibly African civilization. The most important conflicts of the future will occur along the cultural fault lines separating these civilizations from one another.

Why will this be the case? First, differences among civilizations are not only real; they are basic.

Civilizations are differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, tradition and, most important, religion.

The people of different civilizations have different views on the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing views of the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy.

These differences are the product of centuries. They will not soon disappear.

They are far more fundamental than differences among political ideologies and political regimes.

Differences do not necessarily mean conflict, and conflict does not necessarily mean violence. Over the centuries, however, differences among civilizations have generated the most prolonged and the most violent conflicts. Second, the world is becoming a smaller place.

The interactions between peoples of different civilizations are increasing; these increasing interactions intensify civilization consciousness and awareness of differences between civilizations and commonalities within civilizations.

North African immigration to France generates hostility among Frenchmen and at the same time increased receptivity to immigration by "good" European Catholic Poles.

Americans react far more negatively to Japanese investment than to larger investments from Canada and European countries. Similarly, as Donald Horowitz has pointed out, "An Ibo may be . . . an Owerri Ibo or an Onitsha Ibo in what was the Eastern region of Nigeria. In Lagos, he is simply an Ibo. In London, he is a Nigerian.

In New York, he is an African."

The interactions among peoples of different civilizations enhance the civilization-consciousness of people that, in turn, invigorates differences and animosities stretching or thought to stretch back deep into history. Third, the processes of economic modernization and social change throughout the world are separating people from longstanding local identities. They also weaken the nation state as a source of identity. In much of the world religion has moved in to fill this gap, often in the form of movements that are labeled "fundamentalist." Such movements are found in Western Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as in Islam.

In most countries and most religions the people active in fundamentalist movements are young, college-educated, middle-class technicians, professionals and business persons.

The "unsecularization of the world," George Weigel has remarked, "is one of the dominant social factors of life in the late twentieth century."

The revival of religion, "*la revanche de Dieu*," as Gilles Kepel labeled it, provides a basis for identity and commitment that transcends national boundaries and unites civilizations.

VERSION C

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Second, the world is becoming a smaller place. The interactions between peoples of different civilizations are increasing; these increasing interactions intensify civilization consciousness and awareness of differences between civilizations and commonalities within civilizations. North African immigration to France generates hostility among Frenchmen and at the same time increased receptivity to immigration by "good" European Catholic Poles. Americans react far more negatively to Japanese investment than to larger investments from Canada and European countries. Similarly, as Donald Horowitz has pointed out, "An Ibo may be . . . an Owerri Ibo or an Onitsha Ibo in what was the Eastern region of Nigeria. In Lagos, he is simply an Ibo. In London, he is a Nigerian. In New York, he is an African." The interactions among peoples of different civilizations enhance the civilization-consciousness of people that, in turn, invigorates differences and animosities stretching or thought to stretch back deep into history.

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Many students struggle with paragraphing.

Common misunderstandings are:

- i) that every new sentence should begin on a new line
- ii) that a paragraph can be typographically subdivided into sub- or micro-paragraphs, by going to a new line INSIDE A 'MACRO' PARAGRAPH

These misunderstandings derive partly from (some) primary school teaching; partly from familiarity with newspaper articles which frequently use one-sentence paragraphs; possibly from familiarity with the style of reports, which use bullet points under headed sections, rather than discursive paragraphs, and often from the mistaken idea that published or adult texts in the Italian language do not use paragraphs

- A paragraph is a **UNIT OF SENSE above the level of the clause or clause complex** (a morpheme, a word, a clause, a clause complex are also units of sense). It has thematic unity, cohesion and coherence.
- A paragraph **develops an idea**. This idea is usually introduced in the first sentence of the paragraph, called **the topic sentence**. A topic sentence remains fairly general, i.e. it does not contain highly specific, detailed information.
- Paragraphs can be **functionally** or **thematically** defined, i.e. in terms of what they do (introduction, explanation, contestation, conclusion etc.) or in terms of what they are about (e.g. in a school geography text, the physical, economic and political geography of a country will be explained in separate paragraphs)

- A paragraph is **a unit of sense**. Although it is not defined in terms of length, as a rough guide, a paragraph will typically have on average about 7 sentences.
- A paragraph is **typographically distinguished** by indentation from the left margin **and / or** by a blank line between one paragraph and the next

Don't break up a paragraph into separate sentences, or into 'micro-sections' within the same paragraph

NO:

Australia can be divided into four distinct regions: the Great Dividing Range, along the east coast, characterized by a series of plateaux and high plains. It runs from Cape York, in northern Queensland, to Tasmania.

Beyond this are the Murray-Darling, Eyre and Carpentaria basins, which stretch from the Gulf of Carpentaria (in northern Queensland) through New South Wales, to western Australia and parts of south Australia.

Over half of Australia is occupied by a series of low plateaux and desert regions, which extend from the tableland of the Northern Territory across to the Kimberley and through the vast desert regions of the Great Victoria, Gibson and Great Sandy deserts.

Finally there is the Great Barrier Reef, which extends for 2,000 km from Cape York to the south.

YES:

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Topic sentence

Content
(the four regions)

Closing sentence

Some well-formed paragraphs, in English and in Italian (to prove the point) by experienced prose writers are proposed on the next slides. Notice how the topic sentence introduces the main ideas in each paragraph, and how these ideas are developed in the sentences which follow.

A well-formed paragraph

The belief in the essential equality of all men and the actual behaviour patterns reflecting it in society has two roots: an ideological and a sociological one. Ideologically, the belief in the essential equality of all men derives from the Christian conception of the brotherhood of all men as children of God. Without this conception, our society could never have developed a political order granting equal status to all. On the other hand, however, this teaching could not have informed social reality if it had not been for certain favourable shifts in the social and political structure of Western societies. The pressure of broad middle and lower strata gaining an increasing share in social and political influence was needed to transform the Christian principle of the equality of all human beings into an institutional and political reality. The idea as such had existed before, but it had little political relevance as long as it was understood only in relation to religious experience and found no application to things of the world. The equal treatment of all individuals as a basic feature of modern society was imposed by the growing power wielded by lower social strata.

(excerpt from Karl Mannheim's essay on democracy in *Essays on the Sociology of Culture*)

Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way, but it is generally assumed that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it. Our civilization is decadent and our language -- so the argument runs -- must inevitably share in the general collapse. It follows that any struggle against the abuse of language is a sentimental archaism, like preferring candles to electric light or hansom cabs to aeroplanes. Underneath this lies the half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes.

Now, it is clear that the decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes: it is not due simply to the bad influence of this or that individual writer. But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely. A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. The point is that the process is reversible. Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step toward political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers. I will come back to this presently, and I hope that by that time the meaning of what I have said here will have become clearer. Meanwhile, here are five specimens of the English language as it is now habitually written.

These five passages have not been picked out because they are especially bad -- I could have quoted far worse if I had chosen -- **but because they illustrate various of the mental vices from which we now suffer.** They are a little below the average, but are fairly representative examples. I number them so that I can refer back to them when necessary [examples follow]:

The paragraphs on the previous slide were separated by a blank line. However, they can be equally marked off simply by indenting from the left margin, as on the next slide.

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Paragraphs are used in Italian, whether a discursive essay, like this:

Per prima è venuta la lingua. Non c'era ancora la nazione, ma da secoli esisteva un'unità linguistico-letteraria nazionale. «Ex linguis gentes, non ex gentibus linguae exortae sunt», scriveva Isidoro di Siviglia (*Etymologiae*, IX, I, 11): sono le lingue che fanno i popoli, non i popoli già costituiti che fanno le lingue. Gli ambiti in cui si sono realizzati valori in grado di unire più di ogni cosa l'Italia e tali da costituire la linea maestra di un'aspirazione unitaria non sono stati tanto principî oggettivi o materiali, l'etnia, l'economia, il mercato, il territorio, una comunità di costumi, la politica ideale dell'uguaglianza e della democrazia, l'unità delle istituzioni giuridiche, il principio della tolleranza o altro ancora. La coscienza e la volontà di un'unione si sono basate soprattutto su un valore culturale (la lingua della letteratura, la sua validità e la sua tenuta) che ha prefigurato sin dalle Origini un'unità immaginata e inseguita come un desiderio. «È un desiderio e non un fatto, un presupposto e non una realtà, un nome e non una cosa» il popolo italiano, ribadirà Gioberti (*Del primato civile e morale degli italiani*), nel secolo dell'Unità.

Non è stata dunque una nazione a produrre una letteratura, ma una letteratura a prefigurare il progetto di una nazione. Carducci nel discorso *Presso la tomba di Francesco Petrarca* del 1874 recitava: «Quando il principe di Metternich disse l'Italia essere una espressione geografica, non aveva capito la cosa; ella era un'espressione letteraria, una tradizione poetica». In quegli anni anche De Sanctis indicava «nella letteratura e nella lingua gli strumenti di fondazione della collettività nazionale». E già Foscolo, al suo esordio sulla cattedra di eloquenza all'università di Pavia, 22 gennaio 1809, aveva così esortato: «Amate palesamente e generosamente le lettere e la vostra nazione, e potrete infine conoscervi fra di voi, e assumerete il coraggio della concordia».

(Excerpt from Gian Luigi Beccaria's essay, *Mia Lingua italiana* 2011 Einaudi)

Not only essays, but other types of text too use paragraphs to organise their content.

Reports; newspaper 'news in brief'; propaganda and the text of speeches may have shorter paragraphs, however, than prose essays. Some of these kinds of text may have one sentence paragraphs. A couple of examples follow.

Do not imitate this practice in your essays.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi killed in US raid, Trump confirms

The Islamic State leader, [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi](#), has been killed in a raid by US special forces on his Syrian safe house, Donald Trump has announced, ending a years-long hunt for one of the world's most-wanted terrorists.

Trump said the "impeccable" two-hour operation was conducted on Saturday night in the province of Idlib, one of the few areas of the country still outside Syrian regime control, and that US officials had confirmed Baghdadi, 48, was among those killed.

"US special operations forces executed a dangerous and daring night-time raid in north-west [Syria](#) and accomplished their mission in grand style," he said.

The US president, facing [impeachment proceedings](#) and under bipartisan fire for [withdrawing troops](#) from the Syrian border, basked in the demise of the self-styled caliphate leader, whose final moments he described in vivid, indulgent detail.

"[Baghdadi] running into a dead-end tunnel, whimpering and crying and screaming all the way," Trump said.

Cornered, Baghdadi detonated a suicide vest and killed himself and three of his children, Trump said. "He died like a dog, he died like a coward. The world is now a much safer place," he said.

Italian government propaganda text

L'Italia può trarre grandi vantaggi dalla globalizzazione.

Lo sanno gli imprenditori e i lavoratori italiani che l'hanno resa la seconda economia manifatturiera in Europa e la quinta globale. Lo sanno i consumatori di tutto il mondo che apprezzano i prodotti del Made in Italy e danno vita ad una robusta e diffusa "domanda di Italia". Aprirsi alla globalizzazione non significa solo portare l'Italia nel mondo, esportando i nostri prodotti ed investendo in nuovi mercati. Significa anche portare il mondo in Italia. Vuol dire attrarre il capitale, finanziario ed umano, con il quale partecipare da pari alla formazione globale del valore e creare lavoro, sapere, e crescita per i nostri cittadini.

È per rispondere a questa sfida che il Governo lancia Destinazione Italia che, sviluppato in stretto raccordo con le priorità di politica economica indicate dal Documento di economia e finanza e dalla Legge di Stabilità, definisce un complesso di misure finalizzate a favorire in modo organico e strutturale l'attrazione degli investimenti esteri e a promuovere la competitività delle imprese italiane, che verranno introdotte progressivamente nell'ordinamento secondo una tempistica che costituirà l'agenda del Governo.

Nella prima versione, si tratta di 50 misure che mirano a riformare un ampio spettro di settori, dal fisco al lavoro, dalla giustizia civile alla ricerca, a valorizzare i nostri asset, e a sviluppare una politica di promozione internazionale del nostro Paese mirata sugli investimenti. Il Governo si impegna in tempi brevi a tradurre queste misure in concreti atti e norme di legge e ad avviare un monitoraggio settimanale della loro attuazione.

Il Governo si impegna ad approfondire e ad attuare gli interventi contenuti in Destinazione Italia in coerenza con i documenti programmatici di finanza pubblica e con il quadro economico e finanziario definito dalla Legge di Stabilità

Destinazione Italia è un living document. Sulla base di questa versione 0.5 il Governo avvierà una consultazione pubblica di tre settimane coinvolgendo cittadini, imprenditori italiani ed esteri, associazioni non solo di categoria, sindacati ed esperti, che condurrà alla versione 1.0.

La Presidenza del Consiglio monitorerà l'impatto di Destinazione Italia con il supporto di Istat, Antitrust, Consob e Banca d'Italia, nonché delle organizzazioni internazionali. In questo esercizio saranno coinvolti i vari stakeholders, a cominciare dagli investitori esteri in Italia. I risultati conseguiti saranno valutati dal Consiglio dei ministri e resi pubblici.

Un rapporto su Destinazione Italia e sullo stato degli investimenti esteri in Italia sarà presentato ogni anno in Parlamento e trimestralmente il Consiglio dei Ministri, sulla base di un cronoprogramma, farà il punto sul suo stato di attuazione, per definire interventi che superino le criticità e per selezionare ulteriori linee di intervento.

(from the introduction to the 'destinazione Italia' project)