

How to Teach Paragraph Structure

Marna Broekhoff

Meliksah University / Kayseri, Turkey

Key words: downshifting, abstraction, critical thinking, paragraph development

ABSTRACT

One of the biggest problems in teaching paragraph writing, to both non-native and native English speakers alike, is the concept of adequate development. Too often students write “paragraphs” of only one sentence, or of multiple but only loosely related sentences. We urge them to write a more general topic sentence and more specific supporting details, but what does this mean? Many international students are not familiar with writing in paragraph form and have difficulty distinguishing general from specific. A concrete technique for teaching paragraph development stems from the semanticist S. I. Hayakawa’s “Ladder of Abstraction” and his concept of “downshifting.” It consists of four steps, starting with word pairs and sentence pairs, then the abstraction ladder itself, sample paragraphs, and finally, students’ own paragraphs. Consensus on the level of generality of a particular item is less important than understanding the interplay between levels. For many students the visual aid of the abstraction ladder and the act of numbering sentences fit well with their learning modalities. Participants in this hands-on demonstration will analyze and rewrite examples for all four steps, taking home several concrete ways to teach paragraph writing. This paragraph development technique improves not only writing, including significance, support, unity, and coherence through adequate transitions. Students can see the whole essay as a macrocosm of paragraph structure. The technique also improves reading, note-taking, and exam preparation by helping students distinguish main ideas from evidence, generalizations from supporting details, and inference from fact. It can even help students separate the woods from the trees in their personal lives!