CREATING EFFECTIVE PARAGRAPHS: CHOOSING APPROPRIATE TOPICS AND FIRST ELEMENTS MINDFULLY

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In the history of linguistics, William Vande Kopple should be recognized as one of its key figures. Though he didn't present us with new understandings on the structure of different languages or a completely new theory about the nature of language, he did offer us valuable pedagogical applications of linguistics to writing, presenting a student-friendly approach to Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) that can be transformative for students and writing teachers. He exemplified "new ways of enhancing practice, especially in contexts where we incorporate theory into the practice" (Yancey) because he aimed to "forge connections between linguistics and composition" (vii) and to provide readers [both teachers and students] with "tools for describing the coherence or incoherence of prose…and to help them see many of the causes of incoherence" (*Clear and Coherent Prose* 3; Yancey). In all his work, the emphasis has been on choice, on showing novice writers how to deploy the various resources language gives them in order to achieve specific goals ("Given New" 73). And, most importantly, he uses the whole text as the unit of analysis—not just isolated sentences; this is a critical feature because it is whole texts that reveal how the choices writers have made best fit their purpose ("Given New" 73).

In what follows, I will first introduce important concepts from Functional Linguistics that have been modified by Vande Kopple so as to be accessible to writers, show their application in paragraph organization and then present relevant 'tools' novice writers can

use to create effective paragraphs. Specifically, in this paper, I will focus on the elements that come before the first verb of the main clause: these elements include the subject of the main clause as well as other constructions that can precede the subject (i.e. sentence "openers" other than the subject). As we will see, these elements are critical for the organization of a paragraph—they are the choices writers can make to create a paragraph (and a text) that meets their specific purpose. In other words, as we will see, there are no purely formal rules for paragraphs: rather, expert writers know how to adapt paragraph structure and organization to fit their purpose and the particular type of text. Finally, I will present specific tools writers can use to become aware ("mindful") of the choices they have. In essence, then, my purpose is to present an alternative to the prescriptive, limiting, 'dysfunctional' approach to paragraph construction that appears in a number of handbooks.

Background Information on Flow of Texts

A well-constructed text depends on two critical elements: the arrangement of information on the basis of what readers know and need to know—the Given-New structure— ("Given New" 102) and the arrangement of information on the basis of what the clause is about –aka "the speaker's point of departure"—the Theme/Rheme structure, a term used by Halliday and other functional linguists (Bloor, Davies, Hoey, Thompson, among others). A more accessible-for-writers way to think about the organization of a sentence is that it can be seen from two different perspectives: the reader's perspective (what the writer assumes is shared knowledge with the reader)[1]and the writer's perspective (what the writer wants the starting point of the message to be; what the clause is about). The concepts of given/new and theme/rheme–which explain textual organization—are important for creating texts that 'flow', that is, texts where sentences are interconnected, working "in harmony with other sentences [in order to realize] complex purposes" (Hancock 57). Introducing these concepts to novice writers and making them accessible can

lead to texts that are more readable because they are more effectively, purposefully organized.

The Given-New arrangement is important for paragraph flow and readability since "in order to communicate effectively, the speaker must bring to the hearer's attention some element of mutual knowledge" (Bloor 66). Rossen-Knill, for instance, has shown in detail how to apply the Given-New Expectation to writing to help instructors "address a central cause of awkward sentences and unintentionally confusing text and writers to revise their work for cohesion and flow" (Rossen-Knill 21). As multiple authors have stated, the given-new arrangement (expectation or even contract) "helps writers improve text cohesion and coherence [and] simultaneously helps them experience the necessity of audience. Without an explicit audience, one cannot determine whether or not information is given or new" (Rossen-Knill 41).

The short excerpts below reveal the relevance of the given/new concepts to paragraph flow:

> The word 'elephant' comes from the Middle East. African elephants have large ears and a low forehead that is sort of flat. Their back arches down in the middle. Each ear may weigh up to 110 pounds. The average male is 10 ½ feet tall at the shoulder and weighs 12,000 pounds. They may live 50-60 years. Indian elephants have small ears, a high forehead, their back arches in the middle, are nine feet tall. They weigh 10-12,000 pounds and may live 70 years.
>
> (Student Writing Excerpts, "Elephants")

The paragraph is about a single topic—elephants—but does not seem to "hold together." The reason for that sense is the lack of connections between sentences: in a cohesive text, each sentence should 'move' towards the following one, with information that is given typically appearing before new information. (It is worth remembering that the term 'given' indicates information that is in the reader's mind as they encounter the text.) In the example above, the first sentence begins with a discussion of the word

'elephant'—and that is what the writer has brought to the readers' awareness. The second sentence, however, begins with 'African elephants' though nothing in the preceding sentence prepares us, as readers, for this new piece of information. As Deborah Rossen-Knill notes, "the writer and reader might be familiar with African Elephants, but because they haven't been activated, the reader is not prepared" (*personal communication*). This paragraph, in fact, shows exactly what happens when a writer does not consider the given/new expectation: the text is a "string of unrelated sentences" (*Clear and Coherent Prose* 163) rather than a cohesive, woven whole, where there is movement from given to new information, with sentences working "in harmony with other sentences" (Hancock, *personal communication*).

We can see the same problem—albeit less extreme—in the following text:

> Politically, Stalinism is a system whereby an authoritarian leader has complete control of all aspects of the country and removes those who disagree with him. Stalin established absolute rule by destroying potential rivals, the old intelligentsia and the old ruling class; their removal from power in society left a void that Stalinism filled. **Lenin's comrades—Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin, and Rykhov**—were killed because Stalin considered them rivals for power and potential dissenters.
>
> (Student Writing Excerpts "What is Stalinism?")

The highlighted section of the sentence presents new information in a position where readers expect given information. The writer probably believes that the reader can easily understand that "potential rivals" and "Lenin's comrades" refer to the same set of people, hence that "Lenin's comrades" is, in fact, given information—therefore, in the reader's immediate awareness. But the writer hasn't made that connection clear; they have not activated that knowledge in the reader's mind. Now if the text were written for experts in Russian history, the readers would easily

determine that "Lenin's rivals" is given information. However, as the title reveals, the readers for the text are novices; the writer, then, has the additional task of activating that connection in order to make the meaning of the text clearer for the particular readers.

Equally important for clarity, cohesion, and paragraph flow is the concept of theme/rheme and the concept of thematic (or topical) progression: as mentioned earlier, the fundamental difference between Theme/Rheme and Given/New relates to orientation: the given-new arrangement is oriented towards the reader (i.e. writers need to decide what is shared knowledge with the reader or what is activated knowledge, at the forefront in the reader's mind and what is not) whereas Theme/Rheme is oriented towards the writer (i.e., writers need to decide what language 'signposts' need to be placed in the beginning of each sentence to help guide the reader through their text, to show them where the text is heading).

Intuitively, the theme allows readers to be "well informed about where they are going" (Butt 134). As Hoey notes, themes contribute to the intelligibility of a text since [they] …reflect the way that [a] sentence draws upon the development of the text" (Hoey 178) by linking back to earlier material. For this linking to be effective, it is useful for writers to know the range of syntactic options for themes that the language offers them; then, they can decide the most effective meaningful connections between their sentences (*Clear and Coherent Prose* 3) so that the paragraphs they create have texture. Before providing specific examples of how to do this, we need to explore theme in more detail.

The Concept of Theme

The concept of 'theme' is foundational in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which is a theory of language "in action." According to SFL, every sentence consists of two parts, with the first part indicating to readers where they are starting and the second part where they are going. We call the first part 'theme' ("the starting point of a sentence or utterance") and the second 'rheme' (the comment about the starting point). Syntactically, the theme is identified in different ways: some identify it as the region

/zone of a clause (it can be one or more constituents) before the first main verb (Forey 54; Thompson, *Unfolding Theme*). Others, however, limit the term 'theme' to the first constituent in a clause. That means that in some cases, the theme includes the subject, but in others it does not. In general, SFL considers only 'theme' as a relevant construct for textual organization and does not give 'subject' any particular consideration in textual organization. Following Vande Kopple, I claim that both constructs are critical for understanding how a text unfolds, with each construct contributing to the text different types of information.

In standardized written English, all sentences—except imperatives—are expected to have an explicit subject; of course, we need to remember that one way fragments—whether deliberate or accidental—are created is by omitting the subject. Frequently, the subject and the theme are conflated (which means that the sentences begin with the subject) while in other sentences, the subject and the theme are not conflated (which means that the sentences begin with a construction other than the subject). When the theme is conflated with the subject, the sentence has an unmarked ("typical"/expected) theme (Bloor 77); when another construction functions as the theme (adverb, complement of verb, conjunction, prepositional phrase, or adverbial clause), the sentence has a marked theme (Bloor 77; Thompson and Thompson 146). While these terms are typical in SFL, we will 'abandon' them shortly in favor of terminology that is more accessible to writers.

We see the following choices on how to open a sentence in the text below: the writer opens some sentences with the subject and others with constructions other that the subject. Specifically, I have marked every construction that appears before the verb of the main clause (the verb indicated in capital letters). Constructions that are subjects (hence expected/typical) are simply underlined; constructions that are out-of-the-ordinary/unexpected (hence not the subjects) are underlined and in bold:

A home IS more than just the structure in which you live.
From the photos you display to the furniture and

appliance you choose, every item CREATES a warm and inviting sanctuary for the whole family. **In this month's special section**, you'LL FIND tips on how to make one-bedroom work for two kids and advice on how best to light a room. **If you're thinking of updating your cooking game**, you MIGHT WANT to consider an induction cooktop. **And** our appliance buyers SHARE some of their favorite items of the season. **Last**, EcoWater Water Treatment systems for the home BENEFIT your family and your appliances.

(*Costco Connection* July 2019, p. 43)

We see in this text, then, that some sentences begin with constructions other than the subject. The openers writers choose are important because they contribute to the flow of a paragraph. Since sentences do not exist in isolation but in "cooperation" with each other, writers need to be mindful of the ways they open their sentences because these openers help 'weave' the sentences within a paragraph.

We can see the importance of openers in more detail in the following text, a section from an article labelled "Spring in the Sierra," with subjects underlined, non-subject openers in bold and main clause verbs capitalized:

…Spring IS the ideal time to head west of Reno to Crystal Peak Park, a 51-acre preserve in Verdi, Nev. **More than 150 years ago**, the old lumber town [Crystal Park] WAS a humming crossroads where the new transcontinental railroad met the California Trail. **Now**, it'S a peaceful spot to appreciate the region's history and natural beauty.

(*Via*, March-April 2020, 25)

The paragraph starts with the subject 'spring'; the next two sentences, however, begin with atypical/unexpected openers (in bold), which 'chart' the chronological development and change of

Crystal Park. The remaining subjects (underlined) clearly show the continuity of topic since they all refer to Crystal Park. This careful arrangement of openers (whether they are subjects or constructions other than subjects) creates an easy-to-read paragraph.

Let's consider what happens to the text if we change the openers. First, we will move the unexpected (i.e. non-subject) opener—which has been used to establish the chronological development of the text—to a position later in the sentence:

> …Spring IS the ideal time to head west of Reno to Crystal Peak Park, a 51-acre preserve in Verdi, Nev. The old lumber town [Crystal Park] WAS a humming crossroads where the new transcontinental railroad met the California Trail **more than 150 years ago**. It'S **now** a peaceful spot to appreciate the region's history and natural beauty.
>
> (*Via*, March-April 2020, 25)

The rewritten paragraph does not contain unexpected, out-of-the-ordinary openers any longer: every sentence begins with the subject. Although this change seems minor (since it doesn't affect the grammaticality of each sentence), it is significant since it has resulted in the loss of the clear chronological development and focus that the unexpected (time-based) openers provided.

Let's now consider what happens if we maintain the unexpected openers (bold) but change the subject (underlined) in the second sentence:

> …Spring IS the ideal time to head west of Reno to Crystal Peak Park, a 51-acre preserve in Verdi, Nev. **More than 150 years ago**, the new transcontinental railroad MET the California Trail at the old lumber town [Crystal Park], a humming crossroads. Now, it [Crystal Park] IS a peaceful spot to appreciate the regions history and natural beauty.

This change has resulted in a slightly awkward text: whereas in the original text the focus (or point of departure) is clear ('the

chronological development and change of Crystal Park'), this focus is less clear in the rewrite. The change in the subject of the second sentence has disrupted the 'flow', the unfolding of the text, shifting from the town to the railroad and back to the town.

When discussing textual organization, most functional linguists do not give the subject any special textual status; when it opens the sentence, it is conflated with the theme—which, as we saw earlier is "the point of departure of the message or that which locates and orients the clause within its context" (Thompson *Introducing Functional Grammar* 143). If the subject is not the first construction (i.e. if it is not conflated with the theme), then it is ignored. However, as we will see in even more detail later in the paper, the subject is important for creating effective sentences that contribute to the organization and 'flow' of a paragraph (Forey, Davis, Thompson).

As we look at the organization of paragraphs, we will use the sentence—rather than the clause—as the unit of analysis for two reasons: first, sentences are clearly marked (capitalization and terminal punctuation), which makes them more accessible to students whose conscious knowledge about grammar might be limited; second, since paragraphs consist of sentences, it is easier to examine the organization and flow of a paragraph if we focus on sentences rather than clauses. Of course, if the sentence is a compound sentence, then we will consider the openers in both clauses since they are independent.

Vande Kopple on 'theme'

In text *Clear and Coherent Prose*, Vande Kopple sets up two different constructs that he names "topic" and "first element." He defines 'topic' (T) as "[the sentence's] center of attention, its focal point… the perspective [a] writer is taking" which is realized "as the first noun or noun phrase" (10); [it] "makes it quite easy for readers to establish early in a sentence what it will be about (52) and "gives [them] something to which to relate all the information that follows" (95). He adds that topic is usually identical with the subject (52), which acknowledges its importance in discourse. It is worth

noting that using the terms topic, subject, unmarked theme to refer to the same construction can cause significant confusion, which is something Vande Kopple also points out ("Themes, Thematic Progressions, and Some Implications for Understanding Discourse" 311). In addition to topic, Vande Kopple sets up a second construct that he considers important for clear and coherent writing: he calls this construct the "first element" (FE). Though he does not define the term, it is clear from the examples provided that the first element (FE) includes adverbs, connectives, prepositional phrases, verb complements, dependent adverbial clauses but also the dummies 'it' and 'there'. In other words, the first element is an opener that is not the subject.

Using Vande Kopple's terminology (topic, subject and first element) we can analyze the paragraph below in the following way:

> …Spring (FE, S, T) IS the ideal time to head west of Reno to Crystal Peak Park, a 51-acre preserve in Verdi, Nev. **More than 150 years ago**, (FE) the old lumber town [Crystal Park] (S,T) WAS a humming crossroads where the new transcontinental railroad met the California Trail. **Now** (FE), it (S,T) IS a peaceful spot to appreciate the region's history and natural beauty.
>
> (*Via*, March-April 2020, p. 25)

While identifying the topic is in most cases intuitive, in sentences beginning with 'it', we may mistakenly consider 'it' as both the subject and the topic. Vande Kopple's commonsense definition that the topic identifies what "writers want to communicate to [readers] about"—which means that the topic cannot be devoid of content—helps clarify an essential quality of the topic.

In the following sentence, then,

> It'S actually hard to run out of juice in an EV
>
> (*Via*, March-April 2020, p. 32)

Vande Kopple labels the dummy 'it' as the first element and the subject, while he labels the construction 'to run out of juice in an EV' as the topic since it carries real information. The pronoun 'it' is a 'dummy'—a placeholder devoid of content. The 'real information' is placed at the end of the sentence for a simple reason: were it placed in the beginning—were subject, topic, and first element are conflated (underlined)—the sentence would be awkward, though grammatical:

> To run out of juice in an EV IS actually hard.

Vande Kopple, then, postulates three elements in a sentence—subject, topic, first element— the first one being a grammatical (syntactic) construct and the other two being discourse constructs. In his work, however, first element does not receive any significant attention; rather, he focuses primarily on topics as the important element for effective paragraph organization, for "clear and coherent prose." As I hope to demonstrate in the remainder of the paper, both subjects and first elements are important for effective paragraph organization.

The distinction between subject and first element—with first element being a marked theme—echoes Davies' view that non-subject constructions in the beginning of a sentence provide the contextual framework for the message while the subjects "carry forward the topic" (Thompson and Thompson 57). This is clearly seen in the text we examined earlier (copied below):

> **More than 150 years ago**, the old lumber town [Crystal Park] WAS a humming crossroads where the new transcontinental railroad met the California Trail. Now, it'S a peaceful spot to appreciate the region's history and natural beauty.
>
> (*Via*, March-April 2020, p. 25)

The first elements (in bold) establish the timeframe whereas the subjects (underlined) maintain the topic—Crystal Park. We see,

then, that the two different types of constructions contribute differently to the text: first elements contextualize the message while subjects indicate the topic (Thompson and Thompson 63).

It is worth repeating that the choice of opener determines the "perspective a writer takes" (*Clear and Coherent Prose* 159). The same material, in other words, can be presented in very different ways depending on our purpose and desired emphasis; once again, it is important to remember that when we look at each sentence as part of the whole paragraph, we are considering the writer's choices for creating an effective text—not any errors in sentence structure or punctuation conventions they may have made.

Let's consider the following two texts which present the same information—they have the same core meaning:

> Text I
> Lifestyle modifications (FE, S) ARE the first step in keeping blood sugar levels low. Appropriate steps (FE, S) INCLUDE a healthy diet, an exercise program, monitoring of blood sugar levels and, if needed, diabetes drugs or insulin. *If medications are required* (FE), metformin (S) MAY BE PRESCRIBED.
>
> Text II
> *If you want to keep your blood sugars low* (FE) your first step (S) IS to modify your lifestyle. You (FE, S) CAN TAKE the following steps: follow a healthy diet, exercise, monitor your blood sugar levels and, if needed, take diabetes drugs or insulin. *If your doctor determines that you need medication* (FE), you (S) MAY BE PRESCRIBED metformin.

In Text I, the focal point is the modifications necessary—with topics consistently referring to the lifestyle modifications, while in Text II, the focal point is the reader, with topics (subjects) emphasizing the reader (you, your [step]) who is given advice on what to do in order to lower their blood sugars. This difference in subjects across the two texts results in two different text types: the

first text is typical of 'expository' writing whereas the second text would be in an instructional document on how to deal with diabetes (*Clear and Coherent Prose* 156). Being aware of their choices for openers—and the effect these choices have—is an important skill for writers because it allows them to determine the best method of development appropriate for the particular rhetorical situation (*Clear and Coherent Prose* 158).

Tools for Creating "clear and coherent prose"

Vande Kopple's advice on how to create clear, readable and coherent texts—that is texts with a "coherent set of topics [that are] identical, closely related, or derivable from material preceding them" (*Clear and Coherent Prose* 146)—is operationalized through the topical progression chart that he recommends writers use (*Clear and Coherent Prose* 135, 137, 138). This chart allows students to determine whether their paragraphs have a single, consistent focal point, a "coherent set" (*Clear and Coherent Prose* 123) or whether they "jump around" (121). Consistent with his overall purpose of making writers "aware of the fine shades of meaning and subtle emotional effects associated with the various stylistic options" (*Clear and Coherent Prose* 4), he is not concerned with writers using the chart to identify errors; rather, he advises writers to use the chart to determine if they have chosen the most appropriate topics that will ensure clear and coherent prose, prose that presents information "accurately and efficiently" (*Clear and Coherent Prose* 3).

While the chart is useful, it only examines the topics in a sentence; and in most typical cases, the topics are conflated with subjects. In order to help writers create better woven/tighter paragraphs but also paragraphs that are appropriate for a particular genre, we can revise this chart and present it as part of a larger assignment that asks students to examine subjects (which, for our purposes we have conflated with topics since the term 'subject' is more accessible to everyone—whereas the term 'topic' can often lead to disagreements) and first elements (which are not the subject) first in mentor texts and then in their own texts; this first task is followed by a metacognitive reflection that asks students to

not only note the similarities and differences between their text and their mentor text but also to suggest appropriate revisions in order to create an effective piece that achieves their purpose and meets the reader's expectation. Additionally, the reflection asks writers to consider the following questions: do the subjects reveal a focal point? What is the purpose of the first element? What does it contribute? Is the information presented as certain or does it need to be hedged? (*Clear and Coherent Prose* 65). By examining mentor texts in detail and comparing them with their own, writers can develop a deeper "understanding of the possibilities [and effects] of particular choices but also experiment with new ways of organizing their paragraphs" (Myhill 21).

Let's look closely at a paragraph from a longer text; subjects are underlined while first elements are italicized. (Please note that sentence 4 includes independent clauses—for our purposes, we identify subjects and first elements in independent clauses, too).

> Vanessa's mom DID better than most teenage mothers. She MARRIED her high-school boyfriend. *When Vanessa was 9*, they MOVED to Mesquite, a working-class suburb of Dallas, where she worked for a mortgage company. Vanessa's parents DIVORCED when she was 12, and money WAS always tight, but they RAISED her and her younger brother to believe they could accomplish anything. *Like her mother*, Vanessa SHONE in school. *As she grew up*, her parents and her grandparents WOULD often TELL her that she would be the one to reach the prize that had slipped away from her mother: a four-year college degree.
>
> (Paul Tough, NYT, May 15, 2014)

Sentence number	First Element (FE)	Subject (Topic also)
1		Vanessa's mom
2		She
3	When V was 9	they

4		Vanessa's parents
	and	money
	but	they
5	Like her mother	Vanessa
6	As she grew up	Her parents and grandparents

Looking at the subjects for each sentence (which align with topics) allows us to see that the paragraph has a clear focal point: Vanessa and her family. Looking at the first element (FE), we see that the writer chose to develop the paragraph through a chronological arrangement of events—it's the narrative that traces Vanessa's upbringing. So, there are two parallel 'threads' in the paragraph—a division of "informational labour" (Thompson and Thompson 62)—that create the texture, the weave of the text: a focal point (established through the choice of subject/topic) and a particular method of development (established through the first element). In addition, in order to strengthen the cohesion of the text, the writer has chosen a specific type of first element—the coordinators 'and' and 'but'—which clearly show how each independent clause fits with its neighbors.

It is important to notice that in the paragraph above, topics and subjects are conflated—and Vande Kopple states that such a decision makes topics "clearly identifiable" (*Clear and Coherent Prose* 61) and facilitates comprehension. In some texts, however, we find that the topics (underlined)—which Vande Kopple defines as "the part of a sentence that tells what the sentence is about" (*Clear and Coherent Prose* 9)—and subjects (bold—when not identical with the topic) are different:

> **There** WERE <u>plenty of decent colleges in and around Dallas that Vanessa could have chosen</u>, but <u>she</u> MADE UP her mind back in middle school that she wanted to attend the University of Texas at Austin, the most prestigious public university in the state. *By the time she was in high school*, <u>she</u> HAD it all planned out. <u>She</u> WOULD MAKE her way

through the nursing program at U.T., then GET a master's in anesthesiology, then MOVE back to Dallas, GET a good job at a hospital, then HELP OUT her parents and start her own family. *In her head*, she SAW it like a checklist. *In March 2013, when she received her acceptance letter from U.T.*, **it** FELT that she was checking off the first item.

Sentence number	FE (Marked Theme)	Topic	Subject
1		Plenty of decent colleges	There
2	but	She (also subject)	
3	By the time she was in high school	She (also subject)	
4		She (also subject)	
5	In her head	She (also subject)	
6	In March 2012, when she received her acceptance letter from UT		it

This paragraph, taken from the same text as the earlier one, shows the same chronological method of development (through the first element) and a consistent focal point—Vanessa. There is one significant difference, though, and it has to do with the syntactic arrangement for sentences one and six. In the first sentence, the writer has chosen the dummy 'there' as the subject; the topic is located in the Comment where typically the central, most

important part of the message is introduced, the part of the sentence that "says something about the topic" (*Clear and Coherent Prose* 68, 11). Similarly, in sentence 6, the writer has chosen another dummy 'it' as the subject: this 'dummy' replaces the construction 'receiv[ing] her acceptance letter.

This chart, then, allows writers to see the choices they have made for each sentence that result in a paragraph that 'flows'. These choices not only involve the first elements (which, when different from subjects, provide contextual information) but also the subjects which, in most cases, are conflated with topics. (For the remainder of the paper, the term subject/topic will be used to indicate the two are conflated; the terms will be used separately only if topics and subjects differ, as we saw in the short text above). This close examination of the subject/topics used reveals whether the paragraph has a clear focal point (because the subject/topics form a limited set), or it appears unfocused because it has a wide range of subjects/topics which, as Vande Kopple mentions, can indicate little elaboration (*Clear and Coherent Prose* 136).

It is also worth noting that although the chart asks writers to analyze each sentence in isolation, it also makes them consider how each sentence connects to what came before it: as Hoey, quoting Winter reminds us, "every sentence can be seen as answering a question that has arisen as a result either of the preceding text or of the context and purpose of the text" (186). In other words, the chart allows writers to see how their paragraphs are woven, how they contribute to the overall meaning of a text.

"Weaving" Paragraphs

The revised chart allows us to examine in each sentence the first elements and subjects (which, typically, but not always—as we have seen—correlate with topics) which, in turn, allows us to determine the focal point, the contextual frame and possible method of development for a paragraph—all the elements, in other words, that create a clear, coherent, tightly woven text. Once this information is compiled in the chart, writers can take a closer look at the subject/topic (when conflated) and at the first element in

order to determine whether the choice of subject/topics is motivated or not; they may ask, for example, why did the writer choose a particular subject/topic in a sentence? How does it fit with the rest of the paragraph?

In order to address these questions, we need to 'revisit' the structure of the sentence. In the simplest case, a sentence consists of an independent clause—which means the terms sentence/clause are conflated. Each sentence (consisting of an independent clause) has a subject (typically conflated with the topic), an optional first element (FE) which sets the contextual frame, and a comment that "says something about the topic" (which is also called the rheme in SFL). The topic and comment structure typically correspond to the subject/predicate division—though, as we have seen, there are cases where the topic and the subject are different (*Clear and Coherent Prose* 11). Though a sentence can consist of an independent and a dependent clause, we will not analyze the 'internal' structure of the dependent clause (i.e. subject, topic, first element), following Vande Kopple's practice (*Clear and Coherent Prose* 15).

When 'weaving' texts—connecting, that is, sentences to each other—writers have different options regarding the choice of subject/topic; here, we offer two of these:

1. Keep the subject/topic constant across a paragraph.
2. "Derive" the subject/topic of a sentence from the comment of its preceding sentence.

The first option is the one we saw in the texts above: the subject and topic were conflated and remained constant across the sentences, providing a coherent set; this parallel progression, as Vande Kopple calls it, then, provides the focal point of the text. He also notes that parallel progression is important when the writer "examines one thing—an object, an action, an event, a person—at length" (*Clear and Coherent Prose* 126).

Now let's consider option 2. For this option, elements in the Comment (bold) of an earlier sentence appear as the topic (italicized) of subsequent sentences; this progression is what Vande

Kopple calls the 'chaining progression' (*Clear and Coherent Prose* 128). This progression, he notes, is "well suited for analysis, logical argument, and exploration of connections among things. [It] is what people probably have in mind when they use the term 'chain of reasoning" (*Clear and Coherent Prose* 129). Consider the following text, for example:

> Plastic bags **CAN also BE REUSED as trash bags, grocery bags, and bags for dog waste**. *This versatility* SAVES the consumer money (they do not have to buy trash bags) and REDUCES the bag's emissions footprint since it is reused.
>
> (Student Writing Excerpts "Research Paper").

We see that the topic of sentence two ('this versatility') connects with the comment of the first sentence ('can be reused....'), a linking that helps 'weave' the text. As Vande Kopple notes, writers often mix progressions, using both constant and chaining progressions (*Clear and Coherent Prose* 131). This is, in fact, the case, with the paragraph where the two sentences above appear:

> For consumers, disposable bags ARE often more advantageous than reusable bags because of their low cost and easy availability. Disposable bags ARE inexpensive (about 5 cents a bag), waterproof, and easily accessible—they ARE readily available at stores (Conway). Though plastic bags DO NOT SEEM very durable, they CAN HOLD 17 pounds while weighing less than 5 grams (Mangu-Ward). Plastic bags CAN also BE REUSED as trash bags, grocery bags, and bags for dog waste. This versatility SAVES the consumer money (they DO NOT HAVE TO BUY trash bags) and REDUCES the bag's emissions footprint since it IS REUSED. Additionally, plastic bags ARE very sanitary since there IS no opportunity for bacteria growth or previous food bits to come into contact with groceries. (Mangu-Ward). However, plastic bags CAN

> BE SUFFOCATED ON or SWALLOWED by young children; about 20 children DIE from this each year.
>
> ("Research Paper" 4)

In the chart below, we see first elements, topics and comments as well as lines that show how the paragraph is woven:

First Element	**(Subject) Topic**	**Comment**	**Notes**
For consumers,	disposable bags	are often more advantageous than reusable bags because of their low cost and easy availability.	The first element provides the context for the paragraph—the advantages for consumers.
	Disposable bags	are inexpensive (about 5 cents a bag), waterproof, and easily accessible	Parallel progression (aka constant theme), where the topic of this sentence is identical to the topic of the preceding sentence
	they	are readily available at stores	Parallel Progression
Though plastic bags do not seem very durable	they	can hold 17 pounds while weighing less than 5 grams	The first element states a misconception

			that is clarified in the comment section
	Plastic bags	can also be reused as trash bags, grocery bags, and bags for dog waste	Parallel progression
	This versatility	saves the consumer money (they do not have to buy trash bags) and reduces the bag's emissions footprint since it is reused.	Chaining progression, where the topic is derived from the comment of the preceding sentences.
Additionally,	plastic bags	are very sanitary since there is no opportunity for bacteria growth or previous food bits to comes into contact with groceries.	First element provides textual connection with preceding sentences.
However,	plastic bags	can be suffocated on or swallowed	The first element establishes

		by young children	contrast with the advantages of plastic bags (mentioned in the comment of the previous sentence). The passive creates an awkward sentence—but seems necessary for maintaining topic constancy.
	about 20 children	die from this each year	Chaining progression

This close examination of topic and first element shows students that sentences in a paragraph are not islands, separate from each other, but they are interwoven, with subsequent sentences affected by earlier sentences (Hoey 177)—and that is what creates a clear, readable, tight paragraph.

Why not just use the information about paragraphs that is widely available?

One might claim that the tasks presented in this paper introduce unnecessary complications for writers since there are multiple resources available regarding the organization of paragraphs. Close examination of some of these resources reveals that the information provided is either general and abstract—hence not useful for novice writers—or it is so specific that it restricts writers.

For example, the following information about paragraphs is listed on an online site:

> Every paragraph in a paper should be:
>
> • Unified: All of the sentences in a single paragraph should be related to a single controlling idea (often expressed in the topic sentence of the paragraph).
> • Clearly related to the thesis: The sentences should all refer to the central idea, or thesis, of the paper (Rosen and Behrens 119).
> • Coherent: The sentences should be arranged in a logical manner and should follow a definite plan for development (Rosen and Behrens 119).
> • Well-developed: Every idea discussed in the paragraph should be adequately explained and supported through evidence and details that work together to explain the paragraph's controlling idea (Rosen and Behrens 119).
>
> (<writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/paragraphs/>).

Though the information may be generally accurate, it has two problems: first, it is not helpful to any student who is struggling with paragraphing; this information, in other words, will not give the novice writer accurate information on how to construct cohesive paragraphs that have a clear focal point and 'deliberate' weaving of the first elements that can indicate the method of development. Second, the information assumes that all paragraphs—in all genres—have the same requirements. This, however, is not the case: for example, in the list above, we see that every paragraph must be well developed, with detail and elaboration. While this might be true in academic texts, it is not accurate in other texts. Let's consider the following two paragraphs from a newspaper article:

> Gabriella Cordy, a housing specialist and case manager at St. Francis Shelter, SAID her organization secured permanent

> housing for its first two families this week. One WAS willing to relocate to Silverton and the other to Salem.
>
> The agencies ARE HELPING those displaced by the wildfires with moving costs and trying to find available rentals. The process BECOMES more complicated for those who were renting using federal housing vouchers, which not all landlords accept, or with large families.
>
> (*Salem Reporter*, Oct. 9, 2020)

The two paragraphs contain the absolutely 'minimal' information needed instead of being "well-developed. Every idea discussed in the paragraph should be adequately explained and supported through evidence and details that work together to explain the paragraph's controlling idea" (Rosen and Behrens 119). This, of course, is understandable: the purpose of the local newspaper is to simply provide the readers up-to-date information about events in the area and not to provide an elaborate, detailed discussion of the issues.

In contrast to this relatively vague, general information about paragraphs presented above—information that is not likely to help a novice writer construct the most effective paragraph—we often find sources that provide relatively detailed information about the structure of a paragraph, though, as is the case below, the information may include narrow, prescriptive advice which, once again, ignores the reality of paragraphs as they exist in a range of texts:

- Put only one main idea per paragraph.
- Aim for three to five or more sentences per paragraph.
- Make your paragraphs proportional to your paper. Since paragraphs do less work in short papers, have short paragraphs for short papers and longer paragraphs for longer papers.
- If you have a few very short paragraphs, think about whether they are really parts of a larger paragraph—and

> can be combined—or whether you can add details to support each point and thus make each into a more fully developed paragraph.
>
> (owl.purdue.edu › owl › paragraphs_and_paragraphing)

In fact, writers are frequently given formulaic guidelines for paragraph structure: the point-evidence-explanation format (popular on a number of websites offering writing advice) where the first sentence in a paragraph makes a point, the second sentence provides specific evidence and then one or more sentences provide detailed explanation that connects evidence to the point. However, as we saw in the newspaper example above, these paragraph "recipes" do not represent the range of paragraphs in various authentic texts. But most importantly, these prescriptions make students believe that if they don't follow "the rules," the paragraphs they write will be somehow flawed, wrong. Yes, having topic sentences in every paragraph facilitates the reader's/grader's job; unfortunately, though, it also sends the message that paragraphs have a fixed form that supersedes its function in a particular text.

Now some may argue that these guidelines are necessary scaffolds for novice writers, that once writers have 'mastered' the structure of the paragraph, they can 'break' the rules (owl.purdue.edu). However, students cannot break the rules since there are no paragraph rules across all text types (unless we, as teachers, preselect paragraphs that fit these rules). If, on the other hand, we share with students a range of authentic texts (texts "in the wild," as I refer to them), they will quickly notice that paragraphs appear in various shapes and structures, not consistently 'adhering' to the rules. What they will also realize is that in effective texts, these paragraphs are tightly woven, clear, coherent, focused, helping the reader navigate the text.

So how can we move from prescription to description, from a dysfunctional, narrow approach to a mindful approach for paragraph construction? We can start by sharing various texts (academic and non-academic) with our writers, showing them in a chart the choices writers have made in terms of subject/topic/first

element, choices that are appropriate for the particular genre. Once they have seen the range of options that exist—options that are not 'predetermined' but purposeful—they can examine their own choices of subject, topic, and first element to determine whether their paragraphs 'flow'. Now, I'd like to be clear here: my purpose is not to replace one set of prescriptive rules with another one: rather, my purpose is to make writers aware of the choices they have (an awareness brought forth by having them examine various paragraphs drawn from a variety of text types) so that they can create paragraphs that are clear both in content and structure, texts that are readable.

Conclusion

This approach to analyzing paragraphs allows novice writers to consider them not as 'containers' to be filled in specific ways but as 'looms' to be woven with threads of their choice. The tools presented above (chart and arrows) can help them create coherent paragraphs ("weave" them) while, at the same time, give instructors the language to talk about the choices writers have when creating paragraphs.

Students readily acknowledge the transformative power that this understanding can have. Suzyn, for example, wrote in her WR 302 reflection:

> *My biggest breakthrough came when I finally realized why my paragraphs, and consequently, why my essays, often came out jumbled and confused when they had sounded so clear in my mind. To be precise, it was chapter seven of William Vande Kopple's Clear and Coherent Prose, "Topical Progression in Essays," which allowed me to stop seeing written English as a series of rules to follow and started giving me choices. As I worked with [a particular] sentence over the course of the activity [the activity is described in the appendix), it began to dawn on me why, over the years, I had so consistently received some variation of the "your-work's-a-bit-choppy-here" feedback from both my instructors and my peer reviewers. Staring at that sentence, and at the sentences which came*

before it, the blurred film which had coated this problem of choppiness for so long, hiding it and obscuring it from view, slowly developed into a picture as clear as the waters in Crater Lake…—finally—I could see why. I could see its topic. And the topics of the sentences that came before it. And why this particular sentence was so different from all those preceding it: its topic was not a logical progression from the topic or comment of the sentence before it. …Now that I could see the problem, I could tackle it.

And Daniel, a Writing Specialist at our Writing Center, writes that understanding Vande Kopple can transform the way we talk about problems in paragraph organization:

First, his ideas have helped me explain how to make effective statements or claims in a paper. Some students I have worked with struggle to make claims in their writing, and they will end up listing either the topic or the comment, but not both. For instance, a student last month wrote a fragment like this: "Teaching centered on students' learning, not just teaching to the test." I could have identified it as a fragment and told them they left out part of their sentence, but that would only have addressed part of the issue. The more important piece to me was helping them see that, when they make claims, they need BOTH a topic and a comment. To help them come to this understanding, I asked them what they thought about the idea in their paper -- teaching centered on students' learning. The student said that she thought it was a good idea, and she was surprised that her stance was not expressed in the sentence. I showed her that the sentence could be written either way:
"Teaching centered on students' learning, not just teaching to the test, is a good idea."
"Teaching centered on students' learning, not just teaching to the test, is a bad idea."

We talked about the fact that no one could agree or disagree with her old sentence, but these new sentences say something; they make claims; people could agree or disagree with the statements. And that

started to help the student to identify those patterns in her writing later on in her paper. The student had a pattern of writing long topics and believing that she was writing a whole sentence. When we started talking about what makes up a claim (and providing lots of other examples), she started to understand she was missing an essential part of her claim.

Second, Vande Kopple's ideas have helped me explain how to connect one statement or claim with another claim inside a paragraph (this is something I do all the time with students, and I have found it to be incredibly helpful for them). I often find that a student writes about one topic and then switches to a new topic without connecting it to anything else in the paper. In those situations, we have a conversation about helping the audience understand their train of thought. Sometimes, I illustrate with an example like this:

"Imagine I am having a conversation with you, and I am telling you about how much I am enjoying reading your paper. And then, I start telling you about my cats. And then, I say, 'You know, pizza is the best food I've ever eaten.' And then I start talking about cats again. In that situation, you might be pretty confused, right? Now, in my mind, there might be a logical connection between our writing appointment, my cats, and pizza, but I never expressed that connection to you. That is kind of what is going on here in the paper. I know you know there is a connection between these ideas, but we haven't shown that to your reader yet. And they may not be able to appreciate your argument or your ideas until they understand that connection."

In short, extending Vande Kopple's pedagogical approach to theme encourages students to think of the choices they have, frees them from strict rules that do not correspond to the reality of authentic texts, and trains them to consider the effect the choices they make have on the text (Myhill 19). As they "make selections wisely, [as they make] "informed decision about sentence topics, [writers develop] "more control over style, more power in prose, more joy

in using the resources of written language appropriately" (*Clear and Coherent Prose* 18).

Notes

[1]The term 'given' knowledge needs to be elaborated: 'given' knowledge (also referred to as familiar knowledge) is knowledge that is accessible to the reader ('at the forefront' in the reader's mind) for various reasons: it might be shared knowledge because it is based on our understanding of how the world works or it might be information that is recoverable because it was mentioned earlier in a text. If it is mentioned earlier in a text, the writer will need to ensure it is knowledge that is reactivated—so as to be brought to the forefront for the reader as given information. As Rossen-Knill mentions, "the given is about ideas rather than words" (32).

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