



Before Papers Come Paragraphs
Unit 3: One Perfect Paragraph:
How to Write the Single-Paragraph Essay

The Denim *Beret*:
a writing school
for teens

LESSON 11
PARAGRAPHS HAVE LEGS:
The Supporting Statement

Supplies: Worksheet for Lesson 11

Goal: to master the skill of using supporting statements to develop the main idea.

Suggested Time: 2 sessions

SESSION 1

Introduction

If you have something to say, whether in speaking or in writing, you are usually not going to want to stop at one sentence. The topic sentence in writing is called that

because it presents the topic, or subject, of the paragraph, as well as the main idea of the paragraph. It carries the basic thrust of your thoughts, but it is also the launching pad into the next part of your paragraph, which I'll often call the "greens" (see the "Rainbow Diagram"). In the "green" section of your paragraph it is time to slow down and discuss your main idea, to give it substance and to explore it further. This is called adding "supporting statements" or "supporting ideas."

Lesson, part 1: Understanding Supporting Statements

The good news about the greens is that they are often the easiest part of the paragraph to write. In your prewriting you planned at least a rough sketch of what you want to say, and you began your paragraph with the topic sentence. This means that you just need to expand on that now by explaining or discussing it. If what you want to get across to your readers is clear in your mind, you might find this easy. If not, you may want to work on your prewriting a little more. Let's talk about how supporting statements work, though.

Perhaps you want to write a short essay on the topic, "my close friends." Your topic sentence might look something like this:

I have three close friends, who couldn't be more different from each other.

What kind of supporting statements (greens) should you add to this sentence to expand or explain it? Easy! Your topic sentence is a number statement. It sets up your paragraph to be a description of your three friends with an emphasis on the ways in which they are different from each other—like this:

Kelly is sassy and crazy and can't sit still for a minute. Jessica is quiet and always has to be pulled away from a book. Then there is Samantha, who is always acting like the circus clown she dreams of becoming someday.

Using the same topic of "my close friends," your topic sentence could also read something like this complex statement:

Whether my friends are laughing or arguing with each other, we're always ready to help each other out of any scrape.

Notice that now you have set your paragraph up to discuss a different angle on friendship—not a description of your friends, like the previous topic sentence, but

instead a discussion of your care for one another. In this case, you need supporting statements that show how this topic sentence is true. Perhaps you might say something like this:

One time, for example, Jessica was mad at Kelly for embarrassing her in public, but she helped Kelly study for a difficult science test anyway. Another time, Samantha accidentally broke her mother's new lamp, and I helped her explain what happened.

The most important thing you must notice in both of these examples is that every supporting statement points straight back to the topic sentence. This is crucial to building a clear, orderly structure into your paragraph. In fact, it is so important that I am going to say it again as a rule:

Every supporting statement must point straight back to the topic sentence.