

# DR. ORDWAY'S VISUAL GUIDE TO PARAGRAPH STRUCTURE

Josiah Peterson on Creating Meaning

While it may not be among her best known works — yet — Dr. Ordway’s “Visual Guide to Paragraph Structure” garners instant recognition and nostalgic nods of appreciation from alumni of her Research Writing and Apologetics class. The guide pithily and visually explains the purpose and structure of paragraphs along with guidance for recognizing and avoiding common pitfalls and strategies for editing essays in light of paragraphs. One student I shared it with told me she learned more from the guide than a semester of college writing. A couple HBU alumni (this author being one) are in the early stages of working with Holly Ordway to make it into a short book, complete with updated visuals, sample paragraphs, and an introduction with advice on how instructors might best use the guide. Apart from expressing gratitude

and admiration for Holly Ordway in a journal issue dedicated to her work, the Paragraph Guide is worthy of attention to cultural apologists for how it helps Christians fulfill God's creative and missional calling.

“Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it.” In the context of Genesis 1, God's command to Adam and Eve most directly refers to raising children, cultivating and ruling the earth, but the implications extend to all creative outputs of the creatures made in the image of a creator God.

Including words. God created through words. God assigned Adam the task of naming animals. Adam creates poetry when he first sees Eve (Gen 2:23). God calls his prophets to speak his word and the great commission is to go into all the world and preach the gospel. Producing good and beautiful words is an innately human, God-ordained endeavor.

Paragraphs, as Dr. Ordway's guide explains, are a structure for helping arrange good words. Paragraphs convey one thought, introduced in the first, “topic,” sentence, and explained and supported in the rest of the paragraph. The paragraph also situates the thought in relation to the paper as a whole and to the immediately surrounding paragraphs. Visually this is an upward pointing

triangle, a focused point followed by its supporting foundation. Recognizing this purpose of paragraphs unlocks their potential expression and communication. Do you have a point you want to make? Try using a paragraph.

Creativity, while part of the natural and original plan, was complicated by the fall. The earth is less naturally fruitful than it once was, and we have to work — by the sweat of our brow against the thorns and thistles — to make it productive. Childbirth is now a painful experience. The creation mandate is much harder to fulfill.

So too with words. One stares at a barren page that matches one's barren mind. At other times words spring up in an untamed jungle threatening to tangle up the unwary traveler. Some writings never make it to fruition, while the fruit of some writing ends up being sour, woody, or overly ripe.

Dr. Ordway's guide identifies many of the challenges writers encounter when writing paragraphs. The headless paragraph — a trapezoid, or triangle missing the top point — leaves the purpose of the paragraph unclear. The two-idea paragraph, usually a really long paragraph represented by a triangle within a triangle, attempts to convey separate points but fails to distinguish them, ultimately obscuring both. The "everything

but the kitchen sink paragraph,” which is oddly often a short paragraph, contains many potential topic sentences that need to be split up (a jagged-edged polygon). The “floaty” paragraph — round circles — might go anywhere but fit nowhere.

Ordway not only identifies common problems, she advises on how to solve them. Look to the end of the paragraph to see if you have a summative statement that may serve as a topic sentence. Look for transition words like “although” or “so” and consider starting a new paragraph. Ask “what is this paragraph about?” write the answer, and if it fits the essay, use it as a topic sentence. If it doesn’t, cut the paragraph (perhaps saving the idea for a future essay). Ordway’s advice provides guidance for plowing fields and pruning jungles.

As with words, Ordway’s guide is not only meant to benefit the creator, but is ultimately meant to benefit the recipient of the creation. The fruit of the garden is not just for the grower, nor the jungle path only for the first explorer. The writing process in particular should be other-oriented as the goal is to create meaning for the reader. Insofar as writers make an effort to make their writing clear and compelling, their writing is a labor of love.

Dr. Ordway's "Visual Guide to Paragraph Structure" is the fruit of years of experience, a cultivated understanding of the joys and travails of the creative process, and a compassionate love for truth, beauty, and goodness. And this fruit carries its own seeds such that all who have tasted it want to see it spread.

