

INTRODUCTION TO WRITING THE PARAGRAPH

PRE-WRITING: THE MANDATORY FIRST STEP

1. The first thing you must do when writing a paragraph or an essay is to read the passage and the prompt carefully, highlighting words which seem important or words which seem to suggest something more.
2. Next, look at the highlighted words to decide what tones (usually two) those words might indicate.
3. After finding tones, determine the **AUTHOR'S PURPOSE**, what message he /she wants you (the reader) to understand, based upon the passage and the prompt.
4. The next step is to form a **TOPIC SENTENCE** which clearly states your opinion, based on the prompt and on the **AUTHOR'S PURPOSE**. Make sure that the TS states what you intend to discuss/prove in that paragraph. The TS must be very clear and easily understood. It is also appropriate, but not mandatory, in the TS to suggest the proof that you will use to support the TS. But do not say "I am going to prove...."
5. Then you must decide on the specifics of what proof (**MAJOR POINTS**) you will use. Think about the natural ways to divide the idea expressed in the TS. Keep in mind that you will need support (elaboration) for your **MAJOR POINTS**. Passages and even certain topics may determine the number of **MAJOR POINTS** that you should use. Each paragraph should contain 2 to 4 **MAJOR POINTS**.

These are the basics of pre-writing, the steps which must be followed to organize your ideas before you write your paper. Of course, you will need elaboration and a conclusion in your actual paragraph, but they are not part of pre-writing.

Some students find that determining Major Points before writing a Topic Sentence helps them to create their Topic Sentence. You may want to try both ways to decide which works better for you.

(**ELABORATION** and **CONCLUSION** will be covered later.)

EXAMPLE: WRITING TOPIC SENTENCES AND MAJOR POINTS

The following is an example of the process that you will use.

PROMPT: How does Mark Twain use humor and exaggeration to create this entertaining look at man's enjoyment of nature and the benefits it offers him?

ROUGHING IT by Mark Twain

"It was always very cold on that lake shore in the night, but we had plenty of blankets and were warm enough. We never moved a muscle all night, but waked at early dawn in the original positions, and got up at once, thoroughly refreshed, free from soreness and brim full of friskiness. There is no end of wholesome medicine in such an experience. That morning we could have whipped ten such people as we were the day before -- sick ones at any rate. But the world is slow, and people will go to 'water cures' and to 'movement cures' and to foreign lands for health. Three months of camp life on Lake Tahoe would restore an Egyptian mummy to his pristine vigor, and give him an appetite like an alligator. I do not mean the oldest and driest mummies, of course, but the fresher ones. The air up there in the clouds is very pure and fine, bracing and delicious. And why shouldn't it be? --it is the same the angels breathe. I think that hardly any amount of fatigue can be gathered together that a man cannot sleep off in one night on the sand by its side. Not under a roof, but under the sky; it seldom or never rains there in the summertime. I know a man who went there to die. But he made a failure of it. He was a skeleton when he came, and could barely stand. He had no appetite, and did nothing but read tracts and reflect on the future. Three months later he was sleeping out of doors regularly, eating all he could hold, three times a day, and chasing game over the mountains three thousand feet high for recreation. And he was a skeleton no longer, but weighed part of a ton. This is no fancy sketch, but the truth. His disease was consumption. I confidently commend his experience to other skeletons."

Analysis of *Roughing It* by Mark Twain

TONES: facetious, admiring of nature

AUTHOR'S PURPOSE: *You determine this by (1)reading the passage carefully, (2) highlighting to decide tones, and (3)reading the prompt. As you highlight the words and phrases and then read the words "exaggeration" and "humor" in the prompt, you realize that Twain intends for the reader to be amused, as well as to appreciate the benefits of nature.*

TOPIC SENTENCE: *In analysis, the Topic Sentence is your opinion in response to what the Prompt is asking. It is the main idea that the rest of the paragraph should support. Looking back at the passage and the highlighted words as well as the Prompt, you conclude that Twain has used exaggeration to create the examples of the advantages that nature offers. So you create your TS:*

TS: Through manipulation of truth (exaggeration), Mark Twain offers humorous examples of those who benefit from nature in this passage from *Roughing It*.

MAJOR POINTS: *Usually passages will offer several possible sub-topics that you need to be able to recognize as potential MP's. The main idea expressed in the Topic Sentence should be divided into two to four sub-topics which support and develop the idea. In this passage, Twain gives three examples: (1) his rejuvenating personal experience (2) a reference to the purity of the air which is the same air as angels breathe, and (3) the "weighty" experience of a skeleton. Also, in this instance, because the Prompt refers to examples of humor/exaggeration, quoting specific words from the passage in the MP's is appropriate.*

MAJOR POINT 1: First Twain boasts of his personal experience when he and others slept outside at Lake Tahoe and "waked...brim full of friskiness" and ready to take on ten people such "as we were the day before."

MAJOR POINT 2: Praising the mountain air as that which "the angels breathe," the author next claims that "three months" of the heavenly air can revitalize an "Egyptian mummy (a 'friskier one') to its pristine vigor."

MAJOR POINT 3: Finally, as if the previous examples are not extravagant enough, Twain recounts the story of a "skeleton" who went to Lake Tahoe to die, but he is so revived that he "chased game over the mountains...for recreation" and gained so that he "weighed part of a ton."

2. PROMPT

Read the following passage. Then describe how Twain uses humor to relate this childhood experience.

The Autobiography of Mark Twain

“Along outside of the front fence ran the country road, dusty in the summertime and a good place for snakes – they like to lie in it and sun themselves; when they were rattlesnakes or puff adders we killed them; when they were black snakes or racers or belonged to the fabled ‘hoop’ breed we fled without shame; when they were ‘house snakes’ or ‘garters’ we carried them home and put them in Aunt Patsy’s work basket for a surprise; for she was prejudiced against snakes, and always when she took the basket in her lap and they began to climb out of it disordered her mind. She never could seem to get used to them; her opportunities went for nothing. And she was always cold toward bats, too, and could not bear them; and yet I think a bat is as friendly a bird as there is. My mother was Aunt Patsy’s sister and had the same wild superstitions. A bat is beautifully soft and silky; I do not know any creature that is pleasanter to the touch or is more grateful for caressings, if offered in the right spirit. I know all about these coleoptera [sic] because our great cave, three miles below Hannibal, was multitudinously stocked with them and often I brought them home to amuse my mother with. It was easy to manage if it was a school day because then I had ostensibly been to school and hadn’t any bats. She was not a suspicious person but full of trust and confidence; and when I said, ‘there’s something in my coat pocket for you,’ she would put her hand in. but she always took it out again, herself; I didn’t have to tell her. It was remarkable the way she couldn’t learn to like private bats. The more experience she had the more she could not change her views.”

TONES:

AUTHOR’S PURPOSE:

TOPIC SENTENCE:

MAJOR POINT 1:

MAJOR POINT 2:

AUTHOR'S PURPOSE:

TOPIC SENTENCE:

MAJOR POINT 1:

MAJOR POINT 2:

3. *This Sacred Soil* by Chief Seattle

"Every part of this soil is sacred in the estimation of my people. Every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove, has been hallowed by some sad or happy event in days long vanished. The very dust upon which you now stand responds more lovingly to their footsteps than to yours, because it is rich with the blood of our ancestors and our bare feet are conscious of the sympathetic touch. Even the little children who lived here and rejoiced here for a brief season will love these somber solitudes and at eventide they greet shadowy returning spirits. And when the last Red Man shall have perished, and the memory of my tribe shall have become a myth among the White Men, these shores will swarm with the invisible dead of my tribe, and when your children's children think themselves alone in the field, the store, the shop, upon the highway, or in the silence of the pathless woods, they will not be alone. At night when the streets of your cities and villages are silent and you think them deserted, they will throng with the returning hosts that once filled and still love this beautiful land. The White Man will never be alone."

TONES:

AUTHOR'S PURPOSE:

TOPIC SENTENCE:

MAJOR POINT 1:

MAJOR POINT 2:

TOPIC SENTENCE

MAJOR POINT 1:

MAJOR POINT 2:

2. PROMPT

Have you, like Benjamin Franklin ever given "too much for the whistle?" If so, you can relate to his comments. You may wish you had learned to ask the question, "Am I paying too much for the whistle?" Explain how Franklin's reminder is useful today.

The Whistle by Benjamin Franklin

"When I was a child of seven years old, my friends, on a holiday, filled my pockets with coppers. I went directly to a shop where they sold toys for children; and, being charmed with the sound of a whistle that I met by the way in the hands of another boy, I voluntarily offered and gave all my money for one. I then came home, and went whistling all over the house, much pleased with my whistle, but disturbing all the family. My brothers, and sisters, and cousins, understanding the bargain I had made, told me I had given four times as much for it as it was worth; put me in mind what good things I might have bought with the rest of the money; and laughed at me so much for my folly that I cried with vexation, and the reflection gave me more chagrin than the whistle gave me pleasure.

"This, however, was afterwards of use to me, the impression continuing on my mind; so that often, when I was tempted to buy some unnecessary thing, I said to myself, don't give too much for the whistle; and I saved my money.

"As I grew up, came into the world, and observed the actions of men, I met with many, very many, who gave too much for the whistle....

"If I knew a miser, who gave up every kind of comfortable living, all the pleasures of doing good to others, all the esteem of his fellow-citizens, and the joys of benevolent friendship, for the sake of accumulating wealth, Poor Man, said I, you pay too much for your whistle....

"If I see one fond of appearance, or fine clothes, fine houses, fine furniture, fine equipages, all above his fortune, for which he contracts debts, and ends his career in a prison, Alas! say I, he has paid dear, very dear, for his whistle.

mechanical way – just going through the motions, without interest. He gives the impression that he wants to withdraw from this human interference and get back to real life – the box. He is like a prisoner who has everything he wants in prison and is content to stay there.”

TONES

AUTHOR’S PURPOSE:

TOPIC SENTENCE:

MAJOR POINT 1:

MAJOR POINT 2:

Now that you have the basic skeleton format of writing a paragraph conquered, you will be moving on to elaboration.