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Help the Reader Swim Downstream: Create Flow in Your Writing

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Help the Reader Swim Downstream: Create Flow in Your Writing

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff

Idahoans know flow. We have the most amazing rivers just out of our backdoors. But as legal writers, Idaho attorneys need to do more than look outside to create effective writing. This month's column will focus on flow when writing, and how to achieve that flow through better paragraphs.

This may seem simple, but remembering the definition and purpose of a paragraph can help you create more effective paragraphs and flow within your writing.

A paragraph is a group of sentences that develop a dominant idea.¹ We shouldn't create a paragraph break simply because it seems like time for one, nor should we just shove disparate ideas into one paragraph. Instead, we should strive to create effective paragraphs: those that are understandable internally and indicate to the reader their place in the overall structure of the argument.² This will give our writing flow — the ability for the reader to seamlessly move from idea to idea and argument to argument.

Creating flow requires attention to several different areas of your writing: paragraph unity, topic sentence, paragraph coherence, and transitions.

Paragraph unity and topic sentences

Many of us were introduced to the concept of unity early in our writing careers. I learned this basic concept in elementary school as soon as I learned about paragraphs. The simplest definition for paragraph unity that I can find states that a paragraph has unity "when every sentence relates to the topic."³

So, simply put, each paragraph of your writing should cover only one



discrete topic. Additionally, that dominant idea should be clearly laid out in the topic sentence. This helps the reader keep track of the organization of your argument. Let's look at the following paragraph.⁴

The tools and devices of discovery are more than options and opportunities. As a franchised auto dealer, Rambler Motors filed suit on March 28, 1961, against American Motors asserting various claims including alleged violation of anti-trust laws. This particular cause of action was abandoned and not briefed on appeal. Rule 56 requires diligence in opposing a motion for summary judgment. Diligence in opposing a motion for summary judgment is required. Here, Plaintiff Rambler Motors failed to seek any documents in discovery during the four years that passed between the filing its complaint and the hearing on the Defendant's motion for summary judgement. Rambler

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Motors did attempt to engage in discovery after the summary judgment hearing. But the trial court in the case at bar was more than patient in awaiting Rambler's controverting affidavits or efforts in any direction. It did not abuse its discretion in refusing to order the production of documents by American after summary judgment had been granted.

What’s this paragraph about? Would it help if I added a topic sentence? Let’s look at a rewrite of the paragraph.

The trial court did not abuse its discretion by refusing to order the production of documents after granting summary judgment. The tools and devices of discovery are more than options and opportunities. As a franchised auto dealer, Rambler Motors filed suit on March 28, 1961, against American Motors asserting various claims including alleged violation of anti-trust laws. This particular cause of action was abandoned and not briefed on appeal. Rule 56 requires diligence in opposing a motion for summary judgment. Diligence in opposing a motion for summary judgment is required. Plaintiff Rambler Motors failed to seek any documents in discovery during the four years that passed between the filing its complaint and the hearing on the Defendant’s motion for summary judgment. Rambler Motors did attempt to engage in discovery after the summary judgment hearing. But the trial court in the case at bar was more than patient in awaiting Rambler’s controverting affidavits or efforts in any direction. It did not abuse its discretion in refusing to order the produc-

tion of documents by American after summary judgment had been granted.

Notice now that some of the sentences don’t fit with the topic of the paragraph. See how much better the paragraph flows with the unnecessary information removed.

The trial court did not abuse its discretion by refusing to order the production of documents after granting summary judgment. Plaintiff Rambler Motors failed to seek any documents in discovery during the four years that passed between the filing its complaint and the hearing on the Defendant’s motion for summary judgment. Rambler Motors only belatedly attempted to engage in discovery after the summary judgment hearing. Rule 56 requires diligence in opposing a motion for summary judgment. The trial court did not abuse its discretion in refusing to order the production of documents by American Motors after summary judgment had been granted. Lawsuits are not timeless or aeonian, and although aging is not an altogether unhappy process, it is not a desirable aspect of judicial proceedings. All things must end-even litigation.

Paragraph coherence and transitions

Once a paragraph covers only one topic, you should turn to making it coherent. Paragraph coherence is what many of us think of as flow. A paragraph has coherence “when there is a smooth and logical flow between sentences and a clear and explicit connection between any one sentence and the topic of the paragraph.”⁵

Finally, now that the paragraph has unity, coherence, and a clear topic sentence, make sure the reader can follow its logic. The easiest way to ensure that is to use transitions. Transitions are words or phrases that show the relationship between sentences. They fall generally into a few categories. I’ve created a handy chart below for your reference.⁶

Take the previous paragraph again. This time I’ve added in transitions.

The trial court did not abuse its discretion by refusing to order the production of documents after granting summary judgment. *Here*, Plaintiff Rambler Motors failed to seek any documents in discovery during the four years that passed between the filing its complaint and the hearing on the Defendant’s motion for summary

| Function | |
|--------------------|--|
| To Add | and, again, and then, besides, finally, further, furthermore, nor, too, next, lastly, moreover, in addition, first (second, etc.) |
| To Compare | whereas, but, yet, on the other hand, however, nevertheless, on the contrary, by comparison, where, compared to, balanced against, but, although, conversely, meanwhile, in contrast |
| To Prove | because, for, since, for the same reason, furthermore, moreover, besides, in addition |
| To Show Exception | yet, still, however, nevertheless, in spite of, despite, of course, sometimes |
| To Show Time | immediately, thereafter, soon, after a few hours, finally, then, later, previously, formerly, first (second, etc.), next, and then |
| To Show Sequence | first, second, third, and so forth, A, B, C, and so forth, next, then, following this, at that time, now, at that point, after, afterward, subsequently, finally, consequently, previously, before this, simultaneously, concurrently, thus, therefore, hence, next, and then, soon; and |
| To Give an Example | for example, for instance, in this case, in another case, on this occasion, in this situation, take the case of, to demonstrate, to illustrate |

judgment. *Rather*, Rambler Motors only belatedly attempted to engage in discovery after the summary judgment hearing. *Yet* Rule 56 requires diligence in opposing a motion for summary judgment. *Thus*, the trial court did not abuse its discretion in refusing to order the production of documents by American Motors after summary judgment had been granted. Lawsuits are not timeless or aeonian, and although aging is not an altogether unhappy process, it is not a desirable aspect of judicial proceedings. All things must end—even litigation.

Was this easier for you to read and understand? If you said yes, remember that your readers will also appreciate the use of transitions in your writing.

Conclusion

I'm off to seek out some flowing water. I'll work on my writing again after I take a cool dip. I hope you, too, can enjoy a little of the outdoor fun we are so lucky to have in Idaho!

Endnotes

1. Helen S. Shapo et al., *Writing and Analysis in the Law*, 179 (4th ed. 1999).

2. *Id.*

3. *Id.*

4. The examples in this article are inspired by *Southern Rambler Sales, Inc. v. American Motors Corp.*, 375 F.2d 932 (5th Cir. 1967).

5. *Id.*

6. Adopted from: Purdue OWL, *Transitional Devices*, <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/574/02/> (last visited June 7, 2016).

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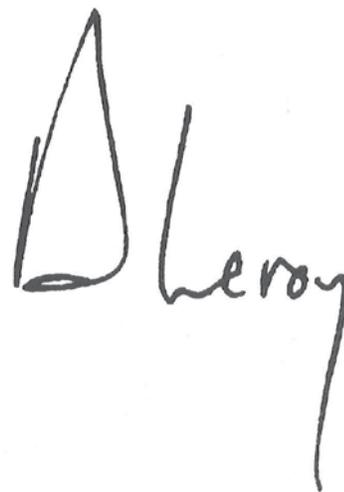


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