

Making a Difficult Language Skill Easy

*Vicky Tchapanian
Lebanese University*

Abstract

One of the main reasons why writing is a difficult language skill according to Roger and Robinson is that “the connection between the mind and the verbal system, by which mental processes are made apparent (visible or audible) to oneself and to others, is difficult to capture” (Roger and Robinson 1990:88). However, one can overcome writing difficulties by following certain rules. This paper intends to introduce rules for better writing.

Key words: writing, combining, summarizing, word, sentence, paragraph.

Overcoming Writing Difficulties

Although language learning skills are difficult in general, yet, writing English is more difficult because “given the importance of English as an international language, more and more people need to learn to write in English for occupational or academic purposes.” (Long and Richards 1987:259). Moreover, it is because “the connection between the mind and the verbal system, by which mental processes are made apparent (visible or audible) to oneself and to others, is difficult to capture” (Roger and Robinson 1990:88). However, one can overcome the writing difficulties in the English language by following certain rules.

Any written piece of prose consists of paragraphs. A paragraph consists of sentences, and a sentence consists of words. However, if the words are not written in a certain order and the sentences do not have coherency, and if the paragraphs do not have a topic sentence followed by supporting sentences and a concluding sentence, the paper would be of little value or no value at all. Thus, to write well, one has to follow certain rules.

Although all the rules serve for the same purpose of better writing, yet, some of these rules are simple and well known for everybody. On the other hand, there are some other rules, which might although not be well known, yet they must be followed for better writing. According to Ronald White, “the ability to

write may be associated with evidence of having learned the language” (found in Long and Richards 1987:259). So, better writing is associated with better knowledge of language and it requires “thought, discipline and concentration. It involves committing something to a relatively permanent form” (260) and since written documents are permanent while spoken words are forgotten, one must try hard to write well. However, writing well does not come easily; it has to pass through many stages and drafts before reaching the final stage.

Steps for Better Writing

Since a whole novel consists of pages that, in their turn, consist of words written in a sequence that makes a sentence, one has to choose the correct words and put them in the right order. So, the first step of better writing is to write correct words in a sentence within a paragraph. But what about the paragraph itself? How to arrange the chosen words in the sentences? According to Oshima & Hogue, coherent paragraphs have three parts: a topic sentence, several supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence (Oshima & Hogue 2007:3):

- a) The topic sentence tells what topic the paragraph is going to discuss.
- b) The supporting sentences give details about the topic.
- c) The concluding sentence summarizes the main points or restates the topic sentence in different words.

1. Writing correct sentences

It is said that “a paragraph is like a sandwich. The topic sentence and concluding sentences are the two pieces of “bread” enclosing the “meat” – the supporting sentences” (Oshima & Hogue 2007:38).

However, to write these paragraphs, the **sentences** within the paragraphs must also follow certain rules, some of these **rules** are:

- a) Write simple but complete sentences with a subject, a verb, and an object (ibid.:11),

e.g. *Mary has a lamp.*
 subject verb object

While writing sentences, do not break sentences in two by using periods for commas,

e.g. *He was an interesting person. A man who had traveled all over the world, and lived in half a dozen countries.*

The first period should be replaced by a comma, and the following word should begin with a small letter (Stink1918:8).

b) Use the active voice; it is usually more direct and vigorous than the passive voice,

e.g.1) *I shall always remember my first visit to Boston.*

2) *My first visit to Boston will always be remembered by me.*

Sentence 1 is much better than sentence 2 (Stink 1918:20).

c) Put statements in positive form omitting needless words from sentences and unnecessary sentences from paragraphs,

e.g. *The Taming of the Shrew is rather weak in spots. Shakespeare does not portray Katharine as a very admirable character, nor does Bianca remain long in memory as an important character in Shakespeare's works.*

e.g. *The women in The Taming of the Shrew are unattractive. Katharine is disagreeable, Bianca insignificant.* (Stink1918:18)

Sentence 2 is much better than sentence 1.

d) Avoid using run-on sentences and comma splices. Run-on and comma splices are similar errors, both happen when you join sentences incorrectly (Oshima & Hogue 2007:87),

e.g. *Men like to shop quickly women like to browse.* (Run-on sentence)

Men like to shop quickly, women like to browse. (Comma splice)

Men like to shop quickly, but women like to browse. (Correct sentence)

Following these rules will make a written paragraph much better. However, "writing will be concerned not only with correctness of expression but also with the organization of ideas and the production of logically coherent prose" (Long & Richards 1987:263). To write a logically coherent prose and improve writing skills, a language learner must practice different exercises such as:

2. Filling blanks following the sample paragraph

A good example is the paragraph presented below which is a description of the port of Calcutta, it is followed by an exercise that gives necessary words to write a similar paragraph describing the port of New York:

e.g. *Calcutta is a port in India. It is situated on the northeast coast, on the estuary of the River Hooghly, which flows into the Bay of Bengal. The population of the city is six million. The distance from New Delhi, the capital of the country is about one thousand miles.* (ibid.:263)

Practicing exercises like the one adduced below can help to write better.

Using the words given, write a paragraph following the one above:

New York, the USA, east coast, River Hudson, Atlantic Ocean, eight million, Washington, two hundred and fifty miles.

The paragraph will be as such:

New York is a port in USA. It is situated on the east coast on the Hudson River, which flows into the Atlantic Ocean. The population of the city is eight million. The distance from Washington, the capital of the country is about two hundred and fifty miles.

3. Combining answers to make a précis

Another way for better writing is combining answers using conjunctions to make summaries. According to Richards & Long, “A way of focusing on the development of a paragraph is to provide a series of questions, the answers to which will form a coherent piece of prose” (Long & Richards 1987:263). So, a way of improving the learner’s writing skills can be through answering comprehension questions. The following is an example of a paragraph along with questions. Later, after answering the questions and combining the answers to each other using combining words such as the FAN BOYS the learner can have a summary to the main paragraph.

E.g. Nobody likes staying at home on a public holiday especially if the weather is fine. Last August we decided to spend the day in the country. The only difficulty was that millions of other people had exactly the same idea. We moved out of the city slowly behind a long line of cars, but at least we came to a quiet country road and, after some time, stopped at a lonely farm. We had brought plenty of food with us and we got it out of the car. Now everything was ready so we set down near a path at the foot of a hill. It was very peaceful in the cool grass until we heard bells ringing at the top of the hill. What we saw made us pick up our things and run back to the car as quickly as possible. There were about two hundred sheep coming towards us down the path! (Alexander 1965:22)

Comprehension questions:

- 1) *Where did we decide to drive last August?*
- 2) *Were there a lot of cars on the road, or were there only a few? Did it take us a long time to find a quiet place or not? (so)*
- 3) *What did we get out of the car? Where did we sit? (and)*
- 4) *What did we hear soon afterwards? Where did we have to turn? (and)*
- 5) *What were coming down the path?*

After answering the questions, join up the answers using the conjunctions given after questions 2, 3, and 4. Your answers to the questions must follow each other. Afterwards, the combined sentences all together will make a complete paragraph which will be a summary of the earlier paragraph.

The answers of the questions that are combined together using FAN BOYS will be as follows:

*Last August we decided to drive into the country. There were a lot of cars on the road **so** it took us a long time to find a quiet place. We got our food out of the car **and** sat down near a path at the foot of a hill. Soon afterwards, we heard bells ringing **and** we had to run back to the car. About two hundred sheep were coming down the path!* (ibid.:23)

4. Finding irrelevant sentences and crossing them out

Another way of practicing exercises for the purpose of writing better and keeping unity in the paragraph is finding irrelevant sentences in a paragraph. The below paragraph is a good sample of a paragraph which includes irrelevant sentences that break its unity.

A Woman of Strength: The strength of character that Eleanor Roosevelt possessed was obvious in her face. *On her head, which was always held high, her light hair was styled in a nonsense way and did not cover her forehead or eyes.* Her eyebrows were thick, natural and expressive. Under these were her intense eyes, which revealed her intelligent mind. *Her nose was straight, and, as she aged, her cheeks sagged a bit and formed the common wrinkles that make a triangle out of the nose and edges of the mouth.* She was a serious woman, but, when she smiled, her smile showed sincerity and genuine pleasure. She was a great asset to her husband, Franklin, who was president of the United States from 1932 to 1945. In short, it was clear from the first impression that Eleanor Roosevelt was a strong woman (Boardman & Frydenberg 2008:226).

To keep unity in the paragraph the italicized sentences have to be crossed out. However, being able to make paragraphs is not enough for good writing, according to Richard and Long, “To teach writing as a form of communication, it is necessary to go beyond sentence level manipulation to the production of paragraphs and subsequently of multi paragraph compositions” (Long & Richards 1987:265).

So, to write a multi paragraph composition, you have to develop ideas and make a first and a second or even a third draft before writing the final draft. To

make the writing process easier and reach the final draft easily, the below rules should be followed for better writing.

5. Practicing prewriting techniques such as:

a) Listing: sometimes called brainstorming, is a quick way to get ideas on paper. Write whatever comes to your mind that is associated with the subject given to write about (Dees & Dornan 2009:52). The list of words and phrases later can be developed by deleting some and keeping others.

b) Free writing: “simply write nonstop. Don’t judge your ideas or shut them out. Don’t also be concerned with the technical aspects of writing: grammar, sentence structure ... They will all come later” (ibid.:53). After finishing; grammar, sentence structure, or any other mistakes should be corrected.

c) Clustering: “Begin a cluster in a simple fashion. Write what you have determined to be your tentative subject in the center of the page, and draw a circle around it” (ibid.:53).

6. Distinguishing paragraph types: According to Mark Cornnelli, “everything you write has a goal. Good writing has a clear goal – to inform, to entertain, or to persuade” (Cornnelli 2007:23). However, whatever you write, your writing is one of the writing types mentioned below:

A – Descriptive paragraph: Where the writer describes a person, a place, an object, or an experience,

e.g. Describe your favorite person.

B – Narrative writing type: Where the writer narrates an event or a series of events in a chronological order,

e.g. Narrate about an unforgettable experience that has happened in your life. (Essential terms are the time order signals: *first, second, third, then, next, finally*).

C – Definition writing type: Where the writer defines a certain term, condition, issue, etc.,

e.g. Define technology (Essential words are the relative pronouns: *who, which, that*).

D – Comparison and contrast: Where the writer compares and contrasts two or more things writing about the similarities and differences. There are 2 type of organization for compare and contrast writing type:

a) point by point organization or

b) block organization,

e.g. Compare and contrast country life with city life.

E – Process writing type: To explain how something occurs or how something is prepared or accomplished,

e.g. How to make chocolate cake? (Essential words are time order signals: *first, second, third, or first step, second step, next step, final step*).

F – Division writing type where the ideas are logically subdivided,

e.g. Why I don't have a credit card. (Essential words are transitional signals: *first, second, furthermore, or on the other hand, for example, in conclusion*).

G – Classification writing type: Where subjects are classified in different classes or levels,

e.g. Ways of protecting the environment (Essential words are: *first, second, third ...*).

H – Cause and effect writing type: Where the the results of an event are given,

e.g. What is the effect of pollution on the Ozone Layer? (Essential words are: *since, because, however, furthermore*).

I – Argument and persuasion writing type: Where an argument is raised to praise readers about a certain opinion,

e.g. The production and sale of cigarettes should be made illegal (Essential words are the auxiliaries: *will, shall, may ...*).

Thus in the writing process, the given topic should be taken into consideration to determine the writing type and the essential words.

In the first stages of language learning, the learner starts to write following simple rules. However, for better writing purposes, in the next stage he has to follow harder and more complicated rules such as using **semantic information and selected words**.

Since “meaning in written text is the set of semantic information produced by the writer composing at some point in time” (Mosenthal 1983:222), the language learner has to consider the semantic meaning of what he is writing. According to Peter Mosenthal “there are three sources of meaning in a text including: meaning in prior text, meaning in current text, and meaning in future text.” Meaning in prior text refers to the semantic information a writer has produced some time before writing. Meaning in current text refers to the semantic information that is being produced at the moment of writing and meaning in future text refers to the semantic information that a writer will produce sometime after he writes (ibid.:222).

Thus, since semantic information or meaning in text is important, for a better written text, a language learner should take semantic meaning into serious

consideration. He has to think about what will be written, write, and consider the meaning of what has been written, since “written texts are permanent” (Long & Richards 1967:257). Therefore, a writer should choose the right word in the right place because “words have power and so using the impact of a written text greatly depends on the words the writer chooses to express ideas” (Connelly 2007:128). Accordingly, a writer has to:

- 1) use words precisely,
- 2) use concrete words,
- 3) use strong verbs,
- 4) appreciate the impact of connotations.

These are important issues that have to be considered while writing. In addition to these, a writer has to consider the language in which he/she is writing, because different languages have different writing organizations.

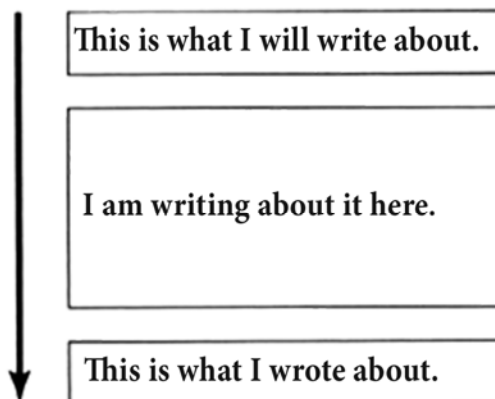
Considering the fact that each language has a different organization type, to show the difference between English and the other languages, I will highlight three different language organization types along with that of English. According to Boardman & Frydenberg, “different languages use different writing styles of organization. English organization is fairly simple. English uses a straight line from beginning to end. When English speakers read an article, they expect the article to have a beginning, middle, and an end” (Boardman & Frydenberg 2008:xiv). The beginning says what the article should talk about, the middle talks about the topic, and the end shows what the article was about. It should be mentioned though, that not all languages have the same style of writing organization.

The Spanish writing organization is similar to English, but the line from beginning to end is not so straight. Spanish speakers write about the topic, but here and there they add something that is not directly related to the topic. To a Spanish speaker, this makes the writing more interesting (Boardman & Frydenberg 2008:xvi).

However, the Japanese writing organization, “is often circular. This means that the topic comes at the end of the article” (ibid.:xvi) here, the writer does not say what the topic is. On the other hand, he gives hints to help the reader guess what the topic is (ibid.:xvi).

The Arabic writing organization “is more repetitive than English writing, with the main points being restated in different ways throughout the text” (ibid.: xvii).

It is important to note that “one style of writing isn’t better than another just as one language is not better than another” (ibid.:xvii). To be a successful writer in any language, you need to follow the writing organization of that specific language. The English writing organization, as mentioned earlier, consists of three parts, the beginning, the middle, and the end. According to Boardman’s diagram (xv), the English writing organization is as follows:



Thus, a writer has to consider the language he is writing in, make sure his writing follows the writing organization of the given language, and also make sure that his writing does not lack any of the parts mentioned above.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that to write well, one has to think thoroughly of the rules that should govern the task. During the first stages of the writing process a writer starts first with structuring sentences, later, moves to writing paragraphs, and next starts writing longer pieces of prose. However, to write good sentences and structure really valuable pieces of prose, the writer has to follow certain rules such as writing coherent paragraphs that have a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a concluding one. A writer has to practice exercises following the samples, practice prewriting techniques, and distinguish different types of prose to write accordingly. Moreover, he/she also has to consider the semantic information and the words selected. The more effective the words, the better the message sent, the more understandable the writer’s intention, the better the writing.

It should also be mentioned that, since each language has a different writing organization, the writing organization of the given language should be considered while writing. Since this paper introduces rules for better writing considering the English language, an English writer has to make sure that his written work has a beginning, a middle, and an end. In other words, he/she has to make sure his written text has an introduction, a body, and a conclusion.

Following the steps and the rules mentioned above will help one to write English well.

References:

1. Alexander, L.G. (1965) *A First Book in Comprehension Précis and Composition*. Burnt Mill, Harlow, Essex: Longman.
2. Boardman, G. & Frydenberg, L. (2008) *Writing to Communicate: Paragraphs and Essays*. 3rd Edition. New York: Pearson, Longman.
3. Conelli, M. (2007) *The Sundance Writer: A Rhetoric, Reader, Handbook*. Boston: Thomson Wardsworth.
4. Dee, R. & Dornan, E. (2009) *Four in One: Rhetoric, Reader, Research Guide, and Handbook*. 4th Edition. New York: Pearson, Longman.
5. Long, H.M & Richards, C.J. (1987) *Methodology in TESOL, A Book of Readings*. Boston, Massachusetts: Helene & Helene, pp. 257-267.
6. Mosenthal, P. (Summer, 1983) *Classroom Writing Competence: A Paradigmatic Perspective*. American Educational Research Association. Available at: <www.jstor.org/stable/1170215> [Accessed November 2011].
7. Oshima, A. & Hogue, A. (2007) *Introduction to Academic Writing*. N.Y.: Pearson, Longman.
8. Roger, E. & Robinson, J. (1990) *The Oral Language Process in Writing: A Real-Life Writing Session*. / National Council of Teachers of English. Available at: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40171447>> [Accessed November 2011].
9. Stink, W. (1918) *The Elements of Style*. New York. Available at: <www.jstor.org/stable/27920620> [Accessed November 2011].
10. Van Valine, R. (2008) *Investigations of the Syntax – Semantics – Pragmatics Interface*. New York: John Benjamin Publishing Company.

Ինչպես հեշտացնել բարդ լեզվական հմտության զարգացումը

Ըստ Ռոջերի և Ռոբինսոնի, գրավոր խոսքի լեզվական հմտության բարդ լինելը պայմանավորված է այն հանգամանքով, որ «մտքի և լեզվական համակարգի կապը, որի միջոցով մտավոր գործընթացները ակնհայտ (տեսանելի կամ լսելի) են դառնում անհատին և ուրիշներին, դժվար է հասկանալ» (Roger and Robinson 1990:88): Սակայն, գրավոր խոսքի զարգացման դժվարությունները կարող են հաղթահարվել, եթե հետևելու լինենք որոշակի կանոնների: Սույն հոդվածում ներկայացված են որոշ կանոններ, որոնք կնպաստեն գրավոր խոսքի հմտությունների զարգացմանը: