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Winner ✓

## Fall 2008 Knight Award for Writing Exercises and Handouts

The Knight Award for Writing Exercises recognizes excellence in short exercises and/or handouts designed to improve student writing. Appropriate topics may be drawn from the whole range of writing issues, large scale to small scale, such as development of theses, use of secondary sources, organization of evidence, awareness of audience, attention to sentence patterns (e.g., passive/active voice, coordination/ subordination), attention to diction, uses of punctuation, attention to mechanics (e.g., manuscript formats, apostrophes). Exercises and handouts may be developed for use in and/or out of class.

Submissions should comprise three parts: (1) A copy of the handouts or instructions that go to students (2) An explanation of the exercise/ handout and of the principles behind it addressed to future instructors who may use the material. (3) If possible, an example of a student response.

Submissions may range in length from one to four or five pages.

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The two winning entries will receive \$350; honorable mentions (if any) will receive \$125.

Submissions are due in 101 McGraw Hall by Friday, December 12. No exceptions can be made.

## Fall 2008 Knight Award for Writing Exercises

~Please Print Clearly~

Instructor's name Cori A. Winrock  
Department ENGL Course # and title 1187.111 Literature and the Laboratory

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The Return of the Paragraph!  
Title of Writing Exercises  
Instructor's signature Cori A. Winrock Date 12.12.08

CORI A. WINROCK  
ENGLISH 1187 LITERATURE & THE LABORATORY  
THE RETURN OF THE PARAGRAPH!

ABSTRACT:

This assignment focuses on the construction of different types of paragraphs, beginning with two published examples and then moving into the students' work. The assignment is given after students have handed in their first essay (not including the Trial Response). Students work in pairs on recomposing two different types of chopped-up paragraphs. The first paragraph is virtually impossible to reassemble, while the second paragraph has two or three constructions that could work. As a class, we discuss how to structure a paragraph that creates a clear argument. The students then bring their own disassembled paragraphs to class and work in pairs to see if their peers can reassemble them. This helps to create a connection between published work and the work that students are producing themselves.

THE RETURN OF THE PARAGRAPH:

The following assignment is given after students have handed in their first draft of the semester (not including the Trial Response). Students work in pairs on recomposing two different types of paragraphs. After each paragraph we discuss structural successes and weaknesses. The first paragraph, from *American Man, Age Ten* is virtually impossible to reassemble. I only allot five minutes for students to attempt to put it back together (or they get hopeless about the rest of the assignment). As a class, we discuss their frustrations and why the paragraph cannot be composed in only one way. We also discuss the importance of how differing *versions* of the paragraph could still make logical sense. In general every group has a different end-paragraph. Then, the students reassemble the much more straightforward second paragraph, from *Meet the Shaggs*. In this case, we discuss how there are two or three different ways of structuring this paragraph while still maintaining a clear argument. This helps to highlight that there is never really one privileged text as an argument can be set up in various forms. Each group finds the opening and ending lines, and we discuss what cues allow them to find them as well as what cues offer structure guidance.

For the next class, their assignment is to take the first paragraph of their recently turned in essay, chop it up into its sentences, and bring it to class. Two different students then recompose the paragraph and, using a peer review sheet, offer constructive criticism. The peer review sheet was created in Writing 700 in collaboration with Ezra Feldman.

I have included both example paragraphs in their full, ordered versions—but I distribute them as slips of paper, out of order, so students can recompose each paragraph in tangible form.

## Language Assignment

### *Highlighting Sentence Structure by Recomposing a Paragraph*

#### Rationale:

In strong writing, most sentences give clues to their places in a paragraph—but if a paragraph reads smoothly, you may not notice those clues. Learning to notice these clues in structure, and how they work to help a reader understand the focus and movement in a paragraph, is a good way to be aware of how to make these types of decisions in your own writing. Since learning to recognize and appreciate these cues will also help you to imitate them, I have taken two different types of paragraphs and chopped them into their individual sentences and rearranged them. In this assignment you will use recognition of cues such as content, syntax, and diction, in order to make decisions about intended sentence order and to return these lonely sentences to their rightful paragraph form.

#### Assignment

In class:

Your task is to put the paragraph from *American Man, Age Ten*, back in order by looking at each sentence carefully and figuring out what information (logical, grammatical, or contextual) must precede it and what information must follow. As you work, make note of what features of the sentences yielded the most useful information. Afterwards, we will talk about the paragraph's structure, and the structures of the individual sentences, together in class.

In groups of two, work together to put the paragraph from *Meet the Shaggs* back in order by looking at each sentence carefully and figuring out what information (logical, grammatical, or contextual) must precede it and what information must follow. Again, as you work, make note of what features of the sentences yielded the most useful information. Think about what information the paragraph from *American Man, Age Ten* was lacking and in what ways these two paragraphs differ?

#### For next class:

Please take the introduction paragraph from your Essay 2 and put the sentences (with a double return in between) in order alphabetically (in a word doc). Print this out. **Cut your paragraph into strips** and bring them to class along with a copy of the original paragraph (on a separate piece of paper). Do *not* cut your strips into puzzle pieces—you don't want to be able to see how the paragraph is ordered just by fitting the strips together.

PARAGRAPH ONE, opening paragraph of "American Man, Age Ten" from *The Bullfighter Checks Her Makeup* by Susan Orlean

If Colin Duffy and I were to get married, we would have matching superhero notebooks. We would wear shorts, big sneakers, and long, baggy T-shirts depicting famous athletes every single day, even in the winter. We would sleep in our clothes. We would both be good at Nintendo Street Fighter II, but Colin would be better than me. We would have some homework, but it would not be too hard and we would always have just finished it. We would eat pizza and candy for all of our meals. We wouldn't have sex, but we would have crushes on each other and, magically, babies would appear in our home. We would win the lottery and then buy land in Wyoming, where we would have one of every kind of cute animal. All the while, Colin would be working in law enforcement - probably the FBI. Our favorite movie star, Morgan Freeman, would visit us occasionally. We would listen to the same Eurythmics song ("Here Comes the Rain Again") over and over again and watch two hours of television every Friday night. We would both be good at football, have best friends, and know how to drive; we would cure AIDS and the garbage problem and everything that hurts animals. We would hang out a lot with Colin's dad. For fun, we would load a slingshot with dog food and shoot it at my butt. We would have a very good life.

PARAGRAPH TWO, opening paragraph of "Meet the Shaggs" from *The Bullfighter Checks Her Makeup* by Susan Orlean

DEPENDING on whom you ask, the Shaggs were either the best band of all time or the worst. Frank Zappa is said to have proclaimed that the Shaggs were "better than the Beatles." More recently, though, a music fan who claimed to be in "the fetal position, writhing in pain," declared on the Internet that the Shaggs were "hauntingly bad," and added, "I would walk across the desert while eating charcoal briquettes soaked in Tobasco for forty days and forty nights *not* to ever have to listen to anything Shagg-related *ever* again." Such a divergence of opinion confuses the mind. Listening to the Shaggs' album "Philosophy of the World" will further confound. The music is winsome but raggedly discordant pop. Something is sort of wrong with the tempo, and the melodies are squashed and bent, nasal, deadpan. Are the Shaggs referencing the heptatonic, angular microtones of Chinese ya-yueh court music and the atonal note clusters of Ornette Coleman, or are they just a bunch of kids playing badly on cheap, out-of-tune guitars?

In class: *Peer Review*

Exchange disordered paragraphs with one of your classmates, and reassemble each other's paragraphs. Once you have done so, answer the following questions in writing:

1. **Does the reassembled paragraph match the original exactly? Yes or No.**
  
2. **Regardless of whether it does or it does not match—are there sentences, or ideas, that seem out of order? Please list these issues and explain in writing why the sentences or ideas seemed misplaced.**
  
3. **Which transitions within the paragraph did you struggle with most as you tried to put it back together, and how might you make those transitions clearer and stronger?**
  
4. **Were there transitions that worked well? Why?**
  
5. **Were you able to identify an opening sentence? A three-story-thesis? Why or why not?**
  
6. **Were there any typographical, stylistic, or grammatical errors in the paragraph? Where/what were they?**

REVISION ELEMENT:

At home, rewrite the paragraph that your classmate has edited. Focus first and foremost on its organization, and do not be afraid to rewrite, add, or delete entire sentences! Read your paragraph out loud to yourself! **Proofread the paragraph closely!!** When you think your introduction is as clear as possible, paste the new version below the old version (please mark which is which) print it out, and bring it to class.

I will collect the following materials from each student on Wednesday, so please save your work:

1. The original paragraph & your revised paragraph (on the same sheet)
2. Your peer review sheet