

WRITING PARAGRAPHS

PROCESSING IDEAS: ABSTRACTION

Language is a collection of symbols (or abstractions) that become tools for communication. S. I. Hayakawa, a language specialist and professor of English at San Francisco State University, has developed what he calls a “Ladder of Abstraction.” It serves as a reminder to the writer/speaker the need for clarity and preciseness in communication.

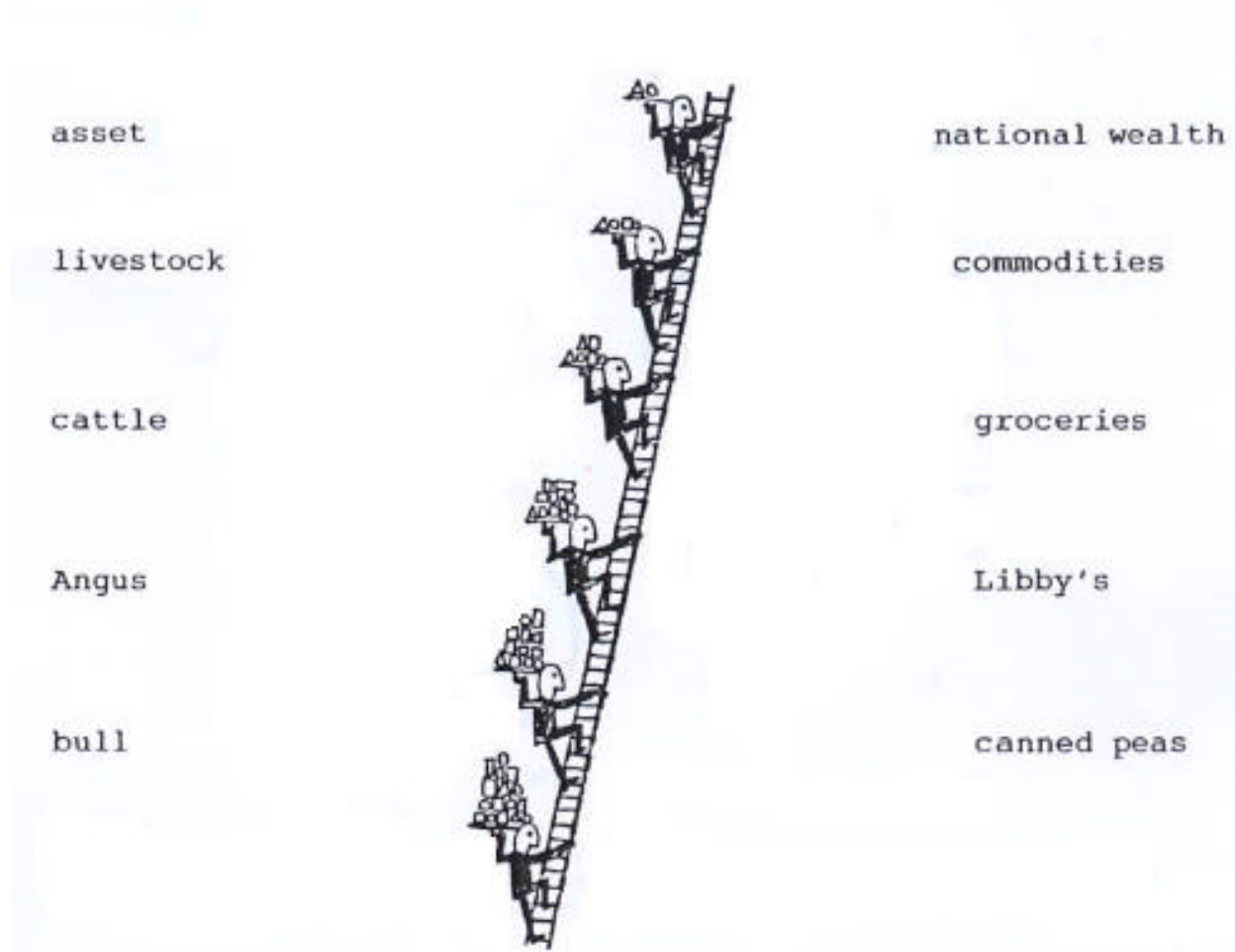
abstraction – the process of using a general idea or word to represent a physical concept; the relations between words and what they stand for; all words, like all ideas, are abstractions.

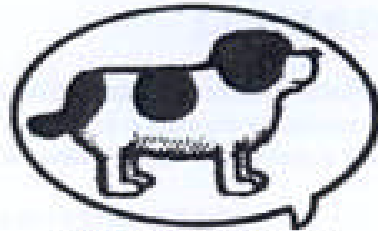
process of abstracting – noting similar differences, while ignoring differences, in order to put a physical concept into a general category.

Example: poodle, German shepherd, collie = dogs

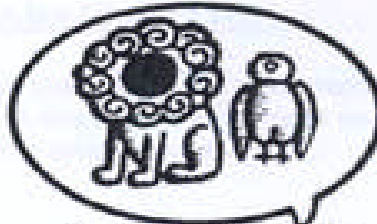
Example: Hereford, Angus, Texas longhorn = cows

S. I. HAYAKAWA’S “ABSTRACTION LADDER”

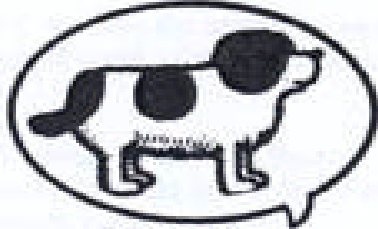




"I have a pet at home"



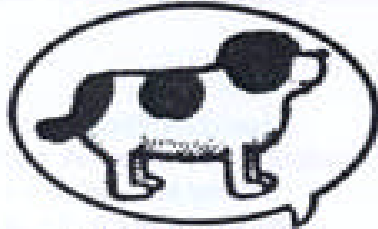
"Ok, what kind of a pet?"



"It is a dog."



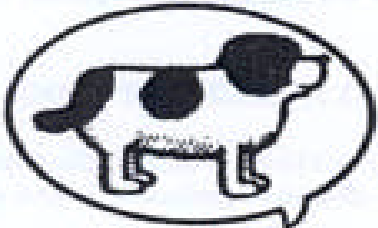
"What kind of a dog?"



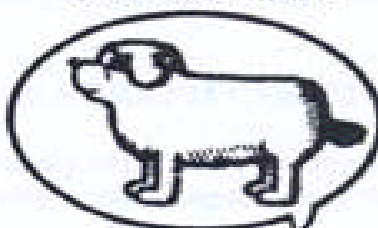
"It is a St. Bernard."



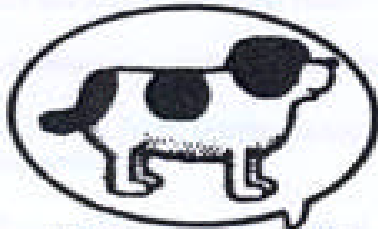
"Grown up or a puppy?"



"It is full grown."



"What color is it?"



"It is brown and white."



"Why didn't you say you had a full-grown, brown and white St. Bernard as a pet in the first place?"



"Why doesn't anybody understand me?"

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LEVELS OF ABSTRACTION

Sentence leveling exercises help students arrange ideas in a paragraph from the general to the specific. The most abstract sentence receives a level one rating. If the next sentence further explains or exemplifies the first sentence, it receives a level two rating, and so on.

EXERCISE ON ABSTRACTION

In Exercise I, arrange the sentences in order of decreasing abstraction beginning with the statement at the highest level of abstraction, as illustrated in the following example:

1. I like travel.
2. I like motoring better than flying.
3. I like American cars better than English cars.
4. I like Honda cars.
5. I like my Honda Accord four-door sedan.

Exercise I:

1. Joe is very handy with tools.
2. Yesterday Joe replaced a broken light socket on Aunt Mary's lamp.
3. Joe is a mechanical genius.
4. Joe is an all-American man.
5. All our household appliances are working because Joe repairs them when needed.

USING SENTENCE LEVELING IN PARAGRAPH CONSTRUCTION

Professor Francis Christensen of the University of Southern California developed his own description of the way outstanding twentieth-century writers prepare paragraphs:

1. Writers usually place their main idea in the first sentence of the paragraph.
2. Later sentences usually explain more concretely the idea of the first sentence.
3. The third and later sentences may explain more concretely any earlier sentence, including the first sentence.
4. The first sentence usually moves forward, but later sentences move backward as they explain the first sentence in more detail; therefore, the first sentence is usually general and abstract with later sentences providing a more concrete explanation.
5. Paragraphs have more interesting "texture" if they have several "layers of generality."
6. Ideas in a paragraph are either on the same level (parallel or equal) or on a lower level (explaining, describing, or exemplifying—subordinate).
7. Paragraphs usually return to a general sentence at the closing of the paragraph.

RECOGNIZING PATTERNS IN LEVELS OF ABSTRACTION

The patterns of the sentence arrangement in a paragraph will vary depending upon the kind of information the writer is presenting. For example, the writer may introduce a main topic, and all the sentences that follow *depend on that first sentence*. If this is the case, the outline for a such a paragraph might look like this:

1. Livestock
2. Cows
2. Sheep
2. Pigs

The example above illustrates a two-level paragraph, but usually we need to write multi-level paragraphs. In a multi-level paragraph, the sentences *depend on each other*. The following outline is an example of multi-level paragraphing:

1. Livestock
2. Cows
3. Dairy
3. Beef
4. Angus
4. Hereford
2. Pigs
3. Berkshire

Exercise in Identifying Patterns in Levels of Abstraction

Based on the principles listed above, Christensen suggests steps to analyze paragraphs. To begin an analysis, assume that the first sentence of the paragraph is the topic sentence that informs the reader of the paragraph's main idea. Assign it a number "1." Examine the next sentences, searching for similarities and differences. If the second sentence is the paragraph is like the first (parallel in structure or ideas), assign it the same number. If the second sentence differs from the first (further explains, exemplifies, or describes the previous sentence) assign it the number "2." To observe this formula in action, apply this process to the example below.

Example I:

A bright splash of color has brightened New York recently. The pedestrian bridge connecting Manhattan with Ward's Island has been painted in bright primary hues. The span was painted yellow. It's a vivid signal yellow that would make taxicabs envious. The towers were painted blue. You could say that the blue towers represent the gravity line that connects sky and water. The control booths were painted red. The red was needed to complete the scheme of principal colors. New Yorkers are falling in love with this vibrant art object. Drivers blink and smile. Children fish under the bridge as if it were their private clubhouse. As a matter of

fact, painting the Ward's Island Bridge is like placing a permanent rainbow over a drab part of New York.

Below are more complex paragraphs for analysis. Using the process suggested by Christensen, assign an abstraction level to each sentence in the paragraph.

Example II: (Excerpted from Deborah Tall's From Where We Stand)

Like so many Americans raised in suburbia, I have never really belonged to an American landscape. The narrow strips of spared trees buffering my several childhood housing tracts from nearby highways don't qualify as much of a landscape. Nor does landscaping, clumped shrubbery from the nursery transplanted under maternal directive on Saturday mornings—a row of squat evergreens screening the house's cement foundation. Bulldozed, paved, it was a terrain as homogeneous and orderly as the developer's desktop model. The land's dull tidiness was hard to escape, except in the brief adventures of childhood when I could crawl beneath a bush or clothe myself in a willow tree. Before long, tall enough to look out the kitchen window, I saw the tree tamed by perspective, the bush that could be hurdled, my yard effectively mimicked up and down the block: one house, two trees, one house, two trees, all the way to the vanishing point.

Example III: (Excerpted from Richard Selzer's "The Pan and the Scalpel")

At first glance, it would appear that surgery and writing have little in common, but I think that it's not so. For one thing, they are both sub-celestial arts. As far as I know, the angels disdain to perform either one. In each of them you hold a slender instrument that leaves a trail wherever it is applied. In one instance, the trail left behind is the shedding of blood; in the other, it is ink that is spilled upon a page. The surgeon sutures together the tissues of the body to make whole what is sick or injured; the writer sews words into sentences to fashion a new version of human experience.

DEAD-LEVEL ABSTRACTING (paraphrased from S.I. Hayakawa's writings)

Some people remain permanently stuck at certain levels of the abstraction ladder—some on the lower levels and some on the very high levels. There are those who persistently speak or write in low-level abstractions. All of us know people who talk on and on without ever drawing any general conclusions. These people go on indefinitely, reciting insignificant facts, never able to pull them together to frame a generalization that would give meaning to their facts. Other speakers remain stuck at high levels of abstraction, with little or no contact with lower levels. This kind of speech is

characterized by vagueness, ambiguity, or utter meaninglessness. Such language remains permanently in the clouds.

Whether at higher or lower levels, dead-level abstracting is always dull. The low-level speaker frustrates the listener because he leaves no directions as to what to do with the basketful of information he has stated. The high-level speaker frustrates the listener because he doesn't provide any concrete details about his general statements, which remain obscure in the mind of the listener.

It is obvious that interesting speech and interesting writing require the constant interplay of high-level and low-level abstractions. The interesting writer, the informative speaker, and the accurate thinker, operate on all levels of the abstraction ladder, moving quickly and gracefully in orderly fashion—from higher to lower, from lower to higher—with minds as lithe and deft as monkeys in a tree.

LEARNING TO RECOGNIZE DEAD-LEVEL WRITING

The following paragraphs are composed of sentences randomly selected from the writings of William Zinsser and placed into paragraphs that differ from his original arrangement. The third paragraph is directly excerpted from Zinsser's book.

Low-Level Abstraction

Take, for instance, the business letter, the interoffice memo, the corporation report, the notice from the bank explaining its latest "simplified" statement. What member of an insurance or medical plan can decipher the brochure that describes what the costs and benefits are? What father or mother can put together a child's toy—on Christmas Eve or any other eve—from the instructions on the box? The airline pilot who announces that he is presently anticipating experiencing considerable precipitation wouldn't dream of saying that it may rain.

High-Level Abstraction

Clutter is the disease of American writing. We are a society strangling in unnecessary words, circular constructions, pompous frills and meaningless jargon. Who can understand the viscous language of everyday American commerce and enterprise: the business letter, the interoffice memo, the corporation report, the notice from the bank explaining its latest "simplified" statement? What member of an insurance or medical plan can decipher the brochure that describes what the costs and benefits are? What father or mother can put together a child's toy—on Christmas Eve or any other eve—from the instructions on the box? Our national tendency is to inflate and thereby sound important. The airline pilot who announces that he is presently anticipating experiencing considerable precipitation wouldn't dream of saying that it may rain. The sentence is too simple—there must be something wrong with it.

LEVELING TOOLS

Teachers always talk about writing a topic sentence for every paragraph, but what is a topic sentence? Dividing the topic sentence into its components helps us understand its function and purpose. First, the topic sentence introduces the limited topic of the paragraph. Only the subject (or

subjects) listed in this first sentence will be discussed in this paragraph. We call the topic “limited” because no other aspect of the topic will be discussed in this paragraph. Other than this very narrow perspective. It may help to think of the “limitation” we’ve placed on the subject as the “pointer” in the sentence. A pointer is the controlling attitude that provides the focus and logical direction for the development of the subject. When beginning to apply this idea, it may help to list the pointer in the predicate of the sentence. The predicate is a word or group of words that normally follows the subject of a sentence and tells what it does, has, or is, or what is done to it. For example, the topic sentence is, “Clutter is the disease of American writing.” The topic of this paragraph concerns clutter, and the pointer is “disease in American writing.” We know that disease is not something we want in our bodies; therefore, we conclude that this paragraph will be about the clutter we don’t want in our writing.

Listed below are several examples of topic sentences and their limited subjects (and pointers) followed by exercises in locating topics and pointers.

Examples:

1. The day is dreary. (Subject: day Pointer: dreary).
2. Eating at Burger Village offers several advantages. (Subject: Eating at Burger Village Pointer: offers several advantages).
3. The secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components. (Subject: secret of good writing Pointer: strip sentences to cleanest components).

Exercises I:

1. My childhood summers seemed precious. (Subject: _____ Pointer: _____).
2. The main characteristic of the little farm we had walked over was disorder.
(Subject: _____ Pointer: _____).
3. Manhattan is shaped like an ocean liner. (Subject: _____ Pointer: _____).
(Subject: _____ Pointer: _____).
4. Despite the desolate look, there’s a coziness to living in Wyoming. (Subject: _____
Pointer: _____).
5. Today’s neighborhood barbecue recreates a world of sharing and hospitality that becomes rarer each year. (Subject: _____ Pointer: _____).
6. These frontier men were the precise opposites of the tidewater aristocrats.
(Subject: _____ Pointer: _____).
7. The second type of technological advance is the kind that reveals our society’s imperfection.
(Subject: _____ Pointer: _____).

DELETING EXTRANEOUS INFORMATION FROM PARAGRAPHS

By using Christensen's sentence leveling methods to outline paragraphs, students can locate material that does not belong in the paragraph. If information in the paragraph is not parallel or subordinate in construction to one of the sentences in the paragraph, that sentence most likely does not belong in the paragraph. List the sentences in the paragraphs below according to a level of abstraction and delete the sentences that cannot be assigned a number.

Exercises I:

All writing is ultimately a question of solving a problem. It may be a problem of where to obtain the facts, or how to organize the material. It may be a problem of approach or attitude, tone or style. Good writing requires the writer to identify purpose, audience, and tone. Whatever the problem, it has to be confronted and solved. Sometimes you will despair of finding the right solution—or any solution. You will think, “If I live to be ninety I’ll never get out of this mess I’m in.” I’ve often thought it myself. But when I finally do solve the problem, it’s because I have written millions of words. Like a surgeon removing his five hundredth appendix, I’ve been there before and have a surer instinct than the beginner about how to fix what has gone wrong.

Exercises II:

Most people work for institutions—businesses and banks, insurance firms and law firms, government agencies, school systems, nonprofit organizations and various other entities. Many of them are executives whose writing goes out to the public: the corporation president addressing the stockholders, the bank manager explaining a change in procedure, the school principal writing a newsletter to parents. Whoever they are, they are so fearful and so uncomfortable with words that their sentences lack all humanity—and so do their institutions. Newsletters need to have a cheery and informal look. Business letters ought to be concise and to the point. It’s hard to imagine that these are places where real men and women come to work every morning. No one ever said writing was easy.

UNITY AND COHERENCE

Unity is a matter of logical direction; *coherence* is a matter of interlocking connection. Good communication uses both unity and coherence—concentrating on a single, limited subject (unity) and providing clear directional signals (coherence).

In communication, unity means oneness. One subject, one controlling attitude, one tone. In all your writing-sentences, paragraphs, short and long papers-you will work for this oneness.

The key to unity is to keep focused on the argumentative controlling attitude toward your single, limited subject. This controlling attitude is a pointer; it provides the focus and logical direction for all the paper's ideas. Unity gives direction.

A good thesis statement or topic sentence, therefore, provides two fundamental keys to unity:

1. A single, limited subject area.
2. A specific, limited predicate area (controlling attitude).

Coherence is the effect of interlocking connection provided by directional signals of many kinds, designed to guide the reader in the one direction established through unity. The key to coherence is the word interlocking. Through interlocking devices, the writer ties sentence to sentence and paragraph to paragraph to achieve coherence. There are 7 ways to achieve coherence.

1. Coherence through *consistent point of view*

Considered grammatically, point of view involves two basic elements: 1. The grammatical subject of each sentence (person). 2. The verb (tense as a time indicator).

2. Coherence through *pronoun reference*

Repeating the same noun too often in a paragraph, especially if repetition isn't needed for clarity, will usually bore the reader. With care, you can use a series of pronouns to do the job; the result is a series of interlocking, pointed grammatical signals clearly referring to an antecedent noun and providing logical continuity.

3. Coherence through *repetition of key words*

4. Coherence through *spatial order of sentences*

In using spatial order to achieve coherence, a writer explains or describes objects as they are arranged in space.

5. Coherence through *chronological order of sentences*

Chronological order means simply the order in which events happen.

6. Coherence through *related sentence patterns*

Holding a paragraph together by repetition of sentence patterns within the paragraph is a relatively difficult means of achieving coherence because it requires more care in designing sentences, but it is an effective means.

7. Coherence through *transition words*

Probably the easiest, and most abused, method of pulling together the thought in a passage is through the use of transition words. Transition words or phrases serve as signals to interlock sentences. They direct the reader from the thought of one sentence to that of another and indicate the relationship between the two sentences.

**TO INDICATE A
CONCLUSION
OR RESULT**

EXAMPLES

therefore
as a result
consequently
accordingly
in other words
to sum up
thus
then
hence

1. Therefore, his action can justified by valid explanation.
2. As a result, hollow, vain aristocracies have been established on American campuses.
3. Consequently, the number of qualified voters remains small.

**TO INTRODUCE
AN ILLUSTRATION**

EXAMPLES

thus
for example
for instance
to illustrate
namely

1. For example, suppose I ask myself, "Will socialization ever come about?"
2. For instance, sophisticates can easily ridicule popular notions of government.
3. Namely, those who complain the loudest are often themselves the most guilty.

**TO ADD A
THOUGHT**

EXAMPLE

second
in the second place
next
likewise
moreover
again
in addition
finally
similarly
further
in fact
and

1. Similarly, the German university can profit by adopting the American practice of letting the student do most of the talking.
 2. Second, human happiness feeds itself on a multitude of minor illusions.
 3. Then again we work and strive because of the illusions connected with fame.
 4. Moreover, the child assumes an attitude that he knows is false.
 5. Effective leaders are effective communicators. And leadership positions demand higher salaries.
-

**TO MAKE A
QUALIFICATION
OR CONTRAST****EXAMPLES**

on the other hand
nevertheless
still
on the contrary
by contrast
however
but
or
nor

1. He was not, however, completely qualified for the task he had undertaken.
2. The Dobu, by contrast, are portrayed as virtually a society of paranoids.
3. Nevertheless, these theories do contain real insights into the nature of value judgments.
4. On the contrary, one should not blindly assume that our birthrate will continue to climb.

PARAGRAPHS FOR ANALYSIS:

(1) The main characteristic of the little farm we had walked over was disorder. (2) The winding, narrow road was bumpy and rough, and weeds grew rank and tall on each side of it. (3) Near the barn stood a battered, unpainted tractor, plow, and rake. (4) On the other side of the road, weeds sapping essential minerals from the soil grew among the small, withered cotton plants. (5) The house needed paint and repairs. (6) The steps and porch were rickety, and several of their boards were broken. (7) The fence around the pasture was badly in need of repairs. (8) The broken window panes in the house had pieces of tin and boards over them. (9) On one side of the road lay bundles of grain decaying from long exposure to wind, rain, and sunshine. (10) The wire was broken in many places, and the wooden posts—rotted at the ground—were supported by the rusty wire. (11) The yard was littered with rubbish—tin cans, broken bottles, and paper. (12) The barn lacked paint; its roof sagged and some shingles needed to be replaced. (13) In the pasture, diseased with weeds and underbrush, grazed thin, bony cattle, revealing their need for more and better food and shelter.

The above paragraph contains excellent concrete details, but it lacks organization of those details. The description of the disorder is presented to the reader at random; the writer has not taken a fixed position from which to describe the disorder of the farm. Instead, his description itself is disorganized. An analysis of the paragraph reveals the basic problems with the order of details presented. First, the author describes the weeds on either side of the road. The third sentence describes the barn. The fourth returns to the description of the road. The fifth and sixth sentences jump to the house, and the seventh depicts the pasture. The eighth returns to the house, and the ninth jumps back to the road. The tenth describes the fence around the pasture; the eleventh depicts the yard around the house; the twelfth elaborates on the barn; and the thirteenth returns to the

pasture where the cattle graze. If the writer rearranged the sentences, presenting the farm objects as one would see them from a fixed position on the road, the paragraph would be better organized.

The following revision depicts the scene through spatial ordering from a fixed vantage point:

(1) The main characteristic of the little farm we had walked over was disorder. (2) The winding, narrow road was bumpy and rough, and weeds grew rank and tall on each side of it. (3) On the other side of the road lay bundles of grain decaying from long exposure to wind, rain, and sunshine. (4) On the other side of the road, among cotton plants, weeds sapped soil. (5) The fence around the pasture was badly in need of repairs. (6) The wire was broken in many places, and the wooden posts—rotted at the ground—were supported by the rusty wire. (7) In the pasture, diseased with weeds and underbrush, grazed thin, bony cattle, revealing their need for more and better food and shelter. (8) Near the barn stood a battered, unpainted tractor, plow, and rake. (9) The barn itself lacked paint; its roof sagged and some shingles needed to be replaced. (10) The house, too, needed repairs. (11) The steps and porch were rickety, and several of their boards were broken. (12) A screen hung on one hinge. (13) The broken window panes were mended with tin and boards. (14) The yard was littered with rubbish—tin cans, broken bottles, and paper.

The paragraph now depicts the farmstead in a logical spatial order; it takes the reader from the road to either side of the road. The writer then describes the pasture, the barn within the pasture, the house next to the barn, and the yard surrounding the house, creating a view from the fixed vantage point of the road. Also, the writer uses clear directional markers to connect each new section of the description to the previous one (note the words in bold print: each side, on the other side, on the other side, around the pasture, in the pasture, near the barn, and the barn itself).

ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES AND EXERCISES
(WITH ANSWER KEY)

The following paragraph has been analyzed using the method indicated above.

1. The intellectual life of the nineteenth century was more complex than that of any previous age.
2. This complexity was due to several causes.
 3. First, the area concerned was larger than ever before; America and Russia made important contributions, and Europe became more aware than formerly of Indian philosophies, both ancient and modern.
 3. Second, science which had been a chief source of novelty since the seventeenth century, made new conquests, especially in geology, biology, and organic chemistry.
 3. Third, machine production profoundly altered the social structure, and gave men anew conception of their powers in relation to the physical environment.
 3. Fourth, a profound revolt, both philosophical and political, against traditional systems in thought, in many beliefs and institutions that had hitherto been regarded as unassailable.
4. This revolt had two very different forms, one romantic, the other rationalistic.
 5. (I am using these words in a liberal sense.)
 - 6.
 5. The romantic revolt passes from Bryon, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche to Mussolini and Hitler; the rationalistic revolt begins with the French philosophers of the Revolution, passes on, somewhat softened, to the philosophical radicals in England, then acquires a deeper form in Marx and Issues in Soviet Russia.

____ Bertrand Russell

A HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

BURGER VILLAGE – LEVELING ASSIGNMENT

This exercise will help you practice ordering and layering major reasons that support a thesis (or topic) sentence and the details that support the major reasons.

Directions: The scrambled list below contains both major reasons and supporting details for those reasons. First, circle the pointer in the thesis; next, identify the major reasons; finally, list the supporting details for each reason.

Thesis: Eating at Burger Village offers several advantages. (level 1)

- A. Your order is ready no more than three minutes or so after placing it.
- B. A hostess is present in the dining room to help you with the children.
- C. The workers wear clean uniforms, and their hands are clean.
- D. There are French fries in two sizes.
- E. The hostess hand out moistened cloths to wash the children after they eat.
- F. The menu lists a variety of items.
- G. You do not have to spend more than a couple of minutes in the waiting line, which moves quickly.
- H. You can order several sizes and types of hamburgers, a fish sandwich with or without cheese, or a ham and cheese sandwich.
- I. The hostess helps you take off the children's coats and brings a highchair for the baby.
- J. The place is clean.
- K. You can choose from several flavors of milk shakes and several kinds of soft drinks, as well as coffee or hot chocolate.
- L. A person is constantly sweeping the floor, collecting trays, and wiping off tables.
- M. The kitchen area is all clean and polished stainless steel.
- N. The service is fast and convenient.
- O. The hostess gives the children small cups to drink from and hats to keep them entertained.
- P. Your order comes packaged in a bag or box that you can carry out with you..

Answer Guide:

1. Eating at Burger Village offers several advantages.
 2. A hostess is present in the dining room to help you with the children.
 3. The hostess helps you take off the children's coats and brings a highchair for the baby.
 3. The hostess gives the children small cups to drink from and hats to keep them entertained.
 3. The hostess hand out moistened cloths to wash the children after they eat.
 2. The menu lists a variety of items.
 3. You can order several sizes and types of hamburgers, a fish sandwich with or without cheese, or a ham and cheese sandwich.
 3. There are French fries in two sizes.
 3. You can choose from several flavors of milk shakes and several kinds of soft drinks, as well as coffee or hot chocolate.
 2. The service is fast and convenient.
 3. You do not have to spend more than a couple of minutes in the waiting line, which moves quickly.
 3. Your order is ready no more than three minutes or so after placing it.
 3. Your order comes packaged in a bag or box that you can carry out with you.
 2. The place is clean.
 3. The workers wear clean uniforms, and their hands are clean.
 3. A person is constantly sweeping the floor, collecting trays, and wiping off tables.
 3. The kitchen area is all clean and polished stainless steel.