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Breaking the Formula: How Paragraph Rules Can Silence Student Voices

Writing is often taught through a set of rules that are meant to help students organize their thoughts clearly. One of the most common of these rules is the idea of paragraph structure, the belief that a good essay must follow a specific pattern with an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion. In the context of writing instruction, paragraph structure has become a construct, a rule that feels natural and necessary but is a human-made guideline.¹ This construct has been repeated so often that it feels like the only correct way to write. However, following this strict pattern can sometimes make students feel trapped instead of supported. For me, paragraph structure has always been something I overthink. When I write, I feel pressure to fit all my ideas perfectly into the introduction, make sure each paragraph has exactly one topic, and end with a conclusion that repeats everything. This makes writing feel like solving a formula instead of expressing what I truly want to say. At the same time, I often struggle with vocabulary, trying to sound “academic” or “correct” instead of natural. These two pressures, structure and word choice, sometimes make me feel like my real voice disappears in English. While the traditional paragraph structure helps organize writing, it should be revised to give writers more flexibility to express their ideas naturally and confidently.

¹ AI assistance used to clarify phrasing and sentence flow.

The traditional paragraph structure exists because it helps writers organize their thoughts and makes it easier for readers to follow an argument.² When students first begin learning how to write, they often struggle to arrange their ideas clearly and logically. Laurie Endicott Thomas explains that “a good writer writes good sentences and puts them in a meaningful order, so that the writer’s ideas flow smoothly from the page into the reader’s mind” (56). This shows that paragraph structure is not only about having an introduction, body, and conclusion, but about creating logical order and flow between ideas. Teachers often emphasize structure because it gives students a clear formula to follow, helping them understand how to guide the reader from one idea to the next. In this way, paragraph structure is a useful foundation. It teaches clarity, coherence, and organization. These are skills that every writer needs to communicate effectively. However, once students begin to understand how ideas connect, the same rule that once helped them can start to feel limiting.

Although paragraph structure is meant to make writing easier, it can also become a source of stress and self-doubt. In many classrooms, students are taught that every essay must have a perfect introduction, one paragraph per idea, and a conclusion that restates everything. These expectations make writing feel like a checklist instead of a creative process. The University Writing Center at the University of Central Florida explains that coherence between paragraphs depends on how ideas connect, not on following a fixed formula. This shows that good writing is more about the relationships between ideas than about the number of sentences or where they appear. However, students are rarely taught this flexibility. Many students who are new to academic writing, especially those still learning English, feel pressured to fit into one “correct” format. For example, some students who think creatively or write in a more narrative way are told their writing is “off topic” or “unorganized,” even when their ideas are clear. Others who come

² AI assistance used to refine overall paragraph organization and transition flow.

from cultures with different writing traditions may struggle because their natural style does not match what teachers expect in English essays. When I write, I often worry that my paragraphs are too short or that my ideas are in the wrong place. I also spend a lot of time changing my vocabulary to sound more “academic,” which makes me feel like I am hiding my real thoughts. Writing in my second language sometimes makes me feel like people cannot see how smart I am in Spanish. The rules about structure and word choice can make students feel like their ideas are not enough, even when they know what they want to say. Some educators argue that strict paragraph structure is necessary for maintaining grading consistency and clarity, but this approach often ignores how rigidity can silence multilingual voices and limit creativity.³ For many students like me, strict writing rules silence our authentic voices instead of helping us find them.

Instead of abolishing paragraph structure completely, it should be revised to focus more on clarity and expression than on strict rules. In *The Elements of Style*, William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White assert, “Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts” (Strunk & White). This advice shows that good writing is not about following a perfect format but about communicating ideas clearly and effectively. Teachers should continue teaching paragraph structure as a helpful guide, but they should also encourage students to break away from it when needed. For example, a paragraph might be shorter if the idea is powerful on its own, or it might include more than one idea if the thoughts are deeply connected. What matters most is that the ideas make sense together and lead the reader smoothly through the text. Allowing flexibility gives writers more space to show their creativity, confidence, and individuality. It also helps multilingual writers express themselves

³ AI assistance used to refine sentence structure and add counterargument.

without worrying about sounding “wrong.” By revising the construct of paragraph structure, writing instruction can move away from perfection and toward communication that truly represents the writer’s voice.⁴

Paragraph structure has always been seen as a rule that guarantees good writing, but sometimes the rules that are meant to help us end up holding us back. Learning how to organize ideas is important, but writing should not feel like filling out a formula. When writers, especially multilingual ones, feel pressured to sound a certain way or fit ideas into specific boxes, their creativity and confidence begin to fade. Writing should be about sharing meaning, not about perfection.⁵ By revising the traditional construct of paragraph structure to allow more flexibility, teachers can help students write with clarity and authenticity at the same time. Rules should serve writers, not silence them. When students are given the freedom to organize their thoughts in a way that feels natural, their true voice, no matter what language it comes from, can finally be heard.

⁴ AI assistance used to improve transitions and conclusion coherence.

⁵ AI assistance used to strengthen the tone and clarity of the conclusion.

Works Cited

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