



Rearrange Within Paragraphs

How It Works

Ask students to highlight the single sentence of each paragraph that best articulates the paragraph's points. Sometimes students will highlight the first sentence, demonstrating that the paragraph begins with a strong statement of purpose, as it generally should. But more often, students will highlight a mid-paragraph or an end-of-paragraph sentence.

Once students identify the strongest sentence, they can move it to the topic sentence position. Presuming that the rest of each paragraph is effective as it is, that's a fine approach. But often, once students move those strong sentences to the topic sentence position, they realize that some of the other sentences aren't necessary. The movement of the strong sentence, therefore, offers students the opportunity to build on each paragraph's strongest idea with more rewriting.

A Student Example

Here is a first draft paragraph wherein a student explores what he means to say as he writes his psychology paper about depression in adolescents:

“Contemporary researchers have a number of different views on what causes higher rates of depression in adolescents. Petersen et al (1993) describe changes in the prefrontal cortex that can lead to moodiness and, potentially, depression. But other researchers, including Thapar (2012) and Hauenstein (2003) suggest a combination of neurological and psychosocial factors that may contribute to teenagers' higher instance of depression. It is also possible that depression is diagnosed more frequently in teenagers because they are in situations (schools) where teachers and guidance counselors see them regularly and are invested in their well-being; adolescents' depression is therefore more likely to be noticed and handled whereas adults may hide it better or have fewer people paying attention to changes in their behavior. It is likely that a combination of factors leads to the higher rates of depression in adolescents. The ongoing development of the prefrontal cortex, changes in teenagers' social situations, their growing sense of self and independence, and, possibly, the microscope under which teenagers live may all contribute to higher rates of diagnosed depression in adolescence.”



The last sentence has the clearest statement of purpose and direction. It says much more than the paragraph's first sentence, which feels like a typical "warm up." This paragraph demonstrates the student's thinking process, but readers will benefit more from the conclusion of his thoughts than from a roadmap of their development.

If the student highlights the last sentence and moves it to the first spot, he'll immediately see organizational improvements in the paragraph.

Then encourage him to read the paragraph again, looking for unnecessary information or space for expansion. This is the resulting paragraph, with the two new sentences in red:

"The ongoing development of the pre-frontal cortex, changes in teenagers' social situations, their growing sense of self and independence, and, possibly, the microscope under which teenagers live may all contribute to higher rates of diagnosed depression in adolescence. ~~Contemporary researchers have a number of different views on what causes higher rates of depression in adolescents.~~ Petersen et al (1993) describe changes in the prefrontal cortex that can lead to moodiness and, potentially, depression. But other researchers, including Thapar (2012) and Hauenstein (2003) suggest a combination of neurological and psychosocial factors that may contribute to teenagers' higher instance of depression. **In particular, as adolescents begin to see themselves as separate from their parents, they question their identities and begin to consider whether and in which ways they want to mirror or break from their parents' values.** It is also possible that depression is diagnosed more frequently in teenagers because they are in situations (schools) where teachers and guidance counselors see them regularly and are invested in their well-being; adolescents' depression is therefore more likely to be noticed and handled whereas adults may hide it better or have fewer people paying attention to changes in their behavior. **While separating each of these factors from the others is essentially impossible, considering all of them in conjunction can lead to a greater understanding of the unique vulnerabilities of this developmental stage.** ~~It is likely that a combination of factors leads to the higher rates of depression in adolescents."~~



Why It Works

It should come as no surprise that students' thinking becomes stronger as they spend time writing about an issue, but the order in which their brains develop ideas need not be the order in which those ideas are presented to readers.

The reorganization of the paragraph led to significant content development as well, through a combination of deletion and addition. But the foundational step that clarified the student's thinking about his work was the first, organizational, step. Help students see that they can reverse-engineer the thinking process, first enacting it and then rearranging it to leave room for even more thinking and, ultimately, stronger content.