

TEACHING PARAGRAPHS

BY LOUIS J. SIRICO, JR.

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Editor's Note: *In this issue of Perspectives, we introduce a new column: Teachable Moments for Teachers. It is designed to give teachers an opportunity to describe a special moment of epiphany that changed their approach to presenting a particular topic to their students. This column is a companion to our existing Teachable Moments column edited by Barbara Bintliff, which has focused on providing quick and accessible answers to questions frequently asked by students and other researchers. To distinguish the two, the existing column has been renamed Teachable Moments for Students.*

In this first installment of Teachable Moments for Teachers, Professor Sirico tells how he first realized what he was up against—and therefore what he needed to change—when teaching about paragraphs. Readers are invited to submit their own “teachable moments for teachers” to Louis J. Sirico, Jr., Villanova University School of Law, 299 N. Spring Mill Road, Villanova, PA 19085-1682, phone: (610) 519-7071, fax: (610) 519-6282, e-mail: sirico@law.vill.edu.

We sometimes talk about teachable moments: times when students and lawyers are particularly open to learning. However, teachers also have teachable moments when a lightbulb turns on and they learn how to teach a lesson more effectively. Here is an example.

I always found it a fairly simple matter to teach about paragraphs. A paragraph is a unit of discourse, just as a sentence is. The typical paragraph has two components. The first component consists of one or more topic sentences that state the point of the paragraph. The second component discusses this point. In some paragraphs, the point is only implicit (as in this paragraph) or unnecessary (for example, in a paragraph of narrative, like most of the following paragraphs).¹

When I would teach about paragraphs, students would seem to accept the lesson easily. However, when I would read the homework that they later completed, I would be surprised at how many students seemed to ignore what I had taught them.

When I asked students why they wrote the paragraphs the way they did, I usually heard one of two answers. Some students told me that they wrote the paragraphs in a way that permitted their ideas to flow. Others told me that they were following the format of the five-sentence paragraph—a topic sentence, three discussion sentences, and a concluding sentence.

The students' explanation sparked my teachable moment. I realized that I was competing with formidable opponents, the students' grade-school and middle-school teachers. Some of their teachers taught a very unstructured approach to writing that focused upon “flow,” while others taught a rigid, formulaic approach that celebrated devices like the five-sentence paragraph.

Once I realized that I was working against powerful historical forces, I revised my teaching method. I began to ask students what their previous teachers had preached. I then explained why I took a different, middle-way approach and encouraged them to try it. By confronting the lessons of the past, I increased my success in teaching my students a new lesson.

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¹ For a fuller explanation of what I teach about paragraphs, see Nancy L. Schultz & Louis J. Sirico, Jr., *Legal Writing and Other Lawyering Skills* 115–21 (3d ed. 1998); Louis J. Sirico, Jr. & Nancy L. Schultz, *Persuasive Writing for Lawyers and the Legal Profession* 17–23 (1995); Joseph M. Williams, *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace* 92–108 (1990).