

PARAGRAPH DEVELOPMENT WITH PIE (PODCAST 17 TRANSCRIPT)

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Greetings everyone. This is Kurtis Clements with another effective writing podcast. In this episode, I am going to talk about developing body paragraphs with a technique called PIE.

In my experience, writers often have one of two problem areas related to paragraph development: not enough development or not enough of the right kind of development. What I mean by the latter is the idea that just because a paragraph contains a lot of content does not necessarily mean that content is doing the best job developing the idea of the paragraph.

One good way to go about developing paragraphs is to use the PIE method, which is an approach that has been around in some form or another I imagine since the time of Aristotle. So for a long time. PIE is an acronym that stands for develop a limited point (that's the P) in a paragraph; illustrate (that's the I) the point with supporting information; the E stands for explain how the evidence supports the point of the paragraph and relates to the thesis of the essay.

Restated:

P = Point

I = Illustrate

E = Explain

Paragraphs need to make clear and focused points. I mean, that's the point of a paragraph right? To make a point. Whether or not you use a topic sentence at the start of the paragraph does not matter, for the paragraph still needs to make a point.

In order to make a point, you have to illustrate the point by using evidence—details, facts, statistics, testimony, examples, and the like. Supporting information helps readers understand the point you are trying to make in a paragraph.

Evidence alone will not help you develop the point. What every paragraph needs is elaboration where you explain the relevance of the information presented as it relates to the point of the paragraph as well as the essay as a whole. As the writer, you need to offer thoughtful commentary of the supporting details you use to illustrate the point. This last part is critical to the success of a paragraph, for its this kind of commentary where the writer offers analysis and interpretation of the content as it relates to their point. It's also how the writer connects the point of the paragraph to the larger point of the essay.

I am going to read a sample paragraph and as I do, listen for the elements of PIE that may be missing:

The United States Postal Service has a proud history. Benjamin Franklin was named Postmaster



General in 1775 even before The Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776

(USPS, 2007). Through the evolution of the service, the mission of the USPS has remained the same: “provide universal service to all Americans. From the bottom of the Grand Canyon to the furthestmost point in Alaska, mail gets through” (USPS, 2010,para. 4). The United States Postal Service provides 596,000 jobs and has donated over\$70 million to breast cancer research (USPS, 2010).

What did you hear? Or, should I ask, what did you not hear? The paragraph starts out with a clear focus—the proud history of the postal service—and that point is illustrated with some good examples. But what’s it all add up to? Is there any explanation that discusses how the information relates to the point of the paragraph and to the larger point of the essay? Do you have any sense of what this paragraph as a whole is trying to support? Do you sense a connectedness to a thesis? I don’t think so. I see this paragraph as just floating in the sea.

This is how PIE can help you. If you think about your paragraphs as needing those three parts—Point, Illustration, and Explanation—then you are more likely to notice that what is lacking in the paragraph I read is explanation, language that helps readers understand the relevance of the information as it relates to the point of the paragraph and to the larger point, the thesis, of the essay. Listen to the revised version of the paragraph:

The United States Postal Service has a proud history. Benjamin Franklin was named Postmaster General in 1775 even before The Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776 (USPS, 2007). Through the evolution of the service, the mission of the USPS has remained the same: “provide universal service to all Americans. From the bottom of the Grand Canyon to the furthestmost point in Alaska, mail gets through” (USPS, 2010,para. 4). In addition to those accomplishments, the USPS also provides nearly 600,000 jobs and has donated over \$70 million to breast cancer research through its breast cancer awareness stamps (USPS, 2010). The United States Postal Service has been an important institution and provided valuable services for over two hundred and thirty years—all at no cost to U.S. taxpayers. While the post office needs to redefine how it conducts business in the electronic age, eliminating the service is not the answer. In fact, there is no reason the postal service cannot, once again, change with the times and continue to add to its rich history and accomplishments.

What do you think? Better? Did it seem as if the paragraph was trying to develop a point and that point was connected to a bigger idea? Was there enough explanation—that is, was there enough commentary on the information presented so that you understand better the point of the paragraph as well as how the paragraph relates to the thesis? When you offer explanation, you are, in a sense, taking a step back and examining-analyzing—the information presented and making sure readers understand how the information relates to the point of the paragraph and to the larger point of the essay. The revision offers language such as the “in addition to those accomplishments” and “also” in the sentence “In addition to those accomplishments, the USPS also provides nearly 600,000 jobs and has donated over 70 million dollars to breast cancer research” thereby creating the sense that the USPS already has many accomplishments and on top of those, the postal service also has other accomplishments. The language connects the new piece of information to other pieces of information which are all connected to the idea of proud accomplishments.



The revision also includes three full sentences of explanation after the last piece of information—all of which work to connect that information to the point of the paragraph and to what the essay as a whole is trying to communicate. Listen:

The first version of the paragraph stops after the sentence “The United States Postal Service provides nearly 600,000 jobs and has donated over \$70 million to breast cancer research.” That’s it—a paragraph floating in an ocean, insignificant and hardly noticed. But listen to what happens when the writer explains the importance of the information:

In addition to those accomplishments, the United States Postal Service also provides nearly 600,000 jobs and has donated over \$70 million to breast cancer research through its breast cancer awareness stamps (USPS, 2010). The United States Postal Service has been an important institution and provided valuable services for over two hundred and thirty years—all at no cost to U.S. taxpayers. While the post office needs to redefine how it conducts business in the electronic age, eliminating the service is not the answer. In fact, there is no reason the postal service cannot, once again, change with the times and continue to add to its rich history and accomplishments.

Do hear the difference? Do you understand the importance not just making a point and illustrating a point but also—perhaps most importantly—explaining the importance of that information through commentary and analysis? The revised paragraph, which is only three sentences and maybe five words longer than the original is better by leaps and bounds.

When you are working on an essay and developing body paragraphs, keep PIE in mind—the idea that body paragraphs need to make a point, information presented needs to illustrate that point, and commentary and analysis is essential to explain the significance of the point. Indeed, PIE is an effective method for developing healthy paragraphs.

Thanks for listening, everyone. Happy writing

