Writing Applications: Paragraph Development

1. Read the attached document from George Mason University entitled “Paragraph Development.”

2. If you have any questions, now is a good time to STOP and meet with a tutor or an instructor to discuss the American style of paragraph development, downshifting, or forms of evidence. If you have no questions, or once you have met with a tutor or instructor, you may move on to item three.

3. For the following three broad statements, please downshift as shown in the reading. Label the broad statement (10) and, as each sentence becomes more specific, label with a smaller number. For each, you must have one point labeled (10), two labeled (9) and at least one (8) and (7) for each (9). Do all work on a separate sheet.
   
   a. Living at Casa Bonita Apartments is frustrating.
   b. The campus writing center offers a variety of useful services.
   c. Although cell phones have become a necessity, they are also a distraction.

4. When you have finished, please review your answers with a tutor or instructor. Ask that person the following questions and write down the answers you are given.
   
   a. Have I done the assignment correctly? ____________________________
   
   b. Why is it important to downshift when I am developing body paragraphs?
      ____________________________
      ____________________________
      ____________________________
   
   c. Do I need to downshift with all paragraphs I write? Do you have examples of times when I don’t need to downshift?
      ____________________________
      ____________________________
      ____________________________
      ____________________________
   
   d. What constitutes good evidence?
      ____________________________
      ____________________________
      ____________________________
      ____________________________
   
   e. Is there bad evidence? If so, what constitutes bad evidence?
      ____________________________
      ____________________________
      ____________________________
   
   f. Is there anything else I should know about paragraph development and/or downshifting when I write?
      ____________________________
      ____________________________
      ____________________________

(continued on reverse)
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5. Have the person with whom you worked sign and date below and return this activity to your instructor.

Tutor/instructor name

Date

DLA # 50.C.15/ SLO: Eng 50, 1 A/B
Development  A well written paragraph in the academic style must have two components:

1. a main idea and
2. support.

In general, the main idea comes first and is followed by sentences that explain it by presenting supporting ideas and concrete details.

Within the American style of academic writing, it is more common to place the main idea at the beginning of the paragraph.

However, it is possible to put the supporting material first and then end with the main idea.

A tool to help you write in this pattern of main idea - support is downshifting.

Downshifting  Downshifting means developing a paragraph from a high level of generality down to lower levels.

The writer makes a rather broad statement, or assertion, in the first sentence, and in the following sentences enriches and expands that statement by giving more specific and concrete details.

The process is like dividing a topic into smaller and smaller pieces. For example, if we label a sentence at the highest level of generality as 10, here is how a writer might develop a paragraph based on a general idea by moving to lower levels of generality.*

10. There are signs that women are finding their way into the world of computing, despite its male bias.

9. A large proportion of the current enrollment in college computing classes is female.

8. For example, at Mount Holyoke, a women's college, 50 percent of this year's graduates have used computers in their courses---up from 15 percent seven years ago.

7. According to John Durso, professor of computer studies, the number of terminals available to Mount Holyoke students has increased from one to 40 over the same period.

7. "The basic course in computing, taught twice a year, has quadrupled in enrollment from 30 students seven years ago to 120 today."

* The two sentences marked 7 are at the same level of generality.

Downshifting is a good cure for paragraphs made up of several sentences all on the same level of generality. Here is an example of that kind of problem.

The 1980s may be remembered as the era when millions of Americans became obsessed with fitness. For most people, this was the decade in which they thought continually about how their bodies functioned. A preoccupation with one's body was a sign of the times. It was very fashionable to talk about how important it is to be fit.

This paragraph doesn't go anywhere; it merely repeats the same generality four different ways, and that's not paragraph development. If, however, the writer starts with the main idea and develops it by downshifting to lower levels of generality and adding specific details, it can become interesting.

10. The 1980s may be remembered as the era when millions of Americans became obsessed with fitness.
9. Ambitious young people took up aerobics and weight lifting as a flat belly and sloping shoulders became assets.
9. Others took up running, as comparing race times became common talk on dinner dates.
8. Even the dinners themselves were affected.
   7. Women and men alike no longer ordered huge steak and potato meals at restaurants,
   7. instead they ordered pasta with low-fat sauce and salads with no dressing.
   7. People also began ordering Perrier instead of white wine, and really hard drinks like martinis brought raised eyebrows from one's date.
   7. Even more frowned upon was lighting up a cigarette after dinner.

This second version of the paragraph uses details to SHOW the reader the main idea. These details not only lead the reader to the same thought as the writer, but they also provide the reader with concrete images from real life experience that can make the reader feel more a part of the writer's explanations.

As you write paragraphs, think about how one sentence explains something about the one before it. You shouldn't write your paragraphs with the numbers and indentations as shown above unless you are assigned to write them this way, but THINK in this way so that each sentence in your paragraph has a clear "thought" connection to another sentence.

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