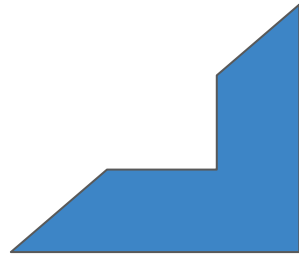


# Writing From The Sentence Up

The fun, effective way to make writers.

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# Presentation Outline

I. Rationale

10 Minutes

II. Structure

20 Minutes

III. Exercises

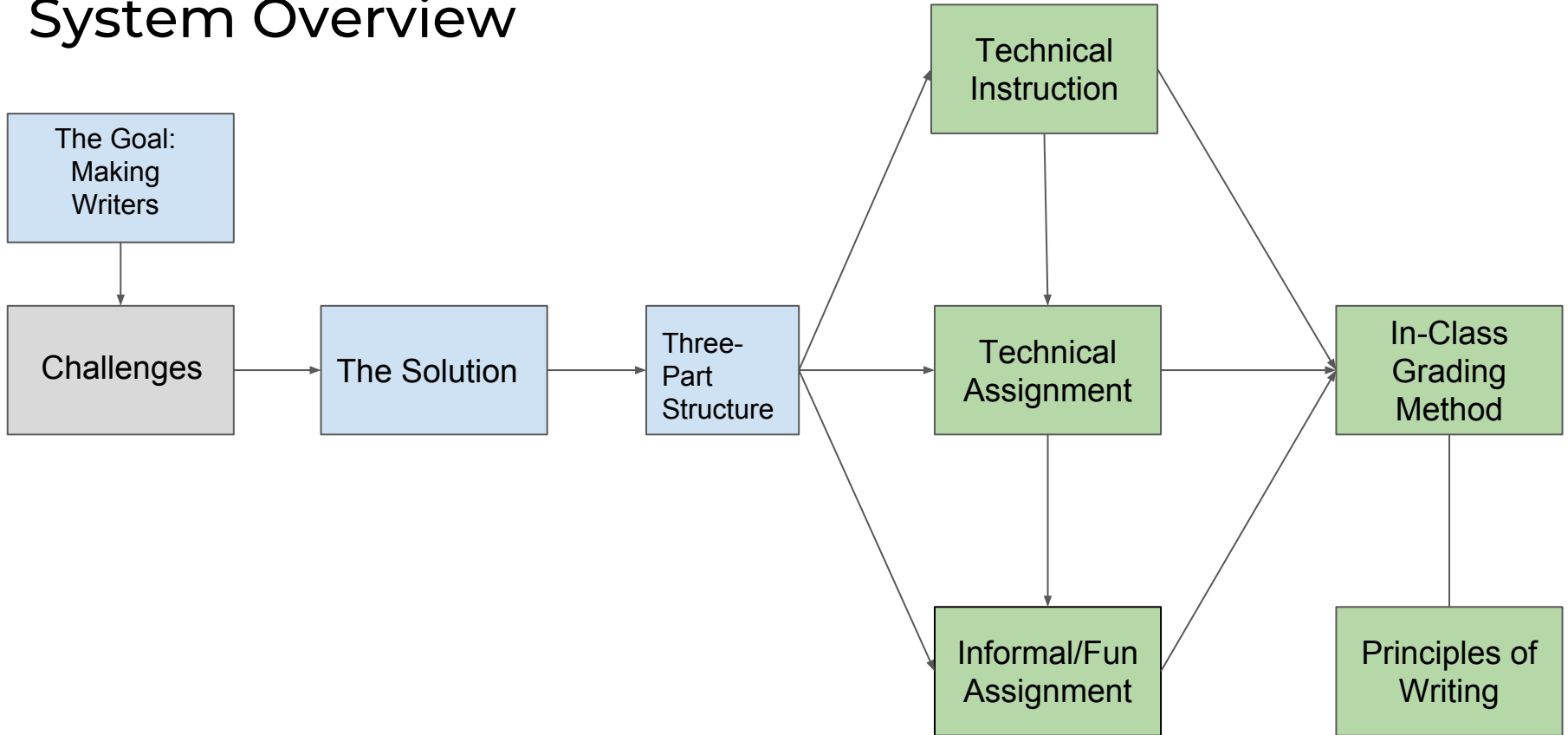
15 Minutes

IV. Q & A

# The Big Picture

- Everyone wants to be a more effective writer.
- Every teacher wants his or her students to write well.
- But can writing be taught?
- Good news! There IS a systematic and timely way to teach writing.
- This method uses the sentence and the paragraph as small arenas in which all major writing concepts are taught, practiced, and rapidly internalized.

# System Overview



# The Goal: Making Writers

- Writers, like artists, are driven to express or represent well what they see.
- Therefore, teaching writing means *igniting interest* in seeing and in effectively expressing what is seen.
- Writers must...
  - be observers and ponderers.
  - be lovers of beauty, truth, and the magic of words.
  - learn to think in an orderly way.
  - be equipped with a specific set of tools.
  - be self-critical, and have an appetite for growth.

# Challenges

Anyone with an appetite for writing can greatly improve at it, but there are obstacles to such growth:

- Writing isn't grammar, but the two are often confused.
- Writing instruction should consist largely of concrete skills and strategies for seeing and generating good content— “DOs” — not just lists of things to avoid.
- Teaching writing means teaching 1) ways or habits of looking at reality, and, 2) teaching specific skills that help en flesh what the mind sees; but classroom learning affords little time for these.
- Writers need targeted feedback, but they vary greatly in their needs, and time is short.

# The Solution (1)

We need a method that...

- teaches writing as a positive craft, a set of skills and habits.
- tethers style to substance, so that writing stays in contact with reality.
- teaches good habits of observation.
- conveys and ignites a passion for expressing things well.
- distinguishes between the craft of writing and mere mechanics.
- teaches the whole class, yet is highly “personalizable.”
- satisfies the above conditions, and yet fits within an existing curriculum and into a packed schedule.



# The Solution (2)

We can accomplish all of these goals by teaching writing “from the sentence up.” Treat sentences and paragraphs as small arenas for learning all major rhetorical and structural concepts.

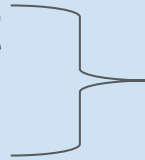
- I use small, focused lessons (technical instruction) to teach writing concepts.
- I give small, focussed assignments (technical assignments) — usually sentences and paragraphs — to drill these concepts.
- I grade these out loud, using the quick grading method.
- I follow up with a fun, informal assignment that allows creative freedom, but which further reinforces the concept (as well as previous concepts, cumulatively.)
- I grade these out loud, using the quick grading method.
- I bring in the next concept. Rinse. Repeat.



# Three-Part Structure

I employ a cumulative strategy that moves conceptually from simple to complex over the course of the year. It also teaches the “deep logic” of writing.

1. Technical Instruction
2. Technical Assignment
3. Informal Assignment

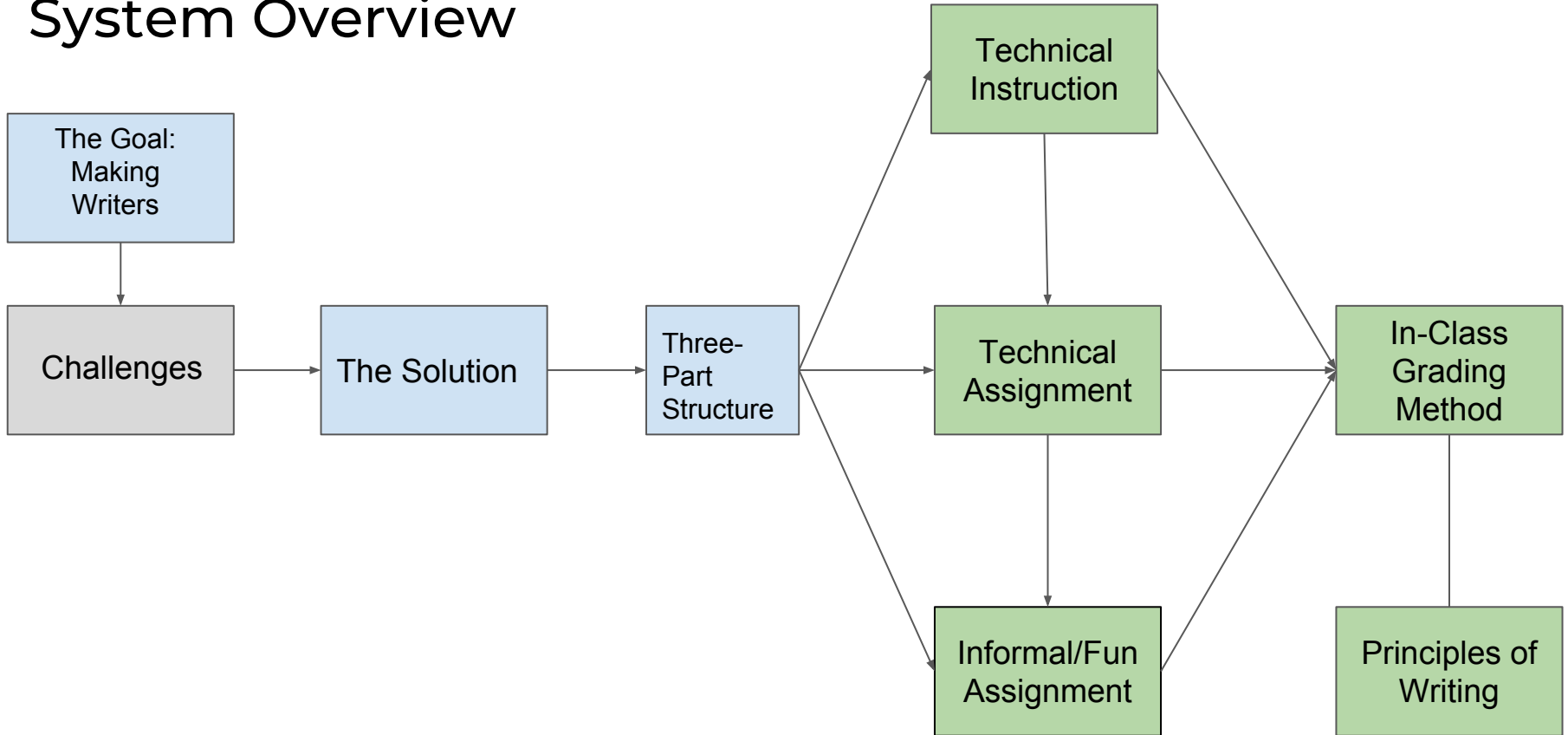


Quick Grading System



Principles of Writing

# System Overview



# Technical Instruction (Overview)

- sentence building & alternative sentences
- sentence forms (cumulative, balanced, and periodic sentences)
- rhetorical forms (simile, metaphor, personification, alliteration, etc.)
- parallelism (balance, contrast, serial syntax, etc.)
- seeing and thinking like a writer (the felt idea, the idea of order, the audience)
- seeing and using order (sensory, spatial, topical)
- the reason and rhythm of a paragraph/paragraph study
- the natural paragraph
- narrative structure (how to write an awesome story)
- the five paragraph essay: from the bottom up
- the five paragraph essay: from the top down
- the five paragraph essay: transitions, bells, and whistles
- seeing the whole picture



# Technical Assignment (Overview)

## The Reason for the Paragraph 4/18

- Like a sentence, a paragraph is organized around a complete thought, or a central point, but this thought is made of whole sentences.
- Paragraphs are going somewhere, so they must have a beginning, a middle, and an end.
- Every sentence in a good paragraph has a reason for its presence and its placement.
- Whether you're writing a story, a description, or an argument, each sentence is a step in a particular direction.
- Paragraphs differ a little depending on the paragraph's job within the work.

## Natural Paragraphs 4/19

- write a paragraph about boy riding his bike down a huge hill.
  - ◆ The first sentence must describe the boy at the top of the hill and the moment he starts down.
  - ◆ The second, third, and fourth sentences must each describe a moment or event that takes place as he goes down the hill. Each of these sentences should do a different job, and one sentence should lead to another.
  - ◆ The fifth sentence must describe the boy's arrival at the bottom of the hill, and how it all ends up (you decide!)
- Your first sentence must be a cumulative (right or left-branching)
- You must use at least one simile, and engage at least two senses.

# Informal/Fun Assignment (Overview)

1. Grade remaining paragraphs (if any)
  - a. Put a timer on it
  - b. You can afford to miss one or two (occasionally)
2. Give Fun Assignment (see example)

## Survival Story 4/26

- Prompt: You're with your family in a well-supplied mountain cabin when a worldwide disaster strikes. You'll have to cross a wide valley to reach the safe zone...but there are deadly obstacles.
- write a 4-6 paragraph story about it
- Every paragraph must begin, illustrate, and complete a particular episode or complex event, and one paragraph should set up the next.
- Use:
  - ◆ 2+ similes
  - ◆ 1 + metaphor
  - ◆ 1 alliteration
  - ◆ 1 left-branching cumulative sentence
  - ◆ 1 balanced sentence with contrast

# In-Class Grading System

I use a quick grading system that works so well, it ought to be illegal.

- During grading sessions, each student being graded reads his assignment *out loud* from his desk.
- I give each reader a red pencil.
- The reader has the floor completely; other students must listen.
- I ALWAYS give one positive critique. **+ The simile worked well because children arguing about a football call really do look like gulls squawking at each other.**
- I ALWAYS give one negative critique (NEVER more than one). **- The description jumped around too much; you went from the sky, to the men in the foreground, then the mountains. Pick a logical order, then follow it.**
- THE RESULT → 1) Students look forward to a regular opportunity to showcase their work, and 2) they actually improve – noticeably, tangibly – at a rapid pace.

# In-Class Grading System (Why it works)

- The goals are clear and concrete (2+ similes and a balanced sentence, etc.)
- The goals are achievable
- Positives are not only noted, but specifically named, so they can be repeated.
- Negatives are named, but *limited*. Such criticism is much easier to take, and much easier to remember.
- Students get a chance to showcase their work.
- Students are teaching each other! This means progress occurs at a much faster rate than through isolated assignments.
- The Result → At a certain point in the year, the entire class internalizes the method itself, and starts constructively critiquing itself!

# Principles of Writing

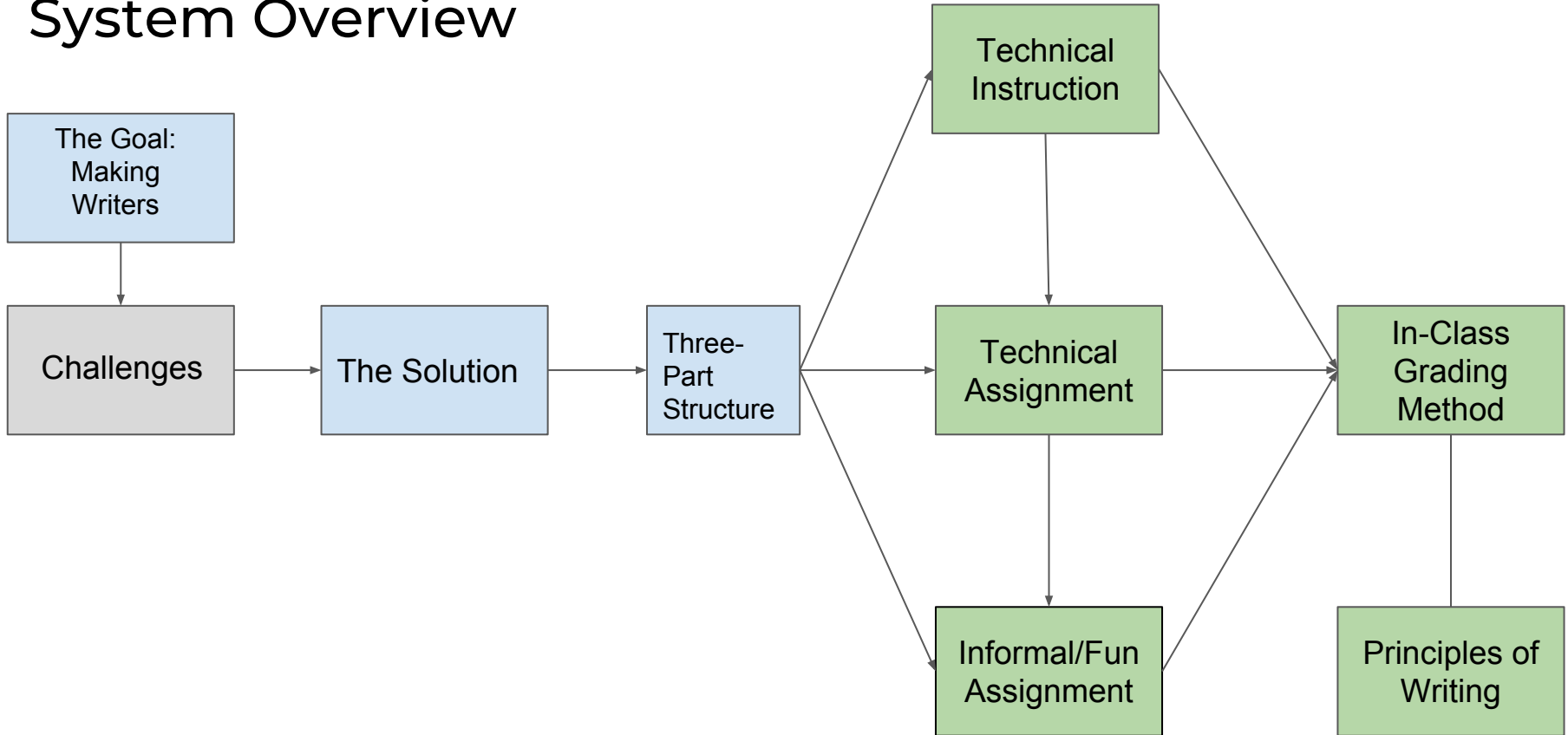
Writing has many general principles, both DOs and DON'Ts.

Rather than serve up long lists, I point these out as they arise organically.

Students simply write them down in the back of their Literature notebooks whenever they emerge.



# System Overview





# Models and Description

- In my opinion, descriptive writing provides the best baseline for learning all kinds of writing.
- I use models in many of my exercises.





# Sentence Building

Base Sentence: A deer head is on the wall.

Subject: A stag is on the wall.

Verb: A stag hangs on the wall.

Mod. Subj: A glassy-eyed stag hangs on the wall.

Mod. Verb: A glassy-eyed stag hangs mutely on the wall.

FT: A stag's head hangs mutely on the classroom wall.





# Alternative Sentences

[Spinning on its axis,] [chaotically catching and scattering the midday sun,] [uttering an argument-ending *shunk!*,] [the tomahawk met its target.]

i.) Chaotically catching and scattering the midday sun, uttering an argument-ending *shunk!*, spinning on its axis, the tomahawk met its target.

ii.) The tomahawk met its target, spinning on its axis, chaotically catching and scattering the midday sun, uttering an argument-ending *shunk!*

iii) Spinning on its axis, the tomahawk met its target, chaotically catching and scattering the midday sun, uttering an argument-ending *shunk!*

iv) Uttering an argument-ending *shunk!*, the tomahawk met its target, spinning on its axis, chaotically catching and scattering the midday sun.



# Sentence Forms: Cumulative (Loose) Sentences

Cumulative Sentences are composed of a base clause preceded or followed by modifying words or phrases.

[Base Clause] (Modifier 1) (Modifier 2) (Modifier 3)

“He wore a bird’s mask, sign that he was a wind god, a red beak surmounted by a crest, the face painted yellow, the tongue lolling out.” (Cortez and Montezuma, Collis)

(Modifier 1) (Modifier 2) (Modifier 3) (Modifier 4) [Base Clause]

Casting nervous glances over his shoulder, sweating, straining, imagining angry breaths just behind him, Inmate 7931 broke through the basement wall.



# Sentence Forms: Periodic Sentences

A periodic sentence delays its subject, predicate, or main point until the end. Often these are long sentences. They can be used to create suspense, or to build logically towards a result.

Here are two ways to structure a periodic sentence:

i) Subject→explanatory phrases or clauses→predicate.

Example: That child whose perfectly innocent eyes were framed in wild, unkempt, spaghetti-sauced curls, placed his sweet, Ragu-covered red right hand upon the just completed tax forms.

ii) Explanatory phrases or clauses→subject→predicate.

Example: In the event that the time machine *does* work, and you find yourself in the Cretaceous period, and, as you emerge from the smoking door, before you stand a Tyrannosaurus Rex, you have my permission to panic.



# Balanced Syntax/Sentences (Parallelism)

Balanced syntax places two elements in a mutual relationship. Balanced syntax is the use of balanced elements generally.

It's especially useful for showing contrast, and can be employed multiple times in the same sentence or work.

Example 1: The waters of the river were cool, and clean, and charged with the energy of youth, but an old cracked willow hung over them, cold, and gray, and dying every moment.

Example 2: “He was showing them contingencies when they showed him to the street.” (“The Rock”, Harry Chapin)



# Thinking Like A Writer

Reality: What is there?

Order: How is it put together?

Audience: To whom am I speaking?

Style/The Felt Idea: Consider the tiger







# Seeing Like A Writer

How is it ordered?

-Space: Top to bottom, Bottom to top, background to foreground, shapes in contrast, etc., (Decide on a plan that reflects the model)

-Senses: What does it smell like? Sound like? Feel like?

-Personality/Energy: How is it infused with dynamism and life? (similes, metaphors)

-Temporal: In what order should you tell it?

-Logical: This depends on that.





# Paragraph Exercises: 1 — Paragraph Study

1 { “All of the hot dog stands were boarded up with strips of golden planking, sealing in all the mustard, onion, meat odors of the long, joyful summer.

Notice that the paragraph has a beginning (1), middle (2), and end (3)

2 { It was like nailing summer in a series of coffins.  
One by one, the places slammed their covers down, padlocked their doors, and the wind came and touched the sand, blowing away all of the million footprints of July and August.

Paragraphs, like sentences, express a complete thought, or central idea.

3 { It got so that now, in September, there was nothing but the mark of my rubber tennis shoes and Donald and Deleaus Arnold’s feet, down by the water curve.” (*The October Country*, Bradbury)

All paragraphs move from a beginning state to an ending state.

Notice that author also appeals to the senses, and uses a dramatic simile.

❖ Write your own paragraph about the last day at a place or setting you loved.

❖ Use: 1+ simile, 1 + personification, and 1 cumulative sentence



# Paragraph Exercises: 2 — Natural Paragraphs

## Racing Down a Hill

1st sentence: Establish rider on the hill, then put him in motion.

2nd-4th sentences: Details and events on the way down.

5th sentence: He arrives at the bottom.

- ❖ Establish parallels between sentences 1 and 5.
- ❖ Use a left-branching cumulative in sentence 5.
- ❖ Use 1+ simile and subtle alliteration.

## A Giant Redwood Tree Collapses

1st sentence: Establish tree, its history, qualities, etc.

2nd sentence: Put it in motion.

3rd-5th sentences: It crashes through the forest, and...

5th sentence: The aftermath; the effects.

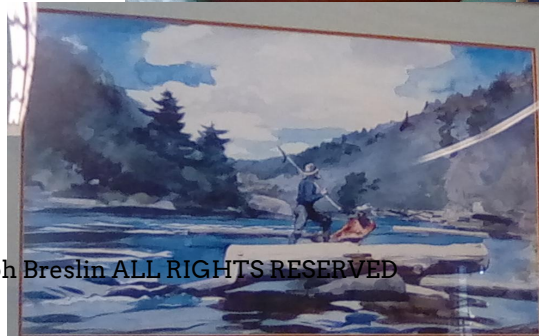
- ❖ Use 1 personification and 1 metaphor
- ❖ End with a periodic sentence



# Paragraph Exercises: 3 — Description

Write a paragraph describing the object/image in an orderly way.

- ❖ Decide on a plan: top to bottom, background to foreground, outside to inside, etc.,
- ❖ Use parallelism
- ❖ Use 1+ simile, 1 + personification
- ❖ 1 + senses (besides sight)
- ❖ 1 right-branching cumulative





# Paragraph Exercises: Fun Assignment 1

Write a three to four paragraph story that explains this picture.

- ❖ The first paragraph must establish the scene and a lead character, and put him in motion towards a goal.
- ❖ The middle paragraphs must show a progression of action toward the goal, with resistance.
- ❖ In the last paragraph, the lead character must achieve, or fail to achieve, his goal.
- ❖ Use 2+ similes, 1 + cumulatives, parallelism, 1 metaphor, 1 personification





# Paragraph Exercises: Fun Assignment 2

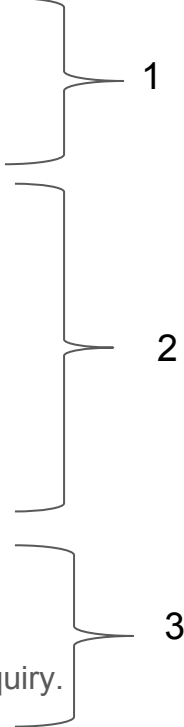
Write a five paragraph story that tells the tale of this man on the bridge.

- ❖ Establish lead character, his goal(s), his setting, and obstacles in first paragraph.
- ❖ Middle paragraphs should show obstacles of increasing difficulty (or one obstacle increasing in difficulty)
- ❖ Last paragraph should be victory or defeat.
- ❖ The last sentence of paragraphs 1-4 should transition (lead into) the first sentence of the next paragraph.
- ❖ Use a variety of rhetorical forms and sentence types.
- ❖ Vary sentence length; some short, some long.





# The Five Paragraph Essay: Easy Method

1. Introduction
    - a. Grabber Sentence — A single, salient fact that says it all.
    - b. Topic/Thesis Sentence — Your subject stated concisely.
    - c. 3 Points Sentence — Point A, Point B, Point C, in one sentence.
  2. Body 1 — Point A
    - a. Mini-topic sentence
    - b. Example
    - c. Example
    - d. Example
    - e. Transition to Point B
  3. Body 2 — Point B (Everything same as above)
  4. Body 3 — Point C (Everything same as above, except sentence e is a transition to conclusion.)
  5. Conclusion
    - a. Mirrored/Restated 3 Points Sentence
    - b. Mirrored/Restated Thesis
    - c. Send-off Sentence — A brief comment/reflection on the subject, or suggestion of further inquiry.
- 



# Curriculum Arc

