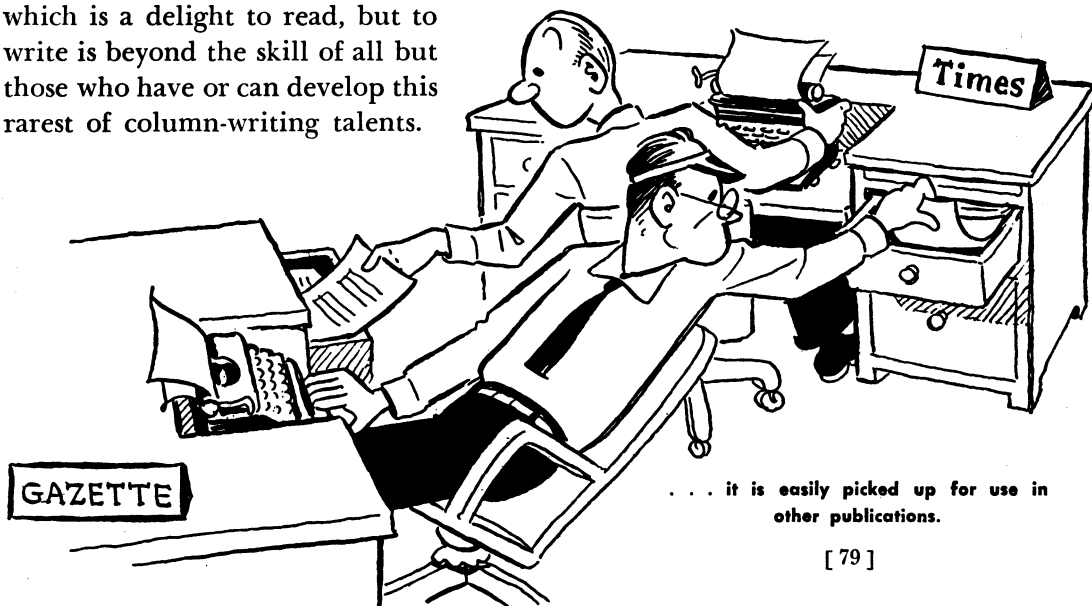


## 8.

## *The Paragraph*

**T**HE NEWSPAPER "PARAGRAPH," referred to in dictionaries as the editorial paragraph, is distinguishable by its brevity and epigrammatic structure. It resembles the paragraph of standard composition mainly in that it is indented and a unit of thought. But instead of developing a thought completely, the editorial paragraph often leaves the reader something to supply; that is an important part of his enjoyment. The technique permits a brevity which is a delight to read, but to write is beyond the skill of all but those who have or can develop this rarest of column-writing talents.



... it is easily picked up for use in other publications.

After the young son saw that we meant business concerning his giving away at least five of his dogs, he proceeded to give them to children in the immediate neighborhood. Now it's a case where the cake was eaten and also kept. The dogs came home.—Robert D. Burgess, Opp (Ala.) News.

You don't get ulcers from what you eat. You get them from what's eating you.—Sidney (Nebr.) Telegraph.

Rubbing elbows with a man will reveal things about him you never suspected. The same is true of rubbing fenders.—Grimes (Iowa) News.

Back a quarter century, nearly all newspaper comment was in editorial columns, and the little quotable stingers appeared as follow-items to the regular editorials. Now, they mostly appear in columns.

We are speaking of small newspapers, which cannot afford the luxury of full-time editorial writers who might also develop a flair for writing paragraphs. The town columnist may deliberately assign himself the duty of writing a few pithy paragraphs each week, or he may produce them in the heat of inspiration while writing news-and-comment matter, anecdotes, and light essays. Sometimes he strikes off a quotable paragraph in summing up his observations.

The paragraph, in the sense used here, is distinguished by its brevity; its independence, and its sparkle. Two to six lines usually suffice. One of the most useable of column items, it is easily picked up for use in other publications as a filler, as the basis of witty comment on its content, and to permit other readers to enjoy its wit and humor. How to make column material quotable is discussed in Chapter 11. As will be noted in that chapter, paragraphs written mainly for local consumption are not as quotable as those based on eternal truths and philosophy.

A column containing only independent paragraphs is rare in small papers. Variety columns may contain many, or few, or none. The types found most commonly in newspapers may be roughly classified as follows:

1. The *epigram*, which Webster says is "a bright or witty thought tersely and ingeniously expressed."
2. The *pun*, "a play on words of the same sound but different meaning."
3. The *fact-and-comment* item, in which a bit of information or opinion from any source is presented in a novel way through a witty remark or display of incisive "horse sense."

4. The *news-and-comment* item, in which current news is commented upon in a novel way, preferably with an unexpected twist which points up a truth even when the comparison may be somewhat ludicrous.

Not worthy of classification here, we think, is the smart alec remark, that adolescent outburst which has no basic good sense. The wisecrack was called "the illegitimate child of the epigram and the hoot" by Arthur Peterson of the *Toledo Blade*.

Smartly written epigrams are cartoon-like in their simplicity and lucidity. Their key words hold overtones and content quite out of proportion to their brevity; the reader supplies enough background to permit him to accept the paragraph's economy of construction. In fact, he is pleased because he is able to supply that background. Of course this feat is not difficult because most paragraphers ride the current news hard and also stay close to common problems of living.

The editorial paragraph is worth a lot of time in the writing. It is almost as concentrated as poetry, and sometimes as filled with imagery. It is a distilled sermon. It is the product of a fleeting moment of human insight. It is a flash of mental inspiration. It is a blunt statement of a philosophy which may have been years in the forming. It is pleasant in sound and arrangement, often clever in alliteration, contrasts, or association. It bespeaks the active, well-filled mind.

A charm of many paragraphs is subtlety. Readers discover absurd prejudices in a face-saving way. They can about-face on issues without being bludgeoned in editorials which imply they are stupid fools.

Most great writers have left humanity a legacy in statements of faith. Countless numbers of these are in paragraph form. The Bible is filled with them. Shakespeare was a master of the short bit, and even used

The reason so many women object to their daughters getting married is they are afraid the daughters will make mistakes as bad as the mothers did.—George B. Bowra, *Aztec* (N. M.) *Independent-Review*.

So live that it doesn't matter if they can recognize your car.—Harlowtown (Mont.) *Times*.

It used to be the family album which scared suitors away. Now it's home movies.—Augusta (Kans.) *Gazette*.

puns more than critics think was good for him. One of the authors received, as a graduation present, a copy of *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*. It is sobering to ponder the sayings of that humble old Roman, pagan emperor though he was.

Pick your paragraphs and sharpen your wits—from the literature of any country. Books are made for men, not libraries. In fifteen minutes a day you can share the thoughts of Epictetus, a pagan slave who lived a life of lofty exaltation. Or perhaps you would prefer the translations of Horace, or Aeschylus, Plautus, or Pliny the Elder. Or Ben Jonson, Samuel Butler, or John Milton. Or perhaps you prefer Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, William Cowper, or Charles Lamb. And possibly Thomas Jefferson, William Wordsworth, and James Russell Lowell. All have contributed to the art of paragraphing.

We do not mean to imply that the newspaper paragraph is literature. Or that it isn't. Paragraphs usually are written for the moment. They may live a day, a year, or forever. Those which are clever only in part may survive in part in the form of idioms. Old-time sayings are a part of the folklore of every region. Most of them become dated and belong to a period. Surviving phrases may be broken into words which merge with the general language. Overuse of these items at any time brands them as bromides. They die, but are exhumed by researchers seeking the origins of old expressions.

The paragraph is a natural form of expression. People constantly pass judgment on things. They weigh everything that is new. Crackling criticisms come from grandpa and grandson alike. And a newspaper without a similar critical voice is unnatural and inadequate. A newspaper without pungent observations—paragraphs—is to that extent failing to use an important literary tool. It is failing to use a device appreciated by good conversationalists, after-dinner speakers, judges in their decisions, preachers

When her eyes say "go" and her lips cry "stop," what's a fellow to do, a conscientious contemporary wants to know. Brother, it was our experience that in towns our size, after midnight all kinds of traffic lights are meaningless.—Brigham City (Utah) News-Journal.

in their sermons, teachers in their lectures. Even the wisecracks of the immature probably represent youth's grasping at life's great truths and attempts to formulate judgments in pleasant forms.

The relative scarcity of good short bits, compared to the supply of anecdotes and light essays, is inherent in the nature of the paragraph. The paragraph requires reflection, relating of facts, some skill in arranging the conclusion, and extreme brevity. Many columns are the work of persons who are too busy to sit in quiet thought before their typewriters. They have never attempted to perfect independent paragraphs. This is more an observation than a criticism. Skill in any kind of condensation takes time and practice.

Nevertheless, the growing interest in the newspaper column has increased the output of paragraphs and called attention to many excellent paragraphers in the small-city field. Other factors are the larger newspaper staffs, which have been made possible by growth of towns, and the steady movement of journalism school graduates into small papers. And reprinting of column excerpts by newspapers and magazines always inspires writers to try to "make" these publications. Recognition is always a stimulant to activity.

Said the late Marlen Pew in *Editor and Publisher*: "One of the best arts in editorial practice is paragraphing. A real paragrapher is a bird of rare plumage, as you well know if you have ever tried the snappy two- and four-line items which must be 'on top of the news' and give each situation a witty twist. It is doubtful if there are two dozen expert paragraphers in the business."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Quoted by A. Gayle Waldrop in *Editor and Editorial Writer*, p. 234.

Skill in any kind of condensation takes time and practice.



## MOOD AND METHOD

Witty paragraphing is partly a state of mind—a mood or pose which may be habitual or as false as a clown's face. Resourceful columnists permit themselves to react to good and bad news, the weather, and their contacts with people. They gripe and growl, apologize, exhort, and demand. Selecting a mood, they sometimes dash off a string of related witty paragraphs. It is this unpredictable moodiness which brings readers to the column each week—often before other parts of the paper are read.

Those three little words. Well, the most popular are: "I Love you," "Dinner is served," "All is forgiven," "Sleep until noon," "Keep the change," and "Here's that five."—D. E. Carrell, Keokuk (Iowa) Gate City.

Mr. Pew was talking of paragraphers of large and consistent output. Few small-town columnists would make claim to this classification. But they are better writers because of their attempts to master this fairly difficult art. Their columns need short, independent items to break up gray masses of straight matter.

Recalling the long-sustained output of paragraphs by the *Detroit News*, the authors wrote to Harry V. Wade, chief editorial writer, for a briefing on paragraphing today. His reply follows, in part:

"The *Detroit News* since the turn of the century has never been without at least one editorial paragrapher, and thirty years ago had three contributing together thirty paragraphs a day. There were many papers at the time that printed as large or almost as large a daily effusion. Funny columns like Luke McLuke's in the Cincinnati *Enquirer*, which were largely paragraphs, ran to great length.

"The art or knack of writing paragraphs has probably not died but in later times has been diverted into other media which invite one of that bent—gag writing for the radio and the panel cartoons, etc. and the writing of light copy in advertising. I recognize my paragraphs regularly in the cutlines under some of the most popular panel comics, illustrating the kinship of the two styles.

"Papers that use paragraphs in any quantity are dwindling in number, and those that persist are papers, like the *Boston Globe*, with a long tradition for good paragraphing that they evidently think worth conserving as an asset. By and large, however, the professional paragrapher today is in about the position of the last horseshoer in town.

"I doubt that one who is not an all-round newspaperman of considerable experience with news and life can produce effective paragraphs in any number day after day. Green hands try it but the vein exhausts itself quickly. The best, most urbane, and

penetrating editorial paragrapher in this country in forty years was the late Bob Ryder of the *Ohio State Journal*. He also was the *Journal's* editor-in-chief.

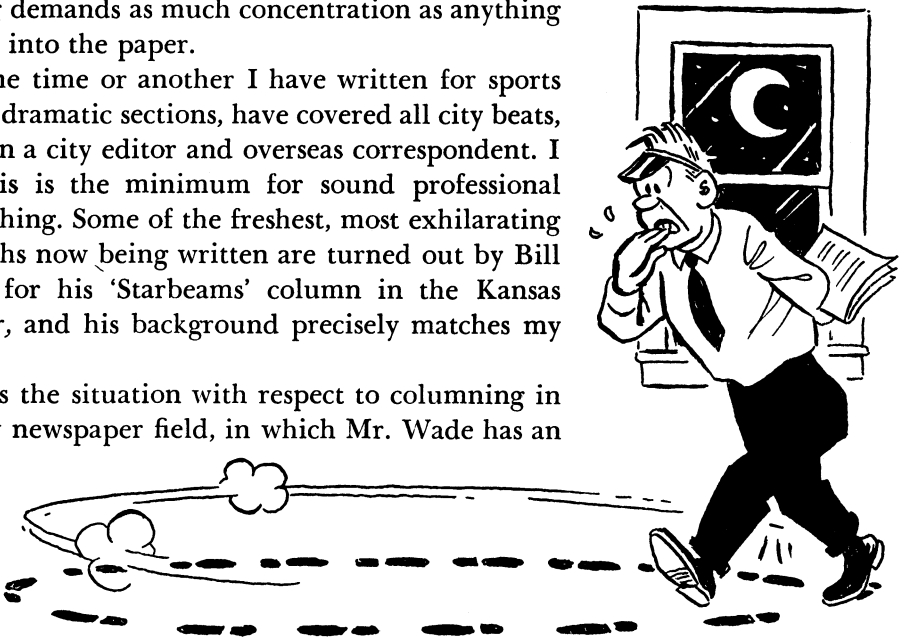
"The paragraph as a form survives sectionally in New England and the Deep South and in the Northwest; but it has largely disappeared in one of its old strongholds, Ohio, and quite generally in the Middle West. I syndicate my daily *News* output through the North American Alliance under the name 'Senator Soaper Says.' It goes to between seventy and eighty papers, a majority of which use the material as *The News* does, following the editorials, with or without the Soaper caption. Most of these papers in the past used paragraphs created in their own offices. Some dress up a daily assortment of five or six paragraphs with a drawn cut, and others frequently pick out a paragraph, title it, and make a short editorial of it. About a third of these customers use the paragraphs as a feature apart or on the page opposite the editorial page.

"I write my paragraphs around midnight in an hour or two. I was brought up on a morning paper and find creative writing, at least, somewhat easier at night. Anyway, it is without interruption, and paragraphing demands as much concentration as anything that goes into the paper.

"At one time or another I have written for sports sections, dramatic sections, have covered all city beats, have been a city editor and overseas correspondent. I think this is the minimum for sound professional paragraphing. Some of the freshest, most exhilarating paragraphs now being written are turned out by Bill Vaughn for his 'Starbeams' column in the *Kansas City Star*, and his background precisely matches my own."

Such is the situation with respect to columning in the daily newspaper field, in which Mr. Wade has an

... paragraphing demands as much concentration as anything that goes into the paper.



## TIMELY OR TIMELESS?

An entirely local column may die as quickly as the newspaper issue in which it appears. It may have no interest for the next county, or decade, or century. In short, it is geared to events and ideas which soon will be forgotten. Yet life is filled with common denominators. Wit and philosophy may be timeless because man does not change much. The small-town columnist who studies life's greatest subject—man—and reflects on this fearful and wonderful creature is sure to refine some of his thoughts to gems of expression. The pungent paragraph suggests itself when a columnist has reflected not only on man's movements, but also on his prejudices, weaknesses, sacrifices, sins, and heroics. Such observations should not be confused with the wise-crack of the smart alec.

eminent position. Writing in the *Saturday Evening Post*, Robert Y. Yoder said that "some of the shrewdest comment made on these wacky times comes from Harry V. Wade—alias Senator Soaper—who is a master of the merry art of paragraphing." It was Wade, Yoder added, who wrote about a retiring circus midget, who had reached the sunset of life, and hoped to get on somewhere as a book-end. It was Wade who wrote that the strip-teaser, Gypsy Rose Lee, had arrived in Hollywood "with twelve empty trunks." It was Wade who said of Russia that the misunderstood nation wanted only peace, unity, and its own way. It was he who remarked that while Sherman lived on into the peace, he never said what he thought of it. Wade likes to paraphrase political speeches, such as having the late President Franklin D. Roosevelt telling young voters that youth "must be strong, unafraid, and a better taxpayer than its father."

Mr. Wade, wrote Yoder, thinks the signed editorial paragraph is a break with tradition. He is against newspaper by-lines, believing they "breed a race of ham actors among writers." This is a shrewd observation. Many columns now are signed. While by-lines no doubt arouse a sense of responsibility, they also give writers a feeling of inflated ego which readers can sense. It is a sobering thought that by its flexibility a regular column gives readers a yardstick for measuring an editor's writing skill and probing his innermost philosophical concepts.

Bill Vaughn, conductor of the "Starbeams" column in the *Kansas City Star*, agrees that on big newspapers and some others the paragrapher's trade has been declining in recent years. He wrote in a letter to the authors:

"The causes, I think, are several. One is that the good paragraph presupposes a certain literacy on the part of the reader—a familiarity with current events, coupled with enough background of history (and



not textbook history, exclusively, but the history of baseball, beer, and burlesque, as well) and a willingness to be amused by words. In this sense our people are becoming less literate. They seem largely unable to decide by themselves if a thing is funny; they need the roar of a studio audience to reassure them.

"Another factor has been the rise of other types of newspaper columns. We have the syndicated thinkers on global matters, the keyhole school and the chroniclers of anecdotes involving our friends, sprinkled with pleas for crutches for old ladies and homes for derelict kittens. All these columns deliver more zing, apparently, than the paragraph. This not only tends to crowd out the paragrapher, but sends young men who might have been good at the business into other forms of column writing.

"In addition, the paragraph has been the victim of that familiar foe of all locally-produced newspaper features—syndication. By this I don't mean that there are many good syndicated paragraphers—in fact, Harry Wade (the best in the paragraphing business) is the only one that comes to mind. Publishers, however, find that in the package of comic strips and canasta lessons, which they have purchased from syndicate salesmen, is also a paragraph service. These paragraphs are likely to be pretty horrible, but they are paragraphs. They are short and they can be stuck in here and there on the editorial page. The publisher doesn't read them and doesn't really expect anyone else to. But he has paragraphs, and why should he hire somebody to write him some more? . . .

"My own 'Starbeams' appeared in the first issue of *The Star* in 1880, and I think it may be the oldest continuously conducted column in an American paper. One of its best known conductors was the late Charlie Blakeslee. For thirty years prior to my taking it over it was run by Clad H. Thompson—a really fine paragrapher with a highly individual style.

He may have a greasy hat and his trousers may be shiny, but if his children have their noses flattened against the window pane a half hour before he is due home for supper, you can trust him with anything you have.—Katheryn Launtz, *Washata (Iowa) Journal*.

On the way back through Texas we caught up with that story about the boys from the sand country who were caught selling, in lots of fifteen, sand burrs to the boys from Wisconsin as settings of porcupine eggs.—W. H. Conrad, *Medford (Wis.) Star-News*.

Growth of the small-city and town newspapers as business enterprises took increasing proportions of the editors' time, with resultant damage to the quality of editorial writing and paragraphing. But recently there has been a stirring at the grass roots, a rebirth of writing for writing's sake at a time when paragraphing is languishing in the big cities. In his attempts to compose quotable column material, the weekly newspaper editor finds nothing more suitable than the witty paragraph.

The claim is heard that columnists are born, not made. Evidence seems to indicate that good conversationalists are born, but that columnists are made. The relationship between inherited and acquired skills is very close, of course.

O. Henry, a bank clerk struggling in Austin, Texas, to keep alive a little paper called *The Rolling Stone*, wrote in a column many of the paragraphs and anecdotes which were later expanded into short stories. O. Henry was a genius, but much of his column material showed little evidence of it. The main distinction appears to be that some columnists are capable of devising techniques and developing latent abilities, and some are content to remain hack writers. A study of techniques and collecting of good examples of the art are basic essentials for any serious study of paragraphing.

Of course methods cannot be dissociated from the personality and thought patterns of the paragrapher. Real or feigned pessimism adduces a brand of acrid comment which, combined with human insight, mixes the bitter with the sweet in a way that many readers find diverting. Other columnists are warm-hearted and mellowly philosophical. The storyteller can afford to attribute brilliance to others, but the columnist who writes paragraphs stands on his own figures of speech. He is clever or he isn't.

In paragraphing, punctuation must be exact.

#### EMBRYO

freckles  
on face  
on teeth  
a brace

pigtails  
down back  
her knees  
both lack

a space  
between  
she's skinny  
as bean

she's only  
eight  
but just  
you wait

next thing  
you know  
she'll start  
to grow

Points must not be lost in useless words. Arguments should be largely impersonal, disarmingly persuasive, and logically sound. A subtle paragraph may shift a reader's point of view, but he must think his change of heart is achieved wholly by himself. It is near literature when a reader can see, in the words of a writer, golden truths which need exert no force for acceptance.

Since paragraphs make much use of contrast, it follows that figures of speech abound in them. Such figures, being comparisons between things of different classes, must be comparable in some striking detail. Paragraphers are endowed with neural paths along which flash recognition of these unique likenesses. The resulting truism, if apt, is pleasing to readers. But writers who can think only of trite comparisons must paraphrase or delete the figures which occur to them. And nothing is duller than a crude figure, nor more absurd than implausible comparisons about ordinary household articles.

Figures of speech should be fresh, logical, and essentially true. They require some time for contemplation and enjoyment, and should be used sparingly. Use of several figures in the same paragraph is too severe a strain on a reader's imagination. Consider the wealth of paragraph forms in anticlimax, antithesis, euphemism, irony, metaphor, simile, personification, and other figures.

These figures involve use of many forms of contrast, including under-statement, exaggeration, resemblance, and attributing of personal forms to abstract things. Of these, the simile and the metaphor are perhaps in widest use. Mention part of a common simile and most anyone can supply the rest of it: "It was as black as . . . coal, night, etc." Similarly, a mean man is a brute, a heel, a rat, a snake, etc.

Strained comparisons should be avoided: "His oratory writhed and struck like an angry snake."

and just  
that quick  
this little  
chick

will have  
complexion  
that's  
perfection

her teeth  
will gleam  
like spot-  
light beam

her hair  
will curl  
with latest  
swirl

her legs  
will pose  
for fashion  
hose

and she'll  
be stacked  
and  
fully packed

she's only  
eight  
but just  
you wait.

—Bob Bowen,  
La Jolla (Calif.)  
*Light.*

Far more acceptable: "As helpless as a young mother trying to manipulate the volume control of her wailing infant."—"As We See It," in Chilton (Wis.) *Times-Journal*.

The epigram appeals mainly to the sense. With his somewhat cynical insight, Ed Howe wrote: "Be careful, and you will save many from the sin of robbing you." Said Byron, "Wrinkles, the damned democrats, won't flatter."

Personification in paragraphs is fairly prevalent. Sometimes a column character is created by accident. A mouse shows a quivering nose as he surveys an editorial office from behind a cut cabinet. A society editor squeals. The mouse gets a column mention. He reappears and is named Percy. Readers write in to know more about his antics. Soon he is being quoted. He visits mice at the city hall, and is quoted. Soon he knows more than most folks, and tells some news which might not be printed in other forms. An irate reader would hesitate to name an office mouse in a libel petition—but don't depend on it.

Paragraphs within columns do not require titles, but may have them. Grouped paragraphs have been titled "Twinkles," "Briefs," "Brevities," "Iowagrams," "Barbs," "Snapshots," etc. Columnists' names may be used. "Annegrams" is used by Ann England of the Morton (Tex.) *Tribune*.

Paragraphs require no particular typography. Occasionally one notes indentions and alternate boldface and regular type.

Types and techniques of paragraphing are further discussed in Chapter 11, and examples are printed in the margins.

If telephone operators could talk back, they probably would say, "Get that cigar, pipe, cigaret, or pencil out of your mouth and put your teeth back in so I can understand you."—Frank Hall, Hill City (Kans.) *Times*.

... visits the city hall, and is quoted.

