

NAME (family name first): \_\_\_\_\_

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**Learning to Write. Workshop. Writing a Text with Paragraphs**

By Micaela Ford for EFL Advanced students (Spain, summer 2019)

In our course, writing assignments involve some **Before Writing** work at two different levels. On the one hand, we need to **find similar texts** to the one we wish to learn to write, and then work on learning about their structure and language. On the other, we need to **think** about our text: brainstorm on ideas and also on language items we could use to express them, and do an **outline** after selecting and ordering our ideas. If we are not clear about what to say and its order, we're bound to fail in our endeavor!

Let us think now of 300 word texts with a title. Consider **narratives** (e.g. a story) and **essays** (e.g. an article). **Structurally** speaking, the **general idea** is written texts need at least an introduction, a body where ideas are developed, and a closure, some type of ending, for instance a final comment (a concluding statement or prediction -- amusing or serious -- linking all that to the future), a conclusion (what the analysis amounts to or the coda in storytelling), a recapitulation or summary. Most texts also need a "title" (original, a true title, or the statement you part from, the essay question), and sometimes other headings or subheadings (e.g. proposals and reports, informative articles). When you read articles, published essays or novels, notice **paragraphing**. In academic essays, intros and endings tend to be shorter than the paragraphs where you develop the body, and these tend to be regular in length. But this needs not be so, of course! It's just a way of training to write.

More on paragraphs. **Beginnings and endings**. A text has an **opening sentence** that is crucial for the beginning, and it generally needs a powerful **closing sentence** too. The title and the opening and closing lines are key moments to grab the readers' attention and make them imagine or continue thinking about the matter. They are also good for indicating what the tone is, whether serious, original, funny, imaginative, factual... Paragraphs have a **topic sentence** at the beginning (generally the first sentence), establishing what the paragraph will be about, and sometimes they have a **transition for closure**, to allow readers know what the next paragraph will be about.

**Transitions** are also used **at the beginning** of the paragraph, for various reasons:

- they establish the topic ("About technology nowadays"), time and place (*After our time in..., In the summer of 1954, While we waited for Muriel, Reaching the summit, After having missed our flight, By late August*) to give us the subject or setting (facilitating thus comprehension),
- they include connectors which allow us to understand logical progression in the text (*Also, Moreover, Besides, Furthermore* = adding more points, *However, But, In contrast, Although, Otherwise, Still, Despite* = comparing, contrasting, opposing events or ideas, *Logically, Consequently, Subsequently* = deducing, inferring, resulting, coming after...),
- they allow us to introduce varied sentence structure to avoid constant S-V opening lines.

These transitions can be words/**short** phrases, like the adverbials and conjunctions above, or **longer** wording which may even include clauses (introduced by subordinating conjunctions, for instance, the "that/who/which" relative pronouns for adjectival clauses, or "when" and "where" for adverbial clauses of time and place, and so on). Check my table of clauses in the *C1 Resource Pack* or any textbook or course notes you have; and my language notes on *Orange Is the New Black*, for instance, on my Language Learning from Reading blog.

## More tips

We learn to write as we learn to notice writing, so **reading is crucial for learning to write**, too. You need to keep a notebook to gather interesting information that will help you **improve your productive skills** (both speaking and writing). We could even publish your notebooks, if you like.

- Practice **outlines** and brainstorming throughout the course, they're key to knowing what to say and knowing how to say it.
- Avoid **beginning paragraphs** with a **pronoun** whose noun has been mentioned in the previous paragraph and now you are taking for granted that the reader knows what you are talking about. Don't do that. Don't be afraid of repeating a word if it's for clarity. In this sense, English allows it and Spanish doesn't favor it. So repetition feels different in English. Notice when I repeat the topic word and when I don't, in my notes.
- Pay attention to **titles, paragraphing, capitalization and punctuation**.
- Train in **revising and editing** (proofreading). It's a skill that makes our working life most effective. Remember we need to check the text by reading it a minimum of three times, noticing different kinds of things.
- As you read and write, notice **vocabulary** range: keep lists of useful words and phrases in context for future reference. Modifiers (adjectives, nouns, prepositional phrases, clauses).
- As you read and write, notice language range: varieties of **sentence structure**, and how S+V's combine with others in connected clauses.
- As you read and write, notice **tone** and **register**. The basics are not that hard to master. Keep a section in your notebook with tables on this. For example: Avoid "many", "big", "huge", "kids", "guys", "go" and "have" (for all kinds of verbs) in semiformal and formal texts.
- As you read and write, notice **standard varieties** of English: US American, or British, and keep a section in your notebook to jot them down.

## Technical matters you need to train in all year through

**How much space do your 300 words take up** when you write with a pen? Visualize. And about how long would it take you to write them, considering the format of the Before, During and After in exams, for instance?

- Counting words in handwritten work. Remember counting words is not about counting all the words. Count the words in three or four lines in your text, work out the average number of words per line, and then multiply by the number of lines on the page.
- Typewritten work. For a page with 3 cm margins and a 12 point font, a good rule of thumb is 500 words for a single spaced page and 250 words for a double spaced page.
- Speaking, no. of words and time. Daphne Gray-Grant says that a human average is about 125-150 words per minute—meaning 5 minutes of speaking would entail about 600-800 words.

### How long does the During and After take you?

The During is about writing the piece just ONCE, but effectively because we have worked on it in the Before Writing. The After is about proofreading: revising (checking textual matters: structure, format, coherence and cohesion or logical progression) and editing (correcting spelling, grammar, punctuation mistakes)

## EXERCISE OUTSIDE CLASS. Reading exercises to learn to write

1. Read to enjoy while trying to notice how well written texts are.
2. Re-read and take notes when you find things we're trying to learn here.
3. In class, share your notes and insight.

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**EXERCISE IN CLASS. Reading exercises to learn to write**

1. Students volunteer to read a first time, including the questions (we underline key words in them)
2. Students read the text a second time and underline things.
3. We answer the questions, in small groups or at plenary. If in small groups, remember that later someone will have to report on your highlights to plenary.
4. Follow-up work: Listen to "A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud," a story by this writer on the TP Podcasts with her hypothesis about love based on experience. It's good for practicing reading aloud your -ed endings!

**EXCERPT 1: STORIES. *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940 novel; Penguin, 1961) by Carson McCullers (USA. 1917-1967).** Excerpt: pages 90-93 (about 1,650 words)  
 Carson McCullers on TP: <https://www.talkingpeople.net/tp/literature/mccullers/mccullers.html>  
 The girl is Mick Kelly, one of the main characters. The other two are deaf men.



But **all the time** — no matter what she was doing — **there was music**. Sometimes she hummed to herself as she walked, and other times she listened quietly to the songs inside her. There were all kinds of music in her thoughts. Some she heard over radios, and some was in her mind already without her ever having heard it anywhere.

**In the night-time**, as soon as the kids were in bed, **she was free**. That was the most important time of all. A lot of things **happened** when she was by herself and it was dark. Right after supper she ran out of the house again. She **couldn't tell** anybody about the things she did at night, and when her Mama asked her questions she would answer with any little tale that sounded reasonable. But most of the time if anybody called her she just ran away **like** she hadn't heard. That went for everybody **except** her Dad. There was something about her **Dad's voice** she couldn't run away from. He was one of the biggest, tallest men in the whole town. But his voice was so **quiet** and **kindly** that people were surprised when he spoke. No matter how much of a hurry she was in, she always **had to stop** when her Dad called.

**This summer she realized something about her Dad** she had never known before. Up until then she had never thought about him as being a real separate person. A lot of times he would call her. She would go in the front room where he worked and stand by him a couple of minutes — but **when she listened** to him **her mind** was never on the things he said to her. **Then one night** she **suddenly realized** about her Dad. Nothing unusual happened that night and she didn't know what it was that made her understand. Afterwards she **felt older** and as though she knew him as good as she could know any person.

**It was a night in late August** and she was in a **big rush**. She had to be at this house by nine o'clock, and no maybe either. Her **Dad called** and she went into the front room. He was sitting slumped over his workbench. For some reason it never did seem natural to see him there. Until the time of his accident last year he **had been** a painter and carpenter. Before daylight every morning he **would leave** the house in his overalls, to be gone all day. Then at night sometimes he fiddled around with clocks as an extra work. A lot of times he had tried to get a job in a jewellery store where he could sit by himself at a desk all day with a clean white shirt on and a tie. Now when he **couldn't carpenter any more** he had put a sign at the front of the house reading 'Clocks and Watches Repaired Cheap'. But he **didn't look like** most jewellers — the ones downtown were quick, dark little Jew men. Her Dad was too tall for his workbench, and his big bones seemed **joined together** in a loose way.

**Her Dad just stared at her**. She could tell he didn't have any reason for calling. He only wanted real bad to **talk** to her. He tried to think of some way to begin. His brown eyes were **too big** for his long, thin face, and since he had lost every single hair the pale, bald top of his head gave him a naked look. He still looked at her without speaking and she was in a hurry. She had to be at that house by nine sharp and there was **no time** to waste. Her Dad saw she was in a hurry and he **cleared his throat**.

'I got something for you,' he said. 'Nothing much, but maybe you can treat yourself with it.'

**He didn't have to** give her any nickel or dime just because he was **lonesome** and wanted to **talk**. Out of what he **made** he only kept **enough** to have **beer** about twice a week. Two bottles were on the floor by his chair now, one empty and one just opened. And whenever he drank beer he liked to talk to somebody. Her Dad fumbled with his belt and she looked away. This summer he had gotten like a kid about hiding those **nickels** and dimes he kept for himself. Sometimes he hid them in his shoes, and other times in a little

slit he had cut in his belt. She only halfway wanted to take the dime, but when he **held it out** her hand was just naturally open and ready.

‘I got so much work to do I don’t know where to begin,’ he said.

**That was just the opposite** to the truth, and he knew it good as she did. He never had many watches to fix, and when he finished he would fool around the house doing any little job that was needed. Then at night he sat at his bench, cleaning old springs and wheels and trying to **make** the **work last** out until bedtime. Ever since he broke his hip and **couldn’t work steady** he had to be doing something every minute.

‘I been **thinking** a lot tonight,’ her Dad said. He poured out his **beer** & sprinkled a few grains of salt on the back of his hand. Then he licked up the salt and took a swallow out of the glass.

**She was in such a hurry that it was hard to stand still.** Her **Dad noticed** this. He tried to say something —but he had not called to tell her anything special. He only wanted to talk with her for a little while. He started to speak and swallowed. They just looked at each other. The quietness grew out longer and **neither of them could say a word.**

**That was when she realized about her Dad.** It wasn’t like she was **learning a new fact** — **she had understood** it all along in every way except with her brain. Now she just suddenly knew that she knew about her Dad. He was lonesome and he was an old man. Because none of the kids went to him for anything and because he didn’t earn much money he felt like he was cut off from the family. And in his lonesomeness he wanted to be close to one of his kids — and they were all so busy that they didn’t know it. **He felt like he wasn’t much real use to anybody.**

**She understood** this while they were looking at each other. It gave her a queer feeling. Her Dad picked up a watch spring and cleaned it with a brush dipped in gasoline.

‘I know you’re in a hurry. I just hollered to say hello.’

‘No, I’m not in any rush,’ she said. ‘Honest.’

**That night she sat down** in a chair by his bench and they talked awhile. **He talked** about accounts and expenses and how things would have been if he had just managed in a different way. He drank beer, and once the tears came to his eyes and he snuffled his nose against his shirt-sleeve. She stayed with him a good while that night. **Even if** she was in an awful hurry. Yet for some reason **she couldn’t tell him about** the things in her mind — about the hot, dark nights.

**These nights** were **secret**, and of the whole summer they were the most important time. In the dark she **walked by herself** and it was like she was the only person in the town. Almost every street came to be as plain to her in the night-time as her own home block. Some kids were afraid to walk through strange places in the dark, but she wasn’t. **Girls were scared** a man would come out from somewhere and put his teapot in them like they was married. Most girls were nuts. If a person the size of Joe Louis or Mountain Man Dean **would** jump out at her and want to fight she would **run**. But if it was somebody within twenty pounds her weight she would **give him a good sock** and go right on.

**The nights were wonderful, and she didn’t have time to think about such things as being scared.** Whenever she was in the **dark** she thought about **music**. While she walked along the streets she would **sing** to herself. And she felt like the whole **town listened** without knowing it was Mick Kelly.

**She learned a lot about music during these free nights in the summer-time.** When she walked out in the rich parts of town **every house had a radio**. All the **windows** were **open** and she could hear the music very marvellous. After a while she knew which houses tuned in for the programmes she wanted to hear. There was one **special house** that got all the good orchestras. And at night she would go to this house and sneak into the dark yard to listen. There was beautiful shrubbery around this house, and she would sit under a bush near the window. And after it was all over she would stand in the dark yard with her hands in her pockets and **think** for a long time. **That was the realest part of all the summer — her listening to this music on the radio and studying about it.**

#### Questions to get you started

1. Consider topic sentences and transitions. What’s their function in their paragraph and in the text?
2. How does the writer make you feel? Where does she take you? What kind of language helps her?
3. What about speed & movement? How does she help you stop or move on?
4. Can you understand Mick? Do you have similar thoughts?
5. Did you feel any tension during the reading? Why would that be?
6. What question would you make your classmates or yourself?