

Paragraphs - an extract from *On Writing Well* by William Zinsser

Keep your paragraphs short. Writing is visual – it catches the eye before it has a chance to catch the brain. Short paragraphs put air around what you write and make it look inviting, whereas a long chunk of type can discourage a reader from even starting to read.

Newspaper paragraphs should only be two or three sentences long; newspaper type is set in a narrow width, and the inches quickly add up. You may think such frequent paragraphing will damage the development of your point. Don't worry; the gains far outweigh the hazards.

But don't go berserk. A succession of tiny paragraphs is as annoying as a paragraph that is too long. I'm thinking of all those midget paragraphs – verbless wonders – written by modern journalists to make their articles quick 'n' easy. Actually, they make the reader's job harder by chopping up a natural train of thought.

Compare the following two arrangements of the same article – how they look at a glance and how they read:

The No. 2 lawyer at the White House left work early on Tuesday, drove to an isolated park overlooking the Potomac River and took his life.

A revolver in his hand, slumped against a Civil War-era cannon, he left behind no note, no explanation.

Only friends, family and colleagues stunned in sorrow.

And a life story that until Tuesday had read like any man's fantasy.

The No. 2 Lawyer at the White House left work early on Tuesday, drove to an isolated park overlooking the Potomac River and took his life. A revolver in his hand, slumped against a Civil War-era cannon, he left behind no note, no explanation – only friends, family and colleagues in stunned sorrow. He also left behind a life story that until Tuesday had read like any man's fantasy.

The Associated Press version (left), with its breezy paragraphing and verbless third and fourth sentences, is disruptive and condescending. My version (right) gives the reporter the dignity of writing good English and building three sentences into a logical unit.

Paragraphing is a subtle but important element in writing nonfiction articles and books – a road map constantly telling your reader how you have organised your ideas. Study good nonfiction writers to see how they do it. You'll find that almost all of them think in paragraph units, not in sentence units. Each paragraph has its own integrity of content and structure.

Reference:

Zinsser, W. (2006) *On Writing Well*. New York: HarperCollins.