Improving paragraph writing

By Georgina Barton

1.   Do some research on your topic

Some students find writing difficult. They may have some great ideas but getting these ideas down on paper can be a struggle. Similarly, students may be able to get some information written but the flow of the writing may be less than optimal.

The first step in writing a good paragraph is really knowing your topic. This means research is vital. One of my mantras is 'reading and writing go hand in hand'.

2.   Get your students to free write

For me, the first step is to encourage students who find writing difficult to get anything down on paper – that way there is something to work with. I mostly suggest they write about something they are really passionate about and already know a lot about (that way step #1 can be bypassed, for now).

Here's an example of a student's 'free write' paragraph (note I have left in the errors purposefully):

> cartoons are really great to Draw because it can help you break down a more complex Drawing such as a photograph. cartoons can help explain speeches like in a movie. it is great to use cartoons because it can be a better and easyer way of Drawing. There are a few types of cartoons like ones without speech bubbles and there are one's that have them.

3.   Identify the level 1 errors and correct them

The first thing I would do as a teacher is to point out the Level 1 errors – that is anything related to spelling, language conventions including grammar and punctuation. I would also then highlight to the student that if they make these changes then their results would automatically shift from probably an E to a D or even a D to a C. It is important to show the students how their paragraph looks different if they simply fix these errors first!

For this example, here are the Level 1 errors in the paragraph example above:

-    The student needs to be reminded about capitalisation – there are five errors i.e. *cartoons* and *it* begin sentences without capitals and the student has written *Draw* and *Drawing* each time with a capital D (perhaps the letter D, including lowercase d, is needing some work)
- The next error relates to grammar – the first sentence has its theme as cartoons (plural) but the student then writes 'it' rather than 'they'
- There is a spelling error – easyer should be easier – the student might need to be reminded about the spelling convention for words that end in 'y'
- The final Level 1 errors is the use of an apostrophe in the final sentence – one's should just be ones as it is not possessive (so a quick refresher here would work well).

Here is the paragraph with all of these corrected:

Cartoons are really great to draw because ~~it~~ they can help you break down a more complex drawing such as a photograph. Cartoons can help explain speeches like in a movie. It is great to use cartoons because ~~it~~ they can be a better and ~~easyer~~ easier way of drawing. There are a few types of cartoons like ones without speech bubbles and there are one's that have them.

Cartoons are really great to draw because they can help you break down a more complex drawing such as a photograph. Cartoons can help explain speeches like in a movie. It is great to use cartoons because they can be a better and easier way of drawing. There are a few types of cartoons like ones without speech bubbles and there are ones that have them.

We can see already that the paragraph is more effective. Now onto Level 2 enhancements including purpose, cohesion and vocabulary.

4.   Improving paragraphs through purpose

This paragraph shows the student has some good knowledge about a topic of interest – cartoons. While I would recommend the student continues to do some research/reading about the topic for further paragraphs there are some good points already made here.

I would ask the student what was the purpose of their paragraph e.g. what specific topic about cartoons did they want to share with the reader? We would then read the paragraph aloud and notice the paragraph was actually about the benefits of cartooning.

The student has jumped into the topic rather than signposted for the reader what cartoons are and what the paragraph was aiming to do. Therefore, it was recommended they add a topic sentence that is descriptive:

Cartoons are a simple way of drawing an image.

Next would be to write what the paragraph is about:

This paragraph will explain the benefits of cartooning.

This information is taken from what the student has already outlined, later in their original paragraph, in the sentence:

It is great to use cartoons because they can be a better and easier way of drawing.

5.   Thinking about cohesive devices and improving vocabulary (e.g topic specific language)

We then read each sentence separately to see how they could be improved.

Cartoons are really great to draw because they can help you break down a more complex drawing such as a photograph.

This is quite a good sentence as it is uses a conjunction (because) between two independent sentences – Cartoons are really great to draw. They can help you break down a more complex drawing (such as a photograph). It is a complex and compound sentence combined.

The student can improve this sentence however by using language that is more sophisticated.

Cartoons are ~~really great~~ extremely effective to draw because they can ~~help you~~ assist people to breakdown a more complex image such as a photograph.

Cartoons are extremely effective to draw because they can assist people to breakdown a more complex image such as a photograph.

Of course it could be changed even further – perhaps unpack what 'breakdown' means.

Let's make the next sentence more cohesive by referring back to the previous one:

Cartoons can help explain speeches like in a movie.

They can help explain speeches such as in animated movies about superheroes.

6.   Adding more information for the reader

The final drafting step is to add more information to increase the knowledge-base of the reader (this is where the research comes in). For example, the student has written:

There are a few types of cartoons like ones without speech bubbles and there are ones that have them.

There are different types of cartoons that have different purposes. Some characteristics are speech bubbles, interesting colours, sound effects in moving image or onomatopoeia in static cartoons, gutters and panels. Figure 1 for example, shows one type of layout for a cartoon such as a comic strip.
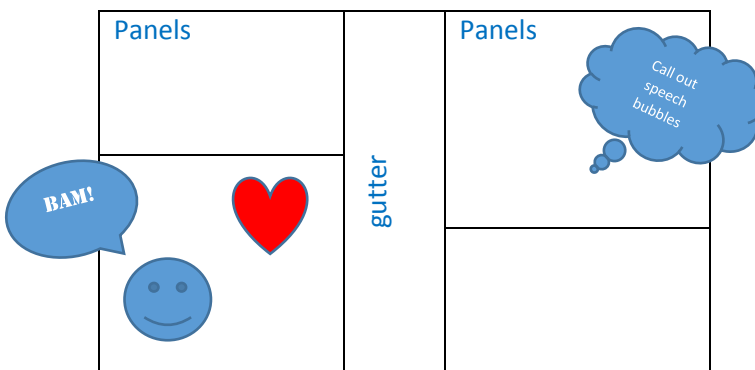

Figure 1: Page layout for cartooning

7.   Make sure you have included a concluding sentence

Finally, the student did not include a concluding sentence with their original paragraph so this needs to be added.

In summary, cartoons are an effective way of conveying information to the reader. In fact, they can be more engaging as they use not only text but also pictures—making them fun and interesting.

8.   Proof read your paragraph

This step is usually left out but it is perhaps the most important one of all. Read your paragraph out aloud. Does it make sense? Does it flow? If not, think about text cohesion and which devices you can use to make it better. Is it interesting for the reader?

FULL DRAFT PARAGRAPH

Cartoons are a simple way of drawing an image. This paragraph will explain the benefits of cartooning. Cartoons are extremely effective to draw because they can assist people to breakdown a more complex image such as a photograph. They can help explain speeches such as in animated movies about superheroes. There are different types of cartoons that have different purposes. Some characteristics are speech bubbles, interesting colours, sound effects in moving image or onomatopoeia in static cartoons, gutters and panels. Figure 1 for example, shows one type of layout for a cartoon such as a comic strip.
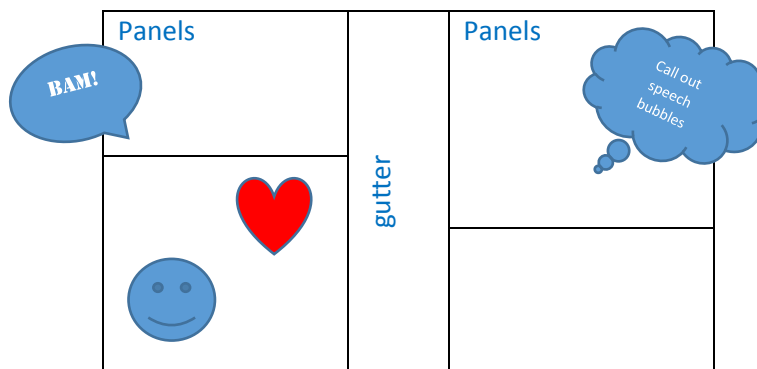

Figure 1: Page layout for cartooning

In this figure you can see how cartoonists can use different shaped and sized panels to add their narrative. Different symbols and characters can also be used including speech bubbles that include what they are saying. In summary, cartoons are an effective way of conveying information to the reader. In fact, they can be more engaging as they use not only text but also pictures—making them fun and interesting.