

Issues in Writing: Argument of Fact

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Topic/theme: Clear and concise writing through the argument of fact
Layering factual information towards the development of argument

1. How long...

- How long should a sentence be?
- How long should a paragraph be?
- What are some important features of a readable, informative writing style?

The following recommendation is based on how we can build well written layers of information.

2. Find a logical sequence

The following sentences form a very short paragraph, or perhaps a layer of information from a longer paragraph. Which order would you put them in to create a logical sequence?

- a) The materials being discharged are present in public waters in illegal and unsafe amounts.
- b) The company is discharging material into public waters.
- c) The materials being discharged are regulated by law and are dangerous.

(Huckin and Olsen, 1991)

Can you describe the purpose of each sentence, or what each sentence does, in terms of developing a critical perspective?

3. Argument of fact

Writers develop argument through a sequence of layers that gradually introduces, defines and adds argumentative value to a text. If a writer introduces a specific idea too

soon, or with too much detail, a reader will find it difficult to follow. The goal of writing is to involve the reader in a sharing of knowledge.

The stages of the cycle are:

| | | |
|-------------------|---|--|
| Existence | ↩ | The company is discharging material into public waters. |
| | ↓ | |
| | ↑ | |
| Definition | ↑ | The materials being discharged are regulated by law and are dangerous. |
| | ↓ | |
| | ↑ | |
| Quality | ↪ | The materials being discharged are present in public waters in illegal and unsafe amounts. |

(Original text sample from Huckin and Olsen, 1991)

Possible new existence sentence continuing the development of the argument:

The most hazardous material has been identified as the controversial chemical XYZ-toxin-B.

The definition could vary according to why you are writing:

XYZ-toxin-B is known to cause significant problems for both flora and fauna and can also be dangerous to humans.

The quality will be more dependent on the definition, but this can also vary:

It is important that action is taken urgently and that the company responsible is prosecuted or it may cause major ecological and health problems.

(Created as an example of how the original text by Huckin and Olsen could continue)

4. Logical flow, editing and redrafting

Look at the first two examples on the next page. (A) is the original text with two layers in one paragraph. (B) is the original text with two layers in two paragraphs. One of the problems here is that we are using very short sentences, where information could be combined in more efficient sentences that say more. The sentences may be longer, but the information is the same and the word count is less. (C) combines the stages from the two layers as a redraft, but look at what happens to logical, coherent flow. (D) rewrites the text to combine the stages into a logical flow, creates a more efficient, detailed argument and saves 20 words at the same time.

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>A) Two layers: one paragraph</p> <p>The company is discharging material into public waters. The materials being discharged are regulated by law and are dangerous. The materials being discharged are present in public waters in illegal and unsafe amounts. The material has been identified as the controversial chemical XYZ-toxin-B. XYZ-toxin-B is known to cause significant problems for both flora and fauna and can also be dangerous to humans. It is important that action is taken urgently and that the company responsible is prosecuted or it may cause major ecological and health problems.</p> <p>86 words</p> | <p>B) Two layers: two paragraphs</p> <p>The company is discharging material into public waters. The materials being discharged are regulated by law and are dangerous. The materials being discharged are present in public waters in illegal and unsafe amounts.</p> <p>The material has been identified as the controversial chemical XYZ-toxin-B. XYZ-toxin-B is known to cause significant problems for both flora and fauna and can also be dangerous to humans. It is important that action is taken urgently and that the company responsible is prosecuted or it may cause major ecological and health problems.</p> <p>86 words</p> |
| <p>C) Two layers: combined sub-arguments (edited from a or b)</p> <p>The company is discharging material into public waters. The material has been identified as the controversial chemical XYZ-toxin-B.</p> <p>The materials being discharged are regulated by law and are dangerous. XYZ-toxin-B is known to cause significant problems for both flora and fauna and can also be dangerous to humans.</p> <p>The materials being discharged are present in public waters in illegal and unsafe amounts. It is important that action is taken urgently and that the company responsible is prosecuted or it may cause major ecological and health problems.</p> <p>86 words</p> | <p>D) Paired ideas within layers (second draft of text a or b)</p> <p>The company is discharging the hazardous chemical XYZ-toxin-B into public waters. XYZ-toxin-B is regulated by law and is dangerous, as it is known to have very bad effects on plant life and can also be dangerous to humans and animals. The amount of XYZ-toxin-B being discharged is illegal and unsafe and unless something is done to clear the waters, we are facing a serious environmental problem.</p> <p>66 words</p> |

The next paragraph, or layer, would begin with an existence sentence is likely to say something more about legal, ecological or health problems. Or perhaps something about the company's responsibility or the inconvenience or dangers to people who live nearby or use the waters.

What would you write and how would you write it? Choose a perspective and write the next two layers:

- Owner of company
- Home owner near the public water
- Journalist
- Environmentalist
- Scientist

Would you keep them in the same paragraph? Would you start a new paragraph with the second layer? Can you find ways to edit what you have written to make it more efficient, as we saw in example (D)?

5. **New Media on the Net**

Look at the text "New Media on the Net". This is a working example of how the argument of fact can be recycled throughout a text. In the early paragraphs we see that three sentences are used that correspond well with the existence, definition and quality principle. In each of these the sub-arguments are cumulative. They build through the opening, which is followed by a defining statement and some kind of value statement.

In the third column we see a much longer paragraph, where we have a one sentence opening statement (existence) and a one sentence concluding statement (quality). Inbetween we have a series of sentences that are all part of a bigger definition, where a series of ideas are parallel to each other.

If we compare paragraphs 2, 3 and 4 we see two types of cumulative development.

Cumulative sequence with sub-arguments in single sentences: one sentence per sub-argument (paragraphs 2 and 3). In these paragraphs it is possible to complete each sub-

argument in one sentence, as they are relatively short statements. This is common in descriptive writing when setting up or summarising an argument. At these stages we want to make concise points.

- 1
- 2
- 3

Cumulative sequence with parallel sub-arguments in different sentences: multiple sentences in one or more sub-argument (paragraph 4). In this paragraph the definition is too big to be completed in a single sentence and must be separated across two or more sentences. This is common when describing specific procedures where a number of points or instructions need to be included. At these stages we need to emphasise detail.

- 1
- 2a 2b 2c 2d 2e 2f 2g
- 3

It is still common in concise writing to see the cumulative development of argument with parallel sub-arguments where more than one sentence is used for each. We can take an example from the text and edit it:

“(E) Since late 1996, a project team, of which I am project manager, has been constructing a web site for Boughton House using the latest in web design technology to replicate the fine interiors and exteriors online – an act of ‘virtual preservation’. (D) The total cost of the initial phase of the project has been about £60,000 over twelve months, a sum which few historic properties would be able to afford. (Q) What we have provided through our work is a template which can be used by other properties at a much reduced cost, with the aim of grouping all such projects together under the location Heritage on the Web.”

(Hiley, 1998: 10)

This is a direct cumulative sequence:

- 1
- 2
- 3

“(E x3) Since late 1996, a project team, of which I am project manager, has been constructing a web site for Boughton House. We have used the latest in web design technology to replicate the fine interiors and exteriors online. We could define this an act of ‘virtual preservation’. (D x2) The total cost of the initial phase of the project has been about £60,000 over twelve months. This is a sum which few historic properties would be able to afford. (Q x2) What we have provided through our work is a template which can be used by other properties at a much reduced cost. This has been done with the aim of grouping all such projects together under the location Heritage on the Web.”

(Hiley, 1998: 10)

In this version we see shorter sentences. The development of argument is the same, but it has created parallel relationships within the cumulative sequence. Arguably, the original version is more efficient in terms of flow, as this version has created more of a stop – start approach.

- 1a 1b 1c
- 2a 2b
- 3a 3b

“(E) Since late 1996, a project team, of which I am project manager, has been constructing a web site for Boughton House using the latest in web design technology to replicate the fine interiors and exteriors online – an act of ‘virtual preservation’ (D) and the total cost of the initial phase of the project has been about £60,000 over twelve months, a sum which few historic properties would be able to afford. (Q) What we have provided through our work is a template which can be used by other properties at a much reduced cost, with the aim of grouping all such projects together under the location Heritage on the Web.”

(Hiley, 1998: 10)

In this version we see the linking of two sub-arguments with a simple conjunction (and). It creates a five line sentence, which is quite common in academic writing. It now contains too much information in one sub-argument.

1 + 2

3

There are many variations on the ways in which published writers will structure their arguments as you may be able to see in the some of the texts you are reading.

6. Your own text sample

From the text you have brought to class, comment on:

- Average sentence length
- Average paragraph length
- Ease of understanding the text
- Any important information you want to know more about
- How the layers of argument are used

Bibliography

Hiley, M. (1998) "New Media on the Net" in *Viewfinder* 32: 10-11.

Huckin, T.N. & Olsen, L.A. (1991) *Technical Writing and Professional Communication for Nonnative Speakers of English*. New York: McGraw Hill.