Paragraph Building: Organizing Complex Ideas

As your ideas and analyses become more and more complex, integrating a variety of examples with your ideas and relating them back to your thesis, you have to be especially careful to develop clear and logical paragraphs. Readers who become confused often find that the structure of the paragraph itself is the problem; they complain that

- it jumps from one subject to another without clear connections
- it presents quoted or personal examples that don't seem relevant to the main idea
- examples aren't fully explained or analyzed, leaving the reader wondering why they are important
- paragraphs are incomplete, which means that the reader's understanding is incomplete

You don't want readers to encounter these problems in your writing; any of these problems can confuse a reader, causing him to stop reading and to reject your ideas. And if that person is a professor giving you a grade, an employer giving you a job, or an admissions counselor admitting you to university, then you're in real trouble.

A strong paragraph typically features 6 elements in roughly this order:

**Paragraph Checklist:**

1. **Topic sentence that is relevant to the essay’s thesis** (1-2 sentences)
2. Development of the idea in the topic sentence, with detailed examples (2-4 sentences)
3. Introduce source for upcoming quotation to build authority (1-2 sentences)
4. Signal phrase and direct quotation, with MLA page citation (1-4 sentences)
5. Explanation and analysis of the quote, showing its relevance to your topic sentence and to your subject, with examples as necessary (2-6 sentences)
6. **Concluding ideas offering your most specific point about the idea in your topic sentence** (1-2 sentences)

These elements will help your reader to understand fully the ideas and interpretations of your essay.

So, imagine I want to write a paragraph about a short story by Sandra Cisneros, "Woman Hollering Creek," the title story of her second book of short stories. I know that I want to claim that Cleofilas, the main character, a woman in an abusive marriage, is rebelling against her culture's attitudes towards women. She finally realizes that submissive women are only taken advantage of, which she will no longer accept.

I know that I'll include one or two direct quotations from the story. I also know that I want to quote from an outside source, an essay by Jacqueline Doyle's on Cisneros' women, so I'll gather that information, too. This will help me prove my point about Cleofilas' rebellion. It's a tricky point to prove; since she's headed back to her father and her family in Mexico at the end of the story, some readers could argue that she's going from one bad relationship to another one in which she'll be disgraced by her family. I don't believe that, so I've got to construct this paragraph carefully.
First, I'll introduce the subject of my paragraph with a clear topic sentence (#1):

While other characters, like Rachel or Ixchel, seem resigned to their situations, Cleofilas is Cisneros' most powerful woman who rebels against her male-dominated world by adopting a masculine, assertive self.

Following this topic sentence, I'll develop that idea in 2-4 sentences (#2):

Cleofilas has spent most of her life laboring under the same romantic fantasies held by Rachel and Ixchel, but hers come from a dominant cultural influence: the telenovela. She believes that handsome men will play the role of Prince Charming, and she can be a Sleeping Beauty who will be rescued and provided for if she plays her role well. But when Juan Pedro first disregards and later physically abuses her, her romantic illusions begin to fall apart.

This begins to explain my interpretations of Cleofilas' conflict. Notice that I've included some cultural references--Prince Charming and Sleeping Beauty--that influence my understanding of the story. Now that I'm ready to show how this is true with an example, I'll introduce an example from the story (#3):

In "Woman Hollering Creek," Cleofilas' betrays her own romantic ideals when Juan Pedro first strikes her.

Now I'm ready for a signal phrase and quotation, with MLA citation (#4). Remember a signal phrase is just an introduction to the quote that tells us who is speaking:

The narrator tells us, "The first time she had been so surprised she didn't cry out or try to defend herself. She had always said she would strike back if a man, any man, were to strike her" (47).

Now that I've presented a direct quotation, I'll need to explain its meaning for my audience. Just because my reader knows the story doesn't mean that she shares my interpretation; my job is to convince her that my interpretation is correct (#5).

Cleofilas believed, like the women of the telenovelas, that she was independent and strong, and that she would stand up to such injustice. She seems to be in control because she creates the home for Juan Pedro and Juan Pedrito, even if it's in a not-so-romantic little town across the border from home, and because she seems to be in control of her daily life.

Now that I've begun explaining, I realize that I need another example from the story. So, I'll repeat steps #3 and #4 and introduce a new quotation.

But, as we learn, she surprises herself by her own passivity: "But when the moment came, and he slapped her once, and then again, and again; until the lip split and bled an orchid of blood, she didn't fight back, she didn't break into tears, she didn't run away as she imagined she might when she saw such things in the telenovelas" (47).

Now I'll return to #5 and explain this quotation's significance.

Cisneros' metaphor, an orchid of blood, is ironic. Men give women flowers as a part of romantic courtship, and the orchid is a rare and delicate flower that needs special care. In this case, however, Cleofilas receives Juan Pedro's "gift," which is anything
but romantic, and she realizes that he doesn't see her as rare, or delicate, or special, but as just a servant to obey his wishes. This is the first of her rude awakenings, and since it happens directly following her thoughts about La Llorona and La Gritona, it reflects her harsh insight: women are sorrowful because they are mourning the death of their own selves and their ideals.

Once I've explained the idea fully, then I'm ready to introduce my outside source, Jacqueline Doyle's essay, which will help me show the changes in Cleofilas' character. I'll go back to #3 to introduce Doyle:

In her essay, "Haunting the Borderlands: La Llorona in Sandra Cisneros' 'Woman Hollering Creek,'" Jacqueline Doyle claims that Cleofilas could become yet another La Llorona, but she avoids this fate.

Now I'm ready for the signal phrase and quotation in MLA style.

Doyle argues, "As Cisneros renews la Llorona's story and rewrites her fate, she releases her to leave her unfaithful and abusive husband and to take her children away with her--to choose life instead of death and to cross the river instead of remaining eternally trapped on its banks."

Of course now I'll return to #5 to explain the significance of that quotation:

Doyle correctly believes that Cleofilas has faced a moment of crisis, and that the abuse is actually liberating for her. Because it shakes loose her romantic notions, she chooses to take an active, aggressive stance in her life, rather than be limited like so many women of the town. Notice that her first friends are Soledad and Dolores: solitude and sorrow. But by the end of the story, she has rejected La Llorona for the more active La Gritona, and her accomplices are Felice and Graciela, good fortune and grace.

And finally I'll conclude my paragraph with the most specific point as it relates to my topic sentence (#6).

Cleofilas' laughter as she travels over the bridge is a cry of freedom, a powerful expression of self that she only now can express as she frees herself from both her husband and the romantic illusions that have suppressed her.

That's not the end of my essay, of course. My next paragraph might be on the borders, rivers, and bridges as metaphorical boundaries, and Cleofilas must cross those psychological and social boundaries to become a new person. Later paragraphs might focus on Chayo of another story, "Little Miracles, Kept Promises," or Lupe of the final story in the book, "Bien Pretty." I'll follow the same paragraph guidelines in those as I have in this one.

Here's what my paragraph finally looks like:

While other characters, like Rachel or Ixchel, seem resigned to their situations, Cleofilas is Cisneros' most powerful woman who rebels against her male-dominated world by adopting a masculine, assertive self. Cleofilas has spent most of her life laboring under the same romantic fantasies held by Rachel and Ixchel, but hers come from a dominant cultural influence: the telenovela. She believes that handsome men will play the role of Prince Charming, and she can be a Sleeping Beauty who will be rescued and provided for if she plays her role well. But when
Juan Pedro first disregards and later physically abuses her, her romantic illusions begin to fall apart. In "Woman Hollering Creek," Cleofilas' betrays her own romantic ideals when Juan Pedro first strikes her. The narrator tells us, "The first time she had been so surprised she didn't cry out or try to defend herself. She had always said she would strike back if a man, any man, were to strike her" (47). Cleofilas believed, like the women of the telenovelas, that she was independent and strong, and that she would stand up to such injustice. She seems to be in control because she creates the home for Juan Pedro and Juan Pedrito, even if it's in a not-so-romantic little town across the border from home, and because she seems to be in control of her daily life. But, as we learn, she surprises herself by her own passivity: "But when the moment came, and he slapped her once, and then again, and again; until the lip split and bled an orchid of blood, she didn't fight back, she didn't break into tears, she didn’t run away as she imagined she might when she saw such things in the telenovelas" (47). Cisneros' metaphor, an orchid of blood, is ironic. Men give women flowers as a part of romantic courtship, and the orchid is a rare and delicate flower that needs special care. In this case, however, Cleofilas receives Juan Pedro's "gift," which is anything but romantic, and she realizes that he doesn't see her as rare, or delicate, or special, but as just a servant to obey his wishes. This is the first of her rude awakenings, and since it happens directly following her thoughts about La Llorona and La Gritona, it reflects her harsh insight: women are sorrowful because they are mourning the death of their own selves and their ideals. In her essay, "Haunting the Borderlands: La Llorona in Sandra Cisneros' 'Woman Hollering Creek,'" Jacqueline Doyle claims that Cleofilas could become yet another La Llorona, but she avoids this fate. Doyle argues, "As Cisneros renews la Llorona's story and rewrites her fate, she releases her to leave her unfaithful and abusive husband and to take her children away with her--to choose life instead of death and to cross the river instead of remaining eternally trapped on its banks." Doyle correctly believes that Cleofilas has faced a moment of crisis, and that the abuse is actually liberating for her. Because it shakes loose her romantic notions, she chooses to take an active, aggressive stance in her life, rather than be limited like so many women of the town. Notice that her first friends are Soledad and Dolores: solitude and sorrow. But by the end of the story, she has rejected La Llorona for the more active La Gritona, and her accomplices are Felice and Graciela, good fortune and grace. Cleofilas' laughter as she travels over the bridge is a cry of freedom, a powerful expression of self that she only now can express as she frees herself from both her husband and the romantic illusions that have suppressed her.

Notice that this complete, fully-developed paragraph is 20 sentences long, much more informative than an anemic 3 or 4 sentence paragraph. It helps readers both with my opinions and with examples from the primary text (Cisneros) and a secondary research text. Some paragraphs in my essay will be shorter than this one, but many will be as fully developed as this is.

Works Cited
