CTC Tips and Strategies: Writing Strong Paragraphs

A paper may have more than adequate information, but if the ideas within it are not arranged in clear, logical groupings, the effectiveness of the paper will suffer. One of the easiest and most effective ways of imposing logic and coherence to a paper is by constructing thoughtful paragraphs. Tying ideas together into discrete units is not always a simple concept, however, so use the following thoughts and guidelines to help evaluate whether you have constructed successful paragraphs.

1. **Functions of a paragraph**
   - Develops a unit of thought as stated in topic sentence
   - Provides a logical break in material
   - Creates a visual break on the page

2. **Functions of a topic sentence**
   - States the main idea of the paragraph
   - Presents a central topic to which the rest of the paragraph should stay focused.

3. **When to start a new paragraph**
   - When subject matter significantly changes
   - A good rule of thumb is to keep paragraphs under twelve lines long.
   - Look for any long paragraphs and try splitting them into two. (Remember that a transitional word or phrase may be necessary.)

4. **Characteristics of a good paragraph**
   - Unity – singleness of purpose
   - Coherence – one point of view, one attitude, one tense
   - Focus – a strong topic sentence and supporting evidence
   - Flow – transitioning from one sentence to the next, leading the reader from familiar to new information

5. **Ways to order information within a paragraph**
   - Time – chronologically
   - Space – a location or scene
   - Climax – build toward a conclusion
   - Order of Importance – from least to most or most to least important

6. **How to provide solid transitions**
   - A judicious repetition of keywords can help tie ideas together.
   - A one-sentence paragraph may be acceptable if used to transition between larger paragraphs
   - The following words and phrases can help to provide effective transitioning:

Concepts and Relationships	Transitional Words or Phrases
addition	also, and, finally, first (second, etc.), in addition, likewise, similarly
comparison	in the same way, likewise, similarly
contrast	although, but, however, in contrast, on the other hand, yet
illustration	for example, for instance, in other words, to illustrate
cause-effect	as a result of, because, consequently, hence, so, therefore, thus
time or space	above, earlier, later, next, to the right (left, west, etc.), soon, then
summary or conclusion	at last, finally, in conclusion, to conclude, to summarize

Note: This handout was adapted from Technical Communication, 6th Edition, 2001, by Mike Markel, published by Bedford/St Martin's Press, Boston.