

CHAPTER 3

PRINCIPLES OF ARMY WRITING STYLE

- CHAPTER OBJECTIVE: When you have completed this lesson, you should be able to perform the following tasks.
- TASK: Apply the principles of Army writing to improve your writing effectiveness.
- CONDITION: You will be given several questions regarding the rules of Army writing. You may use the instructional content of this lesson.
- STANDARD: You must accurately identify the principles of Army writing and how they apply to writing effectively.
- REFERENCES: *AR 25-50, Preparing and Managing Correspondence* and *DA Pamphlet 600-67, Effective Writing for Army Leaders*.

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1. INTRODUCTION. At various times soldiers will have to communicate their intention through writing. Putting our thoughts on paper is important, but just as important is to ensure that what we have written clearly communicates our intentions. Our understanding of "how to" organize our thoughts into coherent sentences and paragraphs can help ensure that we communicate clearly. The objective of this lesson, then, is to help you as a writer sharpen your understanding of the Army writing style by briefly reviewing the structure and function of word groups (phrases, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs) to assist you in writing effectively.

2. PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE STYLE.

- a. Accuracy.* Your work should represent only essential and accurate facts free of bias or distortion.
- b. Brevity and completeness.* You must keep to essentials. Your writing should be brief and to the point. To cover a subject completely, while keeping the length of the paper to the absolute minimum requires careful analysis and probably several revisions. If necessary, attach explanatory facts and figures as annexes. The shorter your paper, the less your chance for error. On the other hand, never sacrifice clarity to gain brevity.
- c. Clarity.* You must make a special effort to keep your writing clear and fully understandable. Your readers must be certain of your intent. Select words and phrases that express your exact meaning and can only have one interpretation. Using familiar, precise words contributes to clarity in writing.
- d. Coherence.* Coherence is the logical development and arrangement of a subject. You can achieve coherence by first thinking the subject through and seeing it as a whole, then arranging the various parts logically and harmoniously. When writing on a complex subject, use an outline to achieve coherence.
- e. Unity.* Your writing must adhere to a single idea. You should apply this principle not only to each sentence and paragraph but also to your entire paper. If you have more than one subject to discuss, prepare a separate paper on each subject.

3. PUT YOUR BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT.

- a. The purpose statement.* Open with a short, clear purpose sentence. The purpose statement is not the same as the bottom line. It only tells the reader what to expect when reading the paper. A purpose statement does not tell the reader the conclusion(s) the writer draws.
- b. Thesis.* The bottom line or thesis statement tells your reader what it is you consider important. Put the recommendation, conclusion, or most important information (the main point) next. (Some writers combine the purpose and the main point.) The Army standard for writing requires putting the main point up front and using the active voice. It is best to capture your bottom line in a single sentence that is clear and easy to understand. Being able to state your thesis in a single sentence indicates that you have a good understanding of your subject. After you have stated your bottom line and explained it in the first paragraph, you are free to support your thesis. For example:

Purpose: It is the purpose of this paper to discuss creating a fair and democratic electoral system for Haiti.

Thesis: The proposed changes to the Haitian electoral system will ensure fair and democratic elections.

c. *Major parts.* Introduce the major parts right after your thesis statement. This tells the reader how you will develop support for your position.

4. CLEAR AND CONCISE SENTENCES. A sentence consists of an arrangement of words to transmit a thought. The words you select, their clarity, conciseness, and how you arrange them directly affects whether your audience will understand your message. A clear and logical sentence is one that has both coherence and unity. A concise sentence expresses an idea with as few words as possible. Your written (and spoken) communication must be clear, direct, and understandable. The following guidelines will help you communicate clearly.

a. *Choose effective words and phrases.* The words and phrases you choose directly affects the clarity and conciseness of each sentence. As you select the words and phrases for each sentence ask yourself, "Do these words and phrases effectively say what I want? Would my reader understand them?" If you can't answer yes, then you need to re-examine what you are trying to say.

(1) Use concrete words. Concrete words are easy to understand because they relate to the five senses. For example, the term M16A2 is meaningful to a military audience because it represents an object that you can see, feel, and use. Abstract words, on the other hand, are hard to understand because they fail to recall experiences of the five senses. Some language experts describe words in terms of an abstraction ladder.

(a) The lower rungs of the ladder represent objects the reader can readily identify. They are concrete words.

(b) As you go up the ladder, each word becomes more abstract than the one below. At the same time, the meaning becomes vague and open to debate. Such a ladder might look like this:

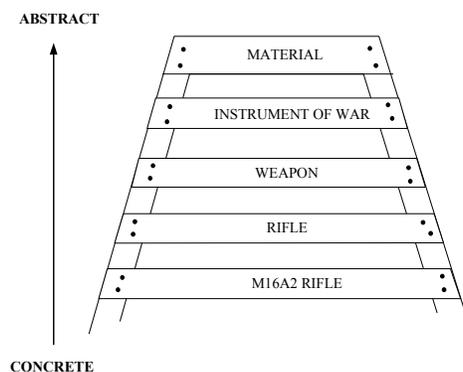


Figure 3 –1. Abstraction ladder.

(2) Use common words. You will find that it is harder to write "gobbledygook" than simple language because you must translate common words into uncommon, impressive sounding words. Many writers use "gobbledygook" because they believe it adds dignity to their writing.

Gobbledygook is a catchword meaning that the writer uses (a) 100 words to say what could be said in 20; (b) words that are unfamiliar to the reader, (c) words of three or four syllables when simpler words convey the same idea; (d) military jargon or overworked phrases; (e) long and involved sentences; (f) foreign expressions; and (g) jumbled, unrelated, illogical ideas.

Gobbledygook: Illumination is required to be extinguished upon vacating these premises.

Improved: Turn out the lights when you leave.

Gobbledygook: Hegemony is a basic characteristic of a good officer.

Improved: Leadership is a basic characteristic of a good officer.

Gobbledygook: An Army career offers you the opportunity to peregrinate in foreign countries.

Improved: An Army career offers you the opportunity to travel in foreign countries.

(3) Use familiar words. Some words cover such a broad field that the reader is unable to decide what you mean. Avoid vague, ambiguous words or ideas that obscure your topic. Consider the following example where unrelated and distant words and ideas hide the real meaning.

Wordy: These chapters on tests and measurements are presented with the hope they will enable you to make full utilization of correct procedures and techniques. It is believed that you will find them of practical value in the event that you are called upon to administer tests or to interpret in the field the scores resulting from tests.

The following rewrite of these two sentences clarifies the message by eliminating the unrelated and distant words and ideas.

Improved: In these chapters, we will teach you how to give tests and interpret test scores.

You improve the clarity by finding the word that precisely expresses your thought. For example, consider the distinction between rebellion and revolution. The two words are similar but different. Rebellion describes resistance to or defiance of any authority, control, or tradition which may or may not result in change. Revolution, on the other hand, describes a forcible overthrow of a government or a complete, usually radical change in something that occurs relatively quickly. Another comparison can be made between the words practicable and practical. Practicable applies only to that which is capable of being put into practice. Practical, as opposed to theoretical, means sensible when applied to persons, efficient when applied to things. The building of a pontoon bridge across a body of water might be practicable (it could be done), but it would not be practical (sensible) unless it were the most efficient method of connecting the two shores.

(4) Avoid wordiness. Use words that have meaning to your audience. Often our writing is cluttered with words that add nothing. We use words that could be omitted; we use phrases when a word would do. Learn to recognize this "excess baggage" and delete it from your writing. Following are three wordy sentences with examples showing how you can improve them.

Wordy: I contemplate inaugurating a reorganization of my company in the near future.

Improved: I intend to reorganize my company soon.

<i>Wordy:</i>	In every instance wherein a change is necessary in a one-page pamphlet, the change will be accomplished by a republication of the pamphlet.
<i>Improved:</i>	When changes are necessary in one- or two-page pamphlets we will republish the pamphlets.
<i>Wordy:</i>	Needless to say, the discarded desk will be repaired in each instance.
<i>Improved:</i>	We will repair each discarded desk.

(5) Avoid stilted words and phrases. Some words or phrases are used so exclusively in writing that they have an artificial, stilted flavor; while you may need to use such words occasionally, try to find plain common terms instead. Compare the following examples:

<u>Stilted</u>	<u>Clear</u>
Accordingly ..., consequently ...	And so ...
Hence ..., thus ...	Therefore ...
Moreover ...	Now ..., next ...
That is to say ...	That is, ...

(6) Avoid overworked words and phrases. Some words and phrases have become trite and tiresome. Ordinary and simple words attract by their simplicity and naturalness. Look for fresh but common words that clearly communicate. Notice the difference between the following expressions.

<u>Trite</u>	<u>Fresh/Common</u>
Makes provision for ...	Does ...
The fullest possible extent ...	The most ...
For the reason that ...	Since ...
Inasmuch as ...	Since ...
In the event that ...	If ...
On the basis of ...	By ...

(7) Don't bury your verbs. Verbs are relation-showing words. They show action (we go), state (he became), feeling (she likes), or existence (you are). A buried verb is one that has been hidden in other words. Buried verbs decrease the forcefulness of your writing while increasing the potential for misunderstanding. If you free these verbs, they will add force to your writing. We bury verbs by adding the endings *ance*, *ent*, *al*, *ing*, *ed*, *tion*, *sion*, and *age*. Consider the following example:

The need for *investigation* of the sounds became *apparent* to them.

In this example the buried verbs are *investigate* in *investigation* and *appear* in *apparent*. If we free the buried verbs, we might write the sentence as follows:

The need to *investigate* the sounds *appeared* to them.

Since the sentence is still awkward, we might say:

Better: They *saw* that they needed to *investigate* the sounds.

Best: They *saw* that they should *investigate* the sounds.

b. Make sentences clear, concise, and logical. Limit each sentence to a single thought. A sentence that includes several unrelated ideas connected by words like “*and*” and “*so*” is hard to understand.

- Vague:* The following individuals failed to make a qualifying score with the M16 rifle, so this course will be repeated during the last half of the current training cycle, and their schedules should be changed to include this instruction.
- Clear:* The following people failed to qualify with the M16 rifle. They will repeat this course during the last half of the training cycle.

Arrange your words and phrases to convey your exact meaning. You do not need to be a grammarian to recognize illogical sentence structure. Use common sense. When you have written a statement, ask yourself, "Is the meaning of the sentence clear when I read it rapidly?" If you can't answer "Yes," the sentence needs rewriting.

(1) Avoid misused modifiers. Modifiers, whether they are words or phrases, should be near the words they modify. If you use modifiers carelessly, you will confuse your reader. There are three general types of misused modifiers: dangling modifiers, misplaced modifiers, and ambiguous modifiers. Any of the three will lead to confusion, as shown in the following examples.

(a) Dangling modifier:

- Dangling:* Driving quickly through the cane fields, the two positions were seized by the 21st Infantry. (Driving cannot logically modify positions.)
- Should be:* Driving quickly through the cane fields, the 21st Infantry seized the two positions.

(b) Misplaced modifier:

- Misplaced:* Every soldier cannot become a general. (Modifies can become.)
- Clear:* Not every soldier can become a general. (Modifies every.)
- Misplaced:* Only the tank contained 2 gallons of gas. (Modifies tank.)
- Clear:* The tank contained only 2 gallons of gas. (Modifies 2.)

(c) Ambiguous modifier:

- Ambiguous:* Inspectors will report any unauthorized use or misuse of equipment. (Unauthorized modifies both use and misuse.)
- Should be:* Inspectors will report any misuse or unauthorized use of equipment.
- Ambiguous:* All damaged equipment and scrap will be turned in to the property disposal officer on Friday. (Damaged modifies both equipment and scrap.)
- Should be:* All scrap and damaged equipment will be turned in to the property disposal officer on Friday.

(2) Watch for faulty pronoun references. A pronoun should be placed as near as possible to its antecedent so that no intervening word is mistaken for the antecedent. If necessary repeat the antecedent to prevent misunderstanding. Further, pronouns should agree in number with the nouns to which they refer.

Confusing: The sniper followed the scout into the woods, where he shot him. (Scout would probably be mistaken for the antecedent.)

Should be: The sniper followed the scout into the woods and shot him.

Confusing: Although we have three types of divisions, its headquarters are essentially the same. (The word “its” should agree with the antecedent types.)

Should be: Although we have three types of divisions, their headquarters are essentially the same.

(3) Use parallel construction to tie parallel thoughts together. Use the same grammatical structure to express parallel ideas.

Not parallel: The property officer is responsible for issuing supplies, maintenance of records, and must keep a reserve stock.

Should be: The property officer is responsible for issuing supplies, maintaining records, and keeping a reserve stock.

c. *Complete your sentences.* Some sentences are not understandable because an essential word or phrase is missing.

(1) Don't omit words in sentences which compare or contrast ideas.

Not comparable: The United States Air Force has more planes than any other country.

Should be: The United States Air Force has more planes than the air force of any other country.

(2) Don't omit parts of compound verbs of more than one tense. Two different verb forms may be required if your sentence uses more than one tense.

Omission: Infantry always has and always will be a deciding factor in battle.

Should be: Infantry always has been and always will be a deciding factor in battle.

(3) Don't omit necessary prepositions. Some prepositions are commonly used with certain other words to form idiomatic phrases; for example, bring to pass, addicted to, come by, and situated on. In writing, you must respect the relationships of these expressions if you are to avoid awkwardness and misunderstanding. When you have two or more such phrases in a sentence, use the correct preposition with each.

Omission: This headquarters is neither concerned nor interested in the proposed program.

Should be: This headquarters is neither concerned with nor interested in the proposed program.

d. *Write unified sentences.* A sentence needs both coherence and unity to be logical and clear. Unity exists when all parts of the sentence contribute to one clear idea or impression. A unified sentence is like a pane of clear glass; you look through it but are unaware of its existence. When an idea is not clear, the sentence becomes more like a wall than a pane of glass.

(1) Avoid mixed construction in sentences. Mixed construction often comes from using the wrong subject-verb relationship and from repeating an object or a conjunction.

(a) Wrong subject-verb relationship.

Mixed: Driving a car is both simple and will also give you much pleasure.

Should be: Driving a car is simple and pleasurable.

(b) Repeating an object.

Involved: The general said that if we hurried that we would catch up with the headquarters.

Should be: The general said that if we hurried, we would catch up with the headquarters.

(2) Use short sentences. Short sentences are easy to read because our eyes can pick them up with little effort. Such sentences are easy to understand and remember because they form clear thought patterns.

Lengthy: Military training teaches a soldier to stand straight and walk with his head up; this helps in future life because it becomes a habit, and so many people have the bad habit of walking stooped, which leads to poor health and poor appearance.

Short: Military training teaches a soldier to stand straight and walk with his head up. Good posture becomes habitual and leads directly to better health and appearance.

(a) How short should your sentences be? AR 25-50 states "The average length of a sentence should be about 15 words." You may feel that complex ideas cannot be adequately presented in such sentences. The *Reader's Digest* uses sentences which average fewer than 17 words. The *New Yorker* magazine, which has a reputation for relatively high literary quality, uses sentences that average 18 words.

(b) You should not limit all of your sentences to 15 words or less. If they are all short, your writing will be monotonous and childish. Vary the length of your sentences; otherwise, your reader will become tired of your style. Some sentences may be one word (for example, "Stop!"); others may total 25 or more words. Try to balance your sentences, though, so that the average length is about 15 words.

Monotonous: Back of the school building are barracks. The barracks are long, rambling, three-story buildings. Each building is divided into 12 rooms. Each room will accommodate 15 men.

Variety: The barracks located behind the school building are long, rambling, three-story buildings. These buildings are divided into 12 rooms, each of which will accommodate 15 soldiers.

e. Use the active voice. Strong sentences help sell your ideas. The heart of a strong sentence is an active, precise verb. The opposite is also true--a weak or wordy sentence contains a passive verb.

(1) The topic of active or passive voice in writing seems to create a lot of confusion. The problem is that many writers confuse *voice* with tense and conclude that passive voice always refers to the past while active voice refers to the present or future. ***Voice only shows whether the subject is performing the action (active voice) or receiving the action (passive voice).*** Active and passive voice never refers to tense but to action.

(2) You form the passive voice by using a form of the verb “to be” with the past participle of the main verb. First, the past participle’s endings are *-ed* or *-en*. Second, some form of the auxiliary verb ***“to be (am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been)*** will always precede the past participle.

Passive: It is believed by many soldiers that PVT Jones was driving when the truck was wrecked.

Active: Many soldiers believe that PVT Jones wrecked the truck.

Passive: Our flank was attacked by the enemy.

Active: The enemy attacked our flank.

f. The passive voice is appropriate for specific conditions. Military writers frequently overuse the passive voice in their correspondence. This is not to say that the passive voice is always wrong. There are specific times when the passive voice is more appropriate than the active voice. For example:

(1) When you place the emphasis on the action rather than the actor.

All men were inoculated against typhoid by the surgeon.

(2) To describe a condition where the actor is unknown or unimportant.

Every year, thousands of people are diagnosed as having cancer.

5. MEANINGFUL PARAGRAPHS. AR 25-50 states that "paragraphs which, with few exceptions, are no more than one inch deep."

a. *Organization of paragraphs.* You have several options for organizing your paragraphs. These include:

- Time.
- Space.
- General to particular or particular to general.
- Climax.
- Compare and contrast.
- Analysis and classification.
- Definition.
- Cause and effect.

(1) Time. A narrative paragraph records events in the order that they occurred.

Within an hour of departing the battalion base camp Bravo Company began receiving enemy fire. Captain Jones, monitoring the Bravo Company report alerted his Alpha Company platoons and directed them to move on order to a rendezvous point north of the perimeter. He instructed his weapons platoon to orient its 81-millimeter orders in Bravo Company’s direction and be ready to provide support as directed. Finally, Captain Jones directed the two platoons with him to move north toward the same rendezvous point.

(2) Space. A paragraph that describes something often uses space as the organizing principle. When you describe the layout of the Alpha Company office you would organize it in some spatial order, from east to west, from bottom to top, from near to far, and the like.

Using available maps Lieutenant Chandler constructed a sand model outlining the most prominent terrain features and the patrol objective. The model showed the routes of advance on Noname Ridge and withdrawal along with the known characteristics of the objective area.

(3) General to particular or particular to general. A general to particular pattern describes the paragraph that begins with a general statement topic sentence, followed by sentences supporting the general statement with details, examples, and evidence. A paragraph may reverse this order by beginning with a particular statement followed by general statements.

General to particular: Disaster is rarely as universal as it seems from media reports. The fact of it being on record makes it appear continuous and wide-ranging whereas it is more likely to have been sporadic in time and place. One would expect that the Northridge, California earthquake had devastated the San Fernando valley forcing thousands of people from their homes and businesses. The fact is only a relatively few people had to move. The majority went about their daily activities as though nothing had happened.

Particular to general: When people get frustrated about crime in their neighborhood and in their schools it is natural for them to look around for somebody to blame. I suppose this is bearable as long as we purge ourselves of the idea that these problems are susceptible to local politics. They are not. They are real, and in spite of what you may hear in the next few weeks changing political leaders will not resolve the problems. You can't vote the problems out of office.

(4) Climax. You can often make your paragraph more effective by arranging details and examples in order of increasing importance.

York was charged by six German soldiers who came at him with fixed bayonets. He drew a bead on the sixth man, fired, and then on the fifth. He worked his way down the line, and before he knew it, the first man was all by himself. York killed him with a single shot.

(5) Comparison and contrast. Some ideas naturally lend organization by comparison and contrast. Consider the following topic sentences:

PVT Jones is a natural soldier; I am a natural nonsoldier.

Foreign wines have their virtues, but if we compare them carefully to our American wines, we'll choose the American.

(6) Analysis and classification. Analysis takes things apart. Classification groups things together.

Analysis: How much can you change the character of a problem soldier? What if a soldier comes from an environment where the parents themselves set a bad example or the soldier received little education? What about a soldier from a neighborhood where accepted conduct is lying and stealing. These norms became instilled as values while he was growing up. Lying to authority, "getting over," "shamming," and taking advantage of "the system" are normal behavior to this soldier. He is undependable and irresponsible; he lacks self-discipline. Can this soldier change?

Classification: American military professionals do not fight to force our political system on others or to gain power or wealth. Professional soldiers are protectors of the ideals of America, willing to fight for these ideals so that others can live in a free and just society. To do this, they must be experts in battle. The military professional who deeply values loyalty to the nation sees himself as a person who will always do his best to defend American ideals.

(7) Definition. Definition sets limits within which a topic or term is used, especially in dealing with abstract issues.

Providing purpose gives soldiers a reason why they should do difficult things under dangerous, stressful circumstances. You must establish priorities, explain the importance of missions, and focus soldiers on the task so that they will function in an efficient and a disciplined manner.

(8) Cause and effect. Whenever you discuss the causes of a problem and the effects that result you employ cause and effect organization.

Stress is the body's response to a demand placed on it. The demands may be physical (cold, injury, disease) or mental (fear, conflict, pressure). Stress also occurs when soldiers think they cannot meet the demands they expect to face.

b. *Paragraph development.* The following five guidelines will help you write effectively.

(1) Limit each paragraph to a single topic. Don't break up your writing into an endless series of paragraphs treating minor ideas. Build each paragraph around a central idea and limit the information to what your reader needs. Three or four fully developed key ideas are more easily remembered than six or eight half-expressed ideas.

(2) Begin the paragraph by telling what it is about. One way to do this is to use a name (topical heading) for the paragraph. Whether you use a topic heading or a full sentence will normally depend on the style you have selected for your paper. The text should begin with a topic sentence that states your main idea or that gives introductory information about the subject.

(3) Add supporting thoughts and data. Following the introductory portion of the paragraph, add the supporting thoughts and data that you have on the topic. Say all you have to say about the topic in one paragraph; while you may later refer to or draw conclusions about the topic, you should not scatter the discussion throughout a series of paragraphs.

(4) Progress from one part of your paragraph to the next. Help your reader to follow you by shifting or rephrasing sentences until each thought leads easily to the next. Use pronouns that refer to antecedents in the previous sentences. Show connection by introducing sentences with such words as however, therefore, or now. Below are other transitional words and phrases for unifying your paper.

To Show

Addition
Cause or result
Comparison
Concession
Explanation
Repetition

Use

Besides, second, further, likewise, moreover
For this reason, on that account, therefore, and so, under these conditions, as a result
In the same way, similarly, likewise
Naturally, of course, although
For example, in particular, specifically
In fact, in other words, obviously

(5) Use the final sentence in a paragraph for emphasis. The concluding sentence in a paragraph of several sentences will often summarize the paragraph. In a paragraph the first and last portions are the most emphatic. If the paragraph is complex, the last sentence should mirror the key information which you set forth in your topic sentence. Figure 3-2 illustrates the techniques discussed in the preceding paragraphs.

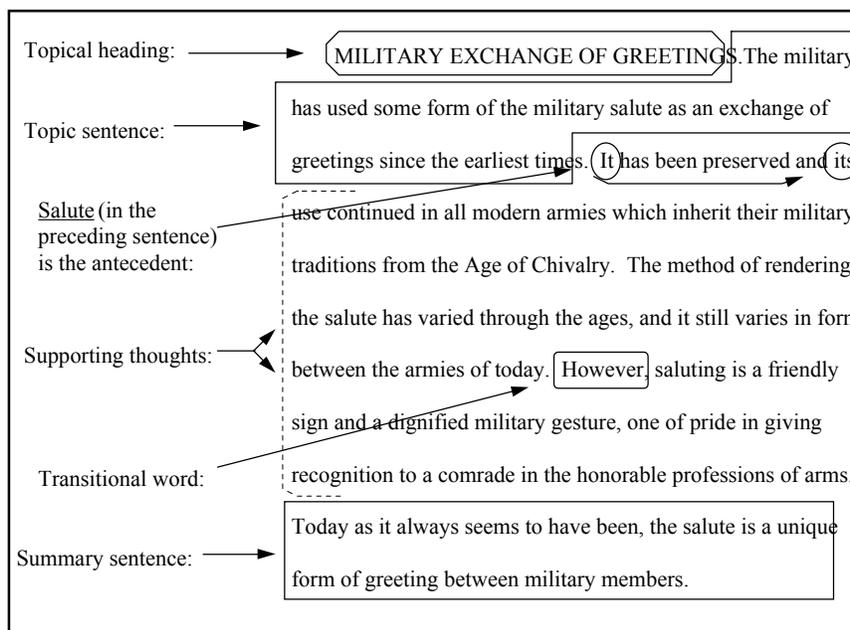


Figure 3-2. A well-organized paragraph.

c. *Logical arrangement of paragraphs.* A simple, easy flow of ideas is necessary if you are to get your message across. Arrange your paragraphs so that each paragraph will prepare the reader for what is to come.

(1) The text of military writing, regardless of its detailed format, is usually made up of three elements--the introductory portion, the body, and the closing or action portion. Think of these three elements as a working breakdown to show the general relationship of your paragraphs to one another.

(a) Your initial paragraph (or paragraphs) tells what the writing is about; it may state a problem, describe the purpose of the paper, or give background on a subject. It may cite governing directives or otherwise show the authority for the paper. Your introductory paragraph should be short and to the point; it should tell your reader what to expect and why you have written the paper.

(b) The body consists of one or more paragraphs. Regardless of its exact arrangement or the number of paragraphs, the body is the place where you state your case. Facts, criteria, and related data are usually presented first; an analysis of the facts and an explanation of your views then follow.

(c) In the closing or action portion, you should recommend a specific line of action or summarize the important points of the paper. If the paper is a directive to lower units, use this portion to set a date for completed action.

(2) As you develop each paragraph, make sure it is consistent with the intended organization of your paper. Be slow to make changes in the tentative outline; think each change through to make sure that its adoption does not upset the overall pattern or omit vital information. If a better presentation will result, change your outline even though you must rewrite other portions. If your outline is well organized, the relationship of each paragraph to the whole paper will be easy to understand.

(3) Briefly review each paragraph as you write. Is the meaning clear? Do the thoughts flow naturally from one paragraph to the next? If not, rework your paragraphs until they satisfy you. However, don't try to give the paper a final review until you have finished it.