

Advanced
B2
Progression

Paragraphs: General to Specific

This lesson will help you practice how to move from the general to the specific in a paragraph.

In Advanced Lesson B1, we focused on **how to write a paragraph so it moves from the specific to the general.**

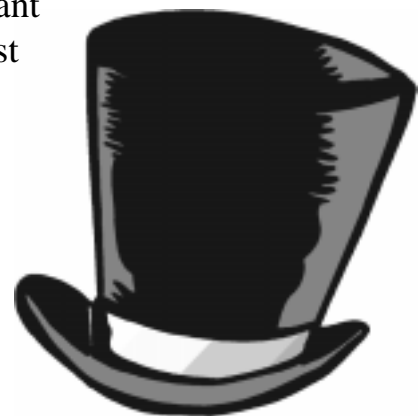
You do not have to be a genius—although you are—to figure out that this lesson will be about **how to write a paragraph which moves from the general to the specific.**

Why bother? Other than for variety (which is a very good reason) why would you write a paragraph from general to specific rather than from specific to general?

Flip back to the two principles on page 33. Remember that specific-to-general writing has a “why” as well as a “how.” You go from specific to general when you need to get details in front of your readers promptly and when you want your writing to be more concrete and literal.

By contrast, in this paragraph about Abraham Lincoln, notice how the writer moves from the general to the specific. (The topic sentence is in *italics*.)

An important insight into Lincoln’s character is the way in which he valued the printed word. This comes out vividly in his ambitious address, “Discoveries and Inventions.” On April 6, 1858, he delivered this before the Young Men’s Association of Bloomington, Illinois, and later, in a completely rewritten form, at Illinois College, at Decatur, and finally at Springfield. In this nonpolitical address Lincoln expressed the conviction that the written word was “the great invention of the world.” It was the great invention, he concluded, because it liberates mankind from the bondage of both the present and the local. “When writing was invented,” he said, “any important observation, likely to lead to a discovery, had at least a chance of being written down, and, consequently, a better chance of never being forgotten.” (1)



The paragraph **begins with a general observation**: “An important insight into Lincoln’s character is the way in which he valued the printed word.” The reader knows there are details to come. You can **sense the writer waiting to tell you more** about Lincoln’s respect for the printed word.

Remember: No matter where it comes in the paragraph, the topic sentence will usually be the most general sentence.

The generality at the beginning of the paragraph **gives you the big picture** and **sets you up to receive more specific information**. If the writer doesn’t follow through with the promised information, you feel cheated.

Principle: If you think your reader needs to see the big picture before you fill in the details, write from the general to the specific.

Secondary Principle: Writing from the general to the specific makes your work feel larger and more comprehensive.

The Lincoln paragraph feels large and comprehensive, but it’s hard to read about Lincoln *without* that sensation. Does the subject matter alone account for the sense of largeness, or does the paragraph structure contribute? Consider this general-to-specific paragraph about **a more frivolous subject**. The writer sets you up to anticipate some pretty weighty facts about raspberries and blackberries. (Topic sentence is in *italics*):

Even expert botanists have trouble trying to tell the numerous members of the raspberry and blackberry family apart. In fact, they can’t even agree how many varieties there are in the United States, the estimates varying from about 50 to 390, including the raspberries, the hordes of true blackberries, the cloudberries, baked-apple berries, salmonberries, dewberries, thimbleberries, and a lot more. Me, I don’t try to identify them all. I just eat them. (2)



Okay, your turn! **Compose a paragraph which moves from the general to the specific**. Be sure to first give your readers an overview or big picture of the specific information which will follow.