Chapter III.

PRINCIPLES OF CHOICE

So far as sentences considered by themselves are concerned, no one kind is, as a rule, better than another. In a given case, a good writer will prefer that kind which most closely fits his thought, and is best adapted to his purpose.

In a succession of sentences, a different principle comes in, — the principle of variety. To fill a page with sentences that are of about the same length, or that are fashioned after the same pattern, is a serious error. The best form of writing, if persisted in too long, becomes monotonous; and monotony gradually dulls attention, and in course of time kills interest. The most brilliant style, as every reader of Gibbon or of Junius knows, loses its effect when the brilliancy becomes a steady glare. To good writing, as to a good picture, shade is as important as light. Variety is the spice of life, and the life of style.

PART III.

PARAGRAPHS

PARAGRAPHS

Chapter I.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD PARAGRAPH

SENTENCES have thus far been mainly considered as if each stood by itself. They have still to be considered in the context, — that is, in their relations to one another, and in their relations to paragraphs, the larger wholes of which they form parts.

As the ideal sentence is that in which well-chosen words are so arranged that they constitute an effective whole, so the ideal paragraph is that in which well-constructed sentences are so arranged that they constitute an effective whole.

The ideal paragraph, like the ideal sentence, has five merits: —

1. It fulfils the requirements of good use: it has CORRECTNESS.
2. It is easy to understand: it has CLEARNESS.
3. It is so framed as to produce a strong impression on the reader: it has FORCE.
4. It is so framed as to be agreeable to the ear: it has EASE.
5. It deals with but one subject, and treats it from but one point of view: it has UNITY.

In a paragraph which possesses these merits, each sentence is as closely connected with every other as the nature of language permits, and all the sentences taken together are practically one in form and in substance.

We have, then, to consider (1) how to arrange and connect sentences in a paragraph; and (2) what a paragraph is, in itself, and in its relations with other paragraphs.

Chapter II.

SENTENCES IN A PARAGRAPH

From Sentence to Sentence. — A paragraph should be so constructed as to enable a reader to get from sentence to sentence with as little friction as possible.

I.	II.
Just as I was pulling on my boots the nine o'clock bell rang. "There!" I cried, "that serves me right for lying abed."	The nine o'clock bell rang just as I was pulling on my boots. "There," I said, "that serves me right for lying in bed!"

The first sentence under II. is so framed as to connect the act of "pulling on my boots" with the exclamation "There!" in the second sentence, whereas the exclamation was really called out by the sound of the bell.

I.	II.
Though Lausanne is the capital of the Canton of Vaud, it is a small place. Small as it is, it tries to appear even smaller.	Lausanne is a small place though it is the capital of the Canton of Vaud. It is small and yet it tries to appear even smaller.

By ending the first sentence with "small place" and beginning the second with "Small," we bind the two sentences together.

I.	II.
We are near one end of the lake, and at the extreme left the hill approaches nearest to the point of observation. In that spot it is almost dark, and nothing can be distinguished.	We are near one end of the lake, and at the extreme left the hill approaches nearest the point of observation. It is almost dark in that spot and nothing can be distinguished.

By beginning the second sentence with "In that spot," we put those words first which are most closely connected with the first sentence.

I.	II.
Before Richardson, every American architect had built his houses with so many sharp angles, hard straight lines, and flat surfaces, that our architecture threatened to become as formal as the lifeless crystals of rock caverns. Of this harsh style the Hemenway Gymnasium is a very good example.	Before Richardson every American architect had built his houses of nothing but sharp angles, hard straight lines, and flat surfaces until our architecture threatened to become as formal as the lifeless crystals of rock caverns. A very good example of this harsh style is to be seen in the Hemenway Gymnasium.

"Of this harsh style" points back to the first sentence. Other examples are —

I.	II.
Whenever the singing at church had been unusually good, the singers were, a few nights later, packed into a sleigh in charge of some jolly tutor, and allowed to use their voices with less restraint than usual. One of those choir sleigh-rides is the pleasantest and at the same time the saddest memory of my school-days. By this time a few flakes of snow were falling, and it was growing colder. Chilled by the long drive, and hungry as well, we were so quiet when we entered Southbridge that we did not have to be called to order by the tutor, as we usually were when going through a town.	Whenever the singing at church was unusually good, the singers were a few nights later packed into a sleigh in charge of some jolly tutor, and allowed to use their voices with less restraint than usual. The pleasantest and at the same time the saddest memory of my school-days is one of those choir sleighrides. By this time a few flakes of snow were falling, and it was growing colder. The tutor always called the boys to order when we passed through towns; but being hungry, and chilled by the long drive, we were quite orderly when we entered Southbridge.

I.

In the words of Carl Schurz, Henry Clay did not try "to trim his sail to the wind, to truckle to the opinions of others, to carry water on both shoulders." To this cause his lack of success may be chiefly attributed.

II.

Henry Clay did not try, to use the words of Schurz, "to trim his sail to the wind, to truckle to the opinion of others, to carry water on both shoulders." His lack of success may be attributed chiefly to this cause.

A sentence should grow out of the sentence which comes before it and into that which comes after it. The first part should look backward, the last part forward.

I.

To an American who has read "Tom Brown at Rugby," the relations between the boys and the masters at St. Peter's would be a surprise. In this school the whole scheme of moral and intellectual training rests on the fact that the traditional "antagonism between teacher and pupil" does not exist.

Sometimes the monotony of school life was varied by holidays given to the boys as a reward for good behavior. This reward of merit came often to the church choir (to which I had the good fortune to belong) in the shape of sleigh-rides and suppers.

II.

To an American who has read "Tom Brown at Rugby," the relations between the boys and masters at St. Peter's would be a surprise. None of the old-time "antagonism between teacher and pupil" exists: and on this fact the whole scheme of moral and intellectual training rests.

Sometimes the monotony of school life was varied by holidays, granted to the boys as a reward for good behavior. I had the good fortune to belong to the church choir, — good fortune I call it because the choir was often treated to sleighrides and suppers.

In these passages as originally written, there is nothing in the second sentence which clearly indicates that it has any connection with the first. The words "In this school" and "This reward of merit" supply the missing links.

I.

There can be little doubt that the time will come when immigration into this country must be further restricted; but there are, in my opinion, two strong reasons why that time is not yet come, — a positive and a negative one. The positive reason is, that the immigrants are a direct gain to the country, for they are necessary to develop its industries and its resources. The negative reason is, that the immigrants are not harmful to American institutions, and do not compete injuriously with the American laborer.

II.

There can be little doubt that the time will come when immigration into this country must be further restricted, but there are, in my opinion, two strong reasons why that time has not yet come. There is a positive argument and a negative argument. The immigrants are a direct gain to this country; and while their presence is necessary to develop its industries and its resources, they are not harmful to American institutions, nor do they compete injuriously with the American laborer.

In this passage as originally written, the second sentence has no apparent connection with what precedes or with what follows. To make the connection of thought plain, it is necessary to make several changes in arrangement and to supply missing links.

I.

A few days ago, great consternation was created in our neighborhood by the unaccountable behavior of a strange dog, — a great shaggy animal, that made his first appearance one afternoon as it was growing dark. For some time he stood in the street, howling mournfully, and then walked slowly and sadly round the corner and out of sight. While he was uttering his ghostly howls, the old women who live in

II.

Great consternation was caused in our neighborhood a few days ago by the unaccountable behavior of a strange dog. One afternoon as it was growing dark the great shaggy animal appeared, stood howling mournfully in the street for some time, then walked slowly and sadly out of sight around the corner. Directly across the street from our house is a "Home for Aged Women." While the dog was uttering his

I.

the "Home for Aged Women," opposite our house, stood at the windows watching him.

II.

ghostly unreasonable howls the old women stood at the windows watching.

In this passage as originally written, every sentence stands apart from every other. To make the connection of thought plain, it is necessary to change the order of words in almost every line and to reconstruct every sentence.

I.

Railroads are subject not only to a very loose kind of federal supervision but also to the laws of the forty-four States. As their interests are secured through legislation, they are, of necessity, in politics.

Mere assent to propositions signifies very little; for propositions do not put a man's heart in the right place. What we want is not right thinking, but right action; not creeds, but life.

When dogma is completely withdrawn, every form of religion falls to the ground. Dogma is the bone and sinew of religion.

II.

Railroads are of necessity in politics. Their interests are secured through legislation. They are subject not only to a very loose kind of Federal supervision but also to the laws of the 44 states.

What we want is right action, not right thinking — life, not creeds. It signifies very little to assent to propositions; they do not put a man's heart in the right place.

Dogma is the bone and sinew of any form of religion. When it is completely withdrawn, every religion falls to the ground.

In these passages as originally written, the serious fault is that there is no real progress from sentence to sentence. In the passages as amended there is an evolution of thought; both in fact and in appearance, the sentences form a climax.[1]

Change in Point of View. — A writer should never change his point of view without good reason.

[1] See pages 249–252.

I.

Attacking Massana next day, Walker gained the first plaza. When, however, he perceived that he could not, without great loss of life, get possession of the other plazas by assault, he began a regular and slow approach.

II.

The next day Walker attacked Massana, and gained the first plaza. But to get possession in a like manner of the other plazas would have necessitated great loss of life. Recognizing this, he began a regular and slow approach.

In this passage as originally written, the subject of the first sentence is "Walker," of the second "to get possession," etc., and of the third "he," — that is, Walker again. By forcing the reader to change his point of view twice, this arrangement imposes unnecessary labor upon him.

Other examples are —

I.

Walter Camp's story in yesterday's "Globe" gave me a new and favorable impression of this great Yale authority on foot-ball. It was happy in the blending of entertainment with instruction, excellent in purpose and with an excellent moral. If it be true that a man must have in himself the qualities he portrays, it follows that the qualities of honor and uprightness of purpose, so marked in the hero of Walter Camp's story, must be in Walter Camp. He is, it is manifest, much more than an athlete: he is a man.

II.

I obtained a new and favorable impression of Walter Camp, the great Yale authority on football, from his story in yesterday's Globe. The ability to write a story with such an excellent purpose, such a good moral, such a happy blending of entertainment and instruction, requires in the author the possession of the qualities he portrays. Expression is the correlative of impression. A man cannot express what is not in himself. Therefore the qualities of honor and uprightness of purpose which were so marked in the hero of Walter Camp's story, must be in Walter Camp himself. It is plainly evident that he is a man, not only an athlete but a man.

I.

Landing near San Juan del Sur, they made for two days and nights forced marches, through a pelting storm, over wretched roads. In all — including a small troop of native soldiers — they numbered one hundred and sixty-five men.

This little force marched on Rivas, which was held by six hundred men, made a brave charge, and drove the Serviles through the narrow streets of the town to the Plaza.

II.

Landing near San Juan del Sur they made for two days and nights forced marches through a pelting storm over wretched roads. With them hurried a small troop of native soldiers making in all a force of 165 men. Waiting their attack in Rivas were 600 men.

The Americans charged bravely and drove the Serviles through the narrow streets of the town to the Plaza.

These passages as originally written show the serious disadvantages of changing the point of view.

Make the transition FROM SENTENCE TO SENTENCE *as plain as possible.*

Beware of changing the POINT OF VIEW.

Chapter III.

PARAGRAPHS BY THEMSELVES AND IN SUCCESSION

What a Paragraph Should Contain. — One way of showing what a paragraph is, is to show what it is not.

Mr Darcy was invited by Mr Bingley to make him a visit at his place.

It happened that, early one morning, Elizabeth Bennet had taken a walk, and on her way had visited the Bingleys.

Here she met Mr Darcy, and at first sight took a dislike to him.

She took cold on account of her walk and was not able to go home for two days; so her sister came and took care of her.

The sister of Bingley wanted to marry Mr Darcy on account of his money, although she could not consider herself poor.

It seems that Mr Darcy was struck at the first sight by the handsome face of Elizabeth and Mr Bingley also was not slow to acknowledge that he liked Jane, Elizabeth's sister.

Soon after the malady was cured, the sisters returned home.

In a few days Mr Bennet invited Mr Darcy and Bingly to a dinner.

Here also Mr Darcy showed a desire for Elizabeths company.

At this time there was quatred at Longbourn a regiment.

This was a very pleasing addition to the pleasures of the Bennet's, for there was always some entertainiment going on, in which they generally took part.

A Mr Wickham made his appearance here in order to join the regiment.

He was very handsome, and could keep up a lively conversation so that he was liked by everyone, especially the Bennets.

One day Mr Darcy with Mr Bingley were riding through Longbourn when they met the Bennets who were with Mr Wickham. As soon as Wickham saw Darcy he turned colour and passed on. Elizabeth noticed this and related it to her sister and they two had a great amount of gossip over the event.