

3. Cindy wrote a funny letter to her grandmother.
- a) difficult
 - b) enjoyable
 - c) strange
 - d) serious
4. Tom went to an expensive restaurant last night.
- a) new and unknown
 - b) costing a lot of money
 - c) famous and stylish
 - d) extremely popular
5. Susan told a terrible joke to her sister.
- a) very surprising
 - b) extremely bad
 - c) funny and interesting
 - d) slow and boring

TEACHING NOTES

Downshifting: A Visual Technique for Teaching Paragraph Development

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Problem

One of the biggest problems in teaching paragraph writing, to nonnative and native speakers alike, is the concept of adequate development. Too often students write "paragraphs" of only one sentence, or of multiple but only loosely related sentences. We urge them to write a more general topic sentence and more specific supporting details, but what does this mean? Many international students, particularly Asians, are not familiar with writing in paragraph form and experience great difficulty in distinguishing general from specific.

Teaching Procedure

A concrete technique for teaching paragraph development that I have used for many years is constructed from the semanticist S. I. Hayakawa's "Ladder of Abstraction" (see Figure 1) and his concept of "downshifting" (Hayakawa & Hayakawa, 1990). To start students distinguishing between general and specific, I usually present word pairs such as the following, asking students to label the words in each as *General*, *Specific*, or *Equal*:

summer	clues	several	government	Koreans
season	fingerprints	many	democracy	Japanese

With the same instructions, I then present pairs of sentences:

The cause of poor health in this area can be traced to many factors.
One of the main causes has been termed the "Big Mac Attack."

Acceptable length of hair has probably caused the most discussion.
Significant changes in school policy have been introduced.

Propositions, of course, are more complex than nominal categories because the subject and predicate or different clauses can be at different levels of generality, but most students do not have difficulty with this exercise.

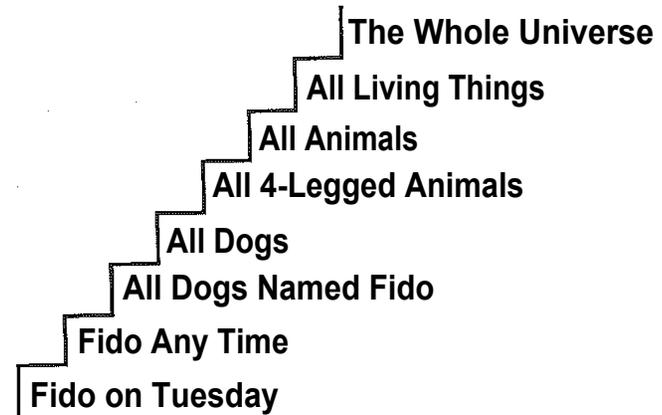


Figure 1. S. I. Hayakawa's Ladder of Abstraction. (Adapted from Hayakawa & Hayakawa, 1990, p. 85.)

Next is the ladder itself, which I draw on the board, eliciting student responses. I start with the most specific category, such as "Fido on Tuesday," and work up to the most general. I make the point that a good paragraph travels up and down this Ladder of Abstraction, with the topic sentence at a higher level than the supporting sentences. However, no paragraph could be adequately developed with a topic sentence from the top of the ladder, and a sentence from the bottom rung is probably too specific for most writing purposes. General and specific are clearly relative terms, to be adapted to the particular rhetorical situation. Also worth noting is that as we climb the ladder, the categories enlarge and their specific attributes decrease, which could explain the difficulty of trying to write specific and relevant supporting details for topic sentences near the top.

After drawing the ladder, I ask students to number the levels of generality of sentences in a sample paragraph, with a 1 for the most general (which should be the topic sentence), a 2 for a sentence which supports the topic sentence, a 3 for a sentence which further explains or gives an example, and so forth. Most good essay paragraphs have three levels, possibly more. Consensus on whether a given sentence is

Level 3 or 4 is less important than understanding the interplay between general and specific within a paragraph. With this numbering exercise I alert students to common signal words for the different levels, such as *reasons, types, main concerns* for Level 1; *first, second, third, moreover, likewise, however, or finally* for Level 2; and *specifically, for example, in other words, or as a result* for Level 3.

The sample paragraph I use most often for this purpose is a canned product about Jake's new job. It is very stilted, with far too many transitional words, but it is easy for students to work with and illustrates the point about sentence levels. I ask students to read and label the sentences in the Jake paragraph according to their level of generality (students write the numbers given below in parentheses).

(1) There are several reasons why Jake likes his new job. (2) To begin with, he now has more free time. (3) Specifically, he goes to work later in the morning and gets home earlier in the evening. (2) Furthermore, he now makes more money. (3) To be specific, his weekly paycheck has increased from \$75 to \$130. (2) Above all, he now has a better chance for advancement. (3) For instance, the skills that he is learning will help him to qualify for a much higher-paying position.

The next step is to send students home to number the sentence levels and rewrite a paragraph in one of their own rough drafts. I ask them to put a 1 by the topic sentence, a 2 by reasons why the topic sentence is true, and a 3 by examples, illustrations, or other specifics. The hope is that if they discover only 1s or even 1s and 2s in their paragraphs, they will realize that more supporting detail is needed. I often copy paragraphs from these drafts (without revealing the writers' identities) for the whole class to work on.

Results

I have used this downshifting technique for teaching paragraph development with good results for many years and at all levels, with both native and nonnative speakers. These levels include college upper division business and technical writing, regular and remedial freshman composition, and intermediate ESL classes (Levels 3 and 4) at the

American English Institute (AEI). It has worked particularly well for the 800-word argumentative essay required at the end of Level 4. Some of the ideas presented above may seem too sophisticated for less advanced students, but the technique can be used in simplified form, without presenting all its ramifications.

Here are some examples from Level 4 student essays written before and after the exposure to downshifting. In the first pair of revised paragraphs, the student has added details while making her topic sentences more specific and relevant to those details; in other words, she has moved everything lower on the abstraction ladder. (The student numbered the sentences herself; the second paragraph could have been split.)

(Before)

The teaching ways are the biggest difference from America and Taiwan. In America, the teachers encourage the students to speak and emphasis on the participation of the students in the class. At the same time, the American teachers like the students to ask questions because they hope the students can find the answers by themselves. However, in Taiwan, the teachers always give the answers to students. They ask the students to remember anything that they teach but don't care whether the students understand or not.

The teaching comments are different, too. In Taiwan, the teachers use the stiff, formulary, and stereotyped textbooks to teach the students. Not like the American teachers, they teach the students reading and writing with novels and some new articles. This method makes the students to know how to use their learning in really English writing.

(After)

(1) The teachers of the stress the students' participation in classes and encourage the students to talk about their opinions and ask any question since they hope the students can find what their problems and the answers are by themselves. (2) Thus, at the

A.E.I., every student must be often asked by these questions like "What is your opinion?" or "Why do you agree or disagree with this idea?" in any class. (1) On the contrary, my English classes in Taiwan are usually progressing in silence. (2) You only can hear the sound of the teacher in class, and find that the students always work hard to take notes, but not speak or ask questions. (3) Therefore, in the beginning, I am not used to speak in any A.E.I. class; however, now I enjoy this kind of teaching method which not only helps me to figure out my problems but also improves my speaking skills at the same time.

(1) Besides, reading material is one of the other differences between the A.E.I. and my English classes in Taiwan. (2) My Taiwanese teachers often use the stiff, formulary and stereotyped textbooks to teach the students about English reading. (2) Not like the reading and writing classes of A.E.I., the teachers use a mystery novel and some new articles. (3) I like this kind of reading material in reading and writing classes of the A.E.I. because it can attract me to read and show me how to use my learning in real English writings. (3) Moreover, in this reading material, you can learn not only a lot of useful words but also many daily conversations.

In the second example, the student, already an able writer, added a topic sentence at a higher level of generality to make it more relevant to the paragraph. (Again, the numbering is the student's own.)

(Before)

(2) American people always say to me, "What's up?" or "How are you doing?" every morning. (3) I can answer to a close friend such as roommates or classmates, but I'm always confused when asked by a person who is not so familiar. (4) If I say "good" or "not much," there will be no problem. (4) However, even if I feel bad or great, I can't say that because not so familiar acquaintances don't know about me, so it is very hard work to explain my condition and the reason of my condition from the beginning. (2) When Japanese people meet friends who are not so familiar, we

say only "Hi." (3) I think it is enough if the person who I meet is not so familiar. (4) We don't need to know each other's condition.

(After)

(1) American people always ask my condition in greetings even though they are not my familiar friends. (2) They always ask me "What's up?"....

Applications

The benefits of teaching students to distinguish between general and specific through the concept of downshifting are myriad. For many students, the visual aid of the abstraction ladder and the act of numbering sentences fit well with their learning modalities. Most obviously, with regard to writing, it can help them to create significant topic sentences and to develop these with adequate and relevant detail. It can help students understand paragraph unity and the need for transitions to show the relationships among supporting sentences. In the process, students come to see the whole essay as a macrocosm of paragraph structure and to write meaningful essays rather than a series of unrelated statements. Students who write the latter type of "essays" often cling, in Hayakawa's terms, to the upper rungs of the abstraction ladder.

But writing is not all that improves. By increasing students' abilities to separate main ideas from evidence, generalizations from supporting details, inference from fact, the technique increases their skills in reading, note-taking, and exam preparation. Last, but not least, it may help them separate the trees from the forest in their personal lives!

REFERENCE

Hayakawa, S. I., & Hayakawa, A. (1990). *Language in thought and action* (5th ed.). San Diego: Harcourt Brace.