

# Paragraphs and Propositions

This [cross-post](#) forms part of a series on the “[substance of the craft](#)” of scholarly writing on *Inframethodology* blog at the Copenhagen Business School Library. Inspired by [Wayne Booth](#) (co-author of *The Craft of Research*) and [Oliver Senior](#) (author of *How to Draw Hands*), **Thomas Basbøll** argues that composition is the coordination of [words and ideas](#), paragraphs and propositions, [sentences and the state of things](#). As such, paragraphs in academic writing form a particular picture of ‘the facts’ in order for which to make sense, potential readers must be able to imagine.

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“We picture facts to ourselves,” said Wittgenstein. And a thought, he explained, is a “logical picture of facts.”

Think for a moment of your hand. (You can take a look, of course, but the important thing for my purposes is that you think. If you have to close your eyes, that’s okay too.) The hand, Oliver Senior tells us, is “a familiar yet highly complex piece of physical mechanism which is almost infinitely adaptable in use.” Imagine your hand open, held out, perhaps, in greeting, or imagine your fist clenched in anger. Picture your hand in these positions. Now, imagine it picking up and holding a delicate instrument. Your hand, says Senior, is capable of “multitudinous individual variations of character as well as changes of appearance in its great range of different positions, actions and movements, yet always conforming to a recognisable standard pattern and subject to strict laws of its own structure.” You can picture it, right?

With a little practice you can learn to draw these pictures. When you become good at it, you can represent the hand in its full variety of positions, always in accordance with the laws of its structure. You learn to see the hand “objectively”, constrained (and enabled) in its movements by its physiology, its reality. Your drawings become increasingly “realistic” because each drawing can be traced back to a recognizable pattern, to which it conforms. Each drawing is logically compatible with the other drawings — it’s simply a transformation of the possibilities in the others. Unless you imagine that your hand is broken (which you are free to imagine if you dare), certain pictures are impossible, unimaginable, unthinkable.

“In a proposition a thought finds an expression that can be perceived by the senses,” said Wittgenstein. That is, a proposition expresses a logical picture of facts. “My hand is empty,” is a proposition. “My fist is clenched,” is another. (“My finger is broken,” is a third.) You can imagine my hand (or yours) in these situations. “Objects contain the possibility of all situations,” said Wittgenstein. “The possibility of its occurring in states of affairs is the form of an object.” We can represent these possible states of affairs (these possible facts) in pictures and in propositions. We can draw them or we can write them down.



In scholarly writing, we arrange propositions (expressions of thoughts, i.e., sentences) into [paragraphs](#) that together represent a situation, a state of affairs, a set of facts. They may be facts about a company, a country, or a current event. They may be facts about the state of the literature or the methods you have used to gather data. They may be very abstract facts about the concepts you have used to model reality. But in all cases, you are claiming that something is true and, importantly, that a great deal more is possible. A paragraph, like a picture of a hand, doesn't just confine itself to how things look right now, right here. A paragraph conforms to a "standard pattern" of reality so that the facts that are represented also imply the possibility (and impossibility) of other facts. The paragraph presents a logical picture of the facts; it expresses a series of thoughts about them. The reader must be able to [imagine](#) it.

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This underlying logic of paragraphs also has implications for their [arrangement](#). As readers pass from paragraph to paragraph, their imaginations are exposed to pictures of various facts. But these facts must conform to the pattern that is being established in the text. It must be possible to imagine what Hemingway called the "sequence of motion and fact" that brings us from one state of affairs to another, without breaking the bones, if you will, of the structure of the argument. (Of course, you can write a paragraph where those bones are explicitly broken if you need to. Now the reader will be able to imagine the painful contortions to come. Please remember to be as kind to your reader as you can.) Your concepts and objects will often be highly complex mechanisms, but they should be familiar to you, and they should become increasingly familiar to your reader. Every time you depict them in a paragraph, they should become easier to imagine.

Try not to make this more difficult or philosophical or even mystical than I may, unfortunately, have made it sound. A [paragraph](#) consists of at least six sentences (propositions, thoughts) and at most 200 words. Like a drawing, it usually occupies no more than a page. You can read it in about a minute, just as you can study a drawing for that long and get some useful information out of it. Just as a drawing isn't the whole or final truth about your hand, but only your hand in a particular position in a particular situation, a paragraph asserts only particular truths about the concepts or objects it describes. The important thing is to make [a definite claim](#) (cf. "this is a fist, clenched in anger,") and then [support, elaborate, or defend](#) this claim within the space of two-hundred words (cf., "[in each purposeful line or passage of \[your\] drawing, achieve ... an expression of form, character, action ...](#)"). Appreciate the finitude of the problem and develop your craft from [a realistic point of view](#).

“The world is everything that is case,” said Wittgenstein. “Objects contain the possibility of all situations.” And, yes, “What we cannot speak about we must consign to silence.” He said that too.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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