

THE FRAME PARAGRAPH, JOHN BEAN

The frame paragraph is a composing tool first described by John C. Bean in *Engaging Ideas*, pages 115-116, at the end of a long list of short, ungraded writing assignments. This particular assignment is intended to focus and organize student “thinking about content,” and so its logical place in the writing-to-learn process is in the gap between thinking on paper about content (WTL’s) and crafting an argument that is grounded in understanding (constructed knowledge) about content. It is, we propose, the critical link between WTL and WID, writing in the disciplines. Here is what Bean says about the frame paragraph in toto:

Frame paragraphs give students an organizational pattern that guides their thinking about content. Students must come up with the needed generalizations and supporting data to flesh out the prescribed form. These are excellent assignments for teaching hierarchal structure. Here are some examples:

To figure out how fast a small steel marble will roll down an inclined plane, you need to have, at a minimum, the following pieces of information. First, you need to know . . . [Third, . . . Fourth, . . .]

Many people think that John Cage’s music is . . . [generalization, then development]. However, I think it is . . . [generalization, then development].

The current tax structure is unfair to poor people for several reasons. First, . . . Second, . . ., [Third, . . . Fourth, . . .]

Later in his discussion of writing tasks that are meant to encourage students to think critically, Bean extends this assignment discussion (126):

Frame assignments are analogous to those old dance lessons for which the instructor pasted footsteps on the floor. A frame assignment provides a topic sentence and an organizational frame that students have to flesh out with appropriate generalizations and supporting data. Students have to dance their way through the paragraph, but the assignment shows them where to put their feet. Often the frame is provided by an opening topic sentence, along with the major transition words in the paragraph. Students report that such assignments help them learn a lot about organizational strategies. More importantly, they see how structure can stimulate invention in that they must generate ideas and arguments to fill the open slots in the frame.

The frame paragraph is different from an executive summary, for example, by the fact that it looks beyond what the writer knows and understands about the subject, towards what s/he might know and understand. It's the first attempt to move beyond short writing activities aimed at drawing connections and prioritizing them, towards understanding, which uses those connections to make knowledge. Executive summaries come at the end of a process, when all the salient points of a document can be outlined for a reader. The same is true of abstracts and précis.

Such paragraphs are often inelegant, for they rarely are framed and worded in the final language of the text, but they are the critical links between writing to learn assignments and mastery of content material that discipline courses require in longer, formal assignments.

Now let's try one.

With your partner, return to #3 from the Geertz WTL exercises; discuss conventions of your respective disciplines; write a "generalization/first sentence" from the perspective of your partner's discipline. Discuss with your partner, and make any revisions in the sentence that your partner suggests.

Draft a brief "frame paragraph" using the corrected first sentence that your partner gave you for your discipline; build on this sentence with evidence from Geertz that would support such a statement within the conventions and priorities of your discipline. Pay particular attention to the process you undergo in drafting your paragraph. Then we'll talk about what you have.

Frame Paragraph:

