Diagrams of the Main Ideas

In most good textbook writing, the paragraph is the enlargement of a single main idea. It may describe a Renaissance painting or list the symptoms of rabies. It may argue the merits of teaching machines or explain the seeding of clouds. It may introduce a theme or provide a conclusion. But all of the sentences have a common purpose - the expansion of the central thought.

1. The towns did not fit readily into the complex structure of the feudal-manorial system. Townsmen tended to be more “progressive” than the peasants and were restive under the restraints of feudal live. They needed, if only because of their numbers, a more elaborate and flexible political organization than feudalism afforded. Moreover, once they had town government, they were in a position to raise and maintain their own bodies of soldiers.

   ![Type 1](image1)

   In paragraph 1, the main idea is stated in the first sentence: the towns did not fit readily into the complex structure of feudalism. Everything else contributes to this idea, giving as reasons the progressiveness of the townspeople, their need for a more elaborate and flexible political organization, and their power to raise and maintain bodies of soldiers.

   A good diagram for this type of paragraph may take the form of an inverted pyramid. Since the main idea stands at the head of the paragraph, it may be represented by the horizontal line at the top. As the paragraph tapers off with details, the diagram tapers off to a point.

2. The townsmen tended to be more “progressive” than the peasants and were apt to be restive under the restraints of feudalism. Because of their numbers, they needed a more elaborate and flexible political organization than feudalism afforded. And once they had town governments, they were in a position to raise and maintain bodies of soldiers. For all these reasons, the towns did not fit in readily with the complex structure of the feudal-manorial system.

   ![Type 2](image2)

   The diagram is reversed for paragraph 2. Instead of starting with the main idea and continuing with the details, the paragraph lists one by one the “progressive” nature of the townspeople, their need for a more flexible and elaborate form of government, and their ability to raise and maintain bodies of soldiers. In the last sentence it concludes with the statement that for all these reasons the towns did not fit in well with the feudal-manorial system. A good diagram here sets the main idea line at the bottom.

3. The beagle hound is a favorite with children: His gentle nature and extreme patience make him an ideal companion for any youngster. Because of his alert intelligence, he is easily trained in manners and tricks. These are a few of the reasons for his rapid rise in popularity in this country. He is not a habitual barker, but he is a good watchdog, and he is inexpensive to feed. He is a good hunter, and is equally at home in the city or the country.

   ![Type 3](image3)

   The third pattern is often used when a writer wishes to break the monotony of a long list of details. Particularly when the illustrative points are similar in form, there is advantage in giving some of them at the beginning of the paragraph and the rest at the end. The main point is stated somewhere in the middle.
4. The word “implicit” is often used to mean “absolute” or “unquestioning.” We speak of “implicit obedience” and “implicit faith in God.” But we don’t always use the word this way. “Implicitly in John’s letter was his promise that he would return at the end of the year.” Here the word has a second connotation: It means “implied,” “suggested,” or “folded in.”

An occasional paragraph splits the main idea. Paragraph 4 begins with one meaning for “implicit” and ends up with another.

5. Each leaf of the Momosa Pudic shows a sensitive swelling at the base of the leaf stalk, and sixty to one hundred leaflets making up the green blade. At the center of each of these there is a place circular area that is the sensitive and mobile heart. It may be asked, “What is the optimum environment for experiment with such a plant?” To this we would reply that 88 to 92 degree Fahrenheit is average: This is the frequent temperature in Brazil during the growing season.

In this final paragraph, no main idea is directly stated; all the sentences contribute. However, they work together to describe the Mimosa Pudica, its leaf stalk, its leaflets, and its growing requirement. Since no one sentence takes the lead, a good diagram may take the form of the one above.