

DOWNSHIFTING: LEVELS OF DEVELOPMENT IN BODY PARAGRAPHING

Lesson Introduction:

Importance of Body Paragraphs:

Your paper can only be as strong as its body paragraphs. Body paragraphs give your evidence. Body paragraphs show your reader examples that will convince him to believe what you are saying. (Readers will never just take writers' words for anything.) Remember: body paragraphs need to give enough information to be engaging and interesting, and they need to be convincing and compelling. Learning to "downshift" in body paragraphs is essential.

"Downshifting" is a writing term, first employed by Professor Francis Christensen, for moving down the ladder of language abstraction, especially in body paragraphs.

Basic principles of body paragraph development:

1. Body paragraphs are developed by addition of sentences at lower levels of generality.
2. The best paragraphs have several levels of generality. Body paragraphs without "downshifting" are usually dull and repetitious, often are childish sounding, and they tend to "bog down."
3. "Downshifting" adds both interest and evidence.
4. "Downshifting" is also a unifying device – it keeps reinforcing the main idea in the reader's mind, but far more effectively than mere repetition.

A simplified summary of the levels possible in a typical effective body paragraph:

- LEVEL 1: The topic sentence or generalization.
LEVEL 2: Explanations or qualifications of LEVEL 1/topic sentence.
LEVEL 3: General or "iterative" examples, instances of what usually or ordinarily happens.
- Very often, these are marked by use of words like "one," "a person," "people," "the student," "anyone."
 - Use of the present tense to show habitual action is also common on Level 3: "Despite the risk, students often take the chance."
- LEVEL 4: Mention of specific individual cases by name.
- Often, these are marked by words like "once," "one time," "just last Friday" to point us toward a particular event.
 - Use of the past tense to show what actually happened is typical of Level 4: "That day, Mary took the risk."
 - First person "I"/personal examples are included.
- LEVEL 4A: Description of named individual(s).
[Fred is 5'11" but slouches badly.]
- LEVEL 4B: Narration/stories/anecdotes relating the experiences of named individual(s) concretely.
[Seconds late, Fred grabbed the big hammer.]

LEVEL 4C: Dialogue: Use of the directly quoted language of specific individual(s) which occurs within the story of a specific case.
[Fred said, "Yikes. That felt not-so-good."]

Some important notes about downshifting levels:

1. It is not unusual for several sentences to be on the same level. For example, you may use two or three or however many Level 2 sentences or Level 3 sentences it takes to establish your point before shifting down again.
2. Levels may be skipped. (For instance, experienced writers often skip directly from Level 1 topic sentences to Level 4 specific cases.)
3. With the usual exception of Level 1 (since a paragraph is shaped around only one dominant idea, the idea in the topic sentence), any level may be returned to within a body paragraph. And there is one instance in which even Level 1 sometimes gets returned to – the “clincher” sentence which ends some paragraphs.

EXAMPLES: (Assume the thesis of the paper this paragraph belongs to is “Fred is an extraordinary slob.”):

A body paragraph **without** adequate “downshifting”:

(1) Fred’s car is a mess. (2) It is a disaster area. (2) I mean, you would probably have to see it in order to be able to believe it. (2) It is really, truly awful. (2) It is actually enough to make a person feel nauseous. (2) Fred’s car looks like a real slob’s car. (2) It’s just exactly the way you’d expect his car to look if you know Fred. (2) In my humble opinion, I would have to say it’s disgusting. (2) I hate to even think about Fred’s car, if you’d even call it a car. (2) Anyone would have to admit that Fred’s car is really a big, big mess.

The same body paragraph **with** adequate “downshifting”:

(1) Fred’s car is a mess. (2) His black 1990 Honda Civic is not just normally messy like most cars seem to get from time to time. (3) People have actually been known to emerge from Fred’s car filthy dirty. (4) Once John, our mutual friend, got good and mad when Fred’s car got John soiled in just a ten-minute ride to school. (4a) John is a normal guy, not a neat freak or anything, but the time he rode with Fred, he looked like he’d spent the night at a Red Cross shelter. (4b) John had simply slipped into the passenger seat and fastened his seatbelt, but in a minute, he had lint all over him, a grease stain across his chest from the seatbelt, mud on his white canvas shoes, and a hundred-year-old French fry glued to his inseam by a blob of ketchup. (4b) In no time at all, John realized the situation was hopeless and sat glaring at Fred. (4c) As he got out of Fred’s car, John said “Gee, thanks for the ride, Fred!” (2) Not even black paint is dark enough to hide all the evil mess in Fred’s car.

Assignment: Downshifting Practice

- Assume you are writing an essay with the following thesis statement:
 - o “Teachers cause their students frustration in many, quite different ways.”
- Assume you are ready to write **one** of the supporting body paragraphs of this essay. Fill in the blanks, and use the following sentence as your paragraph’s Level 1/topic sentence. Then write the paragraph, using examples to support your claim. Try to “show,” not just “tell.”
- *NOTE: If you are writing about a living, lawsuit-capable teacher, please use a made-up name! This is not your opportunity to attack a teacher, nor is it your chance to vent. This topic has been chosen because everyone has been frustrated by his teacher, even if the teacher is an excellent teacher. Have fun with the topic, but conduct yourself in an honorable way. Remember, we all have our faults. See the model paragraph at the end for help with various downshifting levels. Malicious papers will receive no credit. This should be a light-hearted paper. It should not be a diatribe against anyone in particular. Creating a fake persona for the purpose of this assignment is completely acceptable. Just be realistic. I’m grading your application of the downshifting skill not your skills at roasting people.*

LEVEL 1/TOPIC SENTENCE:

Mr./Ms./Mrs. _____ frustrated his/her students because he/she was extremely _____ (use a negative judgment word or phrase).

- When you’ve written a draft, check to be sure you’ve made adequate transitions from sentence to sentence and from level to level. Mark the levels so you are aware of your downshifting.
- Finally, proofread with great care to make sure all your sentences are free of errors.
- Type your final draft in appropriate MLA 8 format.

Example of a fully downshifted “rotten teacher” body paragraph (with downshifting markings):

***You should mark the downshifting levels in your own paper. This will help you see the pattern that is emerging.**

(1) Sister Mary Agatha frustrated her students because she was extremely senile. (2) Sister was over eighty and should have been retired years before she taught my first grade class. (3) Each day, she made us write our numbers from one to one-hundred and our letters from A through Z. (3) Quite a few times, she forgot we had already done these things and made us do them again. (3) Worst of all was her method of punishment, which was the same whether you forgot your homework or talked in class. (3) All kids due to be punished has to sit on her “punish bench,” where she administered punishment by the teaspoonful. (4a) Gary Tuminello was the worst kid in our class and got punished almost every day. (4a) He never shut up or did his homework. (4b) One day, Sister Mary Agatha took out the big jar of white school paste that was her means of punishment. (4b) She approached Gary, who was sitting on the bench. (4c) She said, “Gary, open your mouth.” (4b) Gary swallowed the usual big spoonful of paste. (4b) But not three seconds later, the paste came back up, spewing white froth all over Sister Mary Agatha’s black habit. (4b) We loved it, but no one dared to laugh. (2) Although that was a good day for us first graders, most days were frustrating or downright frightening.