

## REVIEW OF CONSTRUCTING THE PARAGRAPH

Title:	Constructing the Paragraph
Publisher:	Computers for Education
System requirements:	Macintosh Version number: 3/98
Minimal hardware requirements:	Any Mac with 2.2 MB free disc space
Technical support:	<a href="mailto:EHansonSmi@aol.com">EHansonSmi@aol.com</a>
Target language:	English
Target audience:	ESL learners
Language Level:	intermediate or advanced
Price:	US \$100.00 for unlimited use site license

**Reviewed by Mark Peterson, Japan Advanced Institute of Science and Technology**

### OVERVIEW

Constructing the Paragraph is a Hyper Card stack designed to assist learners in developing their academic writing skills. The designers have taken an approach which focuses on the basic components of paragraph structure. The stack provides learners access to over 60 paragraphs which encompass both tutorial and exercise activities. The program may be used for self-study, pair work, or as an element of a writing syllabus.

### INTERFACE DESIGN

The program presents an accessible interface that offers consistent navigational metaphors by means of an on-screen button bar. A link to the introductory screen is provided by a home icon which is located on each screen. The interface provides for simple data input and error handling. Each screen is well laid out and free from visual clutter. Moreover, color has been used to enhance the visual appeal of the interface. The designers have achieved consistency of data display, thus reducing to some extent the cognitive load on learners. The introductory screen is reproduced in [Figure 1](#).

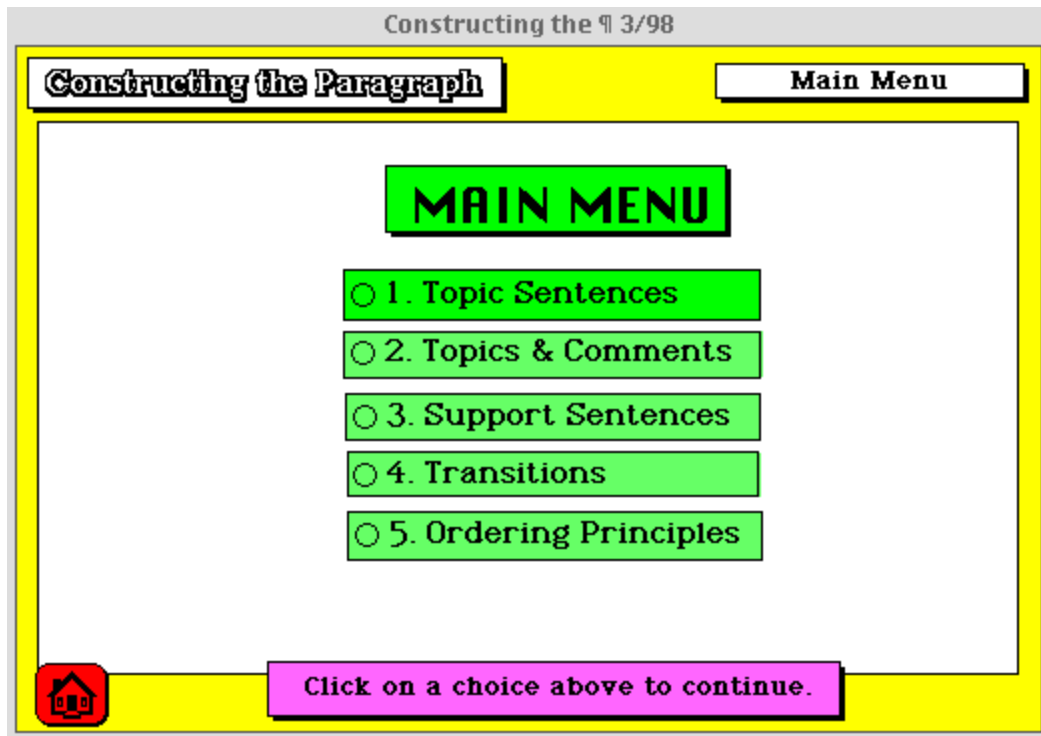


Figure 1. Introductory screen

#### PROGRAM STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

The stack presents learners with 5 challenge exercises and 5 tutorials that focus on the following areas:

- Topic sentences
- Topics and Comments
- Support sentences
- Transitions
- Ordering principles

The above activities offer logically sequenced instructional tasks arranged in order of difficulty. These tasks are described below.

**Challenge Exercises** Each challenge exercise focuses on the central aspects of the above themes. Learners are provided with an on-screen text where they are requested, for example, to select the topic sentence in a paragraph. At the same time, learners are also encouraged to interact with the program, by selecting the correct response from a number of alternatives. An innovative feature of the design is the fact that feedback is provided to learner responses. Moreover an attempt has been made to incorporate authentic language in most of the exercises. [Figure 2](#) shows a screen shot of a challenge exercise interface.

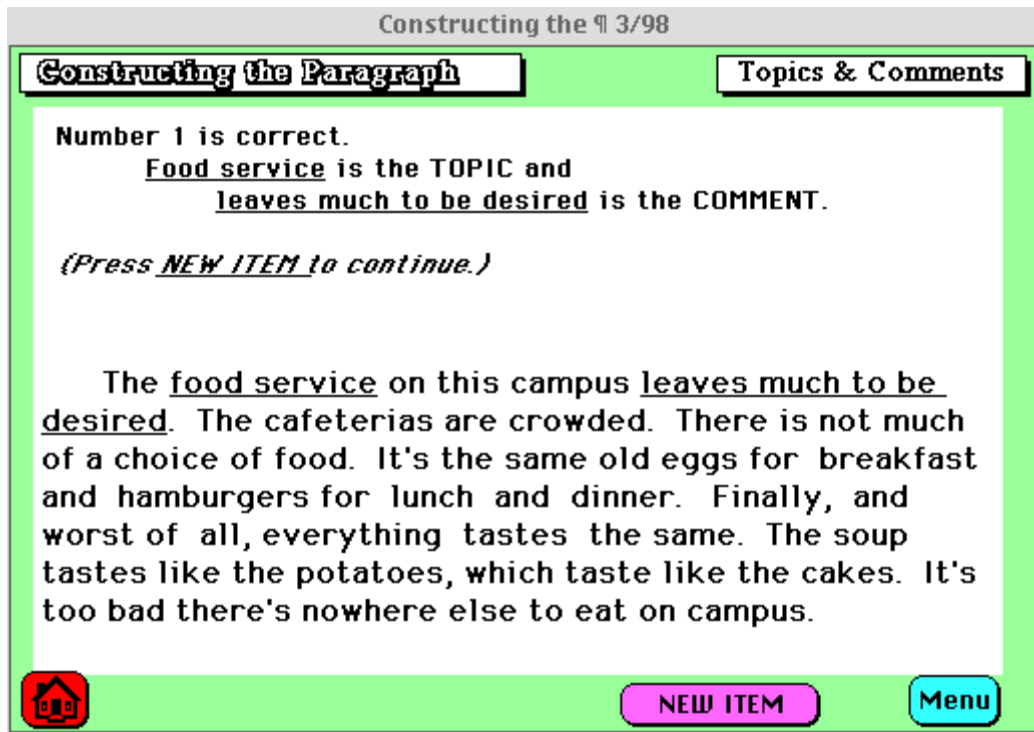


Figure 2

**Tutorial Mode** The tutorial activities in the stack focus on the basic principles of sentence construction. For example, the Topic Sentence tutorial focuses on the role and position of the topic sentence in the paragraph. The Topics and Comments tutorial reviews the previous tutorial and reinforces its theme by highlighting the role that comments play in controlling the direction of the paragraph. A similar approach is taken in the tutorials Support Sentences, Transitions and Ordering Principles. Each tutorial reviews the main points of the previous one while providing new information through the use of flow charts and diagrams.

**Activities Folder** The program comes with an additional folder entitled Word-Processing Ideas. This folder contains the following collection of CALL-based writing activities:

- An intermediate writing syllabus incorporating the Constructing the Paragraph stack
- A description of a computer-based adjective clause game
- A list of questions designed to be used with a brainstorming program entitled Writing a Character Sketch
- Advice for students on revising essay drafts
- Brainstorming activities
- A self-evaluation form for student essays
- Interview questions designed for essay preparation
- A past tense quiz that requires students to rewrite a paragraph from the present to past tense.
- A grading rubric used in holistic grading and peer evaluation
- A list of ideas relating to the creative use of word processing software in a writing course

## DISCUSSION

Constructing the Paragraph has several major strengths. One is its use of authentic text. Extensive use is made of authentic text in all tutorial and challenge paragraphs. It has great design consistency. Learners are presented with a consistent user interface. There is good visual clarity; each screen is free from visual

clutter and the overuse of color. It uses simple visual metaphors for ease of navigation. It contains user friendly error handling and data input as the designers have simplified the process of data input and error handling. Feedback is informative and is provided in all Challenge Activities. All activities are sequenced in order of difficulty. In contrast to many programs, extensive supplementary activities are supplied. Technical support is provided by the creators of the program. It is highly reliable and the reviewer found it to be bug free. It is inexpensive and an outstanding value for the money.

There are also, however, some weaknesses of the program. In the reviewer's experience, the vocabulary level may be challenging for some intermediate level learners. There is a lack of in-depth feedback in some examples. Constructing the Paragraph conforms to a rather conventional instructional design paradigm in which outside variables are controlled and the learner is guided through the exercises through a route proscribed by the designer Cole and Wilson (1996). Therefore, opportunities for exploratory learning are somewhat limited.

However, a strong case may be made for adopting this design approach with regard to the teaching of writing. By focusing on the paragraph as the basic unit of written expression the program provides learners with opportunities to develop the basic skills they will require to overcome what Byrne (1988) has identified as one of the central problems learners face in writing: expression at a level beyond that of the sentence. As a well designed program, Constructing the Paragraph will doubtless find a place in many writing labs.

## REFERENCES

Byrne, D. (1988). *Teaching Writing Skills*. London: Longman.

Cole, P., & Wilson, B. G. (1996). *Cognitive Teaching Models*. Retrieved June 8, 1998 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.cudenver.edu/~bwilson/hndbkch.html>

## ABOUT THE REVIEWER

[Mark Peterson](#) is a faculty member at Japan Advanced Institute of Science and Technology. At present he is conducting research into the design of World Wide Web based courseware.

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