Understanding the Paragraph and Paragraphing, by Iain McGee. Equinox, 2018. 438 pp.

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Iain McGee's book about paragraphs is seminal. Here's why.

Everyone who teaches writing reckons with the paragraph eventually. But a comprehensive monograph on the paragraph has never emerged, probably because the task was not a small one. Such a book would need to present the English paragraph from all the myriad angles that scholars have used since Joseph Angus and Alexander Bain and present a unified theory that encompasses most of the paragraph's textual complexity. A few dissertations have attempted to ascend that Everest, notably Edwin Lewis's in the nineteenth century, but McGee is the first to reach the summit.

If you have questions about how paragraphs function or how to treat them in your pedagogy, a handbook or Google might be your first recourse. But I would encourage that this book should be your first stop instead. McGee's complex and descriptivist conclusions will not make the average composition instructor giddy with relief after having glimpsed something of the ultimate, but teaching writing is never a simple matter, and if you think paragraphs are a trivial side concern on the road to successful writing, McGee might dissuade you.

In a perfect world, *Understanding the Paragraph and Paragraphing* would have been written in the late 1980s, just as interest in the paragraph along with sentence combining and the usual grammatical suspects in composition waned, and ideology and cultural studies waxed. If McGee is secretly a time traveler from that period, I recommend he go straight back, as composition studies could have used thirty years with this book available to maintain a stronger connection to its roots as a discipline that struggled (often futilely) with fundamental questions about linguistic structure.

McGee's first two chapters orientate. Chapter 1 offers a clear, reader-friendly overview of the chief theoretical and pedagogical issues that sets up mysteries to be unpacked in later chapters and makes clear that defining the paragraph and sorting through its myriad and reinforcing rhetorical and linguistic functions is no simple task. The paragraph can be viewed as a discourse marker, a highlighting technique, a structural device, a unit of cohesion, an aid to readability, a crutch for developing writers, a pedagogical problem, or all these and more.

Chapter 2 is a historical view of the origins of the paragraph concept, a badly needed update to Lewis's 1894 dissertation that engages and critiques his work directly. McGee begins with the Greek *paragraphos*, a punctuation mark

with different functions, including text division, referencing, an aid to oral delivery, and rhetorical emphasis, and traces it forward to its modern English equivalent, using many sources unavailable to Lewis's more narrow justification of Bain's pedagogically simplified paragraph. The ancient and medieval usages of the concept are shown just as flexible and complex as modern ones, forming a strong counterpoint to Chapter 3, which explores what McGee calls the "Era of Terminology," the myriad 19th century attempts to codify and simplify paragraph structure and function. In this timeframe, the paragraph is narrowed down by Alexander Bain and his many imitators into a curious system of rules and topic sentences, governed by an abstract triad of unity, emphasis, and coherence, all more suitable for mass writing instruction. McGee also notes competing germinal ideas about the importance of the reader and paragraph purpose that appear in Chapter 4's post-1960s theory, where more complex ideas about how paragraphs function (and should function) were debated. This history has been told before, but McGee's account has the advantage of a far broader command of how related fields like linguistics, education, and psychology can work together with composition to form a holistic view of the paragraph.

The next three chapters illustrate this depth: Chapter 5 regards the paragraph as a discourse marker, Chapter 6 explores linguistic cohesion, and Chapter 7 centers on psychological aspects of the paragraph, with each chapter synthesizing a broad array of disparate studies from many subfields. For example, McGee notes how different paragraphing styles can manipulate the reader experience; the placement (or omission) of a topic sentence, a shift in indentation, or a match between style and the background knowledge of the reader can create different outcomes in comprehension, retention, and learning. McGee is not sanguine about every avenue, however; he critiques the long history of textual segmentation studies, where previous paragraphs are re-assembled by test subjects to study paragraph formation, holding that they do not factor in the experience of the reader enough.

Chapter 8 marks a formal shift to pedagogy, which is threaded informally though the previous chapters. McGee notes a longstanding pressing need for empirical research, as why writers paragraph the way they do remains poorly understood, and none of the existing models, prescriptive, functional, linguistic, or otherwise, reflect all of the complexities of how writer decides, consciously or unconsciously, to compose and frame their sentences inside paragraphs.

McGee's answer to this challenge in Chapter 9, "Wrapping Up The Paragraph," centers on how the paragraph has so many interconnected aspects – genre, linguistic and extralinguistic context, purpose, context, reading psychology – that only a perspective that encompasses all of these can explain why and how a given paragraph functions, and how facility with these aspects

can be taught most effectively. Such a holistic perspective is only partially available, however, due to a lack of empirical work in corpus and computational linguistics, the effects of technology and psychology, and genre variances.

A reader new to this area might be distressed to find a theoretical Olympus Mons lurking behind the Everest that McGee just climbed. But McGee is wise to espouse humility. Understanding the paragraph, as the book is titled, is the task that lies ahead, not a state reachable by reading a single book. Olympus Mons, the solar system's highest mountain, is a good way to think of McGee's paragraph – so vast in profile that it cannot be seen in its entirety from either its summit or any given point on Mars, and even a satellite in orbit cannot really give its scale justice. The book's comprehensive bibliography reflects the work of a scholar who has thoroughly scoured the extensive literature on paragraphs, forming a holistic picture for another generation of scholars that may be intrigued by an over-twenty-kilometer-high shield volcano.

The goal of composition theory, in my view, is to offer teachers of composition the deepest possible understanding of all the nuances of the writing process, so that they can then use that knowledge to teach students to the greatest extent possible. As the concept of the paragraph sits, arguably, at the center of the compositional act, it represents one of the most tantalizing and direct routes to that goal. But unlocking the paragraph proved too much for many a theorist and practitioner. Christenson and Rodgers felt they were close, and Bain and his imitators a century before thought they had it in hand, but the paragraph still rests just outside of our understanding, a strange combination of deceptively simple and limitlessly complex. McGee's book reminds us that the paragraph remains a mystery left unsolved not because it is unimportant, but because the initial explorations offered no quick or easy or convenient answers to the difficult task of teaching composition, and the writing field moved on to ideological and professional concerns that were critical and important but not necessarily exclusive.

In *Understanding the Paragraph and Paragraphing*, McGee offers a multidisciplinary path to the intense study of a central structural aspect of teaching writing. It is also an invitation to take up the quest again. Reading McGee's book has inspired me to return to that path after a long absence. Olympus Mons awaits.

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