How to use Paragraphology to teach the writing process - with Bridget Barley

Triple R Teaching Podcast #209

Hello, this is Anna Geiger, author of *Reach All Readers* and creator of the Reach All Readers website. Today I'm bringing you an interview with Bridget Barley.

I watched a presentation that Bridget gave for the IDA. I watched it virtually. It was about a method that she has developed to help students be competent writers. It's called Paragraphology. It's using color-coded index cards to teach children the structure of paragraphs. I found it extremely fascinating how they started it very simply and gradually built up to be more complex, helping students understand how to write topic sentences, transitions, supporting details, and so on. I think you're going to really enjoy this episode.

I hope that you will check out the website that we link to in the show notes for Paragraphology on the Jemicy School website, where Bridget is currently director of the middle school. You can start using Paragraphology in the primary grades and it will gradually get more complex as students move through the grades. I hope you enjoy this! Here we go.

Anna Geiger:

Welcome, Bridget.

Bridget Barley:

Hi, thank you so much for having me. I'm super excited.

Anna Geiger:

I'm really excited to talk to you about Paragraphology. I paid for a virtual ticket to the IDA conference this year and watched your session about how you teach students to structure paragraphs. I thought it was fascinating and perfect for this series about writing.

Before we talk about that, could you introduce us to yourself and talk about your history as a teacher and what you're doing now.

Bridget Barley:

Sure. My name is Bridget Barley. This is about my 24th year in education. I taught in Baltimore City Public Schools and Baltimore County Public Schools. After about four years, I found myself here at the Jemicy School in Owings Mills, Maryland.

Our population is one where all of our students have a diagnosed language-based learning difference. This is where I really developed Paragraphology. I started as a composition and a literature teacher. Our students have three language classes every day here. They have a skills class where they really delve into OG with morphology, spelling, decoding, and fluency. Then they have 45 minutes of structured writing, which is composition, and then 45 minutes of literature.

What we found is when you try to have one language arts class or one English class, something doesn't get the attention that it needs, so it is really great. This is my 20th year here and the past four years have been in administration as I am now the head of the middle school.

Anna Geiger:

Does this school cover all the grades?

Bridget Barley:

We do. We start in 1st grade and we go through 12th grade.

Anna Geiger:

When you were teaching language arts, were you teaching multiple grades composition, or how did that work?

Bridget Barley:

I did; I taught sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. My heart is always with middle school. I had some fifth grade students that I tutored and some ninth grade students that I tutored as well. When we start really kind of diving in, Paragraphology can reach out to all those different levels. I even have some college students that I worked with for a time. I love all the kids, they keep my job so interesting, but middle school is where my heart is.

Anna Geiger:

Oh, good for you. You're a special person. A very special person. Most people just don't want that job.

Bridget Barley:

I know, I know. They're fun.

Anna Geiger:

They're very special. But I know with my own kids, when they get to that age they can tend to be a little more challenging.

Now, you developed Paragraphology because you found that students didn't know how to structure paragraphs. Could you just explain what it is, just bare basics? Then we'll talk about how it progresses and how it can look in different grades.

Bridget Barley:

Sure. My first year here at Jemicy we were using Diana King's *Writing Skills* book, which was great because it broke down the paragraph types. But what I found with my students is that I could say all day, "Hey, write a topic sentence, write a supporting sentence, write a concluding sentence," and it didn't mean anything. It had that label. I kind of found that the sentences weren't meaning anything. I needed to give them meaning.

I developed some color coding that went with each sentence and a formula on how to write each sentence so that they could build that confidence. A lot of times - with kids that have a language-based learning difference and kids that don't - writing is like the scariest word that you can say. So just kind of giving them that confidence and building that up.

What it does, it gives color coding to each sentence. It gives it a structure and a meaning. It scaffolds, and it evolves from something as simple as a five-sentence basic paragraph, through expanded paragraphs, through writing to persuade, to writing to inform, and then three-paragraph essays, five-paragraph essays, and even note-taking.

Anna Geiger:

Okay, so how does it begin? When does it begin? I'm thinking about what students might be starting with, and what it would look like from the get-go.

Bridget Barley:

We really start Paragraphology with our writing classes in third grade, but schools that don't have to worry about these language diagnoses begin as early as first grade.

The way that it works is that we teach our students that there are five sentences in a basic paragraph and we assign a color, but we use index cards. Each student creates a ring on which they have a green card for a topic sentence, three yellow cards for supporting sentences, and then a red card for a concluding sentence.

That doesn't seem like anything and, for a lot of kids, that's not enough. You need a little bit more. So on the back of their green topic sentence, we'll give them a sentence starter, especially in the elementary grades that say, "There are many..."

What happens if they've done a brainstorm - we really encourage teachers and tutors to do brainstorms. We'll have them do a brainstorm. If it was ice cream, they'd come up with ten ice cream flavors. At the top of the paper, ice cream flavors would be written in green because those words are going to have to go in my green topic sentence.

Then we would have them look at the ten flavors and say, "Well, what are the three you know the most about? Highlight them in yellow." They might pick vanilla, chocolate, strawberry, or whatever they have on their list.

What's great about those brainstorms, if you do them as a group, is that kid that's struggling to generate the ideas is going to be able to choose something from there. It levels their playing field a little bit.

When they get to their cards to go write a paragraph and they have to write that topic sentence, they can say, "Okay, yeah, I need a topic sentence, but how do I do that? I'm going to turn over that card and see that prompt, 'There are many..' Okay, there are many, and ice cream flavors are written in green, so that has to go in my sentence. There are many ice cream flavors."

You have a couple students that will add in, "There are many varieties of ice cream flavors." "There are many different ice cream flavors." But either way, those students can manipulate that sentence to make sure they have that starter and they have the brainstorm topic in there.

Then for the kid that really is not going to be able to add enough, "There are many ice cream flavors"; that's giving them a complete sentence. They have felt success; they have that topic sentence done.

Then when they get to their next card, they flip that over. They're done, and they can look at that first yellow card, that supporting sentence. They can say, “All right, well, supporting sentence, it's yellow. I've highlighted three things in yellow. I have three yellow cards.” Those are going to support that idea of there are many different ice cream flavors.

On the back of each of those yellow cards there are some transition words, and we say that they're “orange words”. Every yellow sentence starts with an orange word.

On the back of the first supporting sentence card, if I had “vanilla,” and I know I need to put the word “vanilla” in that sentence, but I don't know how to start it, I might say, “To begin with, vanilla is a delicious flavor.” It takes the yellow and it ties it to my card, and I know I need that orange word, so I've gotten over that big mammoth mountain of “How do I start this sentence?”

Then for the second supporting card, I'll look at my organizer. It might say “chocolate,” and I'll look at the back of that card and it will say, “Additionally….” or “Furthermore…” on the back. I'll have some choices for transition words. I'll say, “Furthermore, chocolate is a delicious flavor.”

Then I'll flip my card. I look at my organizer, and I have “strawberry,” and I'll go to my last card. It's funny, a lot of the younger kids really love the choice we put “As a final point…” on our third card. They're like, “As a final point, strawberries is an ice cream flavor.” It's just so cute when you get a first grader's paper and that's the final point: “Furthermore…” or “Moreover…” It enhances their vocabulary too.

Those transition words that we use here at Jemicy, they're not the be all, end all of all transition words. Different teachers have different transition words they like, but as long as they have a choice on the back of each of those cards, it helps them with that sentence.

Then they finally get to the most exciting sentence - the red one - because you're finished after that! But it's also the most difficult sentence because how are you supposed to finish? Get me out of this. On the back of that card, we give two starters: “As you can see…” or “It should be obvious…” When they get to that card, they write, “As you can see, there are many ice cream flavors.” Or, “It should be obvious there are many ice cream flavors.”

What's happened at that point? The student has felt success in writing that basic paragraph. We've taken a little bit of the labor out of “We’re going to fill out this paper organizer, now we’re going to copy it here, and now we’re going to copy it here,” because those index cards act as an organizer. They're also a manipulative, which is great, because that's what's going to tie the colors together. Everything is fluid and making sense.

As they flip the card, they know they're on their next sentence. When they get to flip that red card, they're done. There's celebration! It gives them that basic structure of that basic paragraph.

Anna Geiger:

Are they writing on the cards or on paper?

Bridget Barley:

They're writing on paper. We use a lot of organizers here. We have color-coded organizers that the students will generally write in. The topic sentence box is green. They know to put that there. Their supporting boxes are yellow, and then their concluding [box] is red.

Sometimes you need to think out of the box. Sometimes teachers will have them write their paragraphs on index cards and there are mobiles hanging in the room. As long as the colors are consistent, that's

what you want, because as it evolves, you want there to always be an anchor as to “What is the purpose of this sentence? What does this mean?”

Anna Geiger:

You start with a lot of support because you're writing a paragraph together. How does this gradually become something they do on their own?

Bridget Barley:

From this point, you just want to really build that confidence. When we start this with middle school - we have an influx coming into our middle school grades because that's one of those change points - but this can also be done in elementary schools. We'll do something called the ten paragraph challenge. And, you know, the middle schoolers are like, “Ten paragraphs? Are you nuts?”

It's like, “Yeah, we're going to write ten paragraphs in five days.”

And they're like, “Oh my gosh, you're really crazy!” at this point.

But what we'll do is I'll have a lot of different topics for them to use. Some of them are really just odd topics, just to buy their interests, such as “Do unicorns exist?” or “Uses for belly button lint.” That's one that we skip. “Is cat food delicious?” Things like that. They can be very simple topics, but we give them a pot of topics.

We say, “Right, so we're going to start. Today, we're going to write one in class, and we're going to write one for homework.” It's always just a very big moment of, “Oh my gosh, I can't do this!”

They sit with their cards, and that first paragraph gets done before half of the class period has even passed, and they've started the second one. Some of them are going home with no homework or maybe one sentence to finish.

Then the next day, they come in and two are coming out in class, no problem. One's being done. We kind of set it up that it's a five-day thing, but most of them finish in four days. That's purposely a little bit manipulative so that you can say, “Yes, look what you did! This is amazing! You accomplished this!”

A lot of our lower grades will do a three-paragraph challenge or a five paragraph challenge. It really depends on what grade you have, but it gives them that repetition. They're getting used to it.

Oftentimes kids will say, “You know what? I wrote this yellow sentence about vanilla ice cream. I want to tell you more about it.”

That's where [we'll say], “No, you're not allowed to say anymore. You're not allowed to write anymore at this point.” It's almost like getting the cauliflower in the mac and cheese. You want them to want it so bad that when you do give them more, they're like, “Oh yeah, I wanted this. I can finally do it.”

We progress to that, just to build that confidence piece because it's so important that they know that they can do it and to give them that familiarity.

Then you start to layer in some more complicated things. Once that ten paragraph challenge is finished, that is where we say, “All right, we're going to level up here a little bit.”

With the middle school students, we give them five different ways to start a topic sentence and five different ways to do a concluding sentence at that point, and we ban the “There are many…” “As you can see…” “It should be obvious…” just because - it's great to learn that and you've got that, you know what that sentence is supposed to do and you know you have to have your topic in there, but it's time to evolve a little bit.

So our cards start to evolve. I have a little cheat sheet that, it's like a foldable I guess, we fold on the back of their green card and the back of their red card. They completely cover up the “There are many…” and “As you can see…” “It should be obvious…”

On the back of that topic sentence, we teach them that there are five different ways to do a topic sentence: a general remark, a quote, a story, an anecdote, or an opposite sentence. While we could just have those five words sitting on the back of the card, some students say, “You want me to write a question topic sentence?” It doesn't mean anything.

We give an example of each. Our examples are about “How an elephant would make a great pet”. The general remark is, “Every time I see elephants at the circus, I consider how great it would be to have one as a pet.” All are about the elephants.

What we teach the students to do with that is that these sentences are about elephants, but they're the kind of sentence that you need. Let's manipulate that to be about your topic. If your topic is recycling, you could say, “Saving the earth is so important. Have you ever considered recycling?” or “Please consider recycling.” Just taking their topic and manipulating that.

A lot of students need that. They do that for just a little while until they get that confidence piece and then they write their own general remarks or their own question sentences.

We do the same for the concluding sentences where we say that they can restate their topic, they can offer some advice, offer a solution, give an opinion, or encourage or discourage someone to do something. Again, we give five examples, that way they can play with it and manipulate their topic.

In sixth grade, we kind of go all in with that and they'll learn the topic sentences for a week and then the concluding sentences for a week. Then they'll go back into that ten paragraph challenge, and they have to change - revising and editing a little bit - two of their topic sentences have to be general remarks and two have to be questions. They go back and they change those topic and concluding sentences.

With younger grades, a lot of our teachers that we've trained in different school systems will say, “All right, we're just going to introduce the general remark and the question right now.” Once they feel that’s solid, maybe they'll introduce the opposite sentence. It's kind of knowing where your kids are and knowing when they're ready to take that next step there.

Anna Geiger:

If you have a 45-minute period of writing, what exactly is happening in that block? Is it mostly all just Paragraphology and moving up towards longer essays? Are they doing creative stories? What's happening?

Bridget Barley:

The way the composition class generally works here is that we do grammar. We have about a 15 to 20 minute grammar drill every day. It looks different in many of our different levels here. In our lower school, their grammar is really Project Read’s Framing Your Thoughts. I don't know if you've [heard of it]. It doesn't exist anymore. Victoria Greene passed away, unfortunately, and her program has been bought by Heggerty, but I don't know if anything's being done with it.

What we really like about that is that instead of using traditional terms like noun and verb and prepositional phrase - words that six and seven year olds [don’t know] - just like Paragraphology, it makes it tangible. A noun is really called a namer and it's a line and there's a hand signal that goes with it. A namer names a person, a place, a thing, or an idea. That muscle memory gets in and they practice

namers, and then, a verb is an action. Prepositional phrases are expanders for that action, a where, or how, or why. It really has a lot of different symbols.

Some of our teachers in our lower school that are using Paragraphology for students that need that support, they'll even put the Framing Your Thoughts shapes in their organizers, so students know what words to plug into their sentences.

We do grammar and then the brainstorming piece, editing piece, Paragraphology piece.

In middle school, it looks a little bit different because we do have to evolve over to those transitional grammar terms. We use Erin Cobb's interactive grammar notebooks. The first page has all the parts of speech. When they open up their flappable, it'll say, "Noun: person, place, or idea," but on the left-hand side, they'll draw the symbol from Framing Your Thoughts, so there's always that tie-in. We're not dropping it cold turkey, it's just evolving.

They really learn the grammar terms there and they go into learning about appositive phrases and compound sentences and subordinating conjunctions, all those different things.

We do diagramming sentences because we really find our students do so well at putting the words where they go. They really like having that formula and it's kind of fun. I hated it when I was in school, but now that I actually know how to do it...

Anna Geiger:

I actually loved diagramming. I was like the only one in my class who loved to diagram.

Bridget Barley:

There are so many fun things that you can do with it. Diagramming sentences happens.

With Paragraphology, a lot of the different paragraph types that we have and things that we do, we will have projects that go with it too, where maybe they're doing a little research. Like in science, they have to write about a geographical time period. They'll do the research in class.

We will use Read&Write for Chrome. I don't know if you're familiar with that, but it's got this excellent thing. It will read to you, voice to text. But it will do that on any web page. If you're doing research on whales, you can find a webpage on whales and it will read it to you. It has four highlighters. You can highlight things that you think would be good for your topic sentence in green. Things that would be for your supporting sentences in yellow. Then, we teach them how to use these tools.

But what's really great about it is there's a button on it. And when you push it, it collects all of your highlights in their colors. So then you have them in your notes and you're like, "Okay, well, I liked this for my topic sentence. Is it going to work? Okay, yes."

All of those things are kind of added in as well. Any big projects or anything cross-curricular that we're doing too.

Anna Geiger:

How does it transition from writing a paragraph to multi-paragraphs?

Bridget Barley:

I'm so glad you asked. When the students get that confidence and they revise those topic sentences and concluding sentences and they get it, then we start to add in blue sentences. At the middle school level, we add in three blue sentences for every yellow. Now they can say three things about vanilla ice cream, three things about chocolate ice cream, and three things about strawberry ice cream, and they have that.

It doesn't need to be three sentences. Lower school usually does one blue sentence per yellow, and then they add in a second. But generally, once we get to middle school, we say three just so that they're building up that muscle and that stamina.

Then we go into teaching some paragraph types. We teach them reason paragraphs, writing to persuade.

Right now, our sixth graders are in the throes of writing sequential paragraphs or how-to paragraphs, and they're doing a cool project where they are drawing a monster and writing the steps to drawing the monster, and then they switch with a partner. Whichever partners can pair up the paragraph to the monster the best win a prize. That's always an exciting one to do.

We do compare and contrast, and we also do classification paragraphs. We're building the structure so they are getting all that practice.

There are different transition words that we'll give them for each of these paragraph types. For sequential paragraphs or how-to paragraphs, they'll put an envelope on the back of their ring of cards that will have some orange slips of paper with all of the transition words like "after", "before", "while", the ones that you're going to use for that paragraph type. That way when they go to write it, they can just spread those words out and they know what to do when they get to those yellow sentences.

Once they've gotten to that point, then, like you said, it's time to think about writing multi-paragraph essays.

Anna Geiger:

Before you get to that, quick question. Are they different rings for each type of paragraph?

Bridget Barley:

Nope. It's one ring, we just keep on adding to it.

Once they have that expanded paragraph, they've got their blue cards. They've got their...

Anna Geiger:

Remind me what the blue cards are. I didn't quite follow that.

Bridget Barley:

Those are going to be details. They'll have their topic sentence and then they'll have supporting sentence number one, and then they'll have three details. So if it were vanilla that they wrote about, it would be three details about vanilla ice cream.

Then they'll have another yellow and three blues, a yellow, three blues, and then their red. That gives them that expanded paragraph. All of their paragraphs are going to be expanded at that point once they're in middle school.

They'll put an envelope for classification paragraphs, the different transition words that they would use there, one type, another type, one category. Then they'll have a different envelope that on the front would say “sequential paragraphs”.

Then they'd have their “while”, “after”, the different transition words for that paragraph type in there. “Compare and contrast” on the front of the envelope, and then different transition words in there for compare and contrast. It just becomes something that evolves with them and grows with them while they're in this paragraph phase.

It's funny, once you get to the end of doing all those paragraph types, they really don't depend on the cards anymore. It's really just, “Okay, yeah, I got this. I have to write an expanded paragraph. I know what the purpose is.”

We also will teach them, when teachers have writing prompts, we're going to look at the prompt together. We're going to [color] code this prompt to find out what's going to answer your topic sentence question. What do you have to put there? What should your yellow sentences be and what kind of details will you need for the blues? Is there anything in the prompt?

It really just brings that full circle for them so that they're able to look at the prompt and independently say, “All right, I know what to do here, because I've highlighted it. Yep, I have an organizer. Bam, I'm ready, I'm going.” They build a lot of confidence with that.

Then we're ready to move to three-paragraph essays. The three-paragraph essay is really nothing new except for the idea of a thesis and a plan. The students already know how to write expanded paragraphs at that point and they're writing three expanded paragraphs. That does not phase them at all except that, “Oh, I have to do three now,” but they know what they're doing. It doesn't cause that angst.

The piece that's new to that is the idea of a thesis and a plan. We spend a lot of time working on the idea of a thesis is the thing that you're going to prove. If we were thinking about ice cream again, we might say “Ice cream comes in so many different varieties.” We want to prove that. It's something we can argue.

We do practice a lot with that idea of a thesis, because I know I even went to college and I didn't know what a thesis was. I just threw stuff at the wall and sometimes it stuck. We're very, very clear about that. We are teaching this to you now in sixth grade, but guess what? You are using this for the rest of your academic life. You need to know what this is.

They know it's what you have to prove. You have to be able to argue it, because you could argue, nope, there aren't enough varieties of ice cream. Not many people would, but you could argue it. So that would be our thesis.

Then we tell them that they need to have a plan. The plan is going to be the roadmap to drive us through that essay.

What are the three body paragraphs going to be about? We could say chocolate, vanilla, strawberry, but that'd be really hard to write an expanded paragraph about vanilla or chocolate or strawberry ice cream. So we talk about categories and we say, well, you can have your classic flavors, you can have your gourmet flavors, or you could have decadent flavors.

What happens now is they've proved there are many varieties of ice cream. You can have classic, decadent, or gourmet flavors. They know the first expanded paragraph has to be about classic flavors. In that, “classic flavors” becomes my topic sentence and I need to make sure that it's in there. I'll write one of the five types of topic sentences for that. I know how to do that.

Then I need three classic flavors to be my yellow, so vanilla, chocolate, strawberry becomes that. Then my second paragraph - “gourmet”, I know that has to be in the topic sentence and I might pick cookie dough, cookies and cream, and cheesecake. Then same with decadent. They know how to do that.

The other piece that's going to be new about that - and this is kind of where the grammar piece comes into play - is instead of writing a regular red conclusion sentence on those first two paragraphs, we teach them that it has to be a transition sentence. You can't just stop after talking about classic flavors because you're still going and that would be too jarring. We need to make a bridge over to the other paragraph.

That's where a lot of students want to say, “Well, I'm next going to tell you about…” and that's like the bane of a teacher's experience. We teach them that it has to be a compound sentence. At this point, we've taught coordinating conjunctions and what “fanboys” are. So we'll say, “Your first half of the sentence needs to talk about how classic flavors are delicious, but gourmet flavors offer an extra zing…” or something like that where you're introducing what your next paragraph's going to be about.

We spend some time on that three-paragraph essay and really working on those transition sentences and that thesis and plan because those are the pieces that are new and those are the pieces that you don't really want to mess up because it would hurt in the long run.

A lot of people will say, “Well, do you combine the thesis and plan? Do you ever make them one sentence?” And I think you can eventually. I think for purposes of having an organizer where they have to fill in boxes, it's great to have them separate because they don't forget to do one or the other. When you have them together, you usually get like half and not the other half. We'll allow students in like eighth and ninth grade to do that at that point when they're ready for it, when they know they're not going to forget it, it's up here. That piece takes us to the three-paragraph essay.

But you're still missing that - it’s the word that kills kids a lot of times in English classes - “hook”. When we get to the point of a five-paragraph essay, that is where we're really adding that introductory paragraph and that concluding paragraph.

What we say with that is there are five different ways to write an introductory paragraph. Those are general remark, question, quote, opposite, and story. What we tell students is they need to have three beginning sentences and then their thesis and plan. That's the introductory paragraph.

If they were writing about ice cream flavors, they would have three questions about ice cream, just the same as we've been asking them to do all along. They know how to write question topic sentences. We want three now and then that thesis and plan.

Then if you're doing a story, three sentences that tell your story and then the thesis and plan or general remark, three general remark sentences, that thesis, and plan. We're asking them to do a little bit more, but it's nothing that's foreign. They've been doing it all along. I just want three now.

It's very much like, all right, now this, now this, now this. Then the same happens with the concluding paragraph as well. We say, “If you had three beginning sentences before your thesis and plan, we want to have balance. There are three beginning sentences. We want three to be your conclusion.” The five different types of sentences that we use for concluding sentences are… Now they're picking three of those to do together at the end.

Again, it's not anything new. They've been doing it all along. But a lot of times, especially when you get to an essay, kids just want to be done, so they'll just start rambling. Then another essay starts to blossom. This just keeps it structured and gives them a formula for the process of getting from that basic all the way through to that expanded.

Anna Geiger:

I remember you said you didn't really know how to write when you got to college. I remember learning how to write a thesis my senior year of high school. I'd always liked writing, but I didn't really know about structuring it. It made so much sense to [use note cards]. I remember using note cards. I'm sure it wasn't like this very much, but there was still that idea of it all clicking together for me. After that, I really loved writing because now I knew what I was doing.

Do you have any success stories or situations where before and after doing this, you've noticed in terms of kids' attitudes around writing or being proud of their writing?

Bridget Barley:

Yes, so many of them. It's funny, like I said, we have such a large influx of sixth graders that come in, especially at the beginning of this year. I co-taught a composition class with a teacher until they kind of got their sea legs with, "OK, I'm ready for this."

They were all brand new. The first thing I said was "Tell me your thoughts about writing."

They said, "I hate writing, hate writing, hate writing."

At parent teacher conferences, all the parents came in and said, "This is their favorite class. Oh my gosh, they want to write at home."

It was funny, one of the kids went home and his mom was writing a brochure for a camp she runs in the summer. And he said, "Let me take a go at that for you." He wrote the brochure. She sent me this email. She said, "I was in tears. He hates writing. He's never enjoyed it. It was so good!"

Because I think what happens is a lot of kids get so scared about messing it up, they keep it very, very minimal. Then they're afraid to make a mistake, but when they know what to do… He had all sorts of vocabulary and things in there that he would have never, ever used because he thought it was going to go in the wrong place.

It's funny, we have students come back to talk to our new families sometimes about their experience here at Jemicy. Last year we had a student come back who's now 25. She's a paralegal, I think. She came back and she had written a speech. When I saw the speech, it was color-coded. I was like, this is amazing. This made me so happy.

Anna Geiger:

I'm sure it's really gratifying for the students to actually know what they're doing, right? Because that's the whole thing: once you know what you're doing, then this makes sense.

What about the teachers? Do they feel like this really helps them with their instruction? What is their feedback on it?

Bridget Barley:

Yes, and it's funny. We're lucky here because we are an independent school. It helped our teachers so much that a lot of our teachers developed things in their classrooms that reflect the colors and the color code of Paragraphology.

For example, our science teachers developed a lab report, and it follows our process paragraph, but it has in there an area for a hypothesis and the results of the experiment. Kids look at that and they're like, “Okay, I know exactly what to do here, great.”

In our social studies classes we use Cornell notes, but we use color-coded Cornell notes now. When students are looking at that we can say, “Oh, we're writing expository text, but textbooks are also written like that.”

If we can understand that and unlock that, we're going to be able to get meaning a little bit better too. The chapter title is green on their Cornell notes. All of the subtitles are over on the left-hand side are in yellow boxes. Then any pertinent details are bulleted in blue boxes on the right, and the students come up with a summary sentence in red under their own. It really helps taking that expository text, compartmentalizing it, and then with studying, it's related to a color now too, and they know what to do.

Or in our US history class, by the time they get in eighth grade and they're taking these Cornell notes, they have to write papers and essays on different topics in government and US history, but their notes are color-coded. It's just one less step for them. They know what they want to say and what should belong there and what historical events and what kind of citations they should have.

Anna Geiger:

When I think back to teachers doing this, so often it's hard to look at a piece of writing and know what to tell them to change or it's just such a mess. But when teachers have this structure that they're walking students through, I'm sure that really helps.

What would you say are the skills that students require to benefit from Paragraphology? What do they need before they can do this method?

Bridget Barley:

It's funny. We always talk about the structure of writing really starting with something so basic as spelling. You have to learn how to spell a word and then write a word and then write a sentence and then write a paragraph. I think having the support of either having that strong foundation for spelling, or, if that is not there, having the tools that are going to help you be able to achieve that success with spelling.

We have students that will use speech to text quite a bit. Having Grammarly or something that's going to be able to identify those spelling errors for you and not limit you on what it is that you have to say. Because I think for a lot of students, that's it. They think, “I'm going to spell it wrong. It's going to come out wrong. I can't do it.” If we take those barriers away and just let it free-flow come out, we get some amazing results.

Anna Geiger:

And I can imagine in the early grades, like first grade, if the students aren't at the point where they're writing sentences or able to write complex sentences, then it’s very easily done as a whole class modeling activity to get them into the idea of understanding how paragraphs go together.

What would you say would be some mistakes to avoid when doing Paragraphology?

Bridget Barley:

I think the biggest mistake that a lot of people will make is they'll say right off the bat, “Okay, so we gave you these sentences and you know what the colors are, and just go to town. You only want one blue under the first yellow and two under the next one and three under the other one…” I think they need so much practice and repetition before they can get to that stage.

Eventually, as writers, when you get into high school, that's going to naturally happen because you're working on a term paper or a research paper where you are going to have a supporting sentence, but your evidence - you might have seven blue sentences to support it, or maybe just two because it's just a short minor detail. But I think you have to get that structure solidified before you kind of mess with that.

And eventually you can, as long as they have a solid foundation. You have to make sure it's all supporting the other thing.

Anna Geiger:

Would you say another pitfall might be expecting children to do this independently too soon?

Bridget Barley:

Yes, absolutely. And it's important to let parents know what you're doing because it's easy, and because there are ways that parents can support it at home. I think that that's a great thing to do.

But yes, expecting that they can do it too soon independently. We model all the time, not just even at the beginning stage. I can even think of a lesson that I would do even in the middle of the year when they already know how to write expanded paragraphs.

They're doing other kinds, but you know what, let's shake it up a little because I think that's the other thing that can happen. It’s like exhaustion; we've done this so many times you lose them.

I do an activity where I get different flavors of Extra gum. They're in the foil. You can't tell what color they are from the foil, but I'll put a cool mint in a bag and I'll put three lemon pieces and some orange creamsicle pieces and strawberry shortcake and blueberry. I have enough pieces of gum that would represent each sentence and expand a paragraph and all of the kids come up and like take a piece of the gum, figure out what color they're going on. Even at that point, they already know how to do it. I'm still going to review it with them. I think that's really important to do, having that review.

Anna Geiger:

For teachers who are listening and want to try this, do you have resources somewhere that they can purchase or look to? How would they get started?

Bridget Barley:

Our website www.jemicyschool.org right at the top says Paragraphology. We do teacher trainings. We have a ten-hour asynchronous teacher training that we do. We do trainings in person.

We also have an app that we created for our students two years ago with UCNLearn. I don't know if you're familiar with Amir Bar and UCNLearn. He's got a lot of great things. The app is great because they can write their paragraphs in there. It prompts them. It’s great if it's a student that isn't able to do this at school with a teacher, but you want them to be able to have the support of it.

What's great about it is the cards are kind of built in there, so when they get to their yellow sentence in the app, it'll prompt them, “Here are the orange transition words that you could use for a first yellow sentence. Which one do you want?” Then they can pick it and it will go into the sentence. It really kind of teaches the students how to use it through there. It has the note-taking feature as well. That has been a real game changer for us, too.

People can always contact me too. I do have handouts that we gave for IDA or things like that that are just information. Those are on the website as well.

Anna Geiger:

Fantastic! It was very exciting watching your presentation when you went into it, obviously in much more detail than we did now. Seeing how this builds and understanding how it starts so basic, which is so helpful, like I said, for the teacher and the student, and then to see how this develops into different grades.

Just one more question. I know your school, maybe your population, is kind of always changing. Maybe kids don't stay there for all the grades. I'm not really sure how it works. For a school that might be doing this, and the kids have been doing it for a couple of years, and then you have a new sixth grader, how does that work?

Bridget Barley:

Every once in a while, we'll have a mid-year student. Usually what we'll do is go ahead and take a week and do it intensively to catch them up to kind of where the rest of the class is, because you can move much faster with one than you can a whole bunch.

Also, when we have new students coming in the summer, we run virtual Paragraphology for students. It's five days, and it's two hours a day with an instructor. It's synchronous. We run it in person here as well, but for people that are in California, that doesn't work. That is a real quick, from beginning, basic paragraph all the way through essay for students as well. It's usually a really quick catch up, actually. Once they get those cards and they start kind of relating, like, “Oh, this is what you want me to do for this. Okay.” It just catches on very quickly because it makes sense.

Anna Geiger:

I could see how it could be a good intervention. You know when I was in college, I was asked to tutor a high school student and I didn't know what I was doing. He was reading a really hard book that he couldn't read, and I didn't know what to do with him. But to know to have a structure like this, as you said even a week [can be impactful]. Turning on the light for how it all fits together is so important.

Thank you for sharing. This is very exciting.

Bridget Barley:

Thank you. It was really exciting. It was my first podcast.

Anna Geiger:

Oh, exciting. Hopefully you’ll do many more!

You can find the show notes for today's episode at reachallreaders.com/episode209. Talk to you next time!

Closing:

That's all for this episode of Triple R Teaching. For more educational resources, visit Anna at her home base, reachallreaders.com, and join our teaching community. We look forward to helping you reflect, refine, and recharge on the next episode of Triple R Teaching.