

Royal Fireworks Language Arts by Michael Clay Thompson

Paragraph Town

Third Edition



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Chapter One

Fishmeal, Queequack, and the Sentence

Call me *Fishmeal*.

I am a city duck—now—but how I came here and what I learned in the journey—that will take time to tell. At the moment I am in the mood to tell the story; I am in the mood for secrets. This hour I might not tell everyone, but I will tell you.

To begin at the beginning: whenever I get down in the beak, whenever it is a damp, cold November in my pond, whenever I find myself staring at great V's of ducks in the sky and pausing in front of each empty nest I find, then I think it is high time to go in search of...something.

Do you know how you start wondering about something, and the more you wonder, the more you wonder? You wonder until your curiosity will not let you alone; it itches to understand, and you must find answers.

Some duck-years ago, I thought I would go about a little and see a far part of the world—a city—in search of the *paragraph*.

You probably know that most ducks are writers. How could we not be, paddling on ponds and following fish in the shallows along the shore, gazing at the blue sky and white clouds reflected in the glassy water, hearing the low sounds of lake water lapping on the shore? A duck's life is made for poetry, so most ducks become writers.

Of course, we do not let other creatures *see* us writing. We sometimes write in our minds and share the writing with our duckmates in quackspeak, but that is another story, for another day.

Most ducks are writers, so right out of the egg I heard writer-tales: tales of sentences, tales of words, tales of the deep, blue secrets of language, and tales of the paragraph. All of these fascinated me, gripped me with an invisible hand, but it was the paragraph that held me the most.

The paragraph: I never could grasp it; it had something to do with words, something to do with logic, something to do with putting ideas somewhere. The paragraph: even the word pulled me close; *para, graph—para, graph*—the sounds drew me like a magnet.

I longed to know more, to understand the paragraph.

So one chill day, when the fall wind whipped ripples on the broad surface of the pond, and red leaves scratched crisp whispers on the ground, I left the pond.

Off I waddled—up the muddy bank, down the path, into the field, then up and over the leafy treetops—in search of the place I had heard about since I was a duckling: Paragraph Town.

Why did I not just take off from the water? Oh no, that would not have done—wet feet, too much chill in the breeze—too abrupt entirely. You can see that.

Rising in the wind I saw the surrounding hills, great rolls of trees with cloud shadows crawling over them. I saw farms, streams, and slow-crunching cows. On the horizon, as though through a mist, I could make out the shape of a great building. Maybe it was the beginning of Paragraph Town.



As I flew closer, I began to see other buildings. Was it Paragraph Town? I sailed down and landed on soft green grass and began to look about me.

Everywhere there was something wonderful—rows of windows rising to high roofs, roofs with chimneys and gables and windows, tiles and slopes, angles and planes. Some of the buildings were tall; others were only a few stories. There were doors, plain and fancy, and every kind of architectural adornment.

The streets were wide, and they were filled with people and cars on their way somewhere. I wondered where they were all going.

The Spouter Inn before me was eight stories high, with massive turrets on the side and a magnificent door at the front. The windows on the lower floors were covered with designs, but the next four floors had spacious windows that let in light and gave the inhabitants a view of the city. The roof was a combination of gable windows and chimneys, with chimney pipes rising to the sky.

I was about to say, “What a beautiful building,” but suddenly I heard a quack. No, it was more of a *kwee*.



SPOUTER
INN

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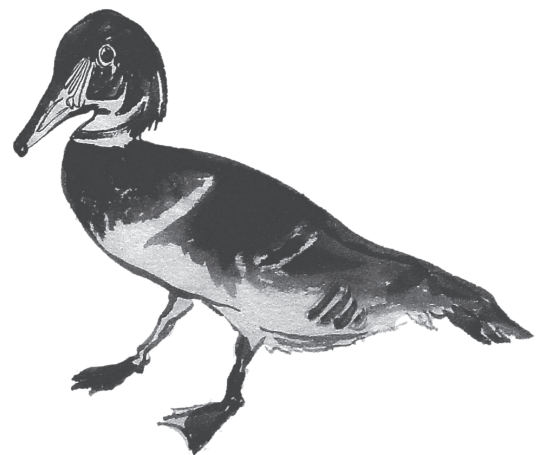
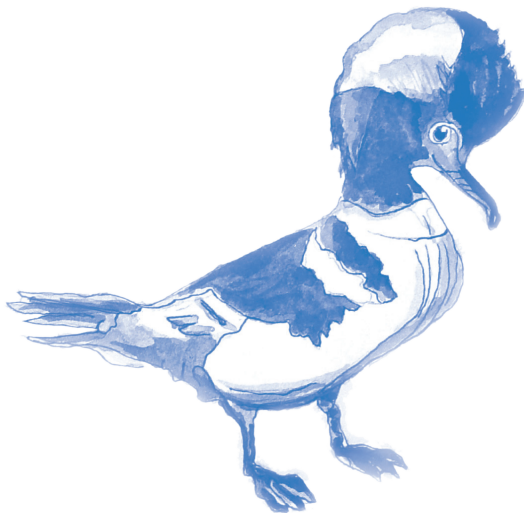
I turned, and there behind me was another duck! He was not a Mallard, as I am; he was a fancy duck, a Hooded Merganser, with a fine, high crest and a friendly countenance, quackling* toward me.

“Kwee!” he said.

“Hello, duck,” I said. “Call me *Fishmeal*. I’m looking for Paragraph Town so that I can learn how to write a paragraph.”

“Kwee!” said the Merganser. “My name is *Queequack*, and you are in the right place! Come with me. I will show you Paragraph Town, and paragraphs happen to be my specialty!” He beamed, as ducks beam.

Then, up he flew to the roof of the Spouter Inn, and I flew after him.



* The verb *quackle* is a word that only ducks know. *Quackling* is waddling and quacking simultaneously.



Chapter Three

Clear Paragraphs

“First,” Queequack began, “is there only one kind of writing, or are there different kinds of writing?”

“Different kinds.”

“So casual writing is free and relaxed, and correct writing has to follow strict rules?”

“Yes.”

“Right now, are you better at casual writing or at correct writing?”

“Oh,” I said, “I can already do casual, free writing. I write in my diary without worrying about rules, but I do not know enough about how to follow correct writing rules. That is the kind of writing that other ducks will read. That is why I want to learn more about paragraphs.”

“Kwee,” said Queequack, “if you want to understand and follow the rules for correct writing, you have to learn different categories of rules. Are there rules for using the right pronouns for each part of sentence?”

“Yes.”

“And are there rules for making your subject and verb agree?”

“Yes.”

“And are there rules for punctuating each sentence, according to the grammar of the sentence?”

“What?”

“Do you know that correct writing always must be punctuated and that to punctuate a sentence, you have to know the grammar of your sentence because the punctuation rules are based on grammar? For example, do you know that if you begin your sentence with multiple introductory prepositional phrases, you are expected to put a comma after the multiple phrases, like this:

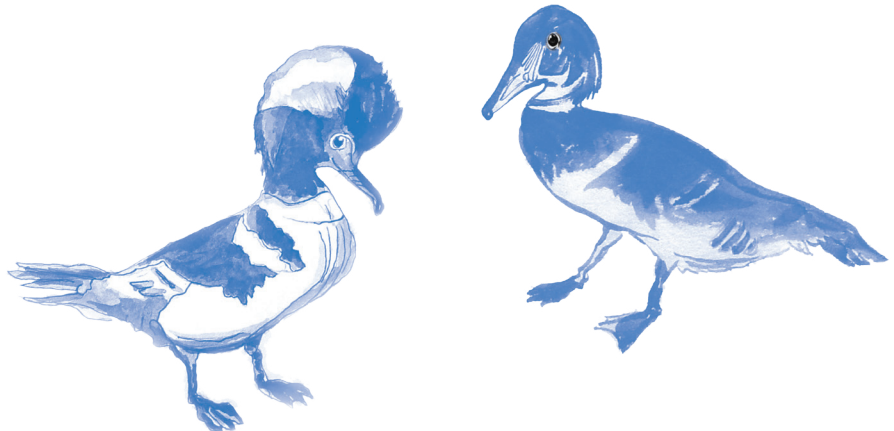
From the top of the roof, Fishmeal quacked.

Did you know that?”

“Yes, I do remember that.”

“So one part of correct writing is writing sentences with correct grammar and correct punctuation.”

“Yes, that is right.”



“But all of these things—the pronouns, the subject and verb, the punctuation, putting words in good places—all of these things happen *inside* a sentence.”

“Inside...I never thought about that,” I said.

“What about *outside* the sentence?” Queequack asked.

“Outside?” We had resumed our walk on the sidewalk.

“Yes, what if you want to say something complicated, with lots of details, and you need lots of sentences? Should the sentences be organized, or can they be in any order at all?”

“I think they should be organized so they are easy to read.”

“How could you organize a group of sentences to make them easier to read?”

I did not know what to say.

“I’ll show you some sentences that I mixed up, and you tell me if I began with one group of sentences or more than one group.”

“All right.”

This is what Queequack showed me:

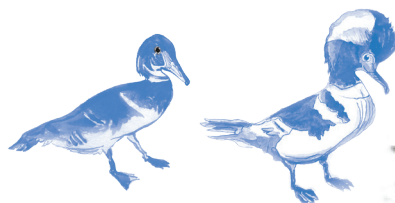
Ducks are water birds. They have three pairs of jointed legs extending from the middle part of their body, which is called the thorax. With their hard beaks, they dive to the bottom of the pond for minnows and insects. Insects live on every continent. They are covered in waterproof feathers. They are vertebrates, with a spinal cord extending through their bodies. They have compound eyes, made of many separate eye facets. They lay eggs in nests made of grass, leaves, and sticks.

“You began with more than one group of sentences,” I said. “There were two groups of sentences: one about ducks and one about insects.”

“Good,” he said. “Is there any sentence that might have been in either group?”

“Not exactly,” I said. “Insects have nervous systems, but they are not vertebrates with spinal cords.”

He smiled.



“Right,” he said. “Birds and insects are both animals, but only birds are vertebrates with spinal cords. So tell me: do you think that some sentences should be together, and other sentences should not be together?”



“Yes.”

“What if you wanted to make a long argument that something was true, and you had lots of different ideas to support your argument, and in each idea there were several sentences?”

“Then,” I said, “all of the sentences should be separated into groups, with each group containing all of the sentences that are about its idea.”

“Good,” he said. “That is what paragraphs are: **putting sentences about the same thing together**. If you have six things to say about what is good to eat in a pond, then those six ideas go together in the same paragraph, and even inside the paragraph you try to arrange the ideas for best effect.”

“The word *paragraph*,” Queequack continued, “comes from ancient Greece, more than 2,000 years ago. When the ancient Greeks wrote, they put short strokes beside their writing to show where there was a break in sense—to show where the sentences started to be about something else.”

The word the Greeks used for this habit of putting marks beside the writing was *paragraphos*, which in their alphabet looked like παράγραφος. The idea of the word can be seen in the two stems: *para*, meaning beside, and *graph*, meaning write.

paragraphos

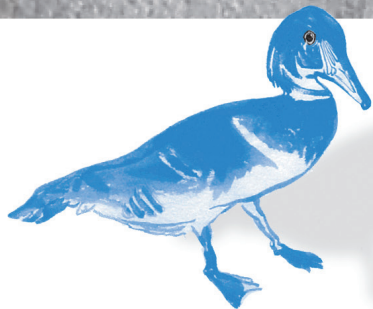
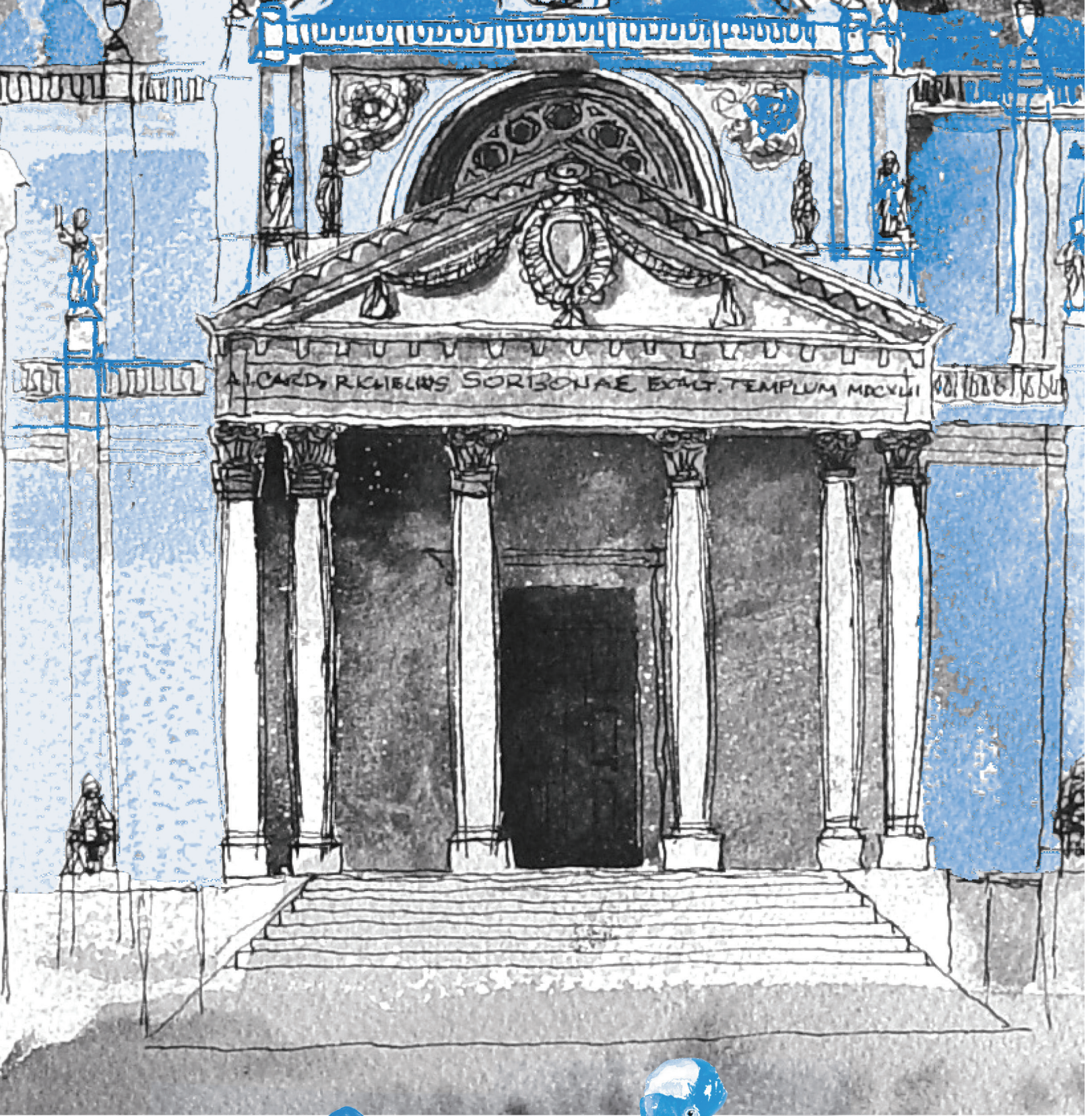
παράγραφος



“Today,” he continued, “instead of putting marks beside sections, we **indent** the first line of each paragraph, or we leave a **blank** line between them. The indentations or blank lines are easier to see than scratches on the side, so our paragraphs are easy to follow.”

“Let me ask you this,” said Queequack. “Do you think a pond is a good place for ducks to live?” I nodded. “Tell me why.” We waddled in thought down the sidewalk.

“Well,” I said, “there is room for every duck. The food is good. The pond is a pretty place to live. There is always something interesting to see.” Queequack found a piece of paper in his left wing pocket and began to write. We walked past a beautiful entrance, and he showed me six paragraphs he had written:



Thorough Pond

Every duck should live on Thorough Pond. The pond is a watery habitat, perfect for ducks. It has everything a duck needs to enjoy life.

Thorough Pond has plenty of room for ducks, geese, and all of the other birds and animals that live there. It is more than a mile long and half a mile wide, and it is almost thirty feet deep in the center, which gives fish and other water creatures space also.

Flying and paddling around such a big space makes ducks hungry, and Thorough Pond has all of the things to eat that ducks enjoy most. Mallards, Mergansers, and even loons can find minnows, frogs, aquatic insects, and lots of other fresh food. There are also delicious worms and vegetation to be found on the muddy banks.

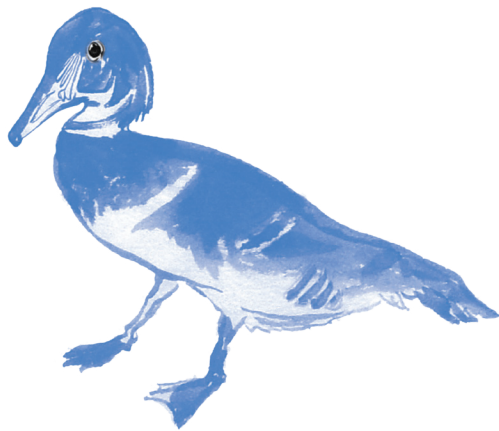
Thorough Pond is also an interesting place to live. Every day is filled with jumping fish, diving waterbirds, mysterious splashes, hawks inspecting overhead, and cranes tip-toeing along the banks. Mice peek between the weeds, and owls hoot in the evenings after the whippoorwills stop their clamor. A duck never knows what to expect next.

All of these things happen in the most beautiful surroundings a duck could want. Blue skies and white clouds are reflected in the water, and fall leaves land along the banks. Willow trees hang over the shore, and you can see the pale blue mountains in the distance.

Thorough Pond is duck-perfect; it is spacious, beautiful, and filled with interesting events. It has great food and is the perfect place for a duck to paddle around and enjoy every day.

“There are six paragraphs,” Queequack said, “and the first line of each one is indented to show where it begins. Each paragraph is about one thing, but all of the paragraphs together make the main point.” Queequack took a piece of chalk from his duckvest and wrote on the sidewalk:

1. Introduction
Thorough Pond is perfect for ducks.
2. Plenty of space
Plenty of room
More than a mile long
Half a mile wide
Thirty feet deep
3. Good food
Minnows
Frogs
Insects
Worms
Vegetation
4. Interesting
Jumping fish
Diving birds
Mysterious splashes
Hawks
Mice
Owls
5. Beautiful
Reflections
Falling leaves
Willows
Mountains
6. Conclusion
Space
Food
Interesting
Beautiful
Perfect



“See?” he said. “All of the facts are sorted into good paragraphs. In the end, each paragraph has its own part in expressing the main idea.”

“It is so clear,” I said, “but the first and sixth paragraphs are different, are they not?”

“Yes,” he said, “those two paragraphs are about the main idea. The middle ones are about smaller pieces of that idea.”

Thorough Pond	
Introduction	Every duck should live on Thorough Pond. The pond is a watery habitat, perfect for ducks. It has everything a duck needs to enjoy life.
Space	Thorough Pond has plenty of room for ducks, geese, and all of the other birds and animals that live there. It is more than a mile long and half a mile wide, and it is almost thirty feet deep in the center, which gives fish and other water creatures space also.
Food	Flying and paddling around such a big space makes ducks hungry, and Thorough Pond has all of the things to eat that ducks enjoy most. Mallards, Mergansers, and even loons can find minnows, frogs, aquatic insects, and lots of other fresh food. There are also delicious worms and vegetation to be found on the muddy banks.
Interest	Thorough Pond is also an interesting place to live. Every day is filled with jumping fish, diving waterbirds, mysterious splashes, hawks inspecting overhead, and cranes tip-toeing along the banks. Mice peek between the weeds, and owls hoot in the evenings after the whippoorwills stop their clamor. A duck never knows what to expect next.
Beauty	All of these things happen in the most beautiful surroundings a duck could want. Blue skies and white clouds are reflected in the water, and fall leaves land along the banks. Willow trees hang over the shore, and you can see the pale blue mountains in the distance.
Conclusion	Thorough Pond is duck-perfect; it is spacious, beautiful, and filled with interesting events. It has great food and is the perfect place for a duck to paddle around and enjoy every day.

“What do you call this kind of argument?” I asked.

“It is an **essay**,” he said, “but the secrets of an essay are a story by themselves—a different voyage. We need to concentrate on the paragraph for now.”