Bain defines rhetoric as “the means whereby language, spoken or written, may be rendered effective” (p. 1146). Bain’s definition of rhetoric moves it beyond oratory, because this definition specifically views rhetoric as an art practiced in both oral and written forms. In oral form the “three principle ends, —to inform, to persuade, to please” align with three departments of the mind “understanding, the will, and the feeling” (p.1146). Also present in Bain’s definition is an attempt to “methodize” instruction of composition. If the purpose of rhetoric is to be effective, then it is understandable that his view of the teacher is of a trainer of students. Bain believes improving the writing of students is difficult, as a result of limited and/or limiting knowledge of language on account of language “resulting from the practice of a life” (p. 1145). As such Bain recognizes a need for composition instructors to find ways to condense lessons to combat the issues with students working with limited language.

Understanding this issue as a limitation to writing instruction, Bain pushes for instructors to focus on the paragraph as a means to teach writing effectively. The paragraph, according to Bain, “handles and exhausts a distinct topic,” and “conditions essential to the effect of any succession of statements directed to a give purpose” (p. 1147). What this amounts to is Bain’s urging to focus on teaching the paragraph because doing so will allow for the student to “fully comprehend the method of the paragraph” and by doing that the student can also “comprehend the method of the entire work” (p.1147).

By restraining students to topic sentences, and an explicit plan “dictated by the nature of composition” (p. 1147). He sees this practice as leading to the student understanding in their mind what is good composition. These paragraphs that exemplify good composition would not only help students understand what is good composition, but also how the entire work can be composed. For Kitzhaber (1950), Bain’s work is significant to the field of rhetoric because of his impact on writing pedagogy.

As influential as Bain’s work was, it eventually fell out of favor as work on whole composition was published. By the 1890s the concept of whole composition, with its aim of teaching students the process of writing an entire composition as opposed to starting with sentences and paragraphs, and then moving to the whole work, became more prominent in rhetoric and composition. However, this shift away from the paragraph does not lessen the impact of Bain’s work. Without the focus on paragraphs, and the lack of adding to Bain’s rules in a significant way leads scholars to continue to explore and research other theories. Without the years of work on paragraph theory, and its inclusion in curriculum scholars would not likely take the step back, and argue to focus on the whole composition as the method and/or means to help a student understand the entire composition.