

Paragraphs

Why are paragraphs important?

Paragraphs organize and structure papers visually. Imagine trying to read a one-paragraph paper. You would be overwhelmed. Paragraphing allows the writer to clearly communicate to the reader that she is moving on to the next point. For most college-level writing, you will be developing expository paragraphs, or paragraphs that explain.

Structure of Paragraphs

Each paragraph should focus on ONE topic. In expository writing, your paragraph will move from general to specific. Introduce your topic and then develop that topic with specific details. By the end, your reader should have a full understanding of your topic and how it relates to the rest of your paper. Structure outline:

1. Topic sentence—tells the reader what the paragraph will focus on
2. Development:
 - a. Evidence related to the topic sentence
 - b. Analysis of evidence—how the evidence supports the topic
3. Topic's relationship to thesis statement
4. Conclusion and transition into next paragraph

Elements of a paragraph

Topic sentence—introduces the controlling idea of the paragraph

- this idea is the concept you are trying to prove to your readers
- Consider this topic sentence: “The narrative voice in this passage is third person and follows Ingeli’s stream of thought.” The **topic** is narrative voice, but the **controlling idea** is that the narrative voice follows a character’s stream of thought.

Unity—focusing on and developing ONE topic per paragraph

- every sentence in a paragraph should support the controlling idea introduced in the topic sentence

Cohesion—sentence-to-sentence flow and logic within a paragraph

- start a sentence with familiar information and end it with new information
- use transitions between sentences and ideas to show relationships
- repeat key words throughout a paragraph

Development—explain your topic enough that the reader understands your evidence and the topic’s relevance to your paper. Consider the following methods of development:

- use specific examples that demonstrate your point
- cite statistics
- paraphrase or quote from an expert on your topic
- define terms used in the paragraph
- examine cause and effect
- analyze a process
- compare and contrast

How long should a paragraph be?

There is no set length. A paragraph should be as long as it takes to develop a topic fully. However, as you're writing a paragraph, you may realize that it should be split into two or three separate paragraphs that develop an over-arching topic. For college-level academic writing, if your paragraph is longer than $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 page, review your paragraph and consider whether you should split it up.

Methods

It will save you more time than it takes if you outline paragraphs before you write. Jot down your topic, your controlling idea, and a list of the facts that you want to use as support. Your outline will help you see whether you have enough support to back up your topic sentence, what a logical order for your points might be, and whether you have too much evidence for one paragraph. If your list of supports is quite long, consider whether you should split your paragraph into two or more paragraphs. Then start writing, following your outline as you go.

Practice

1. Number these sentences in the order they should go in to create a developed paragraph. Remember to move from general (a topic sentence and controlling idea) to specific (an example or other information that develops the topic).

She does not swoon or grow too nervous to speak when she first sees him.

Hellena's views on love show that she has some appreciation and desire for femininity.

But Hellena's fantasies are not accurate predictions of her behavior because she is inherently not as feminine as her sister is.

She hasn't experienced love yet, but says that when she does she will look pale and tremble just as her sister did when she first saw her love (Behn, 1677, 5).

In contrast, she jokingly threatens to pickpocket him and then continues the flirtatious repartee through the rest of their conversation.

Her first encounter with her soon-to-be lover proves this point.

2. In the following paragraph, circle the sentences that are out of order and draw arrows to where they should be.

The essence of Sufism is the union of God and man (Bell, 1995). In the ghazals of his collection, *Divan*, Hafez' Sufi leanings are apparent. Were it not

References

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Parks, F.P., Levernier, J.A., Hollowell, I.M. (1991). *Structuring Paragraphs: A Guide to Effective Writing*. New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc.