



The Paragraph

A paragraph is a collection of related sentences dealing with a single topic. To be as effective as possible, a paragraph should contain each of the following: **a topic sentence, adequate development, unity, and coherence.** As you will see, all of these traits overlap. Using and adapting them to your individual purposes will help you construct effective paragraphs.

A Topic

Sentence:

A topic sentence lets readers know the focus of a paragraph in simple and direct terms. In a sense, it is a one-sentence summary that tells readers what to expect as they read, much as a thesis statement does for the whole essay. Thus, the topic sentence should provide some kind of orientation. It should indicate whether a paragraph will introduce a new topic or develop one already introduced. Topic sentences often do more than merely identify the topic though: they also indicate how the topic will be developed in subsequent sentences—whether it will be by citing examples, describing physical features, presenting reasons and evidence, relating anecdotes, classifying, defining, comparing, or contrasting, etc.

Although topic sentences may occur anywhere in a paragraph, stating the topic sentence as the first sentence is a good idea because it gives readers a sense of how the paragraph will be developed. The beginning of the paragraph is therefore the most common position for a topic sentence; although they can appear elsewhere in the paragraph.

Adequate

Development: The topic (introduced by the topic sentence) should be discussed fully and adequately. Again, particulars of this development vary from paragraph to paragraph, depending on the author's purpose, so there are no firm rules about how long a paragraph should be. But student writers should be wary of paragraphs that only have two or three sentences. It's a pretty good bet that the paragraph is not fully developed if it is that short.

More than length, however, college instructors care much more about how well developed the writing is. They expect students to qualify their ideas by providing specific support—information that explains, illustrates, defends, describes, supports, or otherwise develops the idea presented in the topic sentence.

Here are some methods you can use to develop a paragraph's topic thoroughly:

- use examples and illustrations
- cite data (facts, statistics, evidence, details, and others)
- use testimony (what other people say, such as quotes and paraphrases)
- use an anecdote or story
- define terms in the paragraph
- compare and contrast
- evaluate causes and reasons
- examine effects and consequences
- analyze the topic
- describe the topic
- offer a chronology of an event (time segments)

Over →

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Unity: In addition to being adequate, your supporting detail must be relevant, which means that every detail in a body paragraph must clearly and directly relate to the idea stated by the topic sentence of that paragraph. The entire paragraph should concern itself with a single focus. If it begins with one focus or major point of discussion, it should not end with another or wander within different ideas.

To test the unity of a paragraph, read each sentence in a paragraph carefully and compare it to the topic sentence of the paragraph. If the paragraph is unified, each sentence will further explain or support the overall focus expressed in the topic sentence. Any sentences that do not do this should be deleted or moved elsewhere.

Coherence: Unity among sentences in a paragraph is crucial, but it is not the only element needed to clearly communicate a topic. The relationships among the sentences in each paragraph need to be clear. Coherence is the trait that provides this clarity by making the paragraph easily understandable. To the writer all of the sentences in a paragraph might appear to be obviously related, but to a reader who is a stranger to the topic of the paper, the relationships between the sentences might not be so obvious. Thus, it is up to the writer to specifically *show* the relationship between ideas to the reader. Paragraphs where the relationships between sentences are clear are coherent and flow smoothly from sentence to sentence without awkward breaks in rhythm or meaning. Coherence can be achieved by keeping the following tips in mind:

- **Arrange sentences in the most effective order:** At the most basic level coherence in a paragraph comes from organizing the ideas and facts in a sensible pattern. Arrange sentences in a way that best conveys the purpose of the paragraph.
- **Use transitional words and phrases to connect sentences to each other:** Transitions are words and phrases that show the relationships between ideas. Transitions should be used between sentences to establish a logical connection between the ideas they put forth.
- **Repeat key words and phrases:** Repetition is another way of knitting together a paragraph. Repeating key words and phrases at strategic moments can improve coherence by reminding the reader of the point the writer is focusing on.
- **Construct sentences using parallel structure:** Parallel structure is a particular kind of repetition which is valuable because it highlights the similarities between ideas. Rather than merely a repetition of key words, parallelism involves wording sentences, or parts of sentences, so that they have similar structure to those around them.

Note: Introduction paragraphs and conclusion paragraphs within essays do not follow these paragraph rules so neatly. The purpose of these paragraphs is often not merely to state a point and adequately explain it; instead they strive to frame an essay by leading the reader into the paper and leading the reader out. Thus, oftentimes they do not contain the typical structure of a topic sentence followed by supporting details. In fact, it is difficult to apply strict rules to introductions and conclusions at all because they should be written so as to best carry out their purpose—whatever style that may involve. However these paragraphs, like all paragraphs, should still display unity and coherence.

*This handout was adapted with permission from a similar one used by Columbia College's Academic Achievement Center.