

# Paragraphs

## What is a Paragraph?

Paragraphs are comprised of sentences, but not random sentences. A paragraph is a group of sentences organized around a central topic. In fact, the cardinal rule of paragraph writing is to focus on one idea. A solidly written paragraph takes its readers on a clear path, without detours. Master the paragraph, and you'll be on your way to writing A\* essays.

## The Four Essential Elements

A basic paragraph structure might typically consist of five sentences: the topic sentence, three supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence. But the secrets to paragraph writing lay in four essential elements, which when used correctly, can make a mediocre paragraph into a great paragraph.

### Element 1: Unity.

Unity in a paragraph begins with the topic sentence. Every paragraph has one single, controlling idea that is expressed in its topic sentence, which is typically the first sentence of the paragraph. A paragraph is unified around this main idea, with the supporting sentences providing detail and discussion. In order to write a good topic sentence, think about your theme and all the points you want to make. Decide which point drives the rest, and then write it as your topic sentence.

### Element 2: Order.

Order refers to the way you organize your supporting sentences. Whether you choose chronological order, order of importance, or another logical presentation of detail, a solid paragraph always has a definite organization. In a well-ordered paragraph, the reader follows along easily, aided by the pattern you've established. Order helps the reader grasp your meaning and avoid confusion.

### Element 3: Coherence.

Coherence is the quality that makes your writing understandable. Sentences within a paragraph need to connect to each other and work together as a whole. One of the best ways to achieve coherency is to use transition words. These words create bridges from one sentence to the next. You can use transition words that show order (first, second, third); spatial relationships (above, below) or logic (furthermore, in addition, in fact). Also, in writing a paragraph, using a consistent verb tense and point of view are important ingredients for coherency.

### Element 4: Completeness.

Completeness means a paragraph is well-developed. If all sentences clearly and sufficiently support the main idea, then your paragraph is complete. If there are not enough sentences or enough information to prove your thesis, then the paragraph is incomplete. Usually three supporting sentences, in addition to a topic sentence and concluding sentence, are needed for a paragraph to be complete. The concluding sentence or last sentence of the paragraph should summarize your main idea by reinforcing your topic sentence.

## Six steps to writing an effective paragraph

1. Brainstorm ideas around a central topic
2. Arrange your points in a logical order.
3. Write the topic sentence.
4. Add supporting details and evidence: use clear, simple sentences with transition words.
5. Tie it all together with a conclusion sentence.
6. Edit your paragraph for grammar, style, and coherence.

## ***1. Brainstorm ideas around a central topic***

(a) Decide what the main topic of the paragraph is going to be. Before you begin writing your paragraph, you must have a clear idea of what the paragraph is going to be about. This is because a paragraph is essentially a collection of sentences which all relate to one central topic. Without a definite idea of what the main topic is, your paragraph will lack focus and unity.

In order to pin down the exact topic of your paragraph, you should ask yourself a number of questions:

- **PROMPT:** What is the prompt I have been given? If you are writing a paragraph as a response or answer to a particular prompt, such as "You have decided to donate money to charity. Which charity do you choose and why?" or "Describe your favorite day of the week," you will need to think carefully about that prompt and make sure you are directly addressing it, rather than going off topic.
- **ISSUES:** What are the main ideas or issues that I need to address? Think about the topic you are being asked or have decided to write about and consider what the most relevant ideas or issues relating to that topic are. As paragraphs are usually relatively short, it is important that you try to hit on all of the main ideas, without going off topic.
- **AUDIENCE:** Who am I writing for? Think about who the intended readership of this paragraph or paper is going to be. What is their prior knowledge? Are they familiar with the topic at hand, or will it require a number of explanatory sentences?
- **REGISTER:** Should I be addressing this audience in a formal or informal tone?

(b) Write down information and ideas relating to that topic. Once you have a clearer idea of what you want to address in your paragraph, you can start organizing your thoughts by writing down your ideas on a notepad or word document. There's no need to write out full sentences just yet, just jot down some key words and phrases. Once you see everything on paper, you may get a clearer idea of which points are essential to include in your paragraph, and which points are superfluous. IN the next stage you can structure the points properly.

## ***2. Arrange your points in a logical order.***

Figure out how you want to structure your paragraph. Now that all of your thoughts, ideas, facts and figures are laid out clearly in front of you, you can start to think about how you want to structure your paragraph. Consider each of the points you wish to address and try to arrange them in a logical order - this will make your paragraph more coherent and easier to read. This new order may be chronological, may put the most important information first, or may just make the paragraph easier and more interesting to read - it all depends on the topic and style of the paragraph you wish to write. Once you have decided where you want everything to go, you can rewrite your points according to this structure - this will help to make the writing process a lot faster and more straightforward.

## ***3. Write the topic sentence.***

Write a topic sentence. The first sentence of your paragraph needs to be the topic sentence. A topic sentence is an introductory line which addresses what the main idea or thesis of the paragraph is going to be. It should contain the most important and relevant point you wish to make regarding your topic, thus summarizing the paragraph as a whole. Every other sentence you write should support the topic sentence and provide further detail and discussion of the issues or ideas it raises. If any sentence you write cannot be directly related to the topic sentence, it should not be included in this particular paragraph. More experienced writers can include their topic sentence at any point in the paragraph: it doesn't necessarily need to be the first line. However, writers who are new or less comfortable with paragraph writing should stick with having the topic sentence first, as it will help to guide you throughout the rest of the paragraph. This is also true in an exam when your time is limited.

#### ***4. Add supporting details and evidence: use clear, simple sentences with transition words.***

Fill in the supporting details. Once you have written and are happy with your topic sentence, you can start to fill in the rest of your paragraph. This is where the detailed, well-structured notes you wrote earlier will come in handy. Make sure that your paragraph is coherent, which means that it is easy to read and understand, that each sentence connects with the next and that everything flows nicely as a whole. To achieve this, try to write clear, simple sentences that express exactly what you want to say.

Link each sentence with transition words which form a bridge between one sentence and the next. Transition words can help you compare and contrast, show sequence, show cause and effect, highlight important ideas, and progress smoothly from one idea to the next. Such transition words include "furthermore", "in fact" and "in addition to". You can also use chronological transitions, such as "firstly", "secondly" and "thirdly".

The supporting sentences are the meat of your paragraph, so you should fill them with as much evidence to support your topic sentence as possible. Depending on the topic, you can use facts, figures, statistics and examples or you can use stories, anecdotes and quotes. Anything goes, as long as it is relevant.

In terms of length, three to five sentences will usually be enough to cover your main points and adequately support your topic sentence, but this will vary greatly depending on the topic and the length of the paper you are writing. As a rough guide, the second sentence identifies the first major supporting detail. The third sentence brings up a second supporting detail. Similarly, the fourth sentence mentions a third supporting detail. Additional sentences can be added here for additional supporting details or to divide one lengthy supporting detail into separate, easier-to-read sentences.

#### ***5. Tie it all together with a conclusion sentence.***

Write a concluding sentence. The concluding sentence of your paragraph should tie everything together and reiterate the main point of your topic sentence, albeit in different words. A good concluding sentence will reinforce the idea outlined in your topic sentence, but now it has all the weight of the evidence or arguments contained in your supporting sentences behind it. After reading the concluding sentence, the reader should have no doubt as to the accuracy or relevance of the paragraph as a whole.

The concluding sentence of the paragraph should basically reword the topic sentence, while drawing in some of the information presented in the body of the paragraph for support.

For example, in a paragraph dealing with the topic "Why is Canada a great place to live?" The concluding sentence might look something like "From all the evidence provided above, such as Canada's fantastic health care provisions, its top-notch education system and its clean, safe cities, we can conclude that Canada is indeed a great place to live."

#### ***6. Edit your paragraph for grammar, style, and coherence.***

(a) Know when to move on to a new paragraph. Sometimes it can be difficult to tell where one paragraph should end and another begin. Luckily, there are a number of guidelines you can follow which can make the decision to move on to a new paragraph an obvious one. The most basic guideline to follow is that every time you start to discuss a new idea, you should move on to a new paragraph. Paragraphs should never contain more than one central idea. If a given idea has multiple points or facets, then each individual aspect of the idea should be given its own paragraph.

A new paragraph is also used each time you are contrasting two points or presenting each side of an argument. For example, if your topic is "should civil servants receive lower salaries?" one paragraph would deal with the arguments supporting lower pay for civil servants, while the other paragraph would provide arguments against it.

Paragraphs make a piece of writing easier to comprehend and give readers a "break" between new ideas in order to digest what they have just read. If you feel that the paragraph you are writing is becoming too complex, or contains a series of complex points, you may want to think about

splitting it up into individual paragraphs.

When writing a paper, the introduction and conclusion should always be given their own paragraphs. The introductory paragraph should define the aim of the essay and what it hopes to achieve, while also giving a brief outline of the ideas and issues it will go on to discuss. The concluding paragraph provides a summary of the information and arguments contained in the essay and states in clear terms what the paper has shown and/or proven. It may also introduce a new idea, one that opens the reader's mind to the questions raised by the essay.

(b) Check your paragraph for spelling and grammar. Once you have finished writing, it is essential that you re-read your paragraph two or three times to check it for misspelled words and poor grammar. Spelling mistakes and bad grammar can significantly impact the perceived quality of your paragraph, even if the ideas and arguments it contains are of a high quality. It is very easy to overlook small mistakes when writing, so don't skip this step, even if you're in a rush.

Ensure that each sentence has a subject and that all proper nouns are capitalized. Also make sure that all of the subjects and verbs agree with each other and that you use the same tense across the entire paragraph.

Use a dictionary to double check the spelling of words that you are unsure about, don't just assume that they are correct. You can also use a thesaurus to find synonyms for words, if you feel like you are using the same term too much.

Check your paragraph for the proper use of punctuation, making sure that you use marks such as commas, colons, semicolons and ellipses in the correct context.

(c) Check your paragraph for coherency and style. Not only should the technical aspects of your writing be spot on, but you should also try to achieve a certain clarity in your writing, as well as stylistic flow. You can do this by varying the length and format of your sentences and by using transitional words and a varied vocabulary.

The point of view of your writing should remain consistent throughout the paragraph, and indeed, the entire essay. For example, if you are writing in the first person (e.g., "I believe that...") you should not switch to a passive voice ("it is believed that") halfway through.

However, you should also try to avoid beginning every sentence with "I think..." or "I contend that..." Try to vary the format of your sentences, as this will make the paragraph more interesting for the reader and help it to flow more naturally.

For beginner writers, it is better to stick to short, to-the-point sentences which clearly express your point. Long, rambling sentences can very quickly become incoherent or fall victim to grammatical errors, so try to avoid them until you gain more experience as a writer.

(d) Decide if your paragraph is complete. Once you have re-read the paragraph and fixed any grammatical or stylistic errors, you should have one more glance over it to determine whether it is complete. Try to look at the paragraph objectively and decide whether it sufficiently supports and develops your topic sentence, or whether it needs a few more details or additional evidence to back up your claims.

If you feel that the main claim of your topic sentence is sufficiently supported and well-developed by the contents of the rest of your paragraph, then your paragraph is probably complete. However, if any important aspect of the topic remains unexplored or unexplained or if the paragraph is shorter than three sentences, it probably needs a little more work.

On the other hand, you may decide that your paragraph is too long and contains superfluous or tangential content. If this is the case, you should edit the paragraph so it contains only the most relevant information.

If you feel that all of the content is necessary to your point, but the paragraph is still too long, you should think about breaking it up into several smaller, more specific paragraphs.

**Example expository paragraph:** *'Do the advantages of social networking sites outweigh the disadvantages?'*

The benefits of social networking websites have the potential to outweigh the dangers of such websites. While social networking does curb real life interaction with one's peers, it also provides shy, introverted, or socially awkward youth with a new avenue of communication that often makes it easier to connect and form relationships. A sharp increase in cyberbullying is an unfortunate result of social networking, but sites like Facebook also give people the opportunity to build a larger network of support. Additionally, while unmonitored teens and young adults may post photographs and information that could damage their futures and make them less desirable to potential employers, responsible and well-guided youth have the chance to build working relationships and create a stronger presence in the working world. Even though there are a large number of risks and downfalls associated with social networking, when the tool is used correctly and the youth are instructed on correct usage, it offers considerable positives.

**Example narrative paragraph**

Susan Sanders did not like the rain. Whenever it rained, dark clouds would cover the sky and block out the sun, making the entire day seem dreary and gray. If it rained on a chilly day, then the day seemed even colder and more miserable than before. Moreover, regardless of the temperature, rain meant that Susan's hair would get frizzy and messed up no matter how much time she spent on it. Even a few raindrops were enough to undo an entire morning's worth of styling. As far as Susan was concerned, rain was certainly not her friend.