

Paragraphs

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A *paragraph* is a group of related sentences serving three important purposes:

- Paragraphs join together sentences into a unit that works to support an essay's main idea or thesis.
- Paragraphs provide breaks that allow readers to pause and make sense of what they are reading.
- Paragraphs indicate the movement or development of ideas in an essay. Each new paragraph—or in some cases, clusters of paragraphs—contributes important new information that moves a reader one step closer to an essay's main idea or thesis.

Writers use four types of paragraphs

- *Introductory paragraphs* identify an essay's topic, give basic background or contextual information, and indicate the writer's purpose for writing, approach to the topic (including the scope of treatment), and thesis.
- *Body paragraphs* provide the main development and support of an essay's main idea or thesis.
- *Transitional paragraphs* connect the various body paragraphs together and join the body of an essay to the introduction and conclusion.
- *Concluding paragraphs* review an essay's main points, discuss the significance of those points, and sometimes point ahead to future treatments of the topic.

When to paragraph

- To signal a shift in focus.
- To signal a shift in time or place.
- To signal the next step in a sequence of steps.
- To add particular emphasis to important ideas.
- To set off a new person's contribution to an unfolding dialogue.
- To set off introductory and concluding material from the body of an essay.

Paragraph Unity and Continuity

Just as paragraphs work together to develop a thesis, the sentences within an effective paragraph support and extend one another to develop a single idea. Thus, you can think of a paragraph as a kind of "mini-essay." Like a full essay, an effective paragraph:

- presents a clear main or controlling idea
- supports or develops that main idea
- arranges ideas and supporting material in an orderly pattern, and
- uses logical associations and transitions to link one idea to the next

Paragraph Unity

As a rule, every effective paragraph has an explicit *topic sentence*, which is stated at or near the beginning and to which all other sentences in the paragraph are logically related. We refer to that logical relationship as *paragraph unity*. To test for paragraph unity, ask yourself how each sentence of a paragraph helps support or develop the topic sentence of that paragraph. Give a name to the relationship between the two sentences (e.g., exemplification, classification, definition).

Paragraph Continuity

Continuity, or the linkage between sentences in a paragraph or between paragraphs, requires that you write each new sentence or paragraph with the adjacent sentences and paragraphs in mind. You want your reader to feel that one sentence or paragraph has grown naturally out of its predecessor and leads naturally to what follows—an effect that is typically achieved by picking some word or idea from one sentence or paragraph (what you might think of as “given” information) and taking it further in the next (the “new” information you’re offering).

It is a good idea to make these relationships between sentences and paragraphs explicit by using *cohesive ties* (e.g., word repetition, related words, pronouns, demonstrative adjectives) and *transitional expressions*. Some common relationships and transitional expressions you can use to bring those relationships up to the surface include:

- addition (e.g., moreover, in addition, furthermore)
- likeness or similarity (e.g., similarly, likewise)
- contrast (e.g., however, but, on the other hand, nevertheless)
- exemplification (e.g., for example, for instance, e.g.)
- consequence (e.g., therefore, thus, as a result, accordingly)
- sequence (e.g., first, next, finally, subsequently)
- restatement (e.g., that is, in other words, i.e.)
- summary (e.g., to conclude, in summary, overall)

For a list of the most commonly used transitional expressions, refer to the Southeastern Writing Center’s handout *Useful Transitional Words and Phrases*.

Some Patterns of Paragraph Development

- *Narrative paragraphs* tell a story and are often arranged chronologically (i.e., according to time).
- *Descriptive paragraphs* give details about the way something is sensed or experienced. The arrangement of those details typically reflects the logical order in which an object is sensed or experienced (i.e., from top to bottom or front to back; from sight to sound; from smell to taste).
- *Exemplifying paragraphs* use specific examples to illustrate and elaborate a more general claim.
- *Process paragraphs* describe how something works or unfolds as a sequence of steps (e.g., in a recipe).
- *Cause and effect paragraphs* examine why events occur and their consequences.
- *Comparison and contrast paragraphs* examine the similarities and differences between things and events. These similarities and differences can be organized on an alternating *point-by-point* basis (e.g., X₁ vs. Y₁; X₂ vs. Y₂; X₃ vs. Y₃), or they can be handled independently *one set at a time* (X₁, X₂, X₃ vs. Y₁, Y₂, Y₃).
- *Classification and division paragraphs* group separate objects into categories according to common qualities or separate objects and groups of objects into their component parts according to their differences.
- *Definition paragraphs* include the term being defined, the class or category of things to which it belongs, and the details that distinguish it from other members of its class.