

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

In many languages, the fundamental unit of composition is the paragraph. A paragraph consists of several sentences that are grouped together. This group of sentences together discuss one main subject. In formal academic English, paragraphs have three principal parts. These three parts are the **topic sentence**, **body sentences**, and the **concluding sentence**.

FORMAT OF AN ACADEMIC PARAGRAPH.

The Topic Sentence

A **topic sentence** usually comes at the beginning of a paragraph; that is, it is usually the first sentence in a formal academic paragraph. (Sometimes this is not true, but as you practice writing with this online lesson site, please keep to this rule unless you are instructed otherwise.) Not only is a topic sentence the first sentence of a paragraph, but, more importantly, it is the most general sentence in a paragraph. What does "most general" mean? It means that there are not many details in the sentence, but that the sentence introduces an overall idea that you want to discuss later in the paragraph.

(Notice how the first sentence begins with "My hometown..." a few spaces to the right of the paragraph edge. This is an indentation. All paragraphs in English MUST begin with an indentation.)

For example, suppose that you want to write a paragraph about the natural landmarks of your hometown. The first part of your paragraph might look like this:

My hometown is famous for several amazing natural features. First, it is noted for the Wheaton River, which is very wide and beautiful. Also, on the other side of the town is

Wheaton Hill, which is unusual because it is very steep.

Note how the first sentence, *My hometown, Wheaton, is famous for several amazing geographical features*, is the most general statement. This sentence is different from the two sentences that follow it, since the second and third sentences mention specific details about the town's geography, and are not general statements.

Here are some examples of sentences that cannot be used as topic sentences. Can you figure out why they are inappropriate?

- 1. My hometown is famous because it is located by Wheaton River, which is very wide, and because it is built near an unusually steep hill called Wheaton Hill.*
- 2. There are two reasons why some people like to buy cars with automatic transmission and two reasons why others like cars with manual transmission.*
- 3. Clouds are white.*

The problem with sentence #1 is that it contains too many details. Topic sentences are general, and details should appear later in the paragraph. A better topic sentence would be like the one mentioned above, *My hometown is famous for several amazing geographical features.*

Sentence #2 is not appropriate as a topic sentence because it mentions two topics, not just one. Paragraphs are usually about one main thing and so their topic sentences should also be

about only one main thing.

The problem with sentence #3 is that it is too general. It is also very boring! Would you like to read a paragraph with this topic sentence? Most people would not.

We can rewrite sentences #2 and #3 in the following ways to make it better:

There are two reasons why some people like to buy cars with automatic transmission.

or :

There are two reasons why some people like cars with manual transmission.

The shapes of clouds are determined by various factors.

Supporting Sentences

Consider again the above-mentioned, short paragraph:

My hometown, Wheaton, is famous for several amazing natural features. First, it is noted for the Wheaton River, which is very wide and beautiful. Also, on the other side of the town is Wheaton Hill, which is unusual because it is very steep.

When a reader reads a topic sentence, such as *My hometown, Wheaton, is famous for several amazing natural features*, a question should usually appear in the reader's mind. In this case, the question should be like, "What are the natural features that make Wheaton famous?" The reader should then expect that the rest of the paragraph will give an answer to this question.

Now look at the sentences after the topic

sentence. We can see that the second sentence in the paragraph, *First, it is noted for the Wheaton River, which is very wide and beautiful*, indeed gives an answer to this question. That is, the second sentence gives some explanation for the fact that Wheaton is a famous town. Similarly, we can see that the third sentence also gives some explanation for the fact that Wheaton is famous by giving another example of an "amazing natural feature," in this case, Wheaton Hill.

The second and third sentences are called **supporting sentences**. They are called "supporting" because they "support," or explain, the idea expressed in the topic sentence. Of course, paragraphs in English often have more than two supporting ideas. The paragraph above is actually a very short paragraph. At minimum, you should have at least five to seven sentences in your paragraph. Here we can see our paragraph about Wheaton with a few more supporting sentences in bold font:

*My hometown is famous for several amazing natural features. First, it is noted for the Wheaton River, which is very wide and beautiful. Also, on the other side of the town is Wheaton Hill, which is unusual because it is very steep. **The third amazing feature is the Big Old Tree. This tree stands two hundred feet tall and is probably about six hundred years old.***

The short paragraph above is a fairly complete paragraph, but it **lacks details**. Whenever possible, you should include enough details in your paragraphs to help your reader understand

exactly what you are writing about. In the paragraph about Wheaton, three natural landmarks are mentioned, but we do not know very much about them. **For example, we could add a sentence or two about Wheaton river concerning HOW wide it is or WHY it is beautiful.** Consider this revision (and note the additional details in bold):

My hometown is famous for several amazing natural features. First, it is noted for the Wheaton River, which is very wide and beautiful. On either side of this river, which is 175 feet wide, are many willow trees which have long branches that can move gracefully in the wind. In autumn the leaves of these trees fall and cover the riverbanks like golden snow. Also, on the other side of the town is Wheaton Hill, which is unusual because it is very steep. Even though it is steep, climbing this hill is not dangerous, because there are some firm rocks along the sides that can be used as stairs. There are no trees around this hill, so it stands clearly against the sky and can be seen from many miles away. The third amazing feature is the Big Old Tree. This tree stands two hundred feet tall and is probably about six hundred years old. These three landmarks are truly amazing and make my hometown a famous place.

If we wished, we could also add more details to the paragraph to describe the third natural

feature of the area, the Big Old Tree.

A Note on Formality. In addition to having a particular kind of structure, academic paragraphs are different from "ordinary writing" (such as letter writing) in that certain kinds of expressions are not allowed. For example, in formal essays, you should not use contractions such as don't or aren't. Instead, you should write out the words in full, for example, do not and are not.

Also, in formal essays you should avoid the first and second person. That is, do not use the pronouns I or you. The pronouns we and us are sometimes used in formal essays in some major fields, but in general you should not use these unless you are certain that they are customary in your field and/or your professor allows them. It is safer simply to use the third person.

The Concluding Sentence

In formal paragraphs you will sometimes see a sentence at the end of the paragraph which summarizes the information that has been presented. This is the concluding sentence. You can think of a concluding sentence as a sort of topic sentence in reverse.

You can understand concluding sentences with this example. Consider a hamburger that you can buy at a fast-food restaurant.* A hamburger has a top bun (a kind of bread), meat, cheese, lettuce, and other elements in the middle of the hamburger, and a bottom bun. Note how the top bun and the bottom bun are very similar. The top bun, in a way, is like a topic sentence, and the bottom bun is like the concluding sentence. Both buns "hold" the meat, onions, and so on. Similarly, the topic sentence and concluding sentence "hold" the supporting sentences in the paragraph. Let's see how a concluding sentence (in bold font) might look in our sample paragraph about Wheaton:

COHERENCE & UNITY

My hometown is famous for several amazing natural features. First, it is noted for the Wheaton River, which is very wide and beautiful. Also, on the other side of the town is Wheaton Hill, which is unusual because it is very steep. The third amazing feature is the Big Old Tree. This tree stands two hundred feet tall and is probably about six hundred years old. These three landmarks are truly amazing and make my hometown a famous place.

Notice how the concluding sentence, *These three landmarks are truly amazing and make my hometown a famous place*, summarizes the information in the paragraph. Notice also how **the concluding sentence is similar to, but not exactly the same as, the topic sentence.**

Not all academic paragraphs contain concluding sentences, especially if the paragraph is very short. However, if your paragraph is very long, it is a good idea to use a concluding sentence.

Coherence refers to a certain characteristic or aspect of writing. Literally, the word means "to stick together." **Coherence in writing means that all the ideas in a paragraph flow smoothly from one sentence to the next sentence.** With coherence, the reader has an easy time understanding the ideas that you wish to express.

My hometown is famous for several amazing natural features. First, it is noted for the Wheaton River, which is very wide and beautiful. On either side of this river, which is 175 feet wide, are many willow trees which have long branches that can move gracefully in the wind. In autumn the leaves of these trees fall and cover the riverbanks like golden snow. Second, on the other side of the town is Wheaton Hill, which is unusual because it is very steep. Even though it is steep, climbing this hill is not dangerous, because there are some firm rocks along the sides that can be used as stairs. There are no trees around this hill, so it stands clearly against the sky and can be seen from many miles away. The third amazing feature is the Big Old Tree. This tree stands two hundred feet tall and is probably about six hundred years old. These three landmarks are truly amazing and make my hometown a famous place.

Major Connectors

Look at the words in bold font. Do you see how they help guide the reader? For example, consider the words, *First*, *Second*, and *The third amazing feature*. We can call these words major connectors. Major connectors help organize the main parts of your paragraph. This paragraph has three main parts: (1) a part about the Wheaton River, (2) a part about Wheaton Hill, and (3) a part about the Big Old Tree. Another way of saying this is that this paragraph has three main points which are indicated by the major connectors. Using such major connectors is an important way of providing coherence in a paragraph.

Minor Connectors

What about the other words in bold, such as those appearing in the phrases "these trees" and "this hill"? We can call these minor connectors. Minor connectors provide coherence to a paragraph by connecting sentences within each of the main parts of your paragraph. That is, when you write about your main points, you can use minor connectors to link your details to each main point.

Now, look at this paragraph. Can you identify the main points?

Each of the U.S. manned space exploration projects had specific major goals. The Mercury project was designed to test whether or not human beings could survive and function in outer space. The Mercury project tested rockets with the new Mercury space capsule, which could hold one person. The Gemini project was intended to find

out whether two people could work in the weightless environment of space. Gemini astronauts took "spacewalks." They floated outside their spacecraft in a spacesuit, connected to it by a tether. Gemini astronauts tried out new flying skills. Some astronauts flew two spacecraft extremely close together; this procedure was called "rendezvous." On some Gemini flights, astronauts physically linked two spacecraft together. Linking, or "space docking," was a major goal of the Gemini program. The Apollo project, with three astronauts, was intended to test spacecraft and skills so that people could actually fly to the Moon and land on it. Performing scientific experiments on the lunar surface and collecting rocks for study on Earth were goals.

Was this paragraph a little confusing to read? Now consider the same paragraph with a few changes:

*Each of the U.S. manned space exploration projects had specific major goals. **For example**, the Mercury project was designed to test whether or not human beings could survive and function in outer space. **In addition**, the Mercury project tested rockets with the new Mercury space capsule, which could hold one person. **As another example**, the Gemini project was intended*

*to find out whether two people could work in the weightless environment of space. One way of doing this was by having Gemini astronauts take "spacewalks." That is, they floated outside their spacecraft in a spacesuit, connected to it by a tether. Gemini astronauts also tried out new flying skills. For example, some astronauts flew two spacecraft extremely close together; this procedure was called "rendezvous." On some Gemini flights, astronauts physically linked two spacecraft together. This linking, or "space docking," was a major goal of the Gemini program. **Finally**, the Apollo project, with three astronauts, had the goal of testing spacecraft and skills so that people could actually fly to the Moon and land on it. Other goals included performing scientific experiments on the lunar surface and collecting rocks for study on Earth.*

Do you see which of the connectors above are major and which are minor? The major ones are **For example** in the second sentence, which introduces the first supporting point (the Mercury program); **As another example**, which begins the second main point (the Gemini program); and the word **Finally**, which introduces the third and last main point (the Apollo moon program). (In the paragraph above, all of the major connectors are in bolds)

As for the minor connectors, we can divide them into three groups. The first group of minor connectors provides coherence for the first main point (the Mercury program). There is only

one minor connector in this first group, **In addition**, although it is possible to have more than one, depending on how many details you have to support your first main point.

The second group of minor connectors consists of **That is**, **also**, and also the phrase **For example** in the sentence, "For example, some astronauts..." Notice that this last minor connector is the same as the major connector at the beginning of the paragraph. However, the function of each is different, depending on the meaning of the sentences.

The third group of minor connectors in this particular paragraph also has one member, which is **Other goals** included....

Here is a table of a few common connectors (also called transitions):

For example,
For instance,
One example of (this) is
First, Second, Third, etc.
As another example,
Another example of [xxx] is (that)
Finally,
In conclusion,
To summarize,
On the one hand,
On the other hand,
However,
..., but...
also

Paragraph Unity

Unity is a very important characteristic of good paragraph writing. **Paragraph unity means that one paragraph is about ONLY ONE main topic.** That is, **all the sentences -- the topic, supporting sentences, the detail sentences, and (sometimes) the concluding sentence -- are all telling the reader about ONE main topic.** If your

paragraph contains a sentence or some sentences that are NOT related to the main topic, then we say that the paragraph "lacks unity," or that the sentence is "off-topic."

Look at the following paragraph, which is similar to the paragraph that we have studied above. Does it have perfect unity? Try to find the sentence that is off-topic:

Each of the Russian manned space exploration projects had specific major goals. For example, the Vostok project was designed to test whether or not human beings could survive and function in outer space. For another example, the Voshkhod project was intended to find out whether people could work in the weightless environment of space. One Voshkhod cosmonaut experimented with weightlessness by taking a "spacewalk." That is, he floated in a spacesuit outside his Voshkhod spacecraft, connected to it by a tether. The cosmonaut to do this was Alexei Leonov. Several weeks later, Leonov's spacewalk was followed by that of U.S. astronaut Ed White. Finally, the Soyuz project, with three cosmonauts, had goals of testing spacecraft and spaceflight skills so that people could fly long missions in Earth orbit.

This paragraph is generally good, but the sentence, *Several weeks later, Leonov's spacewalk was followed by that of U.S.*

astronaut Ed White, does not have anything to do with the major goals of the various Russian space projects. That is, it is an "off-topic" sentence (or: an irrelevant sentence), so we can say that the paragraph somewhat lacks unity. In order to improve the paragraph, we should omit this sentence, even though it is historically accurate.