

Writing Effective Paragraphs

A paragraph should be unified, coherent, and well developed. Paragraphs are unified around a main point, and all sentences in the paragraph should clearly relate to that point in some way. The paragraph's main idea should be supported with specific information that develops or discusses the main idea in greater detail.

Creating a Topic Sentence

The topic sentence expresses the main point in a paragraph. You may create your topic sentence by considering the details or examples you will discuss. What unifies these examples? What do your examples have in common? Reach a conclusion and write that "conclusion" first. If it helps, think of writing backwards--from generalization to support instead of from examples to a conclusion.

If you know what your main point will be, write that as clearly as possible. Then focus on key words in your topic sentence and try to explain them more fully. Keep asking yourself "How?" or "Why?" or "What examples can I provide to convince a reader?". After you have added your supporting information, review the topic sentence to see that it still indicates the direction of your writing.

Purposes of Topic Sentences

- To state the main point of a paragraph
- To give the reader a sense of direction (indicate what information will follow)
- To summarize the paragraph's main point

Placement of Topic Sentences

- Often appear as the first or second sentences of a paragraph
 - Rarely appear at the end of the paragraph
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Supporting a Topic Sentence with Details

To support a topic sentence, consider some of the possible ways that provide details. To develop a paragraph, use one or more of these:

- Add examples
 - Tell a story that illustrates the point you're making
 - Discuss a process
 - Compare and contrast
 - Use analogies (eg., "X is similar to Y because. . .")
 - Discuss cause and effect
 - Define your terms
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Reasons for beginning a new paragraph

- To show you're switching to a new idea
- To highlight an important point by putting it at the beginning or end of your paragraph

- To show a change in time or place
 - To emphasize a contrast
 - To indicate changing speakers in a dialogue
 - To give readers an opportunity to pause
 - To break up a dense text
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Ways of Arranging Information within or between paragraphs

- Order of time (chronology)
 - Order of space (descriptions of a location or scene)
 - Order of climax (building toward a conclusion)
 - Order of importance (from least to most important or from most to least important)
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Writing Effective Paragraphs

The Topic Sentence

by S. Marques, Kentridge High School

A paragraph is a group of sentences dealing with a single topic or idea. Usually, one sentence, called the topic sentence, states the main idea of the paragraph. All the other sentences are related to this topic sentence. They further explain or support the main idea.

The Topic Sentence's Function

The topic sentence of a paragraph is like a contract between writer and reader. The writer is saying, in effect, "I have an idea I want to explain to you." The reader is answering, "All right, explain it to me." For the writer to hold to the contract, he or she must explain the idea stated in the topic sentence. Therefore, the topic sentence controls the content of the paragraph.

Judging Topic Sentences

A topic sentence makes a general statement that is wider in its scope than the rest of the sentences in the paragraph. A good topic sentence is broad enough to be developed by specific details. However, if a topic sentence is too general, the remainder of the paragraph will have to be either extremely long in order to give an adequate explanation of the idea, or it will have to contain nothing but more general statements.

A topic sentence can be evaluated by asking a few questions.

1. Does the topic sentence present one--and only one--topic?
2. Is the topic sentence an overgeneralization?
3. Does the sentence give strong direction to the whole paragraph?

Usually, it is difficult to say that a topic sentence is "good" or "bad." It is possible, however, to say that one topic sentence is better than another.

Placement of the Topic Sentence

In general, a sensible plan is to tell readers what the paragraph is intended to discuss before it is discussed. Thus, the common practice in writing a paragraph is to begin with the topic sentence and to follow it with supporting sentences. The topic sentence serves the special purpose of announcing the paragraph's topic. Using this approach to placement of the topic sentence, the reader can more easily identify the central point that the writer is making.

Developing Paragraphs

Well developed paragraphs support their topic sentences with concrete details, lively examples and illustrations, or well developed, clearly worded arguments. The relation between the specific, concrete details--the facts you are basing your opinion on--and your opinion must be clearly spelled out for your reader.

Forms of Supporting Material

In order to hold your readers' attention, you must give them something worth reading. Essays containing paragraphs that are not adequately developed simply waste your readers' time. Therefore, so as to keep your audience, you must bring in enough specific detail to keep the reading interesting. In fact, your goal should be to capture on paper your memories (narration), mental images (description), or reasoning processes (exposition and argumentation) in such a carefully detailed and ordered fashion that your readers cannot help but recreate the mental images or reasoning processes in their own minds. There are a number of different ways in which you can develop a paragraph. The most common are explained below.

Explanation

An explanation is an attempt at making a term, concept, process, or proposal clear and intelligible. An explanation may show the relationship between the whole and its parts. Often, explanation is followed by a specific example or illustration.

Comparison and Contrast

Comparison attempts to help the reader understand a new concept by likening it to one that the reader already knows. Contrast may be used to explain how the new concept is different from the old one, how it has its own identity.

Comparison and contrast may be used alone or in combination. In the examples below, **X** indicates the **new** concept while **Y** represents the **familiar** concept:

- Comparison used alone is really analogy. Analogies often take the form of
X is like Y in that
- Contrast is often used to differentiate between two closely related or outwardly similar ideas.

Sometimes contrast is used to describe something by explaining what it is not. Contrast sometimes take the form of

Unlike **Y**, **X** does not

- Comparison and Contrast together are very often the best way to convey a new idea to your readers, relating the new idea to something your readers are already familiar with and then explaining how it is NOT the same as that more familiar concept.

Keep in mind that neither comparison nor contrast will work if you are not relating the new concept to one that your readers already understand. Therefore, it is important to define your audience and know **who** they are and **what** they care about.

Illustration, specific instance and example

An illustration is a narrative example, a story exemplifying the idea that you are trying to express. An illustration should have concrete details, all of which support the main idea you are expressing. Unlike specific instances and examples, which are usually conveyed in one sentence or sometimes in just a phrase, illustrations may make up an entire paragraph.

Illustrations may be factual--recounting a true story--or hypothetical. Hypothetical illustrations present a possible event that could happen in the future if certain actions are not taken or convey a possible scenario that could have happened in the past if certain actions had not been taken.

To be effective, illustrations, examples, and specific instances **must** be

- clearly related to the idea in your writing that you are trying to support
- reasonable and realistic, not the exception, not science fiction
- vivid in detail

Choose your illustrations, specific instances, and examples carefully, applying the above criteria.

Statistics

Statistics are figures that show trends in the population. Statistics from surveys often indicate how different segments of the population differ from each other in opinion. In addition, statistics can indicate such tendencies as how people react to a new drug, which segment of the population has the greatest tendency toward a certain illness, and what the most common manner of death is for particular segments of the population. Statistics can help you to support your opinion by showing how great a problem is in the population in general or in a segment of the population or by indicating trends across time.

Authoritative opinion and personal testimony

Another way to support your thesis or topic sentence is through the use of authoritative opinion or personal testimony. A person qualifies as an authority on a subject either through depth of education

or through depth of experience, preferably both. Thus, the PhD in Sociology may be an authority on poverty through years of field research and reading in the discipline, but the woman who has reared her children successfully despite an income below the poverty line is also an authority on poverty.

In order for the authoritative opinion or expert testimony to be acceptable to your audience and an effective method of support for your main idea, you must establish the following for your audience:

1. The person whose opinion or testimony you are using qualifies as an expert.
2. The information is based on your expert's first-hand knowledge.
(If your expert cites another source, try to go to that original source.)

NOTE: A well developed topic sentence paragraph will be much longer than most of the paragraphs you are reading on these web pages. Writing for the Internet is usually very different from traditional academic writing. (For example, on the Internet, you will find capital letters in odd places for emphasis.)

One primary difference in these two types of writing lies in the length of paragraphs. Paragraphs tend to be much shorter in e-mail messages and on web pages. In your final drafts for this class, you should write fully developed paragraphs, which are at least eight sentences long.

I do not generally care for counting words, pages, or sentences in student writing, but for paragraph development, I've found that fewer than eight sentences generally do not constitute a well developed paragraph according to academic writing standards. On the other hand, having eight sentences in a paragraph **does not** assure that you have a fully developed paragraph. Paragraph development **always** refers to content, but chances are good that, if a paragraph looks "skimpy" on the page, it probably is underdeveloped.

Paragraph Development: Coordination and Subordination of Details

Effective paragraphs include specific facts and details that support the main idea. Since the details are more specific than the main idea, they are considered *subordinate* to it. But the details themselves may be equally specific. If so, we say that they are *coordinate*. However, some details may be more specific than others. A detail that is more specific than another is considered *subordinate* to it.

Thus, all the details in a paragraph are subordinate to the main ideas, but some details are coordinate (equal to others), and some are subordinate to others (more specific than others).

Coordinate Details

One way to develop the main idea of a paragraph is to use all coordinate, or equally specific, details. For example, the supporting details in the paragraph below are coordinate.

(1) Mexico offers visitors a world of contrasts. (2) Its pyramids and ancient ruins give us a glimpse of the past while its modern cities provide us with the best of today's technology. (3) Its mountains offer cool weather and majestic peaks while, only a few miles away, its beaches tempt us with brilliant sun and white sand. (4) Its elegant restaurants serve the most sophisticated continental cuisine while, across the street or down the block, sidewalk vendors sell the simplest of native foods. (5) Thus the traveler to Mexico is faced with a series of delightful decisions.

In this paragraph, the main idea, which is stated in sentence (1), is supported by three equally specific, or coordinate, supporting details: sentences (2), (3), and (4). Sentence (5) concludes the paragraph and reinforces the main idea. This paragraph can be diagrammed as shown below.

Main idea (sentence 1)

Coordinate detail (sentence 2)

Coordinate detail (sentence 3)

Coordinate detail (sentence 4)

Conclusion (sentence 5)

(1) Mexico offers visitors a world of contrasts.

(2) Its pyramids and ancient ruins give us a glimpse of the past while its modern cities provide us with the best of today's technology.

(3) Its mountains offer cool weather and majestic peaks while, only a few miles away, its beaches tempt us with brilliant sun and white sand.

(4) Its elegant restaurants serve the most sophisticated continental cuisine while, across the street or down the block, sidewalk vendors sell the simplest of native foods.

(5) Thus the traveler to Mexico is faced with a series of delightful decisions.

Developing Unified and Coherent Paragraphs

A paragraph is unified when every sentence develops the point made in the topic sentence. It must have a single focus and it must contain no irrelevant facts. Every sentence must contribute to the paragraph by explaining, exemplifying, or expanding the topic sentence. In order to determine whether a paragraph is well developed or not, ask yourself: "What main point am I trying to convey here?" (topic sentence) and then "Does every sentence clearly relate to this idea?"

There are several ways in which you can build good, clear paragraphs. This section will discuss three of the most common types of paragraph structure: development by detail, comparison and contrast, and process. Finally, it will suggest that most paragraphs are built of a combination of development strategies.

Paragraph Development by Details

This is the most common and easiest form of paragraph development: you simply expand on a general topic sentence using specific examples or illustrations. Look at the following paragraph (you may have encountered it before):

Work tends to be associated with non-work-specific environments, activities, and schedules. If asked what space is reserved for learning, many students would suggest the classroom, the lab or the library. What about the kitchen? The bedroom? In fact, any room in which a student habitually studies becomes a learning space, or a place associated with thinking. Some people need to engage in sports or other physical activity before they can work successfully. Being sedentary seems to inspire others. Although most classes are scheduled between 8:30 and 22:00, some students do their best work before the sun rises, some after it sets. Some need a less flexible schedule than others, while a very few can sit and not rise until their task is completed. Some students work quickly and efficiently, while others cannot produce anything

without much dust and heat.

The topic sentence makes a general claim: that school work tends not to be associated only with school. The rest of the sentences provide various illustrations of this argument. They are organised around the three categories, "environment, activities, and schedules," enumerated in the topic sentence. The details provide the concrete examples which your reader will use to evaluate the credibility of your topic sentence.

Paragraph Development by Comparison and Contrast

You should consider developing your paragraph by comparison and contrast when you are describing two or more things which have something, but not everything, in common. You may choose to compare either point by point (X is big, Y is little; X and Y are both purple.) or subject by subject (X is big and purple; Y is small and purple.). Consider, for example, the following paragraph:

Although the interpretation of traffic signals may seem highly standardized, close observation reveals regional variations across this country, distinguishing the East Coast from Central Canada and the West as surely as dominant dialects or political inclinations. In Montreal, a flashing red traffic light instructs drivers to careen even more wildly through intersections heavily populated with pedestrians and oncoming vehicles. In startling contrast, an amber light in Calgary warns drivers to scream to a halt on the off chance that there might be a pedestrian within 500 meters who might consider crossing at some unspecified time within the current day. In my home town in New Brunswick, finally, traffic lights (along with painted lines and posted speed limits) do not apply to tractors, all terrain vehicles, or pickup trucks, which together account for most vehicles on the road. In fact, were any observant Canadian dropped from an alien space vessel at an unspecified intersection anywhere in this vast land, he or she could almost certainly orient him-or-herself according to the surrounding traffic patterns.

This paragraph compares traffic patterns in three areas of Canada. It contrasts the behaviour of drivers in the Maritimes, in Montreal, and in Calgary, in order to make a point about how attitudes in various places inform behaviour. People in these areas have in common the fact that they all drive; in contrast, they drive differently according to the area in which they live.

It is important to note that the paragraph above considers only one aspect of driving (behaviour at traffic lights). If you wanted to consider two or more aspects, you would probably need more than one paragraph.

Paragraph Development by Process

Paragraph development by process involves a straightforward step-by-step description. Those of you in the sciences will recognise it as the formula followed in the "method" section of a lab experiment. Process description often follows a chronological sequence:

The first point to establish is the grip of the hand on the rod. This should be about half-way up the cork handle, absolutely firm and solid, but not tense or rigid. All four fingers are curved around the handle, the little finger, third finger and middle finger contributing most of the firmness by pressing the cork solidly into the fleshy part of the palm, near the heel of the hand. The forefinger supports and steadies the grip but supplies its own firmness against the

thumb, which should be along the upper side of the handle and somewhere near the top of the grip. (from Roderick Haig-Brown, "Fly Casting")

The topic sentence establishes that the author will use this paragraph to describe the process of establishing the "grip of the hand on the rod," and this is exactly what he does, point by point, with little abstraction.

Paragraph Development by Combination

Very often, a single paragraph will contain development by a combination of methods. It may begin with a brief comparison, for example, and move on to provide detailed descriptions of the subjects being compared. A process analysis might include a brief history of the process in question. Many paragraphs include lists of examples:

The broad range of positive characteristics used to define males could be used to define females too, but they are not. At its entry for woman Webster's Third provides a list of "qualities considered distinctive of womanhood": "Gentleness, affection, and domesticity or on the other hand fickleness, superficiality, and folly." Among the "qualities considered distinctive of manhood" listed in the entry for man, no negative attributes detract from the "courage, strength, and vigor" the definers associate with males. According to this dictionary, womanish means "unsuitable to a man or to a strong character of either sex."

This paragraph is a good example of one which combines a comparison and contrast of contemporary notions of "manliness" and "womanliness" with an extended list of examples.

Paragraph Development: Coherence

by S. Marques, Kentridge High School

Coherence is the orderly presentation of ideas. Paragraphs are made coherent by arranging the supporting details in an order that will be clear to the reader and by using transitional words and phrases to introduce and connect those details. If the reader says to herself, "What are these sentences doing together in this order in this paragraph?", then that paragraph probably lacks coherence.

Coherence in a paragraph depends chiefly on ordering the sentences according to a logic that is easy to follow. One sentence should logically, sensibly, grow out of the preceding sentence, as if the writer's thoughts are flowing on and on. Often the plan of development is so easy that readers may be unaware of it.

Order of Importance

Order of importance is a way of organizing ideas according to the degree of their value, power, authority, interest, or quality. A paragraph may begin with the least important item and progress to the most important (ascending order), thus building the reader's interest. Alternatively, the most-to-least-important order (descending order) may be used if the writer wants to arouse the reader's attention immediately.

Order of Generality

Order of generality is a way of arranging ideas according to their breadth or scope. When a paragraph is organized from the general to the particular, ideas are presented that are increasingly narrow or specific. The paragraph might begin by identifying a major issue, continue by focusing on just part of the issue, and conclude by giving examples of the part. On the other hand, when a paragraph is organized from particular to general, increasingly broad ideas are presented. Such a paragraph might begin with a concrete observation, expand the observation to an idea, and enlarge the idea to a rule or general statement.

Comparison and Contrast

Comparison and contrast are useful methods for developing a topic that consists of two or more similar items. When items are compared, the writer shows how they are alike. When items are contrasted, the writer is able to show how the items differ. A paragraph may be developed through comparison, or contrast, or both.

There are two main ways to develop a paragraph by comparison or contrast. One way is to alternate details, following each point about one item with a corresponding point about the other. The pattern of this kind of development is AB AB AB. The second way is to present all of the details about one item before taking up the other. This pattern is AAA BBB. Whichever approach is selected, make certain that the treatment is balanced--that every point of comparison or contrast is applied to both items.

Cause and Effect

When a paragraph is organized by cause and effect, the writer is providing an explanation of the relationship between two items. A cause produces a result; an effect is a result of a cause. To claim that one event or condition causes another is to say that the first brings about the second.

Organizing a paragraph by cause and effect can be accomplished in two ways: (1) Begin the paragraph with an effect and then follow with the causes of the effect. (2) Begin with a cause and follow with its effects. If the writer's objective is show why something exists or occurs, then effects-to-causes is the better choice. If the writer's goal is to show consequences, then the causes-to-effects order is more appropriate.

Paragraph Coherence

The three qualities by which a paragraph is evaluated are unity, development, and coherence. We have already discussed unity and development, leaving only coherence. However, coherence is a quality which many writers have trouble achieving in their paragraphs. In fact, **coherence may be the most difficult quality for most students to achieve in their writing.**

Coherence refers to how well the contents of a paragraph "hang together." Achieving unity in your paragraphs is a good start on coherence as is having the substantive supporting detail that helps you to achieve paragraph development. However, coherence goes beyond achieving unity or avoiding digressions. Coherence refers to how the individual sentences--their order within the paragraph and their individual structures--relate to one another in shaping the paragraph.

In order to achieve paragraph coherence, you must look at a number of different elements in your paragraph:

- the organizational pattern
- the use of transitional devices
- the repetition of key words or related terms, including pronouns
- the occurrence of parallel syntactic structures

Connections Between Sentences

by S. Marques, Kentridge High School

A good paragraph has unity: All the sentences have a relationship to one another and to the main idea. The connection between sentences in a paragraph can be shown in several ways, but principally by the use of transitional words and phrases. Transitional words and phrases may be conjunctions, such as *and*, *but*, and *however*, or explanatory expressions, such as *for instance*, *on the other hand*, and *so on*. Transitional words and phrases act as signals. They give directions. They tell where the paragraph is going. In this sense, transitional words and phrases also act to hold sentences together, achieving unity.

Here are some of the most commonly used connecting words and phrases and the purposes they serve.

Purpose	Connecting Word/Phrase
To add another idea	furthermore, in addition, also, moreover, likewise, similarly
To arrange ideas in order or time	first, finally, meanwhile, eventually, next, subsequently, ultimately, at the same time
To add an illustration or explanation	for example, for instance, in other words
To conclude or sum up	hence, therefore, thus, accordingly, in brief, in conclusion, consequently
To connect two contrasting ideas; to differentiate ideas	on the other hand, however, yet, conversely, nonetheless, nevertheless, rather, although, on the contrary
To emphasize or confirm	indeed, naturally, of course, certainly, undoubtedly, admittedly, plainly

Logical Connectives

Additionally, the logical development chosen for the paragraph can be made very clear to the reader by the words used to connect one sentence to the next. These words are often referred to as logical connectives because they make clear not only the order but also the meaning of the writing.

Each organizational pattern has its own logical connectives. Order of importance may be emphasized with transitional words and expressions such as *first*, *a second factor*, *equally important*, *furthermore*, *of major concern*, *finally*, *least important*, and *most important*. Transitional expressions such as *equally*, *similarly*, *just as*, *however*, *on the other hand*, *despite*, and *otherwise* may be used to emphasize comparison or contrast. Words particularly suited to writing about causes and effects are *as a result*, *because*, *consequently*, and *therefore*.