



Paragraphs

Paragraphs fall into two main categories: shorter paragraphs used in popular writing and academic paragraphs often ten or fifteen sentences in length. Paragraphs in popular writing, such as those used in news media, magazines, websites, social media, and other digital forms of communication, tend to be short with only a few sentences. These paragraphs are designed to allow readers to read quickly and to grab readers' attention with key pieces of information.

Academic paragraphs (especially for expository writing), on the other hand, contain several sentences, have a main idea, and use plenty of supporting examples and details. Some writing scholars describe paragraphs as a kind of paper in miniature, complete with its thesis statement, "body," and conclusion. Unlike their popular versions, academic paragraphs encourage readers to slow down and reflect on the ideas of the essay. Below are the central "parts" of academic paragraphs, and some strategies for drafting and revising your paper paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraph Unity

Every paragraph of your essay needs to deal with a single topic – your paper's thesis – and every sentence in each paragraph should also be related in some way to this topic. Scan your paragraphs for unity: does each paragraph relate back to your main point or thesis, or do you find that paragraphs touch on more than one idea instead of developing one claim or topic? If you discover more than one idea at work in a paragraph, you might consider developing each of these ideas in separate paragraphs (if the ideas are related to your topic and thesis of course).

Paragraph Completeness

The length of a paragraph does not entirely determine its completeness, but paragraphs consisting of only a few sentences can be symptomatic of poor paragraph completeness and development. Studies of paragraph length suggest that successful paragraphs are typically between six to nine sentences (but this is not a set rule). An underdeveloped paragraph leaves the reader confused and wondering what the purpose of the paragraph might be: what does this paragraph have to do with the rest of the paper? Why does the writer draw this conclusion? How does this point fit in? What does this paragraph mean? Complete, fully developed paragraphs will answer all of these questions.

Complete paragraphs will contain several unified "parts" that together create a whole:

- 1) *Topic Sentences*: usually the first sentence of a paragraph, topic sentences or topic claims guide readers by giving them the main (thesis-related) point of the paragraph. The topic sentence is the controlling idea of the paragraph and its most important single point.
- 2) *Definition of any Key Terms*: if you introduce certain terms or ideas that are vital for the point of your paragraph, you will need to explain and define these for the reader.
- 3) *Use of Evidence*: all paragraphs need to provide examples that support the topic of

- the paragraph (and consequently the thesis); strong paragraphs do not necessarily contain a lot of evidence. Remember to limit your use of evidence to facts, quotes, statistics, definitions, etc. that relate directly to your thesis and topic sentence. If the relationship of the evidence to your topic is too vague or you have to “stretch” the logic a bit to make it work, this evidence is likely not useful to the development of this paragraph or to the paper as a whole.
- 4) *Discussion and Analysis*: explanations of how evidence supports or “proves” the idea of the topic sentence and the paper’s thesis should constitute the majority (take up the most space) of a strong, complete, and fully developed paragraph. Analysis should not consist of your opinion on the topic, but instead should explain how the evidence illustrates an aspect of the thesis. Ask yourself: why did I select this particular quote? What do I want to show the reader by using this quote in my paper? A well-developed paragraph will anticipate readers’ questions and will respond to readers’ concerns through thoughtful, specific analysis of the text.
 - 5) *Concluding Sentence*: the conclusion of your paragraph should bring together the point and evidence you have just explored. Contrary to what you may have been taught, the concluding sentence of a paragraph should not be a transition introducing the next paragraph. Embed transitions between paragraphs into topic claims instead.

Paragraph Coherence

You can achieve coherence in a paragraph by making sure that all of the sentences in this paragraph have logical connections. Part of this involves constructing effective transitions between your sentences (as you need to do between paragraphs throughout your essay), but transitional words and phrases cannot stand alone to provide logical connections between the ideas and claims you make in a paragraph. By putting yourself in your reader’s position, you can more effectively produce writing that a reader can follow or make sense of, and appreciate. As you check your paragraph for coherence, ask yourself: does this paragraph relate to my thesis? Does each sentence of the paragraph relate to my topic sentence? Finally, do my sentences show clear and logical connections?