



Paragraph Construction

What is a paragraph?

What is a paragraph?

After sentences, paragraphs are the next order of **organization** for **written English communication**.¹

A paragraph is a collection of **sentences** arranged in such an order that they convey a **complete topic**.²

What is a paragraph?

There is no “formula” to determine how many sentences comprise a paragraph. It depends on the **depth** and **complexity** of the logic employed.³

The **harmony** and **relationship** of **ideas** among the sentences determine what constitutes a paragraph. Every sentence in the paragraph should relate to the **main idea** in some clear way.⁴



Paragraph Content

There are **four essential elements** to good paragraph writing:

- **Unity**
- **Order**
- **Coherence**
- **Completeness**⁵

Paragraph Unity

Every paragraph has **one** single, controlling **idea**.

That idea is expressed in the **topic sentence**.

A paragraph is **unified** around this main idea.⁶

Topic Sentence

- The topic sentence **sums up** the whole of the paragraph and **ties** it all together.
- The topic sentence is **usually** the first sentence in the paragraph, but not always.
- The topic sentence points the reader toward **where you, the writer, are going** next.
- The topic sentence is the most **"general"** sentence in the paragraph.⁷

Topic Sentence

- 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.⁸

Paragraph Unity

“**Support**” sentences add **detail** to the topic sentence.

Supporting sentences **develop, explain, and substantiate** the topic sentence.

Supporting sentences provide **facts, details, and examples**.

Supporting sentences explain **why** the main idea is **true**.

A paragraph may have as many supporting sentences as needed to corroborate the main idea.⁹



Paragraph Order

A paragraph's **order** refers to the way you **organize** your supporting sentences.¹⁰

Paragraph Order

There are many ways to organize a paragraph. Here are just a few:

- **Chronological**: the order of events, or time order
- **Spatial**: looking at how things are arranged in a space (descriptive)
- **Emphatic**: details presented in their order of importance or for emphasis
- **Cause and Effect**: a certain situation causes--- or results from---another
- **Comparison/Contrast**: examining the similarities or differences between things¹¹

Paragraph 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.¹²

Paragraph Coherence

You can use transition words that show:

- **order** (first, second, third)
- **spatial relationships** (above, below)
- **logic** (furthermore, in addition, in fact)

Other ways to maintain coherence in a paragraph:

- Use consistent **verb tense** (past, present, future)
- Maintain **point of view** (person)¹³

Paragraph 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 develop your main point, then the paragraph is **incomplete**.¹⁴

Paragraph Completeness

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.

The concluding sentence either **finishes** the paragraph or **prepares** the reader for the next paragraph.¹⁵

Paragraph Transitions

A paragraph might begin with a **reference** to the preceding paragraph.

These are called **paragraph transitions** and are very important for clear writing.

Transitional words help **signal** to the reader **shifts** in thought or sequence.

They help present ideas in a **clear** and **organized** way.

Some transitional words help present the **sequence** of ideas; others are used to clarify the **relationship** between ideas.



Paragraph Editing

The **editing** stage is when you **check** your paragraph for mistakes and **correct** them.¹⁷

Paragraph Editing

Grammar and Spelling

- Check your spelling.
- Check your grammar.
- Read your assignment again.
- Make sure each sentence has a subject.
- See if your subjects and verbs agree with one another.
- Check the verb tenses of each sentence.
- Make sure that each sentence makes sense.¹⁸

Paragraph Editing

Style and Organization

- Make sure your paragraph has a topic sentence.
- Make sure your supporting sentences focus on the main idea.
- Make sure you have a concluding sentence.
- Check that all your sentences focus on the main idea.
- Check your use of transition words.
- See if your paragraph is interesting.¹⁹

Paragraph Tone

Academic paragraphs (and multi-paragraph essays, which will be the topic of another lesson) 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.²⁰

Paragraph Tone

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.²¹



Resources

- Liberty University's Online Writing Center
 - <http://www.liberty.edu/academics/graduate/writing/index.cfm?PID=17176>
- Purdue University's Online Writing Lab
 - <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>
- *The Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation* by Jane Straus
 - <http://www.grammarbook.com>

Endnotes

1. John M. Kierzek and Walker Gibson, *The MacMillan Handbook of English*, 5th ed. (New York: MacMillan, 1965), 84.
2. Jane E. Aaron, *The Little, Brown Compact Handbook with Exercises*, 7th ed. (New York: Pearson, 2010), 39.
3. William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*, 7th ed. (New York: Harper-Collins, 2006), 79-80.
4. Thomas S. Kane, *The Oxford Essential Guide to Writing* (New York: Berkley, 2000), 95.
5. Aaron, *The Little, Brown Compact Handbook*, 40.
6. Ibid.
7. William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*, 4th ed. (New York: MacMillan, 2000), 16.
8. Joseph M. Williams, *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*, 81.
9. Kane, *The Oxford Essential Guide to Writing*, 95.
10. Ibid., 96.
11. Kierzek and Gibson, *The MacMillan Handbook of English*, 133-134.
12. Aaron, *The Little, Brown Compact Handbook*, 40.
13. Williams, *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*, 92.
14. Aaron, *The Little, Brown Compact Handbook*, 46.
15. Ibid.
16. Zinsser, *On Writing Well*, 54-55.
17. Kierzek and Gibson, *The MacMillan Handbook of English*, 143-144.
18. Ibid., 337-349.
19. Williams, *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*, 97-99.
20. Kierzek and Gibson, *The MacMillan Handbook of English*, 14-36.
21. Kane, *The Oxford Essential Guide to Writing*, 75.