Paragraph Construction

> After sentences, paragraphs are the next order of organization in structuring your writing to develop what will become an essay, literature review, research paper, or other written communication. A paragraph consists of coherent sentences structured in such an order that they communicate a complete topic or main idea to the reader.

Paragraph Content

A well-written paragraph is characterized by four essential elements: unity, order, coherence, and completeness. Instructors are often asked about the "number of sentences" required to form a well-developed paragraph. The response depends on the depth and complexity of the writing required to clearly communicate the complete thought of the paragraph. Therefore, the actual number of sentences can vary by paragraph, but nearly all writing instructors agree that no composition should contain one-or-two-sentence paragraphs. Ultimately, every sentence in the paragraph should connect to and support its main idea.

Unity

Every paragraph should communicate a main, controlling idea. That idea is expressed in the topic sentence. A paragraph must be unified around this main idea. The topic sentence serves as a concise snapshot of the whole of the paragraph and binds the sentences together. The topic sentence is usually the opening sentence of the paragraph, though not always. It points the readers in the direction the writer wants to take them. In order to write an effective topic sentence, focus on the main theme and the points you intend to make in supporting the theme. Then, decide which point drives the supporting statements and write that main point as your topic sentence.

Order

A paragraph's order refers to the way you organize your supporting sentences. These sentences add the required detail to the topic sentence by developing, explaining, and substantiating the topic sentence. Supporting sentences provide facts, details, and examples that explain why the main idea is true. A paragraph may have as many supporting sentences as needed to corroborate the main idea.

Coherence

Coherence makes your writing understandable. Sentences within a paragraph need to connect to each other and work together as a whole. Appropriate transition words help achieve coherence in the paragraph. These words create bridges from one sentence to the next that show the following: **order** (*first, second, third*); **spatial relationships** (*above, below*); and **logic** (*furthermore, in addition, in fact*). Consistent verb tense (past, present, future, etc.) and maintaining point of view (person) are other ways to maintain coherence in a paragraph.

Completeness

Completeness refers to whether the paragraph would be considered well developed. If all sentences clearly and sufficiently support the main idea, then the paragraph is complete. If there are not enough sentences or enough information to develop the writer's main point, then the paragraph is incomplete. Usually three supporting sentences, in addition to a topic sentence and concluding sentence, are needed for a paragraph to be considered complete. (However, recall that the actual number of sentences can vary by paragraph.) The concluding sentence or last sentence of the paragraph should summarize your main idea by reinforcing your topic sentence. This final sentence either finishes the paragraph or prepares the reader for the next paragraph.

Paragraph Transitions

A paragraph might begin with a reference to the preceding paragraph. Such sentences serve as *paragraph transitions* and are essential for clear writing. Transitional words, phrases, and sentences help signal to the reader shifts in thought or sequence. They help present ideas in a clear and organized way, either sequentially or by clarifying the relationship between ideas.

Paragraph Editing

The editing stage is that point in the writing process where you check your paragraph for mistakes and correct them. Editing covers not only correcting grammatical errors, but extends to checking and correcting errors in mechanics, style, and organization.

Grammar and Mechanics

The use of a checklist during the editing stage helps avoid overlooking obvious errors that can sometimes be missed when the proofreading process is rushed.

- ✓ Check your spelling, grammar, and mechanics.
- ✓ 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.

Style and Organization

As you proofread and edit your paragraph for style and organization matters, confirm that it has a clear topic sentence with supporting sentences that focus on the main idea. Do you have a strong introductory sentence and a compelling concluding sentence in the paragraph? Check your use of transition words and ask yourself if you have achieved clarity and fluency in your sentences across the paragraph. Is your paragraph engaging and will it keep the interest of the reader?

Paragraph Tone

Academic paragraphs are different from "ordinary writing" (such as letter writing or creative writing) in that certain kinds of expressions are not allowed. For example, in formal essays and research papers, you should not use contractions. You should not express personal opinions or use first-person pronouns unless the assignment expressly permits the usage, such as in reflection papers. Always defer to the assignment instructions and follow the formatting and style guidelines for your discipline.