

Paragraph Writing

A paragraph is a unit of text that develops one idea or topic in specific detail. Like a paper, a paragraph has a beginning, a middle and an end. The beginning, or the topic sentence, forecasts what the paragraph is going to be about. The middle develops the idea in detail by giving specific support for it, and the conclusion emphasizes the insight you have arrived at.

Paragraph Structure

Topic Sentence: forecasts the writer's main point.

Elaboration: makes the main point more specific.

Development: gives support or evidence for the main point:

- facts, examples, illustrations
- citations in the form of summary, paraphrase or quotation
- logical inferences

Interpretation: shows the writer's view on the support used (facts don't speak for themselves).

Conclusion: states the writer's insight (what the development proves or explains).

Transition: carries the conclusion forward to the next paragraph.

Paragraph Example

The **concentration** of economic activity in Toronto was dramatic (Topic sentence). Assessment returns record the number of merchants' shops, storehouses, and mills of various kinds in Ontario (Elaboration on what is meant

by “economic activity”). The degree to which commercial activities in the Home District were concentrated at Toronto greatly exceeded the degree of concentration at Hamilton in Gore (Interpretation of evidence introduced in the following three sentences. The evidence backs the claim made in the topic sentence). Table 7 shows that in 1822 there was one shop for every 42 residents of Toronto. Outside Toronto in the Home District, there was one shop for every 321 people. In Hamilton, in the same year, there was one shop for every 121 residents; in the hinterland, there was one shop for every 436 individuals (Evidence). Such **concentration** is further evidence of the divergence in the population sizes between the two cities (Conclusion).

-Ann M. Carlos & Patricia Fulton

Supporting Your Ideas

The purpose of the paragraph is to show that you can support your ideas with specific examples and evidence. If you have no support for your ideas, you generalize, and generalizations tend to be vague and imprecise. Effective academic writing is based on concrete evidence that can help you prove your point.

Use concrete, everyday words to explain and illustrate your ideas, and abstract, specific words to show how you interpret the support and evidence you present:

- Abstract words organize ideas ("concentration of economic activity")
- Concrete words illustrate ideas ("merchants' shops, storehouses, mills")
- Repetition of key words create coherence ("concentration")

If your evidence is a citation in the form of either summary, paraphrase, or quotation, make sure it is smoothly integrated into the text, logically interpreted, and correctly documented.

Organization

You organize and sequence the material for a paragraph just the way you organize a paper. Find a logical pattern that the reader will be able to follow and build to a point of emphasis.

However, the reader can't follow your line of thought unless each sentence leads smoothly and logically to the next. Use **repetition and transition words** to create connections and make sure that grammar errors don't break down the coherence of your writing.

Use these transition words between sentences and paragraphs to give direction to your writing:

Enumerate

- first
- second
- third

Change Direction

- but
- however
- although
- whereas

Add

- and
- also
- in addition

Give Reasons

- since
- because

Qualify

- often
- generally
- usually

Summarize

- in short
- finally

Illustrate

- for example
- in other words
- that is

Draw Conclusions

- therefore
- hence
- consequently

Focus and Cohesion

If you have problems writing focused, cohesive paragraphs, try the "old - new" formula shown below.

In paragraph **A** the grammatical subjects (in italics) change in every sentence and this shift in focus makes the paragraph hard to read:

A. Business *analysts* have noted the different ways managers operate. Sometimes all the *decisions* are made by a manager, and *employees* are given orders or procedures to follow. The *success* of this kind of manager is not long-term, since leaders are not developed as potential successors. The opposite *type* is the manager who avoids making decisions, tending to delay by forming committees and requesting endless studies. *Managers* of this sort are also not effective. *Employees* find themselves between these extremes with managers who encourage their participation in planning. *Responsibility* for making the final decision remains in the bosses' hands. *These* are effective managers.

In the following revision, paragraph **B**, the text states something "old" or "known", modern managers, and goes on to tell us something "new" about them. The idea

behind this formula is to put the "old" topic in the subject position in the beginning of the sentence so that the readers are with you from the start. Then you go on to tell the readers something "new" about your topic to extend their understanding:

B. As business analysts have noted, *modern managers* have different ways of operating. *Sometend* to make all the decisions, giving employees orders or procedures to follow. In the long term *they* are ineffective, since they do not develop leaders who can succeed them. *Other managers* avoid making decisions, tending to form committees and request endless studies. *They* are also ineffective. In between these extremes are *managers* who encourage employees to participate in planning, but who take final responsibility for decisions. These *managers* are effective.

You will notice how this revision has made the paragraph extremely easy to read because the "old - new" structure anticipates the way we read. We have to be able to retain what we have read, "know" it, as it were, and we need to connect it to the "new" information given. In fact, we predict what is to come in a sentence. That is exactly what the predicate or verb in a sentence does; it predicts something about the subject. Furthermore, the coherence of the paragraph is reinforced through clear pronoun reference - "managers ... they".

This revision also establishes a recognizable pattern in order to structure the point made about modern managers. The pattern visualizes three different types of managers on a spectrum: two inefficient types occupy the extremes, and one efficient type is right in the middle.

The two paragraphs A and B are from Impact by Margot Northey.

Grammar Guidelines that Strengthen Coherence

1. Put main points in main clauses and supporting ideas in subordinate clauses (bolded).

X Business *analysts* have noted the different ways managers operate.

√ **As business analysts have noted**, *modern managers* have different ways of operating.

2. *Put ideas of equal importance in parallel grammatical form.*

What is *written without effort* is in general *read without pleasure*. -Samuel Johnson

3. *Use clear pronoun reference.*

X No one should be forced into a career that they do not want to pursue.

√ No one should be forced into a career that he or she does not want to pursue.

X The MP supports gun control *which* rankles many constituents. (Are they rankled by the legislation or their MP's support for it?)

4. *Use correct and consistent verb tense.*

After I **had finished** my draft, I **revised** it until I **found** it satisfying and **felt** it was positive and concise.

In the essay "On Going Home", **written** in 1966, Joan Didion **shows** how she is paralysed by her home and her past.

5. *Use correct subject-verb agreement.*

Writing well-researched, documented term papers **is** every student's nightmare.

6. *Avoid sentence fragments.*

X I constantly use the spell check function on my computer. **Because I am a bad speller.**

√ I constantly use the spell check function on my computer because I am a bad speller.

7. *Avoid comma splice.*

X I love hunting for fossils, they intrigue me.

√ I love hunting for fossils. They intrigue me.

√ I love hunting for fossils; they intrigue me.

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