# Paragraphing

## Paragraphing and its Importance

Paragraphing is the process of dividing and structuring a paper into paragraphs. Paragraphs exist as a visual way to separate the main ideas of a paper and are therefore essential to establishing a clear flow of ideas within a piece of writing. Indeed, the reason writers do not structure papers as one long paragraph is obvious: doing would be immensely confusing for the reader.

Thus, effective paragraphing and paragraph construction ensures that the main ideas of a paper are clearly separated, logically organized, and explicitly connected to the central argument of the paper. The ultimate goal is to create an effective paper—one that is clear and reader-friendly.

## Paragraph Purpose

Start by thinking about the one main idea that you want your paragraph to express. Focusing on one main idea will give the paragraph unity and coherence, qualities readers expect in polished academic writing. As you write, you may find that you begin discussing a new idea within a paragraph, and that it should be divided into two separate paragraphs. Each paragraph should have a clear purpose in furthering your argument. For example, if you are comparing and contrasting the writing styles of three authors, you would need paragraphs that discuss either each author or each stylistic element. Other purposes that paragraphs might fulfill include illustrating one idea with examples, narration of a process, definition of a key word or phrase, classification into categories, cause and effect, or presenting an analogy. You may re-order individual paragraphs according to how you think the ideas fit together once you are revising the paper.

## Components of a Paragraph

After you have roughly determined the overall structure of your piece, work on each individual paragraph. Paragraphs generally include the following elements:

1. Topic Sentence

It may help you draft your paragraph by composing a highly explicit topic sentence as the first sentence in the paragraph, and it helps your readers to quickly and easily understand your main idea if you let this sentence stand through the revision process. However, having an explicit topic sentence can seem contrived or formulaic. Once you develop the paragraph more fully, your topic may be implicit but nevertheless clear to your audience. When revising, decide if you need the explicit topic sentence, and if so, if it should appear at the beginning or at the end of your paragraph.

2. Support for the main idea

The rest of the paragraph should be devoted to explaining or developing the main idea of the paragraph. Give examples and evidence to support your point. Then explain how that evidence substantiates the claim you made in the topic sentence.

3. Relevance to your thesis

In addition to explaining the main idea, connect it to your thesis. Explain why the main idea matters or fits into the overall argument you are trying to make. Answer the implicit “So what?” question buzzing around in the readers’ heads by directly telling them why you spent so much time and space developing one point.

4. Transition

It usually helps your reader follow the flow of your argument if you include a transitional phrase or word at the beginning of each paragraph or at the end of the preceding paragraph. You may need to incorporate these into your paragraphs after you organize the paper because the order in which paragraphs occur may affect which transition is appropriate. For example, you might have one paragraph that deals with a cause and one that deals with an effect, and these may occur in either order in your final draft. Your transition would depend on the order in which they appear. For examples of transitional words and phrases, see the UWC handout on transitions.

## Revising Your Paragraphs

Begin by reading a draft of your paper and evaluating the paper’s argument. Start by underlining each paragraph’s topic sentence or writing the main idea if the topic is implicit. Does each paragraph have one main idea, or many? If there are too many ideas in one paragraph, separate them into different paragraphs, each with its own main idea.

Next, make sure that you have sufficiently developed the main idea of each paragraph. Is any important information left out? Can you think of anything the reader might wonder while reading your paper? If yes, add the missing content to your paper to enhance and clarify your explanations.

In addition to sufficiently developing your main points, **cut out extraneous** **information**—this is very important! If there are sentences in your paragraph that do not directly relate to its topic, do one of three things: (i) explicitly connect them to the topic; (ii) move them into a paragraph where they belong; or (iii) remove them. In the process of revising, you may even discover that entire paragraphs need to be omitted.

Last but not least, **remember to connect the main idea to the overall thesis of the paper**. This way, the reader knows exactly why each paragraph matters and that each serves to further your argument.

Material adapted in part from:

Hairston, Maxine, John Ruszkiewicz, and Christy Friend, eds. *The Scott Foresman Handbook for Writers*, 7th ed. Upper Saddle River, NY: Pearson Education, 2004.