

WRITING THE PARAGRAPH

The Basic Rule: Keep One Idea to One Paragraph

The basic rule of thumb with paragraphing is to keep one idea to one paragraph. If the writer transitions into a new idea, it belongs in a new paragraph. There may be several points in a single paragraph as long as they relate to the overall topic of the paragraph. If the single points start to get long, then perhaps elaborating on each of them and placing them in their own paragraphs is the route to go.

General Paragraph Guidelines:

Paragraphs need to be:

United – focused on a single thing.

Coherent – easily understandable to a reader.

Adequately developed—

UNITY

Unity in a paragraph implies a sustained purpose and forbids digressions and irrelevant matters.

UNITY

The development of a single controlling idea is usually presented in the topic sentence. Each sentence should develop that idea and no others.

A paragraph on the role of midwives in child-birth should not digress to child-rearing in the same paragraph.

COHERENCE

IN LATIN, COHERENCE MEANS "TO STICK TOGETHER." MAKE THINGS STICK TOGETHER FOR YOUR READERS. THE WRITER ISN'T BESIDE THEM WHISPERING "OH, THIS IS WHAT I MEANT." TELL THEM WHAT YOU MEAN IN WRITING!

COHERENCE

A paragraph is coherent if its details fit together clearly in a way that readers can easily follow. Sentences must relate to one another structurally. Coherence can be achieved by repeating key terms, organizing ideas, using parallel structure, pronouns, and transitions.

ADEQUATE DEVELOPMENT

The topic (which is introduced by the topic sentence) should be discussed fully and adequately. This will vary from paragraph to paragraph, depending on the author's purpose, but writers should beware of paragraphs of only two or three sentences. It's a pretty good bet that the paragraph is not fully developed if it is that short.

ADEQUATE DEVELOPMENT

If a writer says in a topic sentence they will discuss several unusual items found in drugstores, then discuss several.

Give readers enough meat to chew on about the topic. What is adequate? Well, it's quite subjective but remember this little saying (sexist implications aside) from one of my early English teachers:

"An essay or paragraph is like a woman's skirt: it should be long enough to cover the topic and short enough to be interesting."

Some methods to make sure your paragraph is well-developed:

Use examples and illustrations

Cite data (facts, statistics, evidence, details, and others)

Examine testimony (what other people say such as quotes and paraphrases)

Use an anecdote or story

Define terms in the paragraph

Compare and contrast

Evaluate causes and reasons

Examine effects and consequences

Analyze the topic

Describe the topic

Offer a chronology of an event (time segments)

TRANSITIONAL SENTENCE

TRANSITIONAL EXPRESSIONS EMPHASIZE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN IDEAS, SO THEY HELP READERS FOLLOW THE WRITER'S TRAIN OF THOUGHT OR SEE CONNECTIONS THAT THEY MIGHT OTHERWISE MISS OR MISUNDERSTAND. THE FOLLOWING PARAGRAPH FROM STEPHEN JAY GOULD, "WERE DINOSAURS DUMB?" SHOWS HOW CAREFULLY CHOSEN TRANSITIONS (CAPITALIZED) LEAD THE READER SMOOTHLY FROM THE

I don't wish to deny that the flattened, minuscule head of the large-bodied "stegosaurus" houses little brain from our subjective, top-heavy perspective, BUT I do wish to assert that we should not expect more of the beast. FIRST OF ALL, large animals have relatively smaller brains than related, small animals. The correlation of brain size with body size among kindred animals (all reptiles, all mammals, FOR EXAMPLE) is remarkably regular. AS we move from small to large animals, from mice to elephants or small lizards to Komodo dragons, brain size increases, BUT not so fast as body size. IN OTHER WORDS, bodies grow faster than brains, AND large animals have low ratios of brain weight to body weight. IN FACT, brains grow only about two-thirds as fast as bodies. SINCE we have no reason to believe that large animals are consistently stupider than their smaller relatives, we must conclude that large animals require relatively less brain to do as well as smaller animals. IF we do not recognize this relationship, we are likely to underestimate the mental power of very large animals, dinosaurs in particular.

TRANSITIONS BETWEEN PARAGRAPHS

The last sentence of paragraphs generally act as a bridge to the next paragraph. Consider this example, from a paper in which a writer compares Americans' reactions to traveling to other parts of the country:

Many Westerners don't like rivers in the East. They are alarmed by the muddy water, the overhanging trees, and the snakes. Some Easterners aren't too thrilled about Western rivers, either.

Western rivers can seem shallow, freezing cold, too exposed to the sun, rocky, and uninviting to someone used to the gentle and fertile rivers of the East. Instead of a gentle float in a canoe, a Western "river run" can be a terrifying experience for the novice Easterner. .

Note how the writer begins the transition at the end of the first paragraph and then continues the transition with a strong topic sentence in the next paragraph.

A TOPIC SENTENCE

A topic sentence is a sentence that indicates in a general way what idea or thesis the paragraph is about. An easy way to make sure the reader understands the topic of the paragraph is to put topic sentences near the beginning of the paragraph. (This is a good general rule for less experienced writers, although it is not the only way to do it). Regardless of whether an explicit topic sentence is included or not, the reader should be able to easily summarize the paragraph.

A TOPIC SENTENCE

A paragraph is unified when every sentence develops the point made in the topic sentence. It must have a single focus and it must contain no irrelevant facts. Every sentence must contribute to the paragraph by explaining, exemplifying, or expanding the topic sentence. In order to determine whether a paragraph is well developed or not, ask this question: "What main point am I trying to convey here?" (topic sentence) and then "Does every sentence clearly relate to this idea?"

CONCLUDING SENTENCE

The final sentence of a paper in the final paragraph is known as the concluding sentence, it should restate the main idea and reinforces the point or opinion. It should leave the reader with a concise final thought.

If you are lost about how to write
good solid paragraphs use the
method taught at MVHS

- 1. Topic Sentence**
- 2. CONCRETE DETAIL**
3. Commentary
- 4. CONCRETE DETAIL**
5. Commentary
- 6. Concluding or transitional sentence**

LENGTH OF PARAGRAPHS

No rules are carved in stone tablets dictating how long a paragraph should be. However, a good rule of thumb is that, if a paragraph is shorter than five or six good, substantial sentences, the writer should reexamine it to make sure that it has fully developed ideas.

A paragraph should be long enough to do justice to the main idea of the paragraph.

LENGTH OF PARAGRAPHS

If a paragraph runs on to a page or longer, reexamine its coherence to make sure that it sticks to one main topic. Perhaps subtopics merit their own paragraphs.

Think more about the unity, coherence, and development of a paragraph than length. If a paragraph is too short, then it probably lacks sufficient development. If a paragraph is too long, the writer may have rambled on to topics other than the one stated in the topic sentence.

THE END

SELECTION 2

It may be the succession of summers with extremely high temperatures that is to blame.

Added to this is the costly array of cooling power drinks that New Yorkers now consume to keep body temperatures down.

The result is high and unwelcome summer electricity and food bills.

New Yorkers have recently been complaining that the cost of keeping cool in summer has sky rocketed.

The cost of running an air-conditioner non-stop in the unrelenting heat has doubled over the last five years.

Electricity prices are the main reason for the chorus of complaints.

The refrigerator too is having to work overtime.

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Writer _____ Evaluator(s) Writing

Topic _____

Evaluation Date _____ Per. __ Paragraph # __

Score 0, 1 or 2

Body Paragraph Evaluation Criteria Use this Rubric to evaluate a body paragraph of an essay, but not for an introduction or summary paragraph.

1. Starts with a transition.
2. First sentence contains appropriate idea from thesis.
3. Contains one to three explanatory sentences.
4. Contains two to four sentences about specific details.
5. Details are colorful, interesting and appropriate.
6. Ends with a good closing sentence.
7. Contains no run ons or sentence fragments.
8. Is free of errors in agreement.
 - A. Subject/verb - singular or plural,
 - B. Prounoun selection correct - singular or plural
 - C. Prounoun selection correct - subject or object
9. Is free of punctuation errors.
10. Is free of spelling errors.
11. Handwriting is easy to read.

What are the strongest points of this paragraph?

Put this paragraph in logical order.

1. Practicing engineers and scientists say they spend half of their time writing memos and reports.

2 This attitude shows a naive faith in the competency of their secretaries.

3 College students going into business think their secretaries will do their writing for them.

4 Many of us foolishly object to taking courses in writing.

5. Students going into the technical or scientific fields may think that writing is something they seldom have to do.

6. Young business people seldom have private secretaries.

7. Our notion that only poets and novelists have to write is unrealistic.

8. Other things being equal, a person in any field who can express ideas clearly is sure to succeed.