

PARAGRAPHS

Why Paragraphs?

Many student writers don't think much about paragraphs; they indent by intuition. It's worth taking a step back to rethink what a paragraph is. Why, for example, don't we simply write the essay straight through without breaks?

To understand the function of paragraphs, try thinking about your reader as a baby and your paragraphs as servings of baby food. As a good parent, are you going to try to wedge a piece of pie, a carrot stick, and Cheerios in your baby's mouth all at once? No. Baby will be confused, cry, and spit things onto the floor. You've given them too much food and too many kinds of food. They need time to chew, recognize the flavor, and swallow before you give them another bite. Similarly, you don't want to force-feed your reader in a single paragraph. Give too much information, and too many kinds of information at once, and your reader will end up frustrated and confused.

Why are people such babies about the way they assimilate new information? According to cognitive scientists, a non-stop stream of information is a cognitive burden for us. We prefer information in lumps rather than steady streams, so it's hard for us to process sentence after sentence unless the sentences are "chunked" by topic. We also have short "working memories," and your reader will tire if your paragraph calls on them to juggle many concepts at once.

The Three 'F's: Focus, Form, and Flow

Now that you've been reminded of the obvious, should you just bundle related information together under topic sentences and indent? Of course not. You want each paragraph to feel like a small, internally coherent life form—a cell in the body of the essay. There are three watchwords to bear in mind as you construct your paragraphs.

1. Focus

Each paragraph should be about one central thing or idea. (Really advanced writers do break this rule sometimes, but it's hard to pull off. For now, put your energies into perfecting the one-main-idea paragraph. After all, even Picasso mastered the classical drawing style before he started moving eyeballs around!) Everything in the paragraph should somehow relate to that thing or idea.

You may object that it's hard to define the boundaries of "one thing." This is true, particularly since your essays aren't organized around simple objects like a laundry list ("shirts"; "socks"; "P.J.s"), but around difficult concepts (e.g., how do Wilson and Gould differ in their ethical approach to understanding human behavior?). You might be justified in treating two issues as "one thing" if you portray them as tightly linked in ways that you explain in the paragraph. Or, to offer another

example, a contrast between two things, plus an implication of that contrast, could count as “one thing.” As long as the contrast and its implication are tightly linked and are conceptually small enough to chew in one mouthful, that’s probably okay.

2. Form

The form of a paragraph is the shape it takes as it develops. You can think about form in terms of a graph’s underlying structure: its architectural design. If you start reading good paragraphs with an eye for their design, you’ll begin to notice patterns. Some paragraphs develop point by point. Others develop text by text. Many paragraphs present a claim, present evidence to defend the claim, analyze the evidence, and restate the claim in richer form. Others take time to describe a phenomenon, then explain how it relates to the thesis. There are many forms a paragraph can take, but their development should always have an underlying logic.

3. Flow

A common problem in student writing is lurching from one point to the next without logical or aesthetic connection. A good writer will never write a sentence or a paragraph that is not explicitly linked to what precedes it. As Richard Marius, former Harvard writing program director, observed:

Quite often student writers let their paragraphs go slack because they forget to carry that development from the first sentence through all the other sentences in the paragraph. They write in a kind of shorthand that leaves out some necessary thoughts. Feeling that something is left out, readers must leap from sentence to sentence like agile children jumping from steppingstone to steppingstone over a stream. What readers want—and what you should provide—is a smooth bridge that will carry them to their destination without causing unnecessary strain. The most frequent cause of unnecessary strain within a paragraph is the lack of development from sentence to sentence. Always look to see if your sentences in a paragraph pick up an idea mentioned in a previous sentence and develop that idea. If you look at a sentence and discover that you cannot find mention of any of its ideas in a previous sentence in the paragraph, you probably have a disorderly paragraph.

An exercise on unscrambling paragraphs should help demonstrate the importance of logical flow in your prose. If you have a paragraph, or a major chunk of the paragraph, that fails the scramble test—that is, if you scrambled the sentences, it would be difficult to put them back together in order—you need to work on its flow.

Credit: University Writing Center, 2020.

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