

WRITING WORKSHOP BRIEF GUIDE SERIES

A Brief Guide to Writing Paragraphs

INTRODUCTION

A well organized paragraph does wonders to make writing clear and help guide a reader through all the important ideas. What follows is a general breakdown of different types, parts, and examples of academic paragraphs to help illuminate what makes a paragraph work. Note: this guide isn't for creative writing, and is more of a list of general suggestions rather than hard and fast rules.

Often times, different disciplines require different writing styles, and no doubt a paragraph in English may be structured quite differently than one in Psychology. This guide doesn't go into all those nuances, but instead aims to give some general ways in which paragraphs, and therefore writing more generally, can be improved.

IMPORTANT PARTS OF A PARAGRAPH

- **Topic Sentence:** This sentence is basically a summary of the argument you're making in the paragraph. Though it doesn't necessarily have to go at the beginning of a sentence, that is often where your reader is looking for it, and putting it at the beginning will definitely make your intentions clear.
- **Evidence:** In an analytical paper, evidence usually comes in the form of information or examples gathered from sources, often presented as quotes. Though evidence is a key part of paragraphs, it should not be the main focus or take up more real estate than your argument. This is *your* paper, and your ideas are the most important part.
- **Development:** Your idea should be fully developed within the paragraph. In this sense, paragraphs that have only three or four sentences probably don't fully consider your idea. Analysis, description, data, and examples are all ways that ideas can be developed.
- **Cohesion:** Paragraphs should also be unified and coherent. That is, they should be their own developed unit of writing.
- **Transitions:** These can be a great way to flow from one paragraph to the next. Personally, I like to have my topic sentence as the first sentence, so I try to use the last sentence of the previous paragraph to prep my reader for the next idea I'm going to cover.



DIFFERENT TYPES OF PARAGRAPHS

INTRODUCTORY: Traditionally, introductory paragraphs serve to preview your paper for your reader, giving them a heads up about what's important. Broadly speaking, they go from wide to narrow and usually end in a thesis statement. For more on introductions, check out the Wesleyan Writing Center guide on them.

CONTEXT/SUMMARY: These paragraphs exist to give your reader some background on your topic. For example, if you're writing about the U.S. Civil War, you could have a paragraph giving historical background on the slavery's place in the Constitution. Or, if you were writing about vaccines, you could talk about how the body's immune system functions.

LIT REVIEW: A lit review is a gathering of the existing work on your topic, and usually combine both summary and synthesis. They are more common in the sciences and social sciences, and can be part of a paper rather than just one paragraph.

“Make the paragraph the unit of composition: one paragraph to each topic.”
-*The Elements of Style*

More Resources

Here are some additional resources for each different type of paragraph. These sites offer explanations and examples to help your writing.

Introductory: www2.ivcc.edu/rambo/eng1001/introductions.htm

Comparison/Contrast: <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/comparing-and-contrasting/>

Transition: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/owlprint/574/> and <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/transitions/>

Conclusion: <http://www.writing.ucsb.edu/faculty/donelan/concl.html> and <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/engagement/2/2/60/>

Lit Review: <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/literature-reviews/> and http://faculty.mwsu.edu/psychology/Laura.Spiller/Experimental/sample_apa_style_litreview.pdf

Evidence/Sub-Claim: <https://depts.washington.edu/owrc/Handouts/Strong%20Body%20Paragraphs.pdf> and <http://writingcommons.org/open-text/information-literacy/critical-reading-practices/distinguishing-between-main-points-and-sub-claims/649-distinguishing-between-main-points-and-sub-claims>

Counter Argument: <http://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/counter-argument>

Summary: <http://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/summary>

TYPES OF PARAGRAPHS CONTINUED

ARGUMENT: This paragraph is one that states the main argument you're making. Unlike an evidence paragraph, it may not necessarily include specific quotes/data, but exists more to elaborate on your main point. These mainly exist in longer papers when the argument might be more complex.

EVIDENCE/SUB-CLAIM: This type of paragraph exists to support your main thesis with more specific examples and arguments. This is probably the most common type of paragraph within an academic paper. This is the paragraph where you answer the question: "What support do you have for that claim?" Usually these types of paragraphs contain quotes or facts to back up the sub-claim, but it's important to remember that evidence should not trump the actual sub-claim you are making. It's also important that each evidence paragraph contain a topic sentence to cue your reader into what point you're about to examine.

COUNTER ARGUMENT: This type of paragraph is structured similarly to an evidence paragraph, but serves a different purpose in your paper. Instead of providing information that supports your argument, it acknowledges that there are contradictory viewpoints, and usually points out why that perspective is flawed.

COMPARISON/CONTRAST: A comparison/contrast could function as one paragraph in a longer paper, or a way to frame your entire argument. On a paragraph level, though, it takes two different things and highlights their similarities and differences. These things could be historical periods, theories, pieces of writing or art, or people. The important thing about comparison/contrast paragraphs is to make sure to signpost clearly so your reader understands which idea you're talking about. Some good words are: like, similar to, unlike, in the same way, despite, while...

TRANSITION: Longer works may require transitional paragraphs, which would summarize the information that you just went over and preview what's to come. In shorter works, though, you typically don't need a whole paragraph to transition ideas. The chart below, from the writing center at UNC-Chapel Hill, gives many examples of words that can be used to help transition, either within a paragraph or between two different paragraphs.

CONCLUSION: A concluding paragraph both sums up your main argument and your sub-claims, reminding the reader why you're right. Conclusions are tricky to write, so for a more detailed explanation check out the Wesleyan Writers Guide on them.

LOGICAL RELATIONSHIP	TRANSITIONAL EXPRESSION
Similarity	also, in the same way, just as ... so too, likewise, similarly
Exception/Contrast	but, however, in spite of, on the one hand ... on the other hand, nevertheless, nonetheless, notwithstanding, in contrast, on the contrary, still, yet
Sequence/Order	first, second, third, ... next, then, finally
Time	after, afterward, at last, before, currently, during, earlier, immediately, later, meanwhile, now, recently, simultaneously, subsequently, then
Example	for example, for instance, namely, specifically, to illustrate
Emphasis	even, indeed, in fact, of course, truly
Place/Position	above, adjacent, below, beyond, here, in front, in back, nearby, there
Cause and Effect	accordingly, consequently, hence, so, therefore, thus
Additional Support or Evidence	additionally, again, also, and, as well, besides, equally important, further, furthermore, in addition, moreover, then
Conclusion/Summary	finally, in a word, in brief, briefly, in conclusion, in the end, in the final analysis, on the whole, thus, to conclude, to summarize, in sum, to sum up, in summary

EXAMPLES OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF PARAGRAPHS

Immediately we know what this paragraph is going to be about

From: William Strunk's *The Elements of Style*

Type of Paragraph: Argument

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.

This paragraph illustrates its point vis-a-vis its construction. It makes a clear argument that the reader understands after only three sentences

From: Intros to Intros <https://introtointros.wordpress.com/theater/>), Theater Paper

Type of Paragraph: Comparison/Contrast

Aunt Ester and Rose have similar roles in that they are both mother figures of adoptive daughters, and these daughters offer them a new beginning. Aunt Ester becomes a mother figure for Black Mary in *Gem of the Ocean*. Black Mary comes to Aunt Ester's house not knowing her or her legacy. Aunt Ester takes Black Mary under her wing and helps her develop into her own person. Rose has a similar relationship to her adopted daughter Raynell. Rose's husband Troy had an extra-marital affair, which resulted in the birth of his daughter. Raynell's biological mother dies childbirth, and Rose agrees to raise her. Although Raynell is only a baby, she helps Rose gain independence from Troy and create a new life for herself. Black Mary and Raynell allow these two matriarchal figures to have a new life. Black Mary gives Aunt Ester the opportunity to pass on her name and legacy, which provides the African American community with continued hope. Adopting Raynell gives Rose the strength to become independent from her husband and to start her own life. Aunt Ester and Rose are both strong maternal figures that are given a second chance when they adopt their "daughters." They both experience pivotal moments in which they relinquish their immediate social power to empower themselves and others important to them.

Immediately the similarities between these two characters is set up

Draws out the similarities more explicitly

This paragraph does a good job of illustrating the clear similarities between these two characters. Its flow could probably be improved, though, as several of the sentences have the same structure

From: The UNC-Chapel Hill Writing Center (<http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/literature-reviews/>)

Type of Paragraph: Lit Review

However, other studies have shown that even gender-neutral antecedents are more likely to produce masculine images than feminine ones (Gastil, 1990). Hamilton (1988) asked students to complete sentences that required them to fill in pronouns that agreed with gender-neutral antecedents such as “writer,” “pedestrian,” and “persons.” The students were asked to describe any image they had when writing the sentence. Hamilton found that people imagined 3.3 men to each woman in the masculine “generic” condition and 1.5 men per woman in the unbiased condition.

Summarize findings of study and then cite said study in parentheses

Authors listed in alphabetical order

Thus, while ambient sexism accounted for some of the masculine bias, sexist language amplified the effect. (Source: Erika Falk and Jordan Mills, “Why Sexist Language Affects Persuasion: The Role of Homophily, Intended Audience, and Offense,” *Women and Language* 19:2.)

The writer does a good job of summarizing the methodology and findings of the study in a concise way

From: Harvard College Writing Center (<http://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/summary>)

Type of Paragraph: Summary

The foreword to Chambers's autobiography is written in the form of "A Letter to My Children." In this introduction, Chambers establishes the spiritual tone that dominates the body of his book. He **initially** characterizes the Cold War in a more or less standard fashion, invoking the language of politics and describing the conflict as one between "Communism and Freedom." **But as the foreword progresses**, Chambers introduces a religious element that serves to cast the struggle between communism and capitalism as a kind of holy war.

The writer does a good job of briefly summarizing the main points of the text. Additionally, important signposts orient the reader to changes in Chambers's thinking

This first sentence does a good job of giving some historical background to introduce the film

The reader knows exactly what specific evidence the author is going to be looking at to support the main argument

From: Intros to Intros (<https://introtointros.wordpress.com/film/>), Film Paper
Type of Paragraph: Introduction

Made fresh after the liberation of Rome from its Nazi occupiers, Roberto Rossellini's *Rome Open City* (1945) strives to capture the struggle between the Roman people and their German oppressors. Rossellini's masterwork is a tribute to the fear, uncertainty, and nervousness of living in a city that, despite being "open," was still under the control of an enemy nation. Using many stylistic elements, including manipulation of **sound**, **editing**, and **camerawork**, Rossellini crafts an atmosphere of tension and suspense. This evokes the fearful reality of the Italians under German control, effectively communicating to the audience what it was like to live in Rome during this tragic time.

This thesis statement would be stronger if the writer specified what the "this" refers to. For example, "This technique..."

This topic sentence could be made a little stronger by being a little more explicit, but it does a good job of letting the reader know what the paragraph is about

From: Intros to Intros (<https://introtointros.wordpress.com/african-american-studies/>), African American Studies Paper
Type of Paragraph: Evidence/Sub-Claim

The rooftop restaurant at the Drayton Hotel serves only white customers, which depicts the idea of Heaven as exclusively white. The way Larsen portrays this celestial environment adds to the racial element of her depiction. Larsen uses language such as "**looked out over**" and "**gazed upon**" to describe Irene's view from the rooftop. The scenic view Irene is granted allows her to look down as if she was in Heaven (Larsen, 13). These phrases indicate that Irene has been physically and socially elevated through passing. This demonstrates that in order to be literally above others, Irene must deny her black identity in order to gain social standing. Irene encounters her old friend, **Clare Kendry**, who has passed for her entire life. The idea that Clare is already at the rooftop restaurant suggests that she has been able to enjoy this heavenly atmosphere, and will always have access to it, unlike Irene who is only passing through.

Key idea of paragraph (could put in topic sentence)

The writer does a good job of using several concrete pieces of evidence (in bold) to support a clearly outlined point. Though that point could be emphasized more through the paragraph, the overall message of the paragraph is clear

Sources:

"Paragraph Structure." *University of Maryland Effective Writing Center*. 2016. http://www.umuc.edu/writingcenter/writingresources/paragraph_struct.cfm#evidence
 Driscoll, Dana Lynn and Allen Brizee. "On Paragraphs." *Purdue Online Writing Center*. July 7, 2015. <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/606/01/>