



## Body Paragraphs

A paragraph is a group of related sentences that develop a central idea. In most essay writing genres, a good paragraph has a clear **topic sentence**, **unity**, **coherence**, and **logical development**. Writers may employ a variety of strategies when organizing a paragraph, but you should take care to include these basic elements in order to communicate effectively with your reader.

Here are some general expectations for effective paragraphing:

- A topic sentence identifies for your readers the main idea of the paragraph.
- A paragraph must be unified: all ideas included must be related.
- A paragraph must be coherent: the sentences follow a clear and logical order.
- A paragraph must have good development: your readers will expect evidence and support for the main idea presented in your topic sentence.
- The end may summarize the content of the paragraph, draw the discussion to a close, or signal what is to come in the next paragraph.
- A paragraph must be related to the paragraphs before and after. Using clear transitions and having a logical pattern of organization throughout are also important.

Paragraphs help guide readers through your paper. There are several reasons to begin a new paragraph: to introduce a new idea, to explore a subtopic in more depth, to emphasize a point, to transition between major sections, to change speakers (in papers where dialogue is included), and to conclude your paper.

The following sections provide an example paragraph for discussion, expand on the definitions key terms, and provide sample paragraphs that follow some common organizational strategies.

### Example Effective Paragraph

Compare the paragraph below to the criteria listed above. This paragraph has a clear **topic sentence** and details that **develop** the main idea; it is **unified** since all the ideas are related and **coherent** since the sentences fit together in a logical order. A CLASS+ tutor has commented on the paragraph's strengths.

The state should offer free parenting classes, taught by experts, to anyone who wishes to become a parent. First and most important, such parenting classes could save children's lives. Every year, over two million American children are hurt, maimed, or killed by their own parents, according to the National Physician's Association. Some of these tragedies could be prevented by showing parents how to recognize and deal with their frustration and anger. Next, good parenting skills do not come naturally, but must be learned. Dr. Phillip Graham, chairman of England's National Children's Bureau, says that most parents have "no good role models" and simply parent the way they were parented. The courses would not only improve parenting skills but might also identify people at risk of abusing their children. Third, critics might argue that the state has no business getting involved in parenting, which is a private responsibility. However, the state already makes decisions about who is a fit parent—in the courts, child protection services, and adoption agencies—but often this is too late for the well-being of the child. Finally, if we do nothing, the hidden epidemic of child abuse and neglect will continue. We train our children's teachers, doctors, day-care workers, and bus drivers. We must also educate parents. (Fawcett 161).

**Commented [A1]:** This is a good topic sentence. It is clear, direct, and contains a topic (parenting classes) and a claim about that topic (state should offer classes to people wishing to become parents).

**Commented [A2]:** To first support the claim in the topic sentence, the writer introduces statistical evidence.

**Commented [A3]:** The writer then makes an emotional appeal to the reader: by educating these people we could avoid "some of these tragedies."

**Commented [A4]:** Next, the writer uses an expert in the field to support her argument.

**Commented [A5]:** Notice how this writer uses clear transitional elements between ideas in the paragraph (*First, Next, Third, Finally*).

**Commented [A6]:** In her third point, the writer anticipates a potential counter-argument and provides a rebuttal in the sentence that follows.

**Commented [A7]:** This paragraph is unified: All supporting ideas are related to the topic sentence. The writer does not include any extraneous details or commentary. It is coherent because the order of the information is logical and the use of transitional phrases is effective.

By paragraph's end, the writer has subtly moved the reader from a suggestion (notice the use of the word "should" in the first sentence) to a demand (notice the word "must" in the last sentence), an insistent call to action.

(Paragraph above from page 161 of *Evergreen: A Guide to Writing with Readings*, 10th edition, by Susan Fawcett. The excerpt is further analyzed below.)

### Topic Sentences

A topic sentence must be focused and specific. When writing persuasively, a topic sentence makes an argument or claim about a topic, and it must be supported by the other sentences in the paragraph. A good topic sentence includes mention of both the issue under discussion and a claim about that issue. A topic sentence may appear at the beginning of a paragraph, in the middle, or at the end; in rare cases, it may be implied rather than stated explicitly. In most of your academic papers for university writing assignments, you'll write most clearly by beginning new paragraphs with topic sentences. Take a look at the example topic sentences below.

**Weak:** *The state might consider offering some kind of classes for parents.*

This topic sentence is unsuccessful because it is vague. What kind of classes should the state offer? Who will teach and attend these classes? In contrast to the topic sentence below, this sentence also is weak as a result of the writer's use of the phrasing *might consider offering*.

**Strong:** *The state should offer free parenting classes, taught by experts, to anyone who wishes to become a parent.*

This topic sentence is specific. It has a topic: *parenting classes*; it also has a claim: *the state should offer the classes to people wishing to become parents*.

### Unity

A good body paragraph is unified, which means that each idea in your paragraph is related to the topic sentence. In the example paragraph above, it would not be a good idea to include this sentence: *Some parents who abuse children should be punished*. The focus of the paragraph is not parents who abuse children and what to do about the parents' behavior. The focus is on why parenting classes should be offered to people planning to have children. Make sure the sentences in the body of your paragraph are related to the idea in your topic sentence; do not allow unrelated details or commentary to creep in.

### Coherence

For a paragraph to be coherent, all sentences must fit together in a logical order. There are a number of strategies for organizing your ideas within each paragraph. Three of the most common ways are (1) by order of importance, (2) from general to specific, and (3) from specific to general. When composing in genres other than persuasive writing, you might find other organizational strategies useful: spatial, chronological, or by association. You might also organize ideas using a logical pattern such as illustration, definition, or comparison and contrast. You can read more about these patterns in Chapter 5 of *The St. Martin's Handbook*, 8<sup>th</sup> edition. Coherence also means that the paragraph "flows" well. Using transitional phrases within and between paragraphs can help you achieve stronger coherence.

### Development

In order for a paragraph to be effective, it must contain evidence, support, and details, all related to the main idea in the topic sentence, as well as commentary on the evidence. Evidence can appear in a number of forms: examples, facts and statistics, summaries, and quotations from knowledgeable experts.

Take a look at this example:

The state should offer free parenting classes, taught by experts, to anyone who wishes to become a parent. First and most important, such parenting classes could save children's lives. Next, good parenting skills do not come naturally, but must be learned. Third, critics might argue that the state has no business getting involved in parenting, which is a private responsibility. Finally, if we do nothing, the hidden epidemic of child abuse and neglect will continue.

Compared to the version on page one above, this paragraph is not developed. This paragraph has a clear topic sentence and transitions well between sentences, but it fails to develop support for the main idea with specific examples. Additionally, the author of this paragraph fails to provide commentary on the relevance of the points that she makes in this paragraph.

### **Organizational Strategies**

Effectively organizing sentences within paragraphs helps your readers follow your ideas. The paragraphs below highlight four common patterns of development: order of importance, general to specific, specific to general, and chronological. This is by no means an exhaustive list: see Chapter 5 of *The St. Martin's Handbook* for more examples.

#### **Order of Importance**

Following your topic sentence, your paragraph may begin with your most important and persuasive ideas. In this organizational strategy, you attempt to create impact and immediately grab the reader's attention. The "most important first" strategy is effective for business communication, essay examinations, and establishing serious or overwhelming impact. In the sample paragraph that introduces this section, the writer employs this strategy, and even announces it to the reader by leading with "First and most important. . . ." The writer's first point of persuasion is that by following her argument children's lives could be saved. The writer's other points—that good parenting skills are learned, that the state is already involved in other issues regarding parenting, and that doing nothing will perpetuate tragedy and abuse—are all persuasive but pale in impact to the argument that her proposal could save children's lives. You may also organize your points from least-to-most important. In this strategy, you trust that your reader stays with the development of your argument. You build to a kind of crescendo at paragraph's end.

#### **General-to-Specific Order**

Another common pattern of development is to begin with a general idea and develop it throughout the paragraph. The example below utilizes this strategy. Ideas are organized from general to specific. As the paragraph progresses, the writer becomes more specific by backing up claims with examples. The topic sentence (italicized), a general assertion, appears at the beginning of the paragraph, and the ideas that follow provide more specific details of support.

*Meanwhile, the city's rich musical heritage grew steadily richer.* Brass bands captivated the whole country after the Civil War—virtually every small town in America boasted at least one—and the New Orleans "mania" for them that had been noted before the war seems only to have intensified afterwards. Citizens of every color and nationality continued to march to German bands, French bands, Irish bands, Italian bands (that highlighted a lyrical, ornamented clarinet style born in Sicily), and the regimental bands of the occupying forces, both black and white. When Patrick Sarsfield Gilmore, the master cornetist and bandleader who was as celebrated as John Philip Sousa in his day, presented a Grand National Concert at Lafayette Square, five hundred New Orleans brass players turned out to play with him. Every summer during the 1880s, a summer resort called West End, on Lake Pontchartrain just north of the city, played host to bands from all over the country with concerts day and night at which were played every kind of music from plantation ditties to operatic overtures, waltzes to so-called "coon songs." (Ward and Burns 11)

(From page 11 of *Jazz: A History of America's Music*, by Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns)

#### **Specific to General Order**

The example paragraph below illustrates another common pattern of development. The author begins with a series of specific examples to illustrate his point and builds to the topic sentence (italicized)—a general statement of the paragraph's content that also wraps up or concludes the paragraph. Notice how the author also incorporates quoted material:

"Nobody is actually starving," President Hoover told reporters. "The hoboes, for example, are better fed than they have ever been. One hobo in New York got ten meals in one day." In September 1932 *Fortune* flatly called the President a liar and suggested that "twenty-five millions in want" might be a fairer description of the nation's economic health. Cases of starvation were being chronicled by *Fortune*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Atlantic*, the *New York Times*, and in congressional testimony. The New York City Welfare Council reported 29 victims of starvation and 110, mostly children, dead of malnutrition. *Hoover simply hadn't seen the suffering*, though he was not to be spared after his departure from the White House; on a fishing trip in the Rocky Mountains he was led by a native to a hut where one child had succumbed and seven others were dying of hunger. (Manchester 140)

(From page 140 of William Manchester's "Depression," in *Forging the American Character*, edited by John R. Wilson)

### **Chronological Order**

In the paragraph below, the author uses a chronological pattern of development, organizing events sequentially. In a chronologically ordered paragraph, the topic sentence, which can appear at the beginning or the end, either summarizes the ideas of the paragraph or offers an interpretation of the ideas. The topic sentence here comes at the end and makes a general statement about the paragraph's content:

Before the arrival of Europeans, Haiti was populated by the Arawak tribes. Within fifty years after Columbus set foot on the island in December 1492, the Arawaks had nearly died out, victims of disease and enslavement. The Spanish colonists imported blacks from Africa to replace the natives as slaves on their plantations. Late in the seventeenth century, the island was ceded to France but was the subject of dispute among England, Spain, and France for decades before achieving independence. *The population of Haiti today, predominantly black and French-speaking, reflects that history.* (Fulwiler and Hayakawa 344)

(From page 344 of *The Blair Handbook*)

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