

## Paragraphs

SUU Writing Center

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**Much of the following tipsheet was adapted or taken directly from Purdue University's handout on paragraphs, to be found at the following website:**

**<<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/workshops/hypertext/ResearchW/paragr.html>>**

### **Definition:**

A paragraph is a collection of related sentences supporting a single point. In academic writing, you should try to create paragraphs that exhibit *unity*, *coherence*, and *adequate development of a main idea as expressed in a topic sentence*.

### **Unity:**

A paragraph is described as unified when it concerns itself with a single focus. If it begins with one focus or major point of discussion, it should not end with another. **In other words, the paragraph should not wander aimlessly from one idea to the next.**

### **Coherence:**

Coherence is the trait that makes the paragraph easily understandable by relating its parts to the “big idea” that focuses and unifies it. When you create coherence, you make the connections between each of the paragraph's sentences and its main idea clear to the reader.

You can help create coherence in your paragraphs by creating logical bridges and verbal bridges.

-Logical bridges:

- The same idea of a topic is carried over from sentence to sentence.
- Successive sentences may be constructed in similar form.

-Verbal bridges:

- Key words may be repeated in several sentences.
- Synonymous words may be repeated in several sentences.
- Pronouns may refer to nouns in previous sentences.
- Transition words may be used to link ideas from different sentences.

### **A Topic Sentence:**

Most paragraphs contain a **topic sentence** that explicitly states the main idea or most important thesis you want to prove or explain in your paragraph. In other words, it addresses the question “so what?” very clearly and directly. Although topic sentences can occur anywhere in the paragraph, an easy way to make sure your reader understands your main point is to begin with it. By the way, to make sure that your topic sentences are pointed enough, check to see if each paragraph begins with a point or argument, not just a statement of fact.

FOR MORE HELP WITH PARAGRAPHS, SEE THE NEXT PAGE

### **Adequate Development**

The point (asserted by the kind of topic sentence discussed directly above) should be “supported” with further explanations, details, and proofs. Knowing how much detail to provide is an art, not a science, in that it depends on your ability to imagine what your readers are going to need to understand and to believe you. Beware of paragraphs that contain only two or three sentences. One way to get yourself to make such paragraphs more clear and convincing is to read each sentence, asking yourself, “What makes me say that?” If you can’t answer that question, you probably need to do more brainstorming and/or research.

### **What are some methods of developing paragraphs?**

Use examples and illustrations, cite data (facts, statistics, evidence, etc.), examine testimony (what other people say, such as quotations and paraphrases), use an anecdote or story, define terms in the paragraph, compare and contrast ideas, evaluate causes and reasons, examine effects and consequences, analyze the topic, describe the topic, or offer a chronology of an event.

### **Example Paragraph:**

Notice how the in paragraph below, a student writer published in the *St. Martin’s Guide to Writing* first asserts her point in a topic sentence and then spends the rest of her paragraph developing that one idea with an anecdote.

Unlike American mothers, who encourage their young children to speak whatever is on their mind, my mother told me to hold my tongue. Once, when I was five or six, I interrupted my mother during a dinner with her friends and told her that I disliked the meal. My mother’s eyes transformed from serene pools of blackness into stormy balls of fire. “Quiet!” she hissed. “Do you not know that silent waters run deep?” She ordered me to turn my chair to the wall and think about what I had done. I remember throwing a red-faced tantrum before my mother’s friends, pounding my fists into the rug, and throwing my utensils at the steaming dishes. Not only did I receive a harsh scolding, but a painful spanking. By the end of that evening, I had learned the first of many lessons. I learned to choose my words carefully before I opened my undisciplined mouth<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Wu, Amy. “A Different Kind of Mother.” *The St. Martin’s Guide to Writing A*. Eds. Rise B. Axelrod and Charles R. Cooper. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001. 93.