

Paragraphs- a general overview

Paragraphs are writing conventions that we have seen millions of times, but what are they? A paragraph is a series of sentences that progress an idea. When you start a new paragraph, you signal to your readers that you are changing topics, perspective, or creating a special emphasis. In other words, you start a new paragraph when you are starting a new idea. Obviously, this can be interpreted in a variety of ways, but the information below will provide you with some general guidelines.

Paragraphs are the building blocks of essays and every paragraph should be *unified* and have a clear *purpose*. There are three basic paragraph types: introductions, body paragraphs, and conclusions. Introductions and conclusions are special types of paragraphs that we will discuss later. For now, we will focus on body paragraphs and their basic structure. The body paragraphs are where you develop your argument, or *thesis*. You do this by providing support that convinces your readers that your thesis is reasonable. You also explain that support and interpret it for your readers. In many ways, the things you need to do with your body paragraphs are the same things you need to do with your essay as a whole. Effective body paragraphs have three sections.



Point

As already stated, every paragraph should have a clear purpose and that purpose is stated in a *topic sentence*. This is generally one of the first few sentences of the paragraph. The term "topic sentence" is a bit misleading, because a body paragraph needs more than just a topic, it needs a *point*. The point is what the paragraph is attempting to show and the point needs to relate to the thesis of the essay. Make sure that the point of your body paragraph is something that you can develop and argue.

My dad is a plumber.

This topic sentence is merely a fact. There's no point to demonstrate.

My dad and I are surprisingly alike.

This topic sentence makes an observation that can be explored. The rest of the paragraph could provide details to show the comparison.

An arguable topic sentence will help you as you write by giving you giving a path for how to develop the paragraph. It will also help your readers by providing them with a clear sign post of where the essay is going.

Illustration

This is usually the bulk of a body paragraph. Here you provide specific evidence to demonstrate the point of the body paragraph.

There are many different types of evidence possible: examples, facts, statistics, quotations, definitions, and personal experience. In college writing, you will be moving away from using personal experience as evidence and moving towards relying more on evidence provided by class readings, instructor lectures, and your own research.

There are also many different ways to present your evidence (otherwise known as the rhetorical modes): narration, description, exemplification, cause, effect, process analysis, comparison, contrast, definition, classification, division, argumentation, and persuasion. In college writing, you cannot rely on narration and description alone.

Whatever approach you use, make sure that your illustration is specific. It also needs to be unified. Get rid of any details that do not relate to the point of the body paragraph.

Explanation

Less experienced writers tend to overlook this crucial part of a body paragraph. Imagine a lawyer coming into a courtroom and saying "my client is innocent." Then the lawyer holds up a piece of evidence, shows it to the jury, and finally sits down saying "that's all I have, your honor." That lawyer would never win a single case. Evidence doesn't speak for itself; it must be explained.

Tell the reader how you interpret your evidence. How does the illustration prove the point of the paragraph? How does it relate to the thesis of the essay? You must make these connections explicit. Don't assume the audience can read your mind.