

Writing Paragraphs

Think of paragraphs as small essays. You must have one sentence around which all other sentences are focused. Just as an essay has a thesis statement, a paragraph has a topic sentence. The topic sentence summarizes the information that will be related in the entirety of the paragraph. (Note: In a formal essay this topic sentence may be labeled a thesis-based assertion. It must define, exemplify or explain a part of your thesis statement.)

Common problems:

Sometimes a sentence will somehow disrupt the flow of a paragraph. If you feel this is the case, question whether the sentence should be deleted, relocated or expanded.

A sentence should be deleted if it is not pertinent to the topic sentence or does not provide support for your thesis. A sentence should be relocated if it is necessary to support your thesis statement but does not support the topic sentence of the particular paragraph. If you choose to relocate the sentence, then it may become a topic sentence that can be expanded. (Note: Many times, reading the paragraph aloud helps pinpoint sentences that may disrupt the flow of the paragraph.)

The length of a paragraph may vary depending on the purpose of the paragraph. Regardless, the paragraph should be long enough to support your topic sentence. Make sure that each part of your topic sentence is well defined, exemplified or explained.

Unity:

Each sentence and every word in a paragraph must contribute in some way to the overall topic, or theme, of the paragraph. A sentence should be deleted if it is not pertinent to the topic or does not provide support for your thesis.

Coherence:

The strength of a paragraph depends on linking your ideas clearly, repeating key words, maintaining consistency and providing transitions.

Linkage of ideas depends on a clear topic sentence. The following sentences in the paragraph should give the reader specific details (support) for your topic sentence. You should always include examples.

Often key words will guide your reader. If you are using scientific terms, you should probably repeat the terms. However if other words become redundant, you should use synonyms or some variation of the word.

Paragraphs should maintain consistency in point of view and tense. To maintain consistency, for example, do not shift from I to you. To maintain tense, for example, do not shift from past to present

Transitions are a bridge between the information that you have already given your reader and the new information that you are going to present in the new paragraph. Often, words such as *however*, *although*, *therefore*, or *hence* signal that you are transitioning from one idea to the next and hence one paragraph to the next. You should also use transitions within paragraphs such as *for example* or *also* to help the paragraph flow from one sentence to the next.

Some common transitions:

- To show addition: and, also, beside, further, furthermore, in addition, moreover, next
- To give examples: for example, for instance, to illustrate, in fact, specifically
- To compare: also, in the same manner, similarly
- To contrast: but, however, on the other hand, in contrast, yet, although
- To summarize or conclude: in other words, in short, in summary, in conclusion, therefore
- To show time: after, as, before, next, during, later, finally, while
- To show place or direction: above, below, nearby, opposite
- To indicate logical relationship: if, so, therefore, consequently, thus, as a result

Development:

Be sure to develop your ideas as fully as possible in each paragraph. Think in terms of levels of generality (Kolln). A topic sentence is a "Level 1." A more specific sentence that follows the topic sentence can be named a "Level 2." A

more specific third sentence that clarifies the second sentence can be named a “Level 3.” And so on.

Here’s an example:

- Level one: Despite the immense racial gulf separating them, Lincoln and Douglass had a lot in common.
- Level two: They were the two preeminent self-made men of their era.
- Level three: Lincoln was born dirt poor, had less than a year of formal schooling, and became a great President.
- Level three: Douglass spent the first 20 years of his life as a slave, had no formal schooling, and became one of the nation’s great writers and activists.

And so forth. Technically, there is no limit to the number of levels you can achieve, but I have not seen paragraphs go more than five levels of generality. And note that levels of generality do not necessarily proceed in sequential order. You may find yourself writing a level 1, then 2, then 1 again, and then a 3. The key is to develop each paragraph topic as clearly as possible.

Beginning a new paragraph:

Most readers feel comfortable reading paragraphs that range between one hundred and two hundred words. But, as always, exceptions exist. Here are some common reasons for beginning a new paragraph:

- To mark the introduction or conclusion
- To signal a shift to a new idea*
- To indicate a shift in time or place
- To emphasize a point
- To signal a change in speaker
- To break up a dense text

Short paragraphs are sometimes necessary and helpful but do not let brevity influence the essay’s cohesion.