

## Writing Research Body Paragraphs

### Some methods to make sure your paragraph is well-developed

Use examples and illustrations

Cite data

Examine what other people say using quotes and paraphrases

Use an anecdote or story

Define terms in the paragraph

Compare and contrast

Evaluate causes and reasons

Examine effects and consequences

Analyze the topic

Describe the topic

Offer a chronology of an event (time segments)

Be sure to identify your assumptions and beliefs. By identifying your own beliefs or ideals you can better understand how the ideas of others affect you. An important part of the paper is being to show you have grown in that understanding. A good paper will not change your ideas in each instance, but it should expand your understanding of a topic.

Define all your terms to ensure reader and writer will understand each other. Do NOT assume your reader, which is likely your professor, will completely understand in each instance. Chances are the professor is knowledgeable, and probably an expert, in the subject matter, but don't make that assumption. A good rule of thumb is to write the paper as if you were educating an undergraduate student.

Support ALL assertions with evidence and proof. This is where both your sources (research) and your application collide. If you make a statement of fact or truth then be able to prove it. Most students do not fail because they had a bad idea but simply because they failed to support their idea.

State your purpose at the very beginning of the paper.

Don't depend on headings to make transitions between ideas. While graduate level papers generally include multiple sections do not assume that a heading will clearly make the transition for you.

Use good writing skills and practices.

Don't depend too much on the words of others -- i.e., direct quotations or references to other works. Sometimes the best paper is one that challenges the status quo or at least gives it a good examination.

When you use quotations be sure to a) introduce the writer and establish his/her credibility, b) explain or interpret what has been said, and c) analyze the value of the other person's contribution to the discussion at hand.

Remember one paragraph should contain one main point. Paragraphs should have at least three sentences: introduction, middle, and conclusion (which sends the reader logically into the next main point).

To avoid plagiarism, first read your source book (or other material), then close it and make notes on what you think is important. (Be sure to take down all details -- author, title, publisher, date of publication, page numbers of direct quotations and/or interesting ideas.)

The majority of the paper should be your own words and ideas.

Pay close attention to the dates of your reference materials. Including references to some classic articles or books is good, but you should be extremely cautious about building your whole paper on dated materials. Similarly, you must be careful not to rely on only one or two sources.

### Some Things to Avoid

Statements that do not logically follow from each other.

Unfounded and unsupported generalizations (eg., Large multinationals abuse labor in developing countries.)

Circular arguments. (eg., Communication is important because organizations need leaders who can communicate effectively.)

Arguments based on the idea that everyone does or knows something. (eg., Bureaucracy is bad because everyone thinks it is.)

Attacks on perfunctory rather than central ideas. (i.e, getting sidetracked)

Considering only favorable evidence.

Considering only two alternatives and ignoring others that are equally relevant.

## Writing Paragraphs and Constructing Your Argument

No argument is perfect. All arguments have weaknesses, like missing or contrary evidence or plausible alternative interpretations. Some writers tend to sweep these things under the rug, afraid that if they call attention to them they're encouraging the reader to reject the whole argument. But such an all-or-nothing attitude isn't the right tack to take in essay-writing. It's understood that academic essays make arguments, not proofs. Instead, you can achieve the apparently paradoxical effect of strengthening your argument by conceding its limits. Disarm the opposition ahead of time, and your reader is likely to trust you and your argument more:

*It may at first seem paradoxical to suggest that a company can increase its profits by putting other values above the bottom line. How can it not hurt revenues to give workers more family leave and increase spending on employee benefits?*

Another example, from an essay arguing that Shakespeare was influenced by Machiavelli:

*Admittedly, there is no direct evidence that Shakespeare read Machiavelli.*

One more, from an essay praising Thomas Jefferson's political thought:

*Clearly, judged by modern standards, Jefferson would be called a racist.*

Let's look at one example in a bit more detail. Here's how a writer, arguing that NATO's 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia caused massive and unjustifiable environmental damage, seeks to defuse the objection that Yugoslavia's environmental problems predate the bombing. The whole paragraph is quoted so we can observe the structure:

*In fairness, every international team doing environmental assessments in Yugoslavia has had difficulty distinguishing preexisting damage to soil and water systems from new toxins linked to the war. Long before the bombing, the Danube's viability was under siege from both industrial polluters to the north and from 50 years of lax environmental oversight in Yugoslavia and the former Eastern Bloc nations. Scientists taking core sediment samples after the war have found toxins dating from the '60s, '70s and '80s—including contaminants related to the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident. But the NATO bombing unquestionably made the situation worse. Preexisting pollution is no reason to dismiss the environmental fallout from the war; it only makes the case for a cleanup more urgent. Joan McQueeney Mitric, "The Environment as Prisoner of War." Op-ed article, Washington Post (July 9, 2000), B1, B4.*

The writer does something inexperienced writers don't realize they can do: rather than avoiding the complicated argument of figuring out when pollutants date from, she takes on the argument, even laying out its data in some detail (the mention of toxins dating back to the 1960s). But notice the sound structure: at the end she reasserts her argument (in the penultimate sentence, beginning *But...*). And in the final sentence she actually uses the preexisting damage argument to buttress her own case for the need for environmental cleanup. Over the course of the paragraph she nimbly turns an apparent weakness in her argument into a strength. By the "middle" of the paper I mean the main section, after you've introduced your topic and stated your argument. The middle is where you actually make the argument, step by step. The middle is a minefield, where every step could shatter the delicate bond between your intended argument and your reader's understanding and sympathy.

**Mediocre writers assume they'll be understood and blame the reader when they're not. Good writers realize that making a sustained argument and holding a reader's attention is as hard as juggling while walking a tightrope. The reader doesn't have your strategic, bird's-eye view of the whole essay. He's stuck on the ground, sloggng through a morass of words, sentence after sentence, never knowing where the trail is leading and what lies over the next ridge or on the next page.**

**Thus as you write you need to keep thinking about your reader. Where will he think the argument is taking him, step by step? What needs emphasis or repetition? What must be explained, and what can be left implicit because it's obvious or has already been mentioned? What questions need to be answered? What objections need to be anticipated? Have you done all you can to weave together a coherent and sensible argument?**

### Paragraphs

The key building block of essays is the paragraph. A paragraph represents a distinct logical step within the whole argument. That step may be big or little; it may take one or ten sentences to lay out—but the key is that it is one step. Thus there's no point in laying down as a rule (as one sometimes hears) that paragraphs should be four or five sentences long. That's probably a decent guideline for most paragraphs in student writing, but in good writing you'll find longer paragraphs and shorter paragraphs—some as short as a single sentence, if that's all it takes for that particular thought (use one-sentence paragraphs sparingly, but don't flinch from them when they're what you need).

**Paragraphs are discrete steps in one's argument, but that doesn't mean that every step in the argument must fit within a single paragraph. Some complex thoughts may require so much space to explicate that the resulting paragraph would be two pages long. In such cases, break into smaller units, looking to subdivide along some sensible and clear scheme.**

**The basic idea is simple but crucial: When you write a paragraph, you should know what it is meant to do. If your answer is simply, "Well, this paragraph helps explain my topic," then you haven't thought deeply enough. How does this particular paragraph contribute to the argument? What logical step does it make? Where does it fit in the overall chain?**

### **Topic sentences**

Readers like to know why they're reading a particular passage as soon as possible. That's why topic sentences placed at the beginnings of paragraphs are a good habit. A topic sentence, as its name implies, states the paragraph's topic—it need not state the paragraph's particular argument about that topic. That means that questions can make good topic sentences. Here, fairly at random, are several good topic sentences, all placed at the beginnings of paragraphs:

*A popular audience for science, and for technology, blossomed in Europe and America in the 19th century. [Examples follow.]*

*The third and final area of Theban expansion was by sea in the Aegean. Here again the enemy was Athens. . . . [Detailed incidents follow.]*

*When we see a play, what is it that we see? [An answer follows.]*

*A special subcase of realist theories deals with the balance of power. According to this version. . . . [Elaboration follows.]*

There's no iron rule that topic sentences must come at the beginning of paragraphs, but if you keep in mind that you're writing to be understood, you'll tend to put them there. That's what readers are used to, and that's what they find easiest to follow.

### **Constructing paragraphs**

Paragraphs should be constructed with some sense of internal order, whether through time, or space, or some other logical way or arranging information. Again, you have a lot flexibility in choosing an ordering scheme—as long as you choose something that will make sense to the reader. It's common for writers to produce paragraphs that don't hang together, partly because we think as we write and don't always go back and revise thoughtfully. Here's an example, from an essay on Machiavelli's opinion about Christianity. This paragraph is really pasted together from two pieces (marked by italics):

*Christianity was not always weak and without vigor and war. When it was a new religion it extinguished the old, Paganism, in order to become the only one. In this, according to Machiavelli, Christianity behaved as every new religion does. The Christians burned the works of poets, threw down statues, and forbade Pagan teachings. Their mistake in this overthrow was to keep the language of the Pagans, Latin. The Christians translated the Gospels into Latin, and Christian political leaders wrote their civil codes in Latin. So, although they had blotted out all of the Pagan ceremonies and teachings, all was not forgotten. The works of great Pagan thinkers were still studied because the language was not extinguished along with the rest of Paganism.*

When the reader reaches the italicized portion, he gets a bit confused. The topic is the same, true—the early history of Christianity. But two distinct argumentative points are being made: (1) Christianity was once a fierce religion, and (2) Early Christians erred in not eradicating the Latin language. Each of these points deserves its own paragraph.

*The best test for deciding whether a paragraph hangs together is to read its topic sentence and see if it reasonably covers everything you discuss in the paragraph.*

### **Linking paragraphs**

In a good essay, each paragraph should have some logical connection to the one before it. When your reader moves from one paragraph to the next, he knows that he has reached a new step in the argument. But that's all he knows. Is this new step another in the same direction, or is it a change? You have to guide your reader with appropriate signposts. One powerful type of signpost that many students think they can't use in essays is a direct question. When you want to move from one part of the argument to the next, it can be useful to start by asking a question that refers to what you just said but gives you room to move on: What does this mean? or Why does Plato think the noble lie is necessary? or What evidence is there for this interpretation? Good sharp questions can guide your reader through your argument. Another way to link paragraphs is simply to write in such a way as to force the reader to recognize the link. Here's how one writer started a paragraph. Notice that it only makes sense in context, and that the writer was confident enough not to repeat material from the previous paragraph or make the link too explicit:

*The strange outcome was that the oil and energy crisis abated.*

A less confident writer would have inserted a reference along these lines:

*The strange outcome of the several years of economic crisis afflicting Western and Arab states was that the oil and energy crisis abated.*

When a writer lacks confidence in her essay's coherence, she'll be tempted to say things like this:

*Earlier it was mentioned that . . . as commented on earlier . . . as stated earlier . . . as stated before . . . as I wrote before*

These are awfully weak constructions. In the same camp is the word also, which is vastly overused as a connector at the beginnings of sentences, where it rarely sounds very good:

*Also, Touchstone tries to get out of marrying Audrey.*

*Also, the data show that the reaction slows down as the temperature falls.*

These nervous pointers (their subtext is *Have I lost your attention yet? Have I confused you yet?*) are poor substitutes for good organization. Planning your argument and crafting coherent paragraphs that proceed step by step should make you feel able to dispense with such things. If on occasion you feel you have to use such a pointer, use a more conventional phrase like as noted above.

### **Transitions and pointers**

Just as in crafting an essay you must fit its paragraphs together so they work with each other to make a smooth and well-developed argument, when you craft each paragraph you need to make sure the sentences work together. Paragraphs typically show some kind of development or movement, whether that movement is spatial (a physical description that, for instance, moves from left to right), temporal (a chronological description that, for instance, moves forward in time), or logical (a causal analysis that, for instance, explains how an action produced a result). In all of these cases, if you stick to your plan for the paragraph (remembering to amend the plan if your ideas evolve while you're writing), you'll find it fairly natural to write a sequence of sentences, one logically following another.

Problems arise when a writer turns in a new direction, but fails to signal carefully enough. Here, for instance, a writer relies on also to mark a turn from the advantages to the disadvantages of her topic, with poor results:

*A competitive culture can be useful in motivating employees and reaching performance goals. But sometimes competition adds too much stress, and harms employees' ability to work effectively. Also, if employees become too wrapped up in beating their coworkers, where does customer satisfaction fit in?*

The writer wants to list some problems pertaining to her topic, but she does so sloppily. A better approach here is to insert a general sentence alerting the reader to the argument's turn, and follow it up with specifics:

*A competitive culture can motivate employees to reach performance goals. But competition has its downsides, too. If it creates too much stress about reaching goals, it can harm employees' ability to work effectively. And if employees become too wrapped up in beating their coworkers, they might neglect the overriding goal of customer satisfaction.*

The new second sentence acts as a roadmap, preparing the way for specific points.

A useful way to help your reader follow the logical movement within a paragraph (or between paragraphs, for that matter) is to use transitions to mark turns in the road, and pointers to remind him where he's going. Using transitions and pointers can help you keep a paragraph—and the whole essay—organized and easy to follow. Here are common transitions and pointers:

and then so on the other hand or before and so against this also after consequently at the same time furthermore still often nevertheless because similarly frequently in short since likewise sometimes in the same way for though at times finally if another but in other words indeed for instance yet last of all in fact for example however first, second, etc. all in all therefore although on the contrary now thus despite this