

What is a paragraph?

This document is taken from information provided by Dr. Gunilla Kester, an exceptional teacher of English.

Paragraphs represent divisions of material that signify a shift in topic, tone, or technique from one paragraph to the next. Often, they serve--visually--as a kind of punctuation.

Why do we break material into paragraphs?

- A major change in the topic.
- A shift of focus to a major division or subdivision of an existing topic.
- A change in the author's point of view or opinion about the topic.
- A change of approach to the topic, such as a shift from statistical analysis to anecdote.
- A change in level of generality, from the more general to the more specific, or vice versa.
- A shift in time or place, or a shift of speakers, as in the alternation of speakers in a dialogue.
- Division of material to set off a point or points for emphasis.
- Division to make the material easier to follow.
- Division to provide variety and interest. (This often prompts an alternation of short, medium, and long paragraphs.)
- Norms of culture or the literary mode, or the author's stylistic sense that says a given paragraph is long enough and that if it continues it will be too long. Modern readers prefer shorter paragraphs and sentences than did nineteenth-century readers; readers of scholarly journals tolerate longer paragraphs than do readers of sports and human interest magazines.

You can regard a paragraph as a miniature essay with the controlling idea--the paragraph's main point--either implied or stated overtly in a topic sentence, and with integrated supporting sentences that carry the development of the main idea to some tentative sense of closure, pause, or change of direction.

Most paragraphs provide focus, development, and movement. Through a topic sentence, expressed or implied, they focus on a single main point, the controlling idea to which everything else in the paragraph relates. Through two or more supporting sentences they develop that central point, and through a transition sentence, phrase, or word they provide movement from one paragraph to the next.

Use your topic sentence as a guide to constructing a unified paragraph:

1. Make sure you have only one major point in the paragraph.
2. Check each sentence in it against your topic sentence, explicit or implied, to be certain they are related.
3. Stick to the point. No matter how fond you are of an observation or detail, if it is irrelevant, eliminate it.
4. Group the evidence supporting your topic sentence into unified categories. Put steps in a process or in an argument onto logical sequence; group all the negatives together, and all the positives; finish talking about one point of view before you proceed to another, and so on.

More on paragraph structures

When you revise a paragraph keep two goals in mind: You want to fulfill the reader's expectations and you want to achieve semantic cohesion. In other words, you want your ideas and your sentences to hang together well. There is no one correct way toward these goals, but you may consider a structure based on "statement/example," a "list structure," or a "chain structure."

A. Statement/Example

One way to achieve greater semantic cohesion in a paragraph is to craft it following a model of statement, restatement, example or illustration to make it more specific, similarity, contrast, example, and conclusion. For example, you are writing a paragraph to a friend in Texas, trying to explain why you like winter:

Statement	Winter is my favorite season in Buffalo.
Restatement	Ever since I was a little girl in Sweden, I have preferred cold weather to hot.
Example	Nothing can compare to the smell of fresh snow.
Similarity	And there is nothing so refreshing as fresh winter air.
Contrast	But the muggy heat of August makes me lazy.
Example	All I can accomplish in August is to swat flies.
Conclusion	But winter in the North, with its log fires and downhill slopes, always makes me happy.

Try writing one paragraph, following this structure, on either one of these topics:

- One of the big problems that high school students face is peer pressure.
- Traveling is the best kind of education.

B. List Structure

List structure is a sequence of sentences that use the same basic pattern to develop a general point with specific examples. In list structure, each new sentence becomes an item on a list:

"They were a diverse group. *There were* priests *who* had brooded over the problem of a world in eternity and made the startling discovery that a holy mission summoned them away. *There were* noblemen in the great courts *who* stared out beyond the formal lines of the garden and saw the vision of new empires to be won. *There were* young men without places *who* depended on daring and their swords and were willing to soldier for their fortunes. *There were* clerks in the counting-houses, impatient of the endless rows of digits, *who* thought why should they not reach out for the wealth that set their masters high? *There were* journeymen without employment and servants without situations and peasants without land and many others whom war or pestilence displaced *who* dreamed in desperation of an alternative to home. Through the eighteenth century their numbers grew and, even more, through the nineteenth." O. Handlin, Race and Nationality in American Life

Paragraph Handout 1

The lead sentence states the main point of the paragraph, and the following sentences develop this point by a series of examples. Additionally, the repetition of *there were...who* makes all the examples parallel in form.

In list structure paragraphing, you can use a particular structure repeatedly to generate a series of examples, as this paragraph shows:

“It is a misunderstanding of the American retail store to think we go there necessarily to buy. Some of us shop. There’s a difference. Shopping has many purposes, the least interesting of which is to acquire new articles. We shop to cheer ourselves up. We shop to practice Decision-making. We shop to be useful and productive members of our class and society. We shop to remind ourselves how much is available to us. We shop to remind ourselves how much is to be striven for. We shop to assert our superiority to the material objects that spread themselves before us.”

--P. Rose, “Shopping and Other Spiritual Adventures”

Develop the following paragraph by adding at least three more examples in sentences that repeat the underlined words.

“As I jogged along the highway, I thought of all the different roads my friends were starting on. I thought of Ruth, who was headed for Syracuse to major in broadcast journalism.”

C. Chain Structure

Another way of ensuring coherence and cohesiveness is to make your sentences form a chain. As long as each new sentence is linked in meaning to the one before it, your reader can readily follow your line of thought:

“The process of learning is essential to our lives. All higher animals seek it deliberately. They are inquisitive and they experiment. An experiment is a sort of harmless trial run of some action which we shall have to make in the real world, and this, whether it is made in the laboratory by scientists or by fox-cubs outside their earth. The scientist experiments and the cub plays; both are learning to correct their errors of judgment in a setting in which errors are not fatal. Perhaps this is what gives them both their air of happiness and freedom in these activities.”

--J Bronowski, *The Common Sense of Science*.

The sentences in this paragraph are like links in a chain. Only the second sentence is directly linked to the lead sentence; each of the others is linked to the one just before it.

Using chain structure, develop the following paragraph by adding at least three more sentences to it. Be sure that each new sentence is linked to the one before it.

Lead sentence: In the next hundred years, the exploration of outer space will undoubtedly change people’s relation to earth.

Earth will be just one of many places where men and women may choose to live.