

paragraphs

As a unit of thought, the paragraph is a critical structural unit in writing. This handout will help you write concise, focused paragraphs.

General Guidelines

Length

Many beginning writers ask, “How long should a paragraph be?” In grade school, your teacher probably taught you that three to five sentences is the standard length of a paragraph. Others might have taught you that a paragraph needs to have more than one sentence. As helpful as these answers may be, they fail to address a key question: Is the paragraph a unit of length at all?

The answer is “no.” **A paragraph is a unit of thought, not length.** This means that a paragraph should be built around a specific idea that is then fully explained in as many sentences as necessary. A new paragraph signals to the reader that you are moving on to a new topic or idea.

Indentation

Most style guides recommend indenting the first line of each paragraph by $\frac{1}{2}$ inch. To create this indent, press the “Tab” key on your keyboard once—do not use the space bar.

Paragraph Structure

In academic writing, paragraphs tend to follow a consistent structure. This allows readers to quickly access information. As you write your paragraphs, consider the structural elements listed below:

Transitions

Transition words and phrases tell your reader how the information that will be presented in the paragraph relates to the information in the previous paragraph.

Note: For more information on transitions, please see our [handout](#) on this topic.

Topic Sentences

Topic sentences orient the reader to the central idea of a paragraph. Remember, academic writing does not function on suspense—tell the reader what the paragraph is about.

Example: The popularity of superhero movies has increased over the last two decades.

Note: Based on this topic sentence, the reader can assume that the paragraph will detail the rise of superhero movies over the past twenty years.

Topic sentences create an expectation for the rest of the paragraph. If your paragraph does not fulfill this expectation, your reader may become lost or confused.

The Body

The body of the paragraph is where you expand and elaborate on the idea introduced in your topic sentence.

Example: Three of the top five highest-grossing movies of the 2010s have been superhero films: *The Avengers*, *The Dark Knight Rises*, and *Iron Man 3*. In the 1990s, superhero films are conspicuously absent from the top ten. Instead, films from a range of genres—such as *Titanic*, *Forrest Gump*, and *The Lion King*—dominated the 90s box office.

Note: These sentences serve as evidence or elaboration of the idea introduced in the topic sentence.

Concluding Sentences

Many beginning writers struggle with concluding sentences. Often these writers simply reiterate their topic sentence, probably under the influence of the famous saying, “Tell them what you’re going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you told them.”

More than restating the topic sentence, the concluding sentence should answer the dreaded question, “**So what?**” In other words, ask yourself, “Why does the idea presented in this paragraph matter?” Concluding sentences can also address the question, “**What now?**”

Example: Studios have scrambled to cash in on this popularity and build their own superhero franchises—much to the detriment of smaller, non-superhero films.

Note: This concluding sentence summarizes the idea of the paragraph: “Superhero movies are increasing in popularity.” It also asserts that this increase in popularity affects the way that studios create movies, an idea which will probably be the subject of the next paragraph.

Revising Your Paragraphs

When revising your paragraphs, ask yourself the following questions:

Is the Paragraph Focused?

Check that your paragraph does not veer off topic. Use your topic sentence to gauge the information within the paragraph. Move or delete any information that does not relate to the paragraph’s central idea.

Is Everything in the Paragraph Essential?

Even if the information in the paragraph relates to the central idea, it may still be extraneous. Make sure that each bit of information in your paragraph adds something new for the reader. If you have multiple examples that all make the same point, choose the best one(s) and delete the rest.

Is the Paragraph Cohesive?

The sentences within a paragraph should flow together. The connection between sentences reflects the connection between your ideas: If your sentences seem jumbled, your thoughts seem jumbled to

your reader.

Does the Paragraph Connect?

Your paragraph should connect to the paragraphs that precede and follow it. It should also connect to the larger argument or purpose of the paper (for shorter documents) or section (for larger documents).

Paragraph Worksheet

For practice constructing paragraphs, please see the worksheet at the end of this handout.

References

- Faigley, L. (2009). *The little penguin handbook* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Pearson.
- Howard, R. M. (2011). *Writing matters: A handbook for writing and research*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- McInelly, B.C., & Jackson, B. (2011). *Writing and rhetoric*. Plymouth, MI: Hayden.
- University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. (n.d.). Paragraphs. Retrieved from [http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts / paragraphs/](http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/paragraphs/)

Paragraph Worksheet

Transition



Topic Sentence



Evidence



Significance



What is the central idea of this paragraph? _____

What claim does the paragraph make? _____

Have I clearly stated this idea/claim in the topic sentence? _____

What evidence supports this claim? _____

What is the significance of this claim? _____

So what? _____

What now? _____

How does this paragraph relate to the previous one? _____

What transition can signal this connection to the reader? _____

How does this paragraph relate to the next one? _____