

Paragraphs

WHAT IS A PARAGRAPH?

A paragraph is a group of sentences that fleshes out a single idea. In order for a paragraph to be effective, it must begin with a topic sentence, have sentences that support the main idea of that paragraph, and maintain a consistent flow.

An effective paragraph

- presents a single idea
- begins with a topic sentence that makes this single idea evident
- contains support in form of sentences that convey this single idea
- is strategically organized to maintain flow
- maintains your essay's objective
- informs and entertains your reader about your paper's overall idea.

Note: different disciplines have different requirements of what a well-written paragraph may entail. You should always consult your professor before beginning any writing assignment.

Essential Elements

There are four essential elements that an effective paragraph should consistently contain: unity, coherence, a topic sentence, and sufficient development.

Unity

In order for a paragraph to maintain a sense of unity, the paragraph must focus solely on a single idea, point, or argument that is being discussed. Therefore, the paragraph should not begin to stray and develop new ideas. If you begin to write sentence that wander from the paragraph's main idea, then it is time to start a new paragraph.

Coherence

Coherence is more commonly referred to as the flow of your writing. When a paragraph flows, the reader will be able to understand the main idea that you have presented. How can you ensure that your paragraph maintains a flow? Well, after presenting your main idea in your topic sentence, each sentence following must build upon each other in an organized manner. After writing your paragraph, go back and read aloud what you have written to make sure your ideas are clearly presented. If they are, you have developed a coherent paragraph!

The Topic Sentence

The topic sentence is the most important part of your paragraph; it tells the reader the general idea of your paragraphs and should essentially "hook" them into wanting to read more! The topic sentence helps to provide a "general summary" for your paragraph. A reader should encounter the topic sentence and have a general idea of what the paragraph will continue to discuss.

Sufficient Development

Now that your paragraph has a topic, it is essential that this topic be sufficiently developed. Do not limit yourself to a set number of sentences. Yes, your paragraph should not be too short or too long, but it should be an appropriate length to flesh out the entirety of your paragraph's idea. A reader should not be left with questions after a sufficiently development paragraph. In order to achieve this, you can provide examples, cite work, provide necessary definitions, describe, analyze, and organize your ideas.

Am I ready for a new paragraph?

All writers struggle with when to begin a new paragraph. Yet, in order to maintain coherence, writers must know when to make the transition to the next paragraph. If a new idea comes into your writing, you must begin a new paragraph. A new idea should only be presented in a new paragraph. If not, the coherence of the paragraph will suffer. New points should begin in the topic sentence of the next paragraph. You can also begin a new paragraph to contrast the ideas presented in the prior paragraph. Sometimes, you may have a paragraph that has become lengthy—a page or more—and needs to be broken apart to maintain the stamina of your work. Find a place where your support is fully developed and create another paragraph that will complete the ideas presented prior.