

Paragraph Structure



Petroglyphs in Canyonlands, Utah

A **paragraph** is a group of related sentences that discuss one (and usually only one) main idea. A paragraph can be as short as one sentence or as long as ten sentences. The number of sentences is unimportant; however, the paragraph should be long enough to develop the main idea clearly.

A paragraph may stand by itself. In academic writing, you often write a paragraph to answer a test question such as the following: “Define management by objective, and give one example of it from the reading you have done for this class.” A paragraph may also be one part of a longer piece of writing such as an essay or a book.

We mark a paragraph by indenting the first word about a half inch (five spaces on a typewriter or computer) from the left margin.

The following model contains all the elements of a good paragraph. Read it carefully two or three times. Then answer the Writing Technique questions that follow, which will help you analyze its structure.

MODEL**Paragraph
Structure****Gold**

¹Gold, a precious metal, is prized for two important characteristics. ²First of all, gold has a lustrous¹ beauty that is resistant to corrosion.² ³Therefore, it is suitable for jewelry, coins, and ornamental purposes. ⁴Gold never needs to be polished and will remain beautiful forever. ⁵For example, a Macedonian coin remains as untarnished³ today as the day it was made 25 centuries ago. ⁶Another important characteristic of gold is its usefulness to industry and science. ⁷For many years, it has been used in hundreds of industrial applications, such as photography and dentistry. ⁸The most recent use of gold is in astronauts' suits. ⁹Astronauts wear gold-plated heat shields for protection when they go outside spaceships in space. ¹⁰In conclusion, gold is treasured not only for its beauty but also for its utility.

Writing Technique Questions

1. What is the topic of the paragraph?
2. What two main points does the writer make about the topic?
3. In which two sentences does the writer say that there are two main points?
4. What examples does the writer use to support each point?

The Three Parts of a Paragraph

All paragraphs have a **topic sentence** and **supporting sentences**, and some paragraphs also have a **concluding sentence**.

The **topic sentence** states the main idea of the paragraph. It not only names the topic of the paragraph, but it also limits the topic to one specific area that can be discussed completely in the space of a single paragraph. The part of the topic sentence that announces the specific area to be discussed is called the **controlling idea**. Notice how the topic sentence of the model states both the topic and the controlling idea:

TOPIC
Gold, a precious metal, is prized for two important characteristics.
CONTROLLING IDEA

Supporting sentences develop the topic sentence. That is, they explain or prove the topic sentence by giving more information about it. Following are some of the supporting sentences that explain the topic sentence about gold.

First of all, gold has a lustrous beauty that is resistant to corrosion.

For example, a Macedonian coin remains as untarnished today as the day it was made 25 centuries ago.

Another important characteristic of gold is its usefulness to industry and science.

The most recent use of gold is in astronauts' suits.

¹**lustrous:** glowing

²**corrosion:** chemical damage

³**untarnished:** unchanged in color

The **concluding sentence** signals the end of the paragraph and leaves the reader with important points to remember:

In conclusion, gold is treasured not only for its beauty but also for its utility.

Concluding sentences are customary for stand-alone paragraphs. However, paragraphs that are parts of a longer piece of writing usually do not need concluding sentences.

The Topic Sentence

Every good paragraph has a topic sentence, which clearly states the topic and the controlling idea of the paragraph.

A topic sentence is the most important sentence in a paragraph. It briefly indicates what the paragraph is going to discuss. For this reason, the topic sentence is a helpful guide to both the writer and the reader. The writer can see what information to include (and what information to exclude). The reader can see what the paragraph is going to be about and is therefore better prepared to understand it. For example, in the model paragraph on gold, the topic sentence alerts the reader to look for *two* characteristics.

Here are three important points to remember about a topic sentence.

1. A topic sentence is a complete sentence; that is, it contains at least one subject and one verb. The following are *not* complete sentences because they do not have verbs:

Driving on freeways.

How to register for college classes.

The rise of indie films.¹

2. A topic sentence contains both a topic and a controlling idea. It names the topic and then limits the topic to a specific area to be discussed in the space of a single paragraph.

TOPIC CONTROLLING IDEA
Driving on freeways requires skill and alertness.

TOPIC CONTROLLING IDEA
Registering for college classes can be a frustrating experience for new students.

TOPIC CONTROLLING IDEA
The rise of indie films is due to several factors.

¹**indie films**: independent films; films not made in or by Hollywood studios

3. A topic sentence is the most general statement in the paragraph because it gives only the main idea. It does not give any specific details. A topic sentence is like the name of a particular course on a restaurant menu. When you order food in a restaurant, you want to know more about a particular course than just “meat” or “soup” or “salad.” You want to know generally what kind of salad it is. Potato salad? Mixed green salad? Fruit salad? However, you do not necessarily want to know all the ingredients. Similarly, a reader wants to know generally what to expect in a paragraph, but he or she does not want to learn all the details in the first sentence.

Following is a general statement that could serve as a topic sentence.

The Arabic origin of many English words is not always obvious.

The following sentence on the other hand, is *too specific*. It could serve as a supporting sentence but not as a topic sentence.

The slang expression *so long* (meaning “good-bye”) is probably a corruption of the Arabic *salaam*.

This sentence is *too general*.

English has been influenced by other languages.

Position of Topic Sentences

The topic sentence is usually (but not always) the first sentence in a paragraph. Experienced writers sometimes put topic sentences in other locations, but the best spot is usually right at the beginning. Readers who are used to the English way of writing want to know what they will read about as soon as they begin reading.

Synonyms

Synonyms, words that have the same basic meaning, do not always have the same emotional meaning. For example, the words *stingy* and *frugal* both mean “careful with money.” However, calling someone stingy is an insult, but calling someone frugal is a compliment. Similarly, a person wants to be slender but not skinny, aggressive but not pushy. Therefore, you should be careful in choosing words because many so-called synonyms are not really synonymous at all.

Sometimes a topic sentence comes at the end. In this case, the paragraph often begins with a series of examples. Other paragraphs may begin with a series of facts, and the topic sentence at the end is the conclusion from these facts.

Medical Miracles to Come

By the year 2009, a vaccine¹ against the common cold will have been developed. By the same year, the first human will have been successfully cloned.² By the year 2014, parents will be able to create designer children. Genetic therapy will be able to manipulate genes for abilities, intelligence, and hair, eye, and skin color. By 2020, most diseases will be able to be diagnosed and treated at home, and by 2030, cancer and heart disease will have been wiped out. These are just a few examples of the medical miracles that are expected in the next few decades.

PRACTICE 1

Recognizing Topic Sentences

- A. Remember that a topic sentence is a complete sentence and is neither too general nor too specific.

Step 1 Read the sentences in each group, and decide which sentence is the best topic sentence. Write *best TS* (for “best topic sentence”) on the line next to it.

Step 2 Decide what is wrong with the other sentences. They may be too general, or they may be too specific, or they may be incomplete sentences. Write *too general*, *too specific*, or *incomplete* on the lines next to them.

The first one has been done for you as an example.

Group 1

- too specific* a. A lunar eclipse is an omen of a coming disaster.
 too general b. Superstitions have been around forever.
 best TS c. People hold many superstitious beliefs about the moon.
 incomplete d. Is made of green cheese.

Group 2

- _____ a. The history of astronomy is interesting.
 _____ b. Ice age people recorded the appearance of new moons by making scratches in animal bones.
 _____ c. For example, Stonehenge in Britain, built 3500 years ago to track the movement of the sun.
 _____ d. Ancient people observed and recorded lunar and solar events in different ways.

¹**vaccine:** medicine that prevents a specific disease such as polio

²**cloned:** made an exact copy of

Group 3

- _____ a. It is hard to know which foods are safe to eat nowadays.
- _____ b. In some large ocean fish, there are high levels of mercury.
- _____ c. Undercooked chicken and hamburger may carry *E. coli* bacteria.
- _____ d. Not to mention mad cow disease.
- _____ e. Food safety is an important issue.

Group 4

- _____ a. Hybrid automobiles more economical to operate than gasoline-powered cars.
- _____ b. The new hybrid automobiles are very popular.
- _____ c. Hybrid cars have good fuel economy because a computer under the hood decides to run the electric motor, the small gasoline engine, or the two together.
- _____ d. The new hybrid automobiles are popular because of their fuel economy.

Group 5

- _____ a. The North American Catawba Indians of the Southeast and the Tlingit of the Northwest both see the rainbow as a kind of bridge between heaven and earth.
- _____ b. A rainbow seen from an airplane is a complete circle.
- _____ c. Many cultures interpret rainbows in positive ways.
- _____ d. Rainbows are beautiful.
- _____ e. The belief that you can find a pot of gold at a rainbow's end.

- B.** Remember that the topic sentence is the most general statement in a paragraph. Read the following scrambled paragraphs and decide which sentence is the topic sentence. Write *TS* on the line next to that sentence.

Paragraph 1

- _____ a. A notes/memo function lets you make quick notes to yourself.
- _____ b. Other capabilities include word processing, spreadsheets, and e-mail.
- _____ c. A voice recorder that uses a built-in microphone and speaker works like a tape recorder.
- _____ d. Basic tools include a calendar to keep track of your appointments, an address and phone number book, to-do lists, and a calculator.
- _____ e. MP3 playback lets you listen to digital music files, and a picture viewer lets you look at digital photos.
- _____ f. Most personal digital assistants (PDAs) have tools for basic tasks as well as for multimedia functions.
- _____ g. A few models also include a built-in digital camera and keyboard.

Paragraph 2

- ___ a. Twelve years after *Sputnik*, the United States caught up by becoming the first nation to land a man on the moon.
- ___ b. The Europeans have joined the competition, vowing to land European astronauts on the moon by 2025 and on Mars by 2035.
- ___ c. The number of nations competing in the “space race” has grown since the early days of space exploration.
- ___ d. China joined the competition in 2003 when it launched *Shenzhou 5*.
- ___ e. Initially, the former Soviet Union took the lead when it sent the first man into Earth orbit in the spaceship *Sputnik* in 1957.
- ___ f. For almost 50 years, the United States and Russia were the only competitors in the contest to explore space using manned spacecraft.

Paragraph 3

- ___ a. Another important change was that people had the freedom to live and work wherever they wanted.
- ___ b. The earliest significant change was for farming families, who were no longer isolated.
- ___ c. The final major change brought by the automobile was the building of superhighways, suburbs, huge shopping centers, and theme parks such as Disney World in Florida.
- ___ d. The automobile revolutionized the way of life in the United States.
- ___ e. The automobile enabled them to drive to towns and cities comfortably and conveniently.
- ___ f. In fact, people could work in a busy metropolitan city and drive home to the quiet suburbs.

Paragraph 4

- ___ a. In time, this melted part rises as magma.¹
- ___ b. The formation of a volcanic eruption is a dramatic series of events.
- ___ c. As the plate² sinks, friction and Earth’s heat cause part of it to melt.
- ___ d. The magma produces heat, steam, and pressure.
- ___ e. First of all, most volcanoes are formed where two plates collide.³
- ___ f. Then one of the plates is forced under the other and sinks.
- ___ g. When the heat, steam, and pressure from the magma finally reach the surface of Earth, a volcanic eruption occurs.

¹**magma:** melted rock inside Earth

²**plate:** large, solid section of rock

³**collide:** crash into each other

Writing Topic Sentences

When you write a topic sentence, remember these three points:

1. A topic sentence must be a complete sentence, with a subject and a verb.
2. A topic sentence should be neither too general nor too specific. If it is too general, the reader cannot tell exactly what the paragraph is going to discuss. If it is too specific, the writer will not have anything to write about in the rest of the paragraph.
3. A topic sentence should not have unrelated controlling ideas.

PRACTICE 3

Writing Topic Sentences

- A. Write good topic sentences for the following paragraphs. Remember to include both a topic and a controlling idea.

Paragraph 1

English speakers relaxing at home, for example, may put on *kimonos*, which is a Japanese word. English speakers who live in a warm climate may take an afternoon *siesta* on an outdoor *patio* without realizing that these are Spanish words. In their gardens, they may enjoy the fragrance of *jasmine* flowers, a word that came into English from Persian. They may even relax on a *chaise* while snacking on *yogurt*, words of French and Turkish origin, respectively. At night, they may *shampoo* their hair and put on *pajamas*, words from the Hindi language of India.

Paragraph 2

In European universities, students are not required to attend classes. In fact, professors in Germany generally do not know the names of the students enrolled in their courses. In the United States, however, students are required to attend all classes and may be penalized if they do not. Furthermore, in the European system, students usually take just one comprehensive examination at the end of their entire four or five years of study. In the North American system, on the other hand, students usually have numerous quizzes, tests, and homework assignments, and they almost always have to take a final examination in each course at the end of each semester.

Paragraph 3

For example, the Eskimos, living in a treeless region of snow and ice, sometimes build temporary homes out of thick blocks of ice. People who live in deserts, on the other hand, use the most available materials, mud or clay, which provide good insulation from the heat. In Northern Europe, Russia, and other areas of the world where forests are plentiful, people usually construct their homes out of wood. In the islands of the South Pacific, where there is an abundant supply of bamboo and palm, people use these tough, fibrous plants to build their homes.

- B. On a piece of paper, write two or three topic sentences for each of the following topics. In other words, give two or three controlling ideas for the same topic.

Example

Topic: cell phones

- Topic sentences: 1. Using a cell phone while driving can be dangerous.
 2. There are certain rules of cell phone manners that everyone should know.
 3. Cell phones have changed the way we communicate.

Topics

Movies

Word processors

Your home town

Advertising

- C. With your classmates, choose three topics that interest you as a group. Write a topic sentence for each topic. Be sure to include a controlling idea.

Supporting Sentences

Supporting sentences explain or prove the topic sentence. One of the biggest problems in student writing is that student writers often fail to support their ideas adequately. They need to use specific details to be thorough and convincing.

There are several kinds of specific supporting details: examples, statistics, and quotations.

PRACTICE 4

Supporting Sentences

Step 1 Read Paragraphs A and B about red-light running. Notice the different specific supporting details that have been added to Paragraph B.

Step 2 Locate the topic sentence in Paragraph B. Circle the topic and underline the controlling idea.

Step 3 Which supporting sentences in Paragraph B contain the kinds of details listed below? Give the sentence numbers of each kind.

An example: _____

A statistic: _____

A quotation: _____

Paragraph A: Paragraph without Support**Red-Light Running**

Although some people think that red-light running is a minor traffic violation that is no worse than jaywalking,¹ it can, in fact, become a deadly crime. Red-light runners cause accidents all the time. Sometimes people are seriously injured and even killed. It is especially a problem in rush hour traffic. Everyone is in a hurry to get home, so drivers run red lights everywhere. The police do not do much about it because they are too busy. The only time they pay attention is when there is an accident, and then it is too late. In conclusion, running a red light is a serious offense.

Paragraph B: Paragraph with Support**Red-Light Running**

¹Although some people think red-light running is a minor traffic violation that is no worse than jaywalking, it can, in fact, become a deadly crime. ²Red-light runners cause hundreds of accidents, including deaths and injuries as well as millions of dollars in damages. ³Each year more than 900 people die, and nearly 200,000 are injured in crashes that involve red-light running. ⁴Motorists run red lights all the time. ⁵For example, in Fairfax, Virginia, a five-month-long survey at five busy intersections revealed that a motorist ran a red light every 20 minutes. ⁶Red-light runners are seldom caught. ⁷According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, “Communities don’t have the resources to allow police to patrol intersections as often as would be needed to ticket all motorists who run red lights” (“Q&A”).²

The next section shows you how to use examples as support. Other types of support—facts, statistics, and quotations—are explained in Chapter 3.

Examples

Examples are perhaps the easiest kind of supporting detail to use because you can often take examples from your own knowledge and experience. You don’t have to search the library or the Internet for supporting material. Furthermore, examples make your writing lively and interesting, and your reader is more likely to remember your point if you support it with a memorable example.

Words and phrases that introduce examples include *for example*, *for instance*, and *such as*. See Transition Signals on pages 25–29 in Chapter 2 for more information.

¹**jaywalking:** crossing a street where there is no marked area for it

²“Q&A: Red Light Running.” Insurance Institute for Highway Safety June 2003. 26 Feb. 2004 <http://www.hwysafety.org/safety_facts/qanda/rlc.htm>.

MODEL*Paragraph
Supported with
Examples***Language and Perception**

Although we all possess the same physical organs for sensing the world—eyes for seeing, ears for hearing, noses for smelling, skin for feeling, and mouths for tasting—our perception of the world depends to a great extent on the language we speak, according to a famous hypothesis³ proposed by linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. They hypothesized that language is like a pair of eyeglasses through which we “see” the world in a particular way. A classic example of the relationship between language and perception is the word *snow*. Eskimo languages have as many as 32 different words for snow. For instance, the Eskimos have different words for falling snow, snow on the ground, snow packed as hard as ice, slushy snow, wind-driven snow, and what we might call “cornmeal” snow. The ancient Aztec languages of Mexico, in contrast, used only one word to mean snow, cold, and ice. Thus, if the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is correct and we can perceive only things that we have words for, the Aztecs perceived snow, cold, and ice as one and the same phenomenon.⁴

Writing Technique Questions

1. What is the main idea of this paragraph? Underline the part of the topic sentence that expresses the main idea.
2. What examples does the writer use to support this idea? Put brackets [] around them.
3. What words and phrases introduce the examples? Circle them.

The Concluding Sentence

A concluding sentence serves two purposes:

1. It signals the end of the paragraph.
2. It leaves the reader with the most important ideas to remember. It can do this in two ways:
 - By summarizing the main points of the paragraph
 - OR
 - By repeating the topic sentence in different words

A paragraph does not always need a concluding sentence. For single paragraphs, especially long ones, a concluding sentence is helpful to the reader because it is a reminder of the important points. However, a concluding sentence is not needed for every paragraph in a multiparagraph essay.

You may want to begin your concluding sentence with one of the signals in the list on page 14. You may also end a paragraph without a formal signal or perhaps by using an expression like those in the column on the right.

³**hypothesis:** theory that has not been proven

⁴**phenomenon:** thing or event (*plural:* phenomena)

End-of-Paragraph Signals
Followed by a Comma

Finally, Lastly,
In brief, Therefore,
In conclusion, Thus,
Indeed, To sum up,
In short,

End-of-Paragraph Signals
Not Followed by a Comma

The evidence suggests that . . .
There can be no doubt that . . .
These examples show that . . .
We can see that . . .

Notes

1. Many writing teachers think *In conclusion* and *In summary* are overused and so will not want you to use them.
2. Do not use the phrase *At last* as an end-of-paragraph signal. *At last* means “at the end of a long period of time,” as in this sentence: *At last, you’ve come home.*

The models that follow demonstrate the two ways of writing a concluding sentence. As you read them, determine which concluding sentence summarizes the main points and which concluding sentence repeats the topic sentence in different words.

MODELS*Concluding
Sentences***Greeting Cards**

Have you noticed how many different kinds of greeting cards you can buy these days? In the old days, the local drugstore had one rack displaying maybe five or six basic kinds of cards. You could walk into the store and choose an appropriate card in five minutes or less. Nowadays, however, the display space for greeting cards is as big as a soccer field, and it may take an hour or two to hunt down exactly the right card with exactly the right message. There are at least 30 categories of birthday cards alone: birthday cards for different ages, from different ages, for different relatives, from different relatives, for different genders, from different genders, from a couple, from the office, for dog owners, for cat owners, and so on. There are cards for getting a job, for retiring from a job, for acquiring a pet, for losing a pet, for becoming engaged, for breaking up. There are also greeting cards to send for no reason—“Thinking of you” or “Just because” cards. The newest type of card is the “encouragement card.” An encouragement card offers comforting thoughts and helpful advice to someone who is sad or distressed in these troubled times. In short, there is now a greeting card for every possible life event and for a few nonevents as well.

A Hawaiian Legend

Native people create legends to explain unusual phenomena in their environment. A legend from the Hawaiian island of Kauai explains how the naupaka flower, a flower that grows on beaches there, got its unusual shape. The flower looks like half a small daisy—there are petals on one side only. The legend says that the marriage of two young lovers on the island was opposed by both sets of parents. The parents found the couple together on a beach one day, and to prevent them from being together, one of the families moved to the mountains, separating the young couple forever. As a result, the naupaka flower separated into two halves; one half moved to the mountains, and the other half stayed near the beach. This story is a good example of a legend invented by native people to interpret the world around them.

Writing Technique Questions

1. In which paragraph does the concluding sentence summarize the main points of the paragraph, which are not specifically stated in the topic sentence?
2. In which paragraph does the concluding sentence paraphrase (repeat in different words) the topic sentence?
3. Circle the conclusion signals in each paragraph.

Note: Never introduce a new idea in the concluding sentence.

INCORRECT

In conclusion, we now have more variety of greeting cards to choose from, but they are also becoming very expensive. (*This is a new idea.*)

INCORRECT

In conclusion, there are many other legends like this one in Hawaii. (*This is a new idea.*)

PRACTICE 5

Writing Concluding Sentences

Step 1 Underline the topic sentence in each paragraph.

Step 2 Add a good concluding sentence to each paragraph. You may either paraphrase the topic sentence or summarize the main points.

Step 3 Practice using end-of-paragraph signals by starting each concluding sentence with one.

Paragraph 1

You can be a good conversationalist by being a good listener. When you are conversing with someone, pay close attention to the speaker's words while looking at his or her face. Show your interest by smiling and nodding. Furthermore, do not interrupt while someone is speaking; it is impolite to do so. If you have a good story, wait until the speaker is finished. Also, watch your body language; it can affect your communication whether you are the speaker or the listener. For instance, do not sit slumped in a chair or make nervous hand and foot movements. Be relaxed and bend your body slightly forward to show interest in the person and the conversation.

Paragraph 2

Modern communication technology is driving workers in the corporate world crazy. They feel buried under the large number of messages they receive daily. In addition to telephone calls, office workers receive dozens of e-mail and voice mail messages daily. In one company, in fact, managers receive an average of 100 messages a day. Because they do not have enough time to respond to these messages during office hours, it is common for them to do so in the evenings or on weekends at home.

Review

These are the important points covered in this chapter:

1. A good topic sentence
 - is a complete sentence with a subject, a verb, and a controlling idea.
 - is neither too general nor too specific. It clearly states the main idea of the paragraph but does not include specific details.
 - is usually the first sentence in the paragraph.
2. Good supporting sentences
 - explain or prove the topic sentence.
 - are specific and factual.
 - can be examples, statistics, or quotations.
3. A good concluding sentence
 - signals the end of the paragraph.
 - summarizes the important points briefly or restates the topic sentence in different words.

Writing Practice

In the back of the book is an appendix outlining the steps in the writing process (Appendix A, pages 265–279). Following the writing process steps will help you write successfully. Your instructor may direct you to follow some or all of them.

PRACTICE 6*Writing a Paragraph*

Choose one of the topics from Practice 3B or Practice 3C (page 11) and write a paragraph eight to ten sentences in length.

- Step 1** Begin with a topic sentence that you wrote in Practice 3. Write several supporting sentences. **Include at least one specific example.** End with a concluding sentence.

- Step 2** After you have completed the first draft of your paragraph, use Self-Editing Worksheet 1. It is on page 317 at the back of the book. Answer the questions on it and write a second draft if necessary. Tear the page out of the book and bring it with your paragraph to class.
- Step 3** Exchange papers with a classmate and check each other's paragraph using Peer-Editing Worksheet 1 on page 318. It is on the back side of the Self-Editing Worksheet. After your classmate has completed the checklist, discuss it with him or her and decide what changes you should make.
- Step 4** At home or in class (as your instructor directs), write a final copy of your paragraph, making any improvements you discussed with your peer editor.
- Step 5** Hand in your first draft, your second draft, and the page containing the two editing worksheets. Your instructor may also ask you to hand in any prewriting (brainstorming and/or outline) that you did for this assignment.

PRACTICE 7*Writing under Pressure*

These assignments give you practice in thinking and writing quickly, as you will have to do for essay examinations. Your instructor may choose to change the time limit or assign other topics depending on the needs and interests of the class.

Choose one of the suggested topics and write a well-organized paragraph. Your instructor will give you a time limit. Try to use a specific example to support your topic sentence.

- Spend 1 to 2 minutes at the beginning thinking of ideas and organizing them.
- Spend 1 to 2 minutes at the end checking your work for errors.
- Spend the remaining time writing.

Topic Suggestions

Why some children have imaginary friends

The difficulty of translating from one language to another

The dependence of humans on machines

Pets

Diamonds

Any topic sentence from Practice 2 on page 9