

BASICS OF PARAGRAPH WRITING

WHAT IS A PARAGRAPH?

A paragraph is a group of sentences held together by a controlling idea. It is a basic unit of composition. It helps writers organize their texts. This organization shows where ideas end and begin, by giving readers space to reflect.

BODY PARAGRAPH

A body paragraph is any paragraph in the middle of an essay that comes after the introduction but before the conclusion. Typically, body paragraphs support and present information about each of the main topics related to the thesis statement or central message of the paper. Body paragraphs usually contain the writer's examination or analysis of data and evidence.

Each body paragraph is made up of sentences, and those are structured to create an introduction, body, and conclusion for the paragraph. A strong body paragraph contains the following four parts:

1. Transitions

A word, phrase, or sentence that connects one body paragraph to the others, creating seamless movement from one idea to the next. Transitions appear at the beginning and/or end of a paragraph, often in the topic and conclusion sentences.

2. Topic Sentence

A sentence that introduces what the paragraph is about and explicitly ties the idea within that paragraph back to the paper's thesis statement or central message.

3. Supporting Sentences

These sentences make up the substance of the body paragraph and support the topic sentence with evidence and analysis. Evidence that supports the main idea of the paragraph can include quotations or paraphrases from a source text, scientific data, personal anecdotes, observations, survey responses, and more. Because the use of evidence must be justified, writers included their own analysis of the evidence.

4. Conclusion (Summary) Sentence

A sentence that sums up and reasserts the paragraph's original point in light of the supporting evidence, reaffirms the analysis of that evidence, and might draw connections to ideas presented in other sentences.

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Avoiding Common Errors

When writing body paragraphs, students commonly make the following errors that should be avoided:

1. **Follow a 5-paragraph essay structure.** In most academic writing situations, a 5-paragraph essay structure is not necessary. It's a useful tool to first learn how to organize your ideas, but it is not required, or even encouraged, by most professors. You might want to create an outline or list of the ideas you want to include in your paper to help you determine which need their own paragraph. The number of ideas you have will tell you roughly how many paragraphs you will need.
2. **Cover too many ideas in a paragraph.** A paragraph typically only covers one idea. If you tackle too many ideas, the paragraph can get long, which makes it difficult for readers to keep track of your points. To minimize confusion, have each paragraph only focus on one identifiable main idea that is stated in your topic sentence. You can always break up a paragraph if you start writing about other ideas or if you have one overarching idea with several supporting ideas in one paragraph.

EXAMPLE

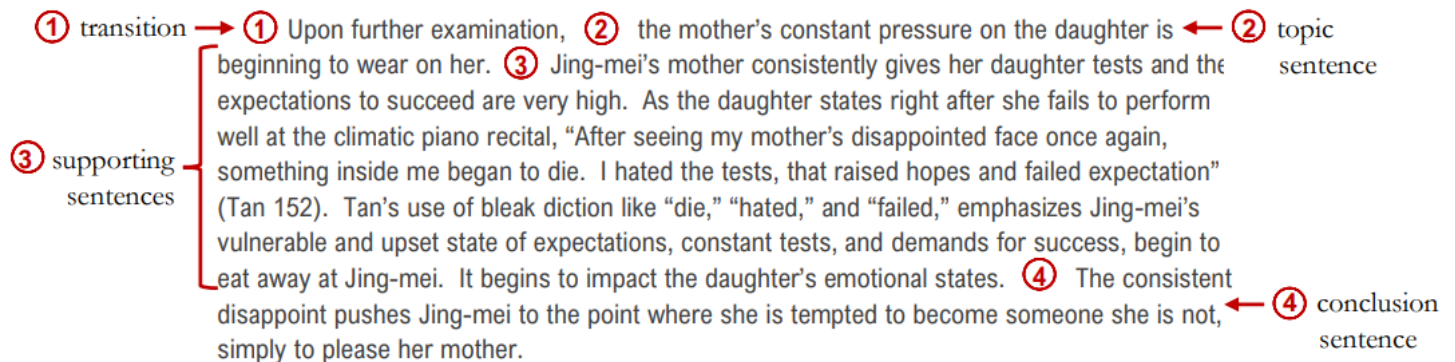
In order to get a better sense of how a body paragraph works, let's look at an example. This thesis statement and body paragraph are from a sample student literary analysis essay.

SAMPLE THESIS STATEMENT

Upon a closer analysis of Amy Tan's short story "Two Kinds," one can argue that the mother does not allow her daughter to become her own person and that the pressure from the mother hinders the daughter.

SAMPLE BODY PARAGRAPH

The following sample is a general model to help you identify how the components of a body paragraph work. You will adapt this model with every paper you write; just make sure that each body paragraph contains these essential elements, even if the specific ways you integrate each look very different



FEATURES OF A WELL-CRAFTED PARAGRAPH

Sufficient Development

Your topic sentence won't be convincing if it is not supported by a well-developed paragraph. Expand on your topic sentence and use supporting details to fully make your case. This is where you should integrate the material you have found in your research. Analyze the topic at hand, compare and contrast, offer examples.

If your paragraph is too short and there are big leaps between your sentences, you should keep working on it. Here is an example of a paragraph lacking in sufficient development and a second, more developed version:

Original paragraph: The evolution of modern soccer began with the introduction of the back-pass rule in 1992. It was no surprise that the club managers and players did not appreciate the rule. However, in the end it all turned out great.

Developed paragraph: The evolution of modern soccer began with the introduction of the back-pass rule in 1992. At first, the English Premier League became the scene of humiliating moments as players seemed to be lost and teams conceded unexpected goals. It was no surprise that club managers and players were extremely unhappy. However, the initial struggle gave way to significant developments. The back-pass rule re-defined what it takes to be a player while changing the game. New generations of goalkeepers were now skilled with their feet, defenders learned to pass the ball progressively, and soccer became a fast-paced, more entertaining sport. (Cox, 2017)

Coherence

Coherence refers to the logical, structural, and verbal unity of a paragraph. When sentences in a paragraph are coherent with each other, the resulting effect is popularly known as “flow.”

To write coherent paragraphs, make sure there are no leaps in the logic and your sentences are connected well with transition words. Be consistent with how you construct your sentences in terms of verb tense, active/passive voice, and verb choices. Maintain clear connections between antecedents and their pronouns. Avoid contradictions in the data you present or the claims you make.

For more, see the handouts on Transitions, Active and Passive Voice, and Parallel Structure on our website.

STRATEGIES

- Once you have a topic sentence, build on it with clear sentences. Remember that wordiness and run-on sentences will have a negative effect on the coherence of your paragraphs.
- When a paragraph does not get coherent despite your repeated efforts, try summarizing it in a sentence. If a one-sentence summary proves impossible, you may have included multiple big ideas in your paragraph. This means the paragraph needs to be split into at least two paragraphs or that irrelevant ideas should be sorted out.
- If a single idea is repeated in different instances across multiple paragraphs where it doesn't belong, re-read your draft. See how you can dedicate a whole separate paragraph to this idea. Doing so will help improve coherence and make your paragraphs more focused.