

Paragraphs

Definitions of Paragraphs

Merriam Webster describes a paragraph as “a subdivision of a written composition that consists of one or more sentences, deals with one point or gives the words of one speaker.” *A Writer’s Reference* defines a paragraph as “a group of sentences that focuses on one main point or example” (42). *A Writer’s Reference* also explains that with the exception of “special-purpose paragraphs” (introductions and conclusions, for example), “paragraphs develop and support an essay’s main point, or thesis” and should be “well developed, organized, coherent, and neither too long nor too short for easy reading” (42).

A careful eye will detect a unifying thread between these definitions: paragraphs deal with a **single topic**. This may explain why essays do not succeed as hoped. Perhaps, in a writer’s excitement, he or she becomes carried away with his or her own thoughts and crams too many ideas into one paragraph. Likewise, in his or her exhaustion or lack of enthusiasm for a certain topic, he or she may use too little information to complete the intended thought, moving on to new ideas without developing the one he or she already began.

Too Many Ideas

As any coffee lover knows, too many dark roasted, freshly ground Ethiopian beans in the morning’s first much-desired pot can gurgle up a blackened, chary mess so bitter and biting the coffee ultimately devours the drinker instead of vice versa.

Too Little

Thin coffee tastes weak.

Purposes of Paragraphs

Academic writing may seem to rest contingent on merely meeting the minimum number of words assigned by the teacher. However, many writers fail to realize that essays are not constructed by a particular number of words; essays are constructed by solid ideas expressed in concise, well-structured forms. This is the purpose of the paragraph.

Paragraphs draw definitive boundaries around ideas, giving each one a unique location in the landscape of the larger essay. Paragraphs also display thoughts in singular frames, where each one can be easily identified.

Learning how to craft well-written, explicitly transitioned paragraphs allows writing to sound more purposeful and energetic. A writer’s essay no longer feels like an impossible incline of slippery words and slurred speech; instead, paragraphs serve as a staircase in an essay, leading from the bottom floor of the introduction to the top floor of the conclusion. Again, with a careful eye exploring the box to the left, one may notice that *movement* sums up the unifying purpose of the paragraph. Paragraphs introduce and conclude essays. Paragraphs draw mile markers between “important points” and “significant transitions.” Paragraphs merge and shift lanes between similar and opposing interpretations. However a writer chooses to view the paragraph, the most appropriate view shows the paragraph in motion, moving the reader through the paper.

Paragraphs serve several purposes:

- 1) to **introduce** or **conclude** an essay;
- 2) to **emphasize** an important point or to **indicate** a significant transition between points;
- 3) to **shift** approach—from pros to cons, or from problem to solution;
- 4) to **mark** movement in a sequence.

(See *A Writer’s Reference* pages 42-54 for more on paragraph purpose)

Guidelines of Paragraphs

Paragraphs need to follow three primary criteria:

- 1) Paragraphs should be **unified**. Because paragraphs deal with one idea, paragraphs should contain a central topic statement or a thesis statement. Each paragraph stands as a tiny essay inside the larger essay. Just as the overall essay deals with a single thesis by exploring various ideas, paragraphs also deal with a single thesis by describing one thought thoroughly. Writers should ask themselves these questions: *Does the paragraph I have written explore only the intended idea? Did I get off topic in pursuit of my ideas?* (See *A Writer's Reference* pages 43-44 for developing a main point).
- 2) Paragraphs should be **coherent**. This is one reason academic writing makes good use of *transitional expressions* between the ideas in paragraphs. Transitions connect ideas that may have very little relationship outside of the paragraph. Whether a paragraph shares a similar idea to a previous paragraph (*also, likewise, in the same way, similarly*) or differing ideas to the next paragraph (*although, in contrast, however, nevertheless, regardless*), by indicating the relationship with a transitional expression, a reader can more easily follow the writer into the places he or she desires to take the audience. (See *A Writer's Reference* pages 49-54, with a list of common transitions on page 52).
- 3) Paragraphs should be **well developed**. As mentioned before in the coffee analogy, a paragraph should contain the necessary evidence to fully explore its unique central theme. The paragraph should explore no more, and it should certainly explore no less. Questions of development are difficult for writers to answer on their own. Development requires asking certain questions: *Do I have the right amount of information? Have I fully supported my intended thesis? Have I used details, facts, and examples appropriate for my thesis?* These questions may be difficult for writers to answer concerning their own writing, precisely for reasons highlighted in the rhetorical questions above. Writers, particularly after spending weeks meditating on the same essay topic, may wrongly feel that they have included the right amount of information, or that they fully supported the thesis, or that all their sources are appropriate. Questions of development may best be answered by a neutral party: someone who may approach the essay or paragraph with fresh eyes. This person may be a friend or a writing center tutor.

One should note that the criteria checklist for successful paragraphs is a **tool for revision—not for rough drafting**. No writer yet has put pen to paper (or fingers to keypad) and immediately drafted the perfect paragraph. Writers must allow themselves “poor” rough drafts in order to bring their ideas to life. Grooming occurs later. The writer should consult the criteria checklist **only after** the initial draft is complete.

(See *A Writer's Reference* pages 42-54 for more on paragraph development.)