

What are the characteristics of a good paragraph?

STEP

18

*'A sentence should contain no unnecessary words,
a paragraph no unnecessary sentences.'*

William Strunk

A

Reflection

Select the statement in each case which is most typical of your current practice.

1. How do you currently make decisions about when you use paragraphs?
 - a) After I have written 10–12 lines of text and it looks a bit long.
 - b) Through a process of logical, ordered reason.
 - c) Complete guesswork.
2. How many ideas do you include in each paragraph?
 - a) One.
 - b) More than one.
 - c) Not sure.

B

Contextualization

Put the sentences in order to form a coherent paragraph.

- In summary, the paragraph has to be planned carefully so that all these aspects are covered fully.
- Logical development is closely related to the idea of coherence, but places a greater emphasis on content rather than language and grammar.
- If this idea is too specific or too general, then your paragraphs may be too long, short or ambiguous.
- Paragraph unity can be achieved through the quality of your controlling idea (as expressed by your topic sentence).
- It is commonly argued that a good paragraph has three specific aspects: unity, coherence and logical development.
- This essay now turns to the specific unit of the paragraph.
- Moreover, the use of linking words (e.g., *therefore*, *however* and *in conclusion*) is considered one of the best ways to ensure that this happens.
- Coherence may, in particular, be developed by appropriate use of referents, such as pronouns, determiners and restatements.

c Analysis

What is a good paragraph?

This essay **now turns to** the specific unit of the paragraph. It is commonly argued that a good paragraph has three specific aspects: **unity, coherence and logical development**. Paragraph **unity** can be achieved through the quality of your controlling idea (as expressed by your topic sentence). **If this idea is** too specific or too general, then your paragraphs may be too long, short or ambiguous. **Coherence** may, in particular, be developed by appropriate use of referents, such as pronouns, determiners and restatements. **Logical development** is **closely related to** the idea of coherence, but places a **greater emphasis** on content **rather than** language and grammar. **In summary**, the paragraph has to be planned carefully so that all these aspects are covered fully. **Moreover**, the use of linking devices (e.g., *therefore*, *however* and *in conclusion*) is considered one of the best ways to ensure these three characteristics.

Paragraphs are the building blocks of writing, giving shape and meaning. Without them, it would be extremely difficult to follow the argument. They are particularly important in academic writing, where the ideas are complex. As in the example above, three key aspects of good paragraphs, like that above, are:

Unity

Unity, coherence and logical development

One paragraph = one idea. This will give each paragraph a clear unity throughout. Importantly, a paragraph is not defined by its length. A paragraph should be as long as it needs to be, but in academic writing, many paragraphs will be around 100–150 words long.

Coherence

Now turns to ... closely related to ... greater emphasis ... rather than ... in summary ... moreover ...

Each paragraph should develop your overall argument, helping to answer your question in some way. A good paragraph is composed of several sentences which link together well. Similarly, a piece of writing is composed of several paragraphs which connect clearly to each other. A transition phrase at the start of the paragraph (e.g., *this said*, *having looked at*) and/or a transition sentence at the end can help integrate the overall text.

Logical development

If this idea is ...

A good paragraph will develop an idea logically, which in academic English generally means theory first, followed by examples, or a general idea, followed by a more specific analysis. In **Step 17** you looked at these principles in more detail.

What problems are common in paragraphs?

It is too long: It may be that your paragraph contains more than one idea. If so, dividing the paragraph in two may be the appropriate solution.

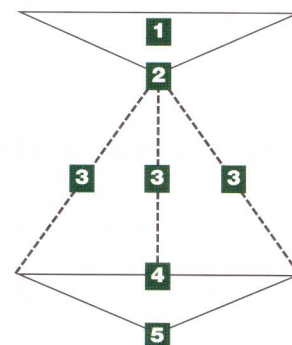
It is too short: Do you explore the idea in enough detail? Is the central idea enough for one paragraph or do you need to combine it with another idea?

It is not clear how the ideas link together: You may need to plan the paragraph in more detail (see part E). It may also help to use more linking devices (see Step 30).

The main theme is not clear: Have you written a clear topic sentence? Alternatively, you may have more than one controlling idea and need to revise your focus.

What kind of sentences might you find in a paragraph?

Like an essay, a paragraph needs planning before you begin to write it. Although there is no fixed order in which sentences in a paragraph should come, some principles are outlined below. The diagram indicates the order in which these sentences tend to appear.



Transition sentence from previous paragraph **1**

This essay now turns to the specific unit of the paragraph.

Links between paragraphs are very important. A short sentence (or a few words, combined with your topic sentence) at the start of the paragraph can often make this transition clear.

Topic sentence **2**

It is commonly argued that a good paragraph has three specific aspects ...

The topic sentence is the most important sentence in the paragraph. It almost always appears as either the first or second sentence of the paragraph. Its function is to:

- illustrate the central theme of the paragraph
- act as a platform for the rest of the paragraph
- get the reader interested and give an idea of the direction in which the paragraph is going

Topic sentences tend to be relatively short, concisely written and full of **CONTENT WORDS**.

Supporting sentences **3**

Paragraph unity can be achieved through the quality of your controlling idea ...

Your supporting sentences follow your topic sentence, and develop the main ideas outlined. Supporting sentences can have several different functions (e.g., *defining, showing cause and effect, comparing and contrasting*), many of which are covered in Unit G. These sentences may use a range of devices – argument, counter-argument, quotations, examples and evidence – to develop the central theme. There is no limit to how many supporting sentences you can include, but be careful not to go into too much detail in one paragraph.

Summary sentence **4**

... the paragraph has to be planned carefully so that all these aspects are covered fully.

The penultimate or last sentence of a paragraph will often give a short summary of the main point of the paragraph. It may well act as a 'bridge', referring to the topic sentence.

Transition sentence to next paragraph **5**

*... the use of linking devices (e.g., *therefore, however* and *in conclusion*) is considered one of the best ways to ensure these three characteristics.*

To improve the cohesion of your writing, you may wish to include a transition sentence to the next paragraph. This may be in the form of an 'open statement', later developed in more detail.

D Activation

Which of the following is the best topic sentence? What is the problem with the other two?

1. When writing topic sentences, there are two very important aspects to consider, namely, content (which provides a summary for the rest of the paragraph) and language (which has to be clear and focused in order to express your point properly).
2. When creating topic sentences, there are two particularly important aspects to consider: content and language.
3. The topic sentence is an interesting part of the paragraph.

Having checked your answer, write a paragraph based on this topic sentence.

E Personalization

- Look at a paragraph of an essay you have recently written and evaluate it according to the table below.

Factor	Guideline target	Self-feedback
Length	c. 100–150 words	
Unity	One central idea	
Transition	Is it linked to the previous/ next paragraph?	
Topic sentence	Is it clear and well-written?	
Supporting sentences	Do they develop the topic sentence sufficiently?	
Summary sentence	Does it reflect the main theme?	

- If you are finding it difficult to write paragraphs, try following the outline below.

Sentence type	Your sentence
Transition sentence	
Topic sentence	
Supporting sentences (c. 3–5)	
Summary sentence	
Transition sentence	

F Extension

- Step 43 looks at punctuation, a key component of **coherence** in paragraphs.
- Appendix 1, Step 18, Documents 5 and 6 are photocopyable versions of the documents presented in part E.
- Appendix 3, Step 18 provides examples of good paragraphs from academic articles in a range of disciplines.