

Developing Paragraphs

Qualities of paragraphs

- Some paragraphs may be many sentences long while other paragraphs may only be one sentence long. The length of your paragraphs will depend on how long you *need* them to be. However, paragraphs in academic papers appear to be around four to eight sentences long.
- Paragraphs, like the paper as a whole, have a logical beginning, middle, and end. Effective paragraphs begin with a **topic sentence**, which introduces readers to the idea explored in the paragraph and may contain a **transition** connecting the paragraph to the previous paragraph. Good paragraphs then develop that idea with a combination of **evidence** and **analysis**. Finally, they conclude with a restatement (not a repeat) of the topic sentence and perhaps a transition into the following paragraph.
- Paragraphs follow a logical order in a paper. The order in which your readers read your paragraphs should make sense.

Beginning a paragraph

The first sentence of your paragraph should be a **topic sentence**. A topic sentence introduces the central idea—the claim—to be developed in the rest of the paragraph. Look at the topic sentence of this sample paragraph:

Since music and rhetoric are so closely related, writers can learn a great deal from the decisions musicians make. In Understanding Style, Joe Glaser recommends that writers consider the sound qualities of their prose: “The closer a written sentence comes to the music of a well-formed spoken one, the more human and credible its ‘voice’ seems” (5). Like musicians, writers have an interest in putting their audience in the world of their composition, and they accomplish this through conscious rhetorical strategies.

Notice how the rest of the sentences in this paragraph all relate to the claim made in the topic sentence.

However, you can also include a **transition** in your topic sentence, which connects the paragraph to the one that came before it. Look at the transition sentence of this sample paragraph, which follows the one you read earlier:

But not all music critics view musical onomatopoeia so favorably. As Castelões notes, musical onomatopoeia has come under criticism from a number of musicians and composers for being artificial, a poor simulation of the natural world. He observes that critics’ condemnation seems to stem from a harsh dismissal of “mere wordpainting, trifling surface details” (308).

Perhaps they consider it an easy way out, a crutch for the incompetent musician who lacks the talent to set the scene with “real” music.

Notice how the word “but” links this paragraph to the prior paragraph. This transition tells the reader that this new idea is still related to the first one. Connecting your paragraphs with transitions is a good way to give your paper a sense of cohesion.

Building a paragraph

Most sentences in your paragraphs will serve to support the claim put forth in your topic sentence. They may introduce **evidence**, or they may feature your own **analysis** of that evidence.

Evidence includes any data, facts, statistics, quotations, paraphrase or other information that supports your claim. In the sample paragraphs, the second sentence offers evidence in the form of a direct quotation and paraphrase, respectively:

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As Castelões notes, musical onomatopoeia has come under criticism from a number of musicians and composers for being artificial, a poor simulation of the natural world.

The writer needs to present evidence that supports the claims made in the topic sentences.

Analysis is your own original interpretation or explanation of your evidence. In the sample paragraphs, the writer follows the evidence with these sentences of analysis:

Like musicians, writers have an interest in putting their audience in the world of their composition, and they accomplish this through conscious rhetorical strategies.

Perhaps they consider it an easy way out, a crutch for the incompetent musician who lacks the talent to set the scene with “real” music.

When presenting analysis, use your own words to elaborate on your evidence. For example, if you cited a statistic as your evidence, use your analysis to explain what that statistic reveals and how it supports the claim you made in your topic sentence.

Continue to present evidence and analysis until you feel confident that you have adequately supported your paragraph’s claim. If you run out of evidence, return to your sources to find more.

Concluding a paragraph

The end of a paragraph should remind the reader what the claim was and perhaps offer a transition into the next paragraph. Look at how one writer concludes the following paragraph:

*There are many different ways a musician can amplify his or her instrument when performing for large audiences. Some musicians prefer to use microphones, but others prefer installing pickups on their instruments. **Therefore, a musician's method of amplification is mostly up to individual choice; however, some methods are more effective than others.***

This author has ended the paragraph by both restating the claim and transitioning into the next paragraph. Placing transitions at the beginnings or ends of your paragraphs is an effective way to give your paper an overall sense of cohesion.

Deciding how to order your paragraphs

The best order for your paragraphs depends on your topic and your purpose. However, here are some suggestions to keep in mind:

- For writing about events that happened in chronological order, such as a lab report or a history paper, it usually makes sense to arrange paragraphs in chronological order. Start with the first event, then the second, then the third, and so on. However, in some cases, you may actually want to start with the most recent event and work your way back in time.
- For writing meant to explain how to do something, such as an instruction manual or a guidebook, you should almost always use chronological order, beginning with the first step.
- For a synthesis-style paper in which you discuss the similarities and differences between two (or more) subjects, you might choose between two styles of ordering your paragraphs:
 1. **Block style:** You first write all about the first subject, then the second, then the third, and so on. This tends to work better when you are synthesizing more than two subjects.
 2. **Alternating style:** You go back and forth writing paragraphs about your subjects. This tends to work better when you only have two subjects.
- For argumentative papers, one idea is to order your main points in a 2, 3, 1 order of importance. In other words, begin with what you believe to be your moderately compelling point(s), follow with your least compelling point(s), and conclude with your most compelling point(s). Of course, not all papers will have three points, but the idea is that you should save your most persuasive material for last. Since readers (and listeners)

often best remember the last thing they read or hear, you want that to be your strongest area.

Note: It is important to remember that “paragraph” does not necessarily mean “section.” A section of your paper may encompass several paragraphs. Many writers falsely assume that each section of the paper must be covered in one and only one paragraph. Remember that while there is no length requirement for paragraphs, exceedingly long paragraphs are likely to annoy your readers, causing them to lose focus.