

Finally...a handout explaining paragraphs!

Most students can significantly improve their essay by focusing on one simple part: the paragraphs! The basic rule is that each paragraph should express a single idea, and there are a few tips to help you do this. In most cases, following the four simple guidelines below will not only improve the paragraph that you are working on, but also refine the paper in general. Having strong paragraphs will almost certainly lead to a paper with a strong argument...which will almost certainly lead to a strong grade!

EXAMPLE OF A GOOD PARAGRAPH

1. A topic sentence, expressing a clear idea.

2B. The second sentence of the paragraph's body demonstrates why the topic sentence is important.

(1) Often, writing out a couple of well-structured paragraphs when you are in the beginning stages of your paper can help you to craft the type of argument that you want: subtle, coherent, and directed towards a logical completion. (2A) Having well-crafted paragraphs is like having exact change for bus fare: it isn't completely necessary, but if you don't have it you end up paying more than you need to! (2B) In any case, you have to know what you have before can you know what you need, and capturing an idea in a superb paragraph is the best way to figure that out. (3) If you write a paper that follows all four of the guidelines above, you'll be taking the bus home from the library in time for dinner instead of at 1 AM...and with a great paper in your hands!

2A. The first sentence of the paragraph's body exemplifies the topic sentence by using a simile.

3. The concluding sentence re-states the topic sentence. Notice that the paragraph makes sense even if you only read the first and last sentence.

BREAKDOWN

1. Express a single idea with a clear topic sentence.

Since a paragraph usually expresses only one idea, why not put that idea right at the beginning? When you do this, you give the reader a clear sign-post towards what is significant in the sentences that follow.

2. Use the body of the paragraph to demonstrate or expand the topic sentence.

If your paper is a road, the turns should happen from one paragraph to the next instead of within the body of a paragraph. If you aren't sure what to write in the body of a paragraph, ask yourself how you can expand, simplify, exemplify, or demonstrate the importance of the topic sentence...these are all great things to do in the middle of a paragraph!

3. First tie the concluding sentence back to the topic sentence, then do your best to link it to the next paragraph.

The most important function of the concluding sentence of the paragraph is to reinforce the importance of the topic sentence. Since you may have strayed a little from the main point of the paragraph when you extended and/or exemplified it in the middle sentences, the concluding sentence serves to remind the reader what the purpose of the paragraph is. Once you are sure that your concluding sentence does this, go through it again and see if there are any little changes that you can make that will point to where your argument is headed in the next paragraph.

4. Check your work by going through your entire paper and reading only the first & last sentence of every paragraph.

If you have acted on the first three tips, you should be able to understand your paper by reading only the first and last sentence of every paragraph. Even better, you should be able to read the first and last sentences to a friend and have them understand what you are arguing. The reality is, when professors have large numbers of papers to mark this is what they sometimes do (not on purpose, of course); if it doesn't make sense to you, it won't make sense to them!