

## Writing Paragraphs

### **What is a paragraph?**

A paragraph is a series of sentences focused on a single topic. Each paragraph in your paper will contribute in some way toward advancing your paper's overall purpose. A well written paragraph is actually much like a well written essay in miniature. Just as an essay presents a thesis about its subject, a paragraph presents a single idea or topic and develops it in a purposeful manner. Just as essays employ smooth transitions between paragraphs, paragraphs should include smooth transitions between sentences. Paragraphs will use evidence, such as quotations, examples, and supporting details to develop their subjects much like essays employ different kinds of support to defend a thesis. If you can write an effective paragraph, you really are able to do the things you need to do to write a good essay.

### **Paragraph features**

A paragraph should have a *topic sentence* that establishes the subject of the paragraph. Topic sentences most often appear at the beginning of a paragraph, though this is not a requirement. Placing topic sentences near the front of a paragraph can help you as a writer better keep in mind the subject you want to develop in the paragraph.

Paragraphs should show *a purposeful pattern of development*. Effective patterns include:

- Narration—tell a story from beginning to end
- Description—provide a detailed description using a variety of sensory details
- Explanation—identify an idea, event, object, etc. and explain its significance
- Evaluation—examine the merit of an idea, action, device, etc.
- Comparison and contrast
- Cause and effect analysis
- Process description—present the steps in a process

Paragraphs achieve *coherence* by remaining focused on their topics, and by using effective sentence-to-sentence transitions to achieve a smooth flow. Good transition strategies include:

- Carrying over words or ideas between sentences
- Using parallel sentences (i.e., sentence with the same grammatical structures and parts of speech) in succession
- Using transition words to refer to surrounding sentences and more firmly define relation between sentence

Of course, your paper needs smooth transitions between paragraphs too, and the strategies above can provide those. Sentences transitioning into a new paragraph often are used to identify its subject.

Paragraphs may use a concluding sentence to summarize the point of the paragraph. Conclusions may also point to questions or issues raised in the paragraph that will be addressed further in the next paragraph, however the topic of the next paragraph should not be stated in the conclusion of a paragraph.

### **Paragraph Length**

There is no set length for a paragraph in an academic paper. A paragraph might be two sentences long (in which case it would do few of the things mentioned above), or it might stretch for a full page or longer. To determine if the length of a paragraph is appropriate, answer the questions:

- Does it adequately develop its main idea?
- Does this paragraph fulfill its purpose in my paper as a whole?
- Can my readers keep the paragraph's main idea in sight over the course of the paragraph?

A disadvantage of longer paragraphs is that both readers and writers may lose track of the main idea. 5-7 sentences is often recommended as a suitable paragraph length in college writing. If an idea is very complex, you may wish to break your discussion of it into several shorter paragraphs.