Body Paragraphs

The Center

What are the functions of paragraphs?
- They help writers organize their work in steps.
- They help readers follow the writers’ thoughts throughout an essay.
- Paragraphs give the reader a break when reading a page of an essay.
- Paragraphs are part of the flow of a larger essay.

What is the required length of a paragraph?
- Paragraph length varies with genre and purpose.
- For newspaper columns, two sentences fill a paragraph.
- Magazines and books have wider columns, so they can be longer.

How do paragraphs work?

Paragraphs do not stand alone. Their meaning is directly tied to the meaning of the essay as a whole. Each new paragraph signals a slight change in emphasis in the paper. You are still heading to the same destination, but you have changed directions. To have a unified paragraph, and thus a unified essay, each paragraph should have a main idea that ties itself back to the main topic of the entire essay (the thesis statement).

The main idea is also called the topic sentence. This should be the first sentence in your paragraph. It will show the direction of the sentences that follow it.

A paragraph is unified ONLY if it supports a single main idea. Each sentence of a paragraph should broaden and add more detail to the main idea, or funnel the information down to an inference or insightful conclusion.

The final sentence should sum up what you have discussed within the paragraph, while looking toward the next paragraph’s main idea. This is typically called a transition sentence. The following is an example in which the paragraph’s main idea is “school uniforms preparing students for their professional lives”. It will transition to the main idea of school uniforms also providing students with structure and discipline in the classroom:

> While this will certainly provide students with valuable experience for the much more strict dress codes enforced in the professional world, it will also provide a level of discipline in the classroom that is typically missing when...

> Students can also learn valuable lessons in discipline when they are required to wear a standard uniform to school.
How should I begin a paragraph?

- With a broad statement that is then limited by the second sentence and all other sentences following it in that paragraph.
- With a question that the rest of the sentences answer.
- With a direct quotation which is interpreted or commented upon by the rest of the paragraph sentences.
- With a generality that the rest of the sentences build or comment upon.

The body paragraph should:

- be indented 5 spaces (or simply push the ‘tab’ key)
- contain (usually) 7 to 12 unified, coherent sentences
- focus on one main idea
- contain a topic sentence, support for the topic, and a concluding statement
- use a transitional phrase, if writing a paragraph of a longer essay, to create a bridge between main ideas.

Let’s review each part of the paragraph and what those parts do:

- **The Topic Sentence**
  - This introduces the subject of the paragraph (the main idea)
  - You should only present ONE main idea.
  - This needs to be a complete sentence.
  - It will either make a statement or ask a question.
  - Avoid absolute terms such as every, all, none, best. Instead, use broad terms such as many, most, or few.

- **Support**
  - This will supply the largest part of the paragraph.
  - You will support the topic sentence (the main idea) with these sentences. This is a MUST.
  - Uses facts, specific examples, and specific details to support your main idea.
  - Every sentence must be a complete sentence.

- **Conclusion/Transition Sentence**
  - Relates to the topic, but DOES NOT simply repeat it.
  - It will summarize the main idea while also ending the conversation.
  - NEVER introduce new information about the main idea here.
  - You will need to look toward the next paragraph’s main idea (this is the transitional aspect of the sentence).

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