

Building an Essay with Paragraphs

University writing is diverse and will form the basis for most of your graded assignments. We typically structure our assignments into paragraphs. A paragraph is a section of text, typically consisting of three or more complete sentences focused on a single topic, theme, event, or idea. Paragraphs allow us to organize broader subjects into smaller topics. While paragraphs have many varieties and functions, strategies exist that will help you write strong, concise paragraphs in any discipline.

Types

University essays have three types of paragraphs: Introduction, body, and conclusion. Each has a specific and important function.

The Introduction

The introduction paragraph(s) appears at the beginning of a paper. In it, you not only introduce the **broad subject** of your paper (e.g., *the use of marijuana in Canadian society*), but also the **narrow focus** (e.g., *the legalization of marijuana in this country*) appropriate to the scope of the paper, and finally, your position, or **thesis statement** (e.g., *legalization will cause unforeseen problems*). In effect, the entire paragraph should follow the structure of a funnel--from broad to very specific. The introduction does a lot of the hard work in a university essay. A weak, general, or disjointed introduction is hard to recover from, even if the rest of your paper is well-organized and cohesive.

Body Paragraphs

Body paragraphs will comprise most of your essay. In these paragraphs you will discuss all of your ideas, evidence, and analysis. Each body paragraph should focus on **one topic** relevant to the thesis stated at the end of your introduction. Think of each paragraph as having a specific task. Body paragraphs might: a) offer a piece of evidence, b) introduce and define a key concept, c) take exception to a commonly held idea, or d) discuss an important quotation. All body paragraphs should always relate back to and advance the thesis. If you are unsure about a particular paragraph, ask yourself the following questions: How does this paragraph relate to my thesis? How do the ideas in this paragraph help me prove my argument?

Whatever the role of the paragraph, you should endeavor toward uniform ideas that, while they always depend on other parts of the essay, remain topically self-contained. This is called **paragraph unity**. Eliminate sentences that do not support or relate to your thesis statement. Maintaining paragraph unity ensures that your paragraphs are coherent and well-organized, making your overall argument much easier for your reader to understand.

Body paragraphs will begin with a **topic sentence**. Notice how in this very paragraph, I began with a topic sentence--now you know this paragraph will be about topic sentences. For the reader, a topic sentence sets the agenda for the rest of the paragraph. For the writer, it guides your focus for the next chunk of writing. If you

feel like you've gone off course, check back to your topic sentence: are you still on topic? A good topic sentence will guide you to the next paragraph. If you've begun to exceed the scope of the topic sentence, it might be time to begin a new paragraph. Similar to each body paragraph, each topic sentence should also relate back to and advance the thesis. Ask yourself the following question: how does this topic relate to my thesis?

Like topic sentences, a good **transition sentence** is key to lucid, logical writing. A transition will give a sense of what is coming next and how it relates to what was just said. For example, a sentence beginning with "Furthermore" would indicate the paragraph is building on a previous idea, while a sentence beginning with "On the other hand" would indicate the paragraph is switching to an opposing idea. If you refer to the previous paragraph, you'll notice how the transition sentence at the beginning of this paragraph acts as a signpost for what comes next. Readers can get confused! Transition sentences are a lighted beacon along the way.

In Conclusion

Readers are not always the most attentive. They leave their phones on; they're listening to the TV; they forgot to take the clothes out of the washing machine. In short, you might have to remind them what you just said, and the conclusion paragraph allows you to do just that. The beginning of the paragraph should reaffirm your thesis followed by a brief summary of what you found. The rest of the conclusion makes up what is sometimes called the "**so what?**" section of the paper. It may be important to your essay, but it's not always easy to answer the "so what" question in relation to your argument. However, at this point in your conclusion, it is meaningful to explain to your reader why your paper is important, leaving them with a final thought on the topic that ties up the essay in a satisfactory way. You can also draft your conclusion earlier on in the writing process, so as not to rush through it at the end. You can always revise it later!