

Paragraph Development

After reading this handout, you should be able to understand how paragraphs are formed, how to develop stronger paragraphs, and how to completely and clearly express your ideas.

What is a Paragraph?

Paragraphs are the building blocks of papers. Many students define paragraphs in terms of length (a paragraph is a group of at least five sentences, a paragraph is half a page long, etc.). In reality, though, a paragraph is defined as “a group of sentences or a single sentence that forms a unit” (Lunsford and Connors 116). Length and appearance do not determine whether a section in a paper is a paragraph. For instance, in some styles of writing (particularly in journalism), a paragraph can be one sentence long. Ultimately, a paragraph is a sentence or group of sentences that support one central idea. In this handout, we will refer to this as the “controlling idea,” because it controls what happens in the rest of the paragraph.

How Do I Decide What to Put in a Paragraph?

Before you can determine what the composition of a particular paragraph will be, you must first decide on an argument and a working thesis statement for your paper. What is the most important idea that you are trying to convey to your reader? The information in each paragraph must be related to that idea. Your paragraphs should also remind your reader that your thesis is related to this information. A working thesis functions like a seed from which your paper, and your ideas, will grow. The whole process is a natural progression from a seed to a full-blown paper where there are direct relationships between all of the ideas.

The decision about what to put into your paragraphs is known as brainstorming. There are many brainstorming techniques; whichever one you choose, this stage of paragraph development cannot be skipped. A paragraph is the foundation that supports what you are building. Any cracks, inconsistencies, or other corruptions of the foundation can cause your whole paper to crumble.

Imagine you have already done some brainstorming to develop your thesis. What else should you keep in mind as you begin to create paragraphs? **Every paragraph in a paper should be:**

- **Unified:** All of the sentences in a single paragraph should be related to a single controlling idea (often expressed in the topic sentence of the paragraph).
- **Clearly related to the thesis:** The sentences should all refer to the central idea, or thesis, of the paper (Rosen and Behrens 119).
- **Coherent:** The sentences should be arranged in a logical manner, following a definite plan for development (Rosen and Behrens 119).
- **Well-developed:** Every idea discussed in the paragraph should be explained and supported through evidence. These details should work together to explain the paragraph's controlling idea (Rosen and Behrens 119).

How Do I Organize a Paragraph?

There are many different ways to organize a paragraph. The organization you choose will depend on the controlling idea of the paragraph. **Below are a few possibilities for organization:**

- **Narration:** Tell a story. Go chronologically, from start to finish.

- **Description:** Provide specific details about what something looks, smells, tastes, sounds, or feels like. Organize spatially, in order of appearance, or by topic.
- **Process:** Explain how something works, step by step. Perhaps follow a sequence (first, second, third).
- **Classification:** Separate into groups or explain the various parts of a topic.
- **Illustration:** Give examples and explain how those examples prove your point. (See the detailed example in the next section of this handout.)

The Five-Step Process to Paragraph Development

Below is a 5-step process for building a paragraph (with explanations and examples). Our example paragraph will be about slave spirituals, the original songs that African Americans created during slavery. The model paragraph uses the illustration technique (giving examples) to prove its point.

Step 1. Decide on a controlling idea and create a topic sentence

Paragraph development begins with the formulation of the controlling idea. Often, the controlling idea of a paragraph will appear in the form of a topic sentence. In some cases, you may need more than one sentence to express a paragraph's controlling idea. Here is the controlling idea for our "model paragraph," expressed in a topic sentence:

Model controlling idea and topic sentence— *Slave spirituals often had hidden double meanings.*

Step 2. Explain the controlling idea

Paragraph development continues with an explanation that the writer gives for how the reader should interpret the information presented in the idea statement or topic sentence of the paragraph. The writer explains his/her thinking about the main topic, idea, or focus of the paragraph. Here's the sentence that would follow the controlling idea about slave spirituals:

Model explanation—*On one level, spirituals referenced heaven, Jesus, and the soul; but on another level, the songs spoke about slave resistance.*

Step 3. Give an example (or multiple examples)

Paragraph development progresses with some type of support or evidence for the idea and an explanation. The example serves as a sign or representation of the relationship established in the idea and explanation portions of the paragraph. Below are two examples that illustrate the double meanings in slave spirituals:

Model example A—*For example, according to Frederick Douglass, the song “O Canaan, Sweet Canaan” spoke of slaves’ longing for heaven, but it also expressed their desire to escape to the North. Careful listeners heard this second meaning in the following lyrics: “I don’t expect to stay / Much longer here. / Run to Jesus, shun the danger. / I don’t expect to stay.”*

Model example B—*Slaves even used songs like “Steal Away to Jesus (at midnight)” to announce to other slaves the time and place of secret, forbidden meetings.*

Step 4. Explain the example(s)

The next movement in paragraph development is an explanation of each example and its relevance to the topic sentence and rationale that were stated at the beginning of the paragraph. This explanation shows readers why you chose to use this/or these particular examples as evidence to support the major claim, or focus, in your paragraph.

Continue the pattern of giving examples and explaining them until all points/examples that the writer deems necessary have been made and explained. **None of your examples should be left unexplained.** You might be able to explain the relationship between the example and the topic sentence in the same sentence which introduced the example. More often, however, you will need to explain that relationship in a separate sentence. Look at these explanations for the two examples in the slave spirituals paragraph:

Model explanation for example A—*When slaves sang this song, they could have been speaking of their departure from this life and their arrival in heaven; however, they also could have been describing their plans to leave the South and run, not to Jesus, but to the North.*

Model explanation for example B—*[The relationship between example B and the main idea of the paragraph's controlling idea is clear enough without adding another sentence to explain it.]*

Step 5. Complete the paragraph's idea or transition into the next paragraph

The final movement in paragraph development involves tying up the loose ends of the paragraph, reminding the reader of its relevance to the main controlling idea of the paper. At this point, you can remind your reader about the relevance of the information that you just discussed in the

paragraph. You might feel more comfortable, however, simply transitioning your reader to the next development in the next paragraph. Here's an example of a sentence that completes the slave spirituals paragraph:

Model sentence for completing a paragraph—*What whites heard as merely spiritual songs, slaves discerned as detailed messages. The hidden meanings in spirituals allowed slaves to sing what they could not say.*

Notice that the example and explanation steps of this 5-step process (steps 3 and 4) can be repeated as needed. The idea is that you continue to use this pattern until you have completely developed the main idea of the paragraph.

Here is a look at the completed “model” paragraph:

Slave spirituals often had hidden double meanings. On one level, spirituals referenced heaven, Jesus, and the soul, but on another level, the songs spoke about slave resistance. For example, according to Frederick Douglass, the song “O Canaan, Sweet Canaan” spoke of slaves’ longing for heaven, but it also expressed their desire to escape to the North. Careful listeners heard this second meaning in the following lyrics: “I don’t expect to stay / Much longer here. / Run to Jesus, shun the danger. / I don’t expect to stay.” When slaves sang this song, they could have been speaking of their departure from this life and their arrival in heaven; however, they also could have been describing their plans to leave the South and run, not to Jesus, but to the North. Slaves even used songs like “Steal Away to Jesus (at midnight)” to announce to other slaves the time and place of secret, forbidden meetings. What whites heard as merely spiritual songs, slaves

discerned as detailed messages. The hidden meanings in spirituals allowed slaves to sing what they could not say.

Troubleshooting Paragraphs

Problem: the paragraph has no topic sentence.

Imagine each paragraph as a sandwich. The real content of the sandwich—the meat or other filling—is in the middle. This includes all the evidence you need to make the point, but it gets kind of messy to eat a sandwich without any bread. Your readers don't know what to do with all the evidence you've given them. The top slice of bread (the first sentence of the paragraph) explains the topic (or controlling idea) of the paragraph. The bottom slice (the last sentence of the paragraph) tells the reader how the paragraph relates to the broader argument. In the original and revised paragraphs below, notice how a topic sentence expressing the controlling idea tells the reader the point of all the evidence.

Original paragraph

Piranhas rarely feed on large animals; they eat smaller fish and aquatic plants. When confronted with humans, piranhas' first instinct is to flee, not attack. Their fear of humans makes sense. Far more piranhas are eaten by people than people are eaten by piranhas. If the fish are well-fed, they won't bite humans.

Revised paragraph

Although most people consider piranhas to be quite dangerous, they are, for the most part, entirely harmless. Piranhas rarely feed on large animals; they eat smaller fish and aquatic plants. When confronted with humans, piranhas' first instinct is to flee, not attack. Their fear of

humans makes sense. Far more piranhas are eaten by people than people are eaten by piranhas. If the fish are well-fed, they won't bite humans.

Once you have mastered the use of topic sentences, you may decide that the topic sentence for a particular paragraph really shouldn't be the first sentence of the paragraph. This is fine—the topic sentence can actually go at the beginning, middle, or end of a paragraph; what's important is that it is in there somewhere so that readers know what the main idea of the paragraph is and how it relates back to the thesis of your paper. Suppose that we wanted to start the piranha paragraph with a transition sentence—something that reminds the reader of what happened in the previous paragraph—rather than with the topic sentence. Let's suppose that the previous paragraph was about all kinds of animals that people are afraid of, like sharks, snakes, and spiders. Our paragraph might look like this:

Like sharks, snakes, and spiders, piranhas are widely feared. Although most people consider piranhas to be quite dangerous, they are, for the most part, entirely harmless. Piranhas rarely feed on large animals; they eat smaller fish and aquatic plants. When confronted with humans, piranhas' first instinct is to flee, not attack. Their fear of humans makes sense. Far more piranhas are eaten by people than people are eaten by piranhas. If the fish are well-fed, they won't bite humans.

Problem: the paragraph has more than one controlling idea.

If a paragraph has more than one main idea, consider eliminating sentences that relate to the second idea, or split the paragraph into two or more paragraphs, each with one main idea. In the following paragraph, the final two sentences branch off into a different topic. The revised

paragraph eliminates them and concludes with a sentence that reminds the reader of the paragraph's main idea.

Original paragraph

Although most people consider piranhas to be quite dangerous, they are, for the most part, entirely harmless. Piranhas rarely feed on large animals; they eat smaller fish and aquatic plants. When confronted with humans, piranhas' first instinct is to flee, not attack. Their fear of humans makes sense. Far more piranhas are eaten by people than people are eaten by piranhas.

Revised paragraph

Although most people consider piranhas to be quite dangerous, they are, for the most part, entirely harmless. Piranhas rarely feed on large animals; they eat smaller fish and aquatic plants. When confronted with humans, piranhas' first instinct is to flee, not attack. Their fear of humans makes sense. Far more piranhas are eaten by people than people are eaten by piranhas. If the fish are well-fed, they won't bite humans.

Problem: transitions are needed within the paragraph.

You probably are aware that transitions are needed between paragraphs or sections in a paper. Sometimes transitions are helpful within the body of a single paragraph. Within a paragraph, transitions are often single words or short phrases that help to establish relationships between ideas and to create a logical progression of those ideas in a paragraph. This is especially

Unknown

Deleted: *A number of South American groups eat piranhas. They fry or grill the fish and then serve them with coconut milk or tucupi, a sauce made from fermented manioc juices*

likely to be true within paragraphs that discuss multiple examples. Let's take a look at a version of our piranha paragraph that uses transitions:

Although most people consider piranhas to be quite dangerous, they are, except in two main situations, entirely harmless. Piranhas rarely feed on large animals; they eat smaller fish and aquatic plants. When confronted with humans, piranhas' instinct is to flee, not attack. But there are two situations in which a piranha bite is likely. The first is when a frightened piranha is lifted out of the water—for example, if it has been caught in a fishing net. The second is when the water level in pools where piranhas are living falls too low. A large number of fish may be trapped in a single pool, and if they are hungry, they may attack anything that enters the water.

In this example, you can see how the phrases “the first” and “the second” help the reader follow the organization of the ideas in the paragraph.

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