

Self Study Programs: Perfect Paragraphs



This module covers:

- Identifying the elements of effective paragraph structure
- Understanding the steps for constructing and editing paragraphs
- Applying your knowledge of the characteristics of paragraph writing to formulate topic, body and linking sentences for paragraphs



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Perfect Paragraphs

Paragraphs are distinct sections within a larger piece of writing, such as an essay, wiki or report.

A paragraph develops one main idea.

Paragraphs are complete units of thought that are presented in a logical order.

Paragraph Structure

A paragraph is made up of three parts:

Topic Sentence

The topic sentence is the first sentence in a paragraph. This sentence introduces the overall idea to be discussed in the paragraph. It is a general sentence about a specific topic.

Topic sentences also have controlling ideas, which further focuses the scope of the paragraph subject (see the section: “example of a paragraph”).

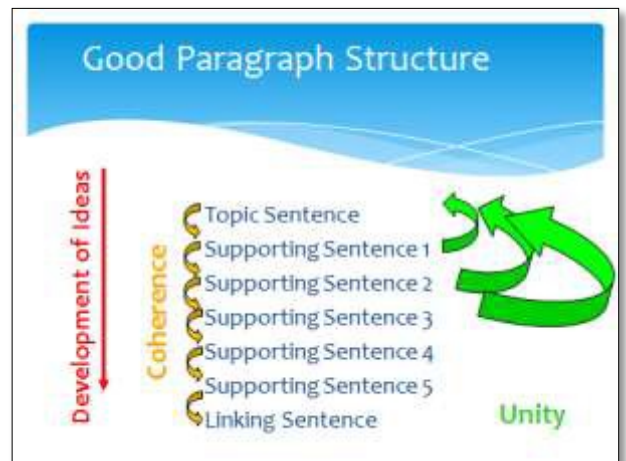
Topic sentences indicate what will be discussed in the following lines of the paragraph, so it is important not to confuse your reader by diverging from the topic. These sentences can also indicate the order in which points will be discussed and the writer’s position.

Supporting Sentences

Supporting sentences ‘support’ and develop the idea outlined in the topic sentence. These sentences support the main idea by providing: explanation to clarify; evidence to validate; and, examples to illustrate.

Linking Sentence

There is usually a linking sentence at the end of a paragraph that leads the reader into the next paragraph. This sentence helps to highlight the logical relationship between paragraphs and provides a link in a chain of ideas.



Writing Perfect Paragraphs

Some steps to help you write that perfect paragraph:

- 1. Research** - make a list of possible effects, consequences and illustrations on a topic.
- 2. Relevance** – be selective and pick out your five strongest points.
- 3. Order** - list five points in a logical order that flows.
- 4. Topic Sentence** - shape a topic sentence with controlling ideas.
- 5. Write** - construct a clean paragraph beginning with a topic sentence, then supporting sentences, then a linking sentence.
- 6. Edit** - check the paragraph for grammar, spelling, punctuation and word choice.

Be a Good Tour Guide

Paragraphs are like stops on your tour. They are where you demonstrate your knowledge about a focal point of the tour. Don’t skim over, tangent off, omit or overwhelm your audience with information!

Problem Paragraphs

My paragraph is too long!

Problem: Paragraphs which are too long (more than eight sentences) signify that you have not been discerning in your choice of relevant points. It has either become a 'catch-all' paragraph (excessive amount of points on the paragraph topic) or a 'mixed-bag' paragraph (variety of points which are not all relevant to the paragraph topic).

Fix:

1. 'Catch-all' – edit (choose your five most relevant points).
2. 'Mixed-Bag' – edit (omit irrelevant points. Retain only the most relevant points on the topic).

My paragraph is too short!

Problem: Paragraphs which are too short (less than six sentences) signify that you have not considered your writing structure and either insufficiently researched the paragraph topic or chosen the wrong focus topic.

Fix

1. Undertake more research to find additional relevant evidence or examples for the chosen topic.
2. Restructure your essay to replace the short paragraph with a different focus area with sufficient evidence.

Example of a Paragraph

Topic Sentence → Paragraph structure is important in academic writing as it helps the writer to logically present information and also helps the reader to comprehend this information. ← **Controlling ideas**

Supporting Sentence 1: A paragraph develops one main idea...

Supporting Sentence 2: These main ideas...

Supporting Sentence 3: By forcing a writer to...

Supporting Sentence 4: When information is ...

Supporting Sentence 5: This ability to predict...

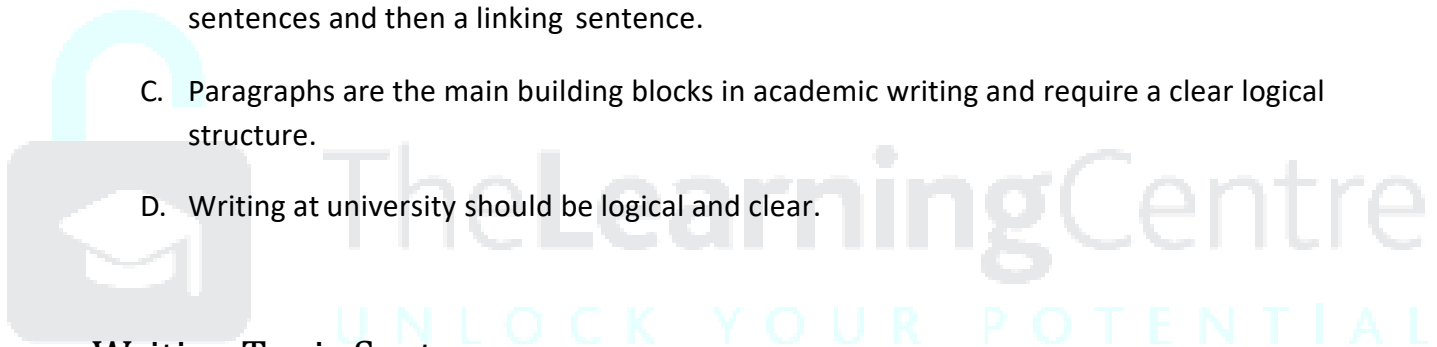
← **Linking sentence**

Choosing the Best Topic Sentence

1. The paragraph below is missing a topic sentence. Read the paragraph and choose the best topic sentence.

[topic sentence]..... Paragraphs should be structured so that each one begins with a topic sentence, followed by supporting sentences and concluding with a linking sentence. The topic sentence tells the reader what the paragraph is about, whilst the supporting sentences present evidence that clarifies and further illustrates this topic. The final sentence in a paragraph is a linking sentence that helps to connect one paragraph to another by linking the main ideas. By following such a clear and logical structure when writing paragraphs, a writer can build an effective piece of academic writing. Writing effectively in this manner has lasting benefits beyond university.

- A. Paragraphs are important.
- B. Paragraph are important building blocks for academic writing at university and each paragraph requires a topic sentence to begin the paragraph, followed by supporting sentences and then a linking sentence.
- C. Paragraphs are the main building blocks in academic writing and require a clear logical structure.
- D. Writing at university should be logical and clear.



Writing Topic Sentences

2. Read the following paragraph and construct a clear, concise and relevant topic sentence .

..... Paragraphs which are too short indicate that the topic has been insufficiently researched or that the topic is too narrow. In this case, the topic should be broadened or the topic should be researched further so that additional supporting information can be included. Paragraphs which are too long, on the other hand, can indicate that the topic is too broad and needs to be narrowed. Long paragraphs can also indicate that the supporting information has not been sufficiently organised or linked together, leading the paragraph to become a 'catch-all' or a 'mixed-bag' of supporting information. Effective paragraph structure is important as it affects the overall structure of an essay or report.

Sentence Jumble

3. The following paragraph sentences have become jumbled. Order the sentences in the best manner possible.

Obtaining a good grade is just one motivation for careful editing: there are also life-long learning benefits.

Checking for grammar includes checking that verb forms are correct and consistent.

Word usage is an often neglected part of the editing process (xxxx, 2012) but is equally important as grammar and punctuation because it affects the overall clarity of a piece of writing.

Technical terms should be used correctly and all colloquial language avoided.

Some lecturers have argued (xxxx, 2013) that careful editing can improve a student's grade by as much as 30%.

Editing for punctuation includes checking that colons and semi colons as well as commas have been used correctly.

Editing is an important final step in the writing process; every paragraph, and indeed every sentence, should be checked for correct grammar, punctuation and word usage to receive better marks.

Writing Supporting Sentences

4. The following paragraph is incomplete. Here are 10 supporting pieces of information. Use this information to complete the paragraph. Think about how to link the supporting information (and use linking words). Can you turn these 10 points into 5 supporting sentences? Try!

1. Essays rarely have headings or sub-headings.
2. Web-writing almost always has headings and sub-headings.
3. Web-writing and report-writing both have headings and sub-headings.
4. Reports are highly structured.
5. Web-writing has shorter sections than in a report.
6. Web writing uses graphics, links, plain English and short sentences.
7. Key-words are often deliberately used in web-writing for search engine optimisation (SEO).
8. People usually scan rather than read information on the web.
9. Important information is usually placed first in web-writing.
10. Placing important information first in web-writing is commonly referred to as an 'inverted pyramid structure'.

Writing for the web can be different from many of the more conventional forms of writing at university, such as essay or report writing.....

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With so many different ways of communicating on the web, and for so many different purposes, it is important to check specific university assignment expectations carefully.

Answers – don't look until after you have finished the activities!

Answer to Activity 1: c)

(a) is too general, b) is too detailed/long and d) is off-topic – doesn't mention paragraphs

Answer to Activity 2:

A possible topic sentence:

Two common problems with paragraphs are that they are either too short or too long.

Answer to Activity 3:

Editing is an important final step in the writing process; every paragraph, and indeed every sentence, should be checked for correct grammar, punctuation and word usage to receive better marks.

Checking for grammar includes checking that verb forms are correct and consistent.

Editing for punctuation includes checking that colons and semi colons as well as commas have been used correctly. Word usage is an often neglected part of the editing process (xxxx, 2012) but is equally important as grammar and punctuation because it affects the overall clarity of a piece of writing. Technical terms should be used correctly and all colloquial language avoided. Some lecturers have argued (xxxx, 2013) that careful editing can improve a student's grade by as much as 30%. Obtaining a good grade is just one motivation for careful editing: there are also life-long learning benefits.

Answer to Activity 4:

A possible paragraph using the information provided:

Writing for the web can be different from many of the more conventional forms of writing at university, such as essay or report writing. Essays, for example, rarely use headings or sub-headings but these features are typical in web-writing. Reports, on the other hand, do make use of headings and sub-headings but information is usually highly structured, whereas web-writing typically proceeds in shorter sections with the most important information placed first in an inverted 'pyramid structure'. Shorter sections and the use of descriptive headings is important in web-writing as the end-user is said to 'scan' rather than 'read' the text as they would in an essay or a report. Web-writing also typically uses graphics and links as well as short sentences and plain English. The use of key words, in order to optimise search engine results, is also important in some forms of web-based writing where it is important to increase visitors to an online site. With so many different ways of communicating on the web, and for so many different purposes, it is important to check specific university assignment expectations carefully.

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