

Paragraphing

Improve Your Paper by Strengthening Your Paragraphs

To improve your writing at the university and in the workplace, you can develop your skills at composing effective paragraphs. Effective *paragraphing* allows you to construct paragraphs that achieve a specific purpose in your writing. Why paragraph with purpose? Think intentionally about what a paragraph needs to do in your paper. You need to write effective paragraphs that serve as building blocks to construct a complex argument that readers are trying to understand; paragraphing helps readers to understand and process your ideas into meaningful units of thought, or paragraphs.

Introductory and concluding paragraphs present special opportunities to the writer.

- **What is a paragraph and how long should it be?**
- **Topic sentences or first sentences**
- **Body sentences or main sentences**
- **Concluding or last sentences**

What is a paragraph and how long should it be?

By the time you are writing at the university-level, you will of course have composed many paragraphs. Most writers have some intuition about what makes a good paragraph. Here we'll teach you how to turn

good intuitions into good technique. So what is a paragraph, and should there be a prescribed length?

To start answering this question, let's read two sample paragraphs.

Sample one: a paragraph written by a former second-year UW-Madison student from an intermediate composition class. This is the third paragraph from a nine-page comparative analysis of two works of art. The writer is trying to consider in what ways one painting is stylistically in communication with another painter's work. What to notice: (1) the writer's topic sentence (the first sentence that makes a claim about the paragraph's main point) announces her topic and how she will approach this topic in her paragraph; (2) how she develops the idea in the body sentences, as promised in the first sentence; (3) how she concludes her paragraph by offering a keen, close observation of specific details, and with a promise to her reader of a more sophisticated point and argument to come in her paper.

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In order to understand how Manet's work echoes or communicates with Titian's, one must first consider the similarities between their paintings. To begin with, both take a nude woman as the subject. More than that, however, Manet directly copies the composition of Titian's *Venus*; the overwhelming similarity in color and the figures' arrangement in each painting prove this. Both women are lying in the same position with their heads on the left-hand side of the canvas. Both women have their left leg crossed over the right. Both women have flowers and accessories. Other key elements unite these paintings, as well: the arrangement of the sheets on the bed; the green curtains; the servants; and the small animal at the foot of the bed. All these features clearly indicate that Manet echoes Titian. If one stopped at the similarity in the composition, it would appear that both paintings communicate the same thing; both would be a celebration of the beauty of the human figure, and Manet's voice would have added nothing new to the conversation; it would have no additional meaning besides venerating the masterful work of Titian.

Sample two: a paragraph composed by former UW-Madison School of Law Professor, Arthur F. McEvoy, who now teaches at Southwestern Law School in Los Angeles. Professor McEvoy wrote this model paragraph as part of a memorandum on effective writing for his students and colleagues. What to notice: each of the body sentences illustrates and develops the main idea or

topic sentence.

McEvoy, Arthur F. Memorandum to Students and Colleagues, University of Wisconsin Law School, 20 March 2006. Web.

The ideal paragraph contains five sentences. The topic sentence almost always comes first and states as clearly as possible the point that the paragraph makes, just as the first sentence of this paragraph did. The three middle sentences of the paragraph follow the topic sentence in some rational order and substantiate it with examples, analysis, or other kind of development; if written clearly, middle sentences may employ conjunctions or subordinate clauses to put across complex ideas without breaking the basic form. Every well-written paragraph ends with a “clincher” sentence that in some way signals completion of the paragraph’s point and places it in context, either by restating the topic sentence, relating the topic back to the thesis of the writing as a whole, or by providing a transition to the paragraph that follows. While good style may require a writer to vary this basic form occasionally, the five-sentence model captures the Platonic essence of the paragraph and most effectively accomplishes its purpose, which is to state a single idea, in sequence, discretely and comprehensively.

Consider what makes a paragraph, a paragraph.

The two sample paragraphs above illustrate well the key principles by providing well-constructed topic sentences, by developing ideas into logical units of thought, and by concluding with purposeful concluding sentences.

- You might think of paragraphs as units of thought: a paragraph develops one coherent idea into a structured thought.
- You compose a paper out of many thoughts. Only structured, organized thoughts count as paragraphs. You might say that paragraphs are the building blocks, or thought units, of writing.
- You’ll be challenged to write many kinds of paragraphs, in many kinds of patterns, too: paragraphs that narrate an event or describe a process, in which you present analysis, or use evidence to support research, to compare and contrast, or even to explain a cause and then in a subsequent paragraph to hypothesize an effect. You will use such patterns to present your ideas, as **units of thought**, in a paper.

Three points about paragraph length.

- About **shorter** paragraphs: depending on the unit of thought you are working with in a paper, it's quite typical for some paragraphs to be shorter. Too many short paragraphs, however, may indicate that your ideas need more development. One strategy is to draft with short paragraphs conveying your main points or units of thought, and then as you revise, consider what evidence or other content your paragraph may require to support its idea. Short paragraphs call a lot of attention to themselves, so they can effectively emphasize a point. However, in academic writing, some instructors prefer more developed paragraphs, so use them sparingly.
- About **longer** paragraphs: you'll generally read and write longer paragraphs in formal academic papers, rather than in journalistic writing or fiction. In fact, some units of thought may span two to three paragraphs. However, too many long paragraphs can provide readers with too much information to manage at one time. Readers need planned pauses or breaks when reading long complex papers in order to understand your presented ideas. Remember this writing mantra: "Give your readers a break!" or "Good paragraphs give one pause!"
- How about an **average** paragraph length: you might try, on average, for approximately four-six or five-eight sentences per paragraph. Solely thinking about paragraphs in terms of length, however, may lead to formulaic writing, or may lead you to think less often about your paragraph's purpose. You might stop short the development of a good idea in process, or you might unnecessarily go on about an idea, an idea that you can effectively treat in three-four sentences. Your paragraphs need enough sentences to develop the idea or information you are trying to

present, depending on how that unit of thought needs to function in your paper.

Two Principles of Effective Paragraphs

- If you organize enough sentences—**in an effective order**—to present one thought, or point, in a paragraph, you will promote paragraph unity (some books call this *coherence*). Remember this writing mantra: “One point per paragraph!” or “Good paragraphs unite!”
- If each sentence **supports the paragraph’s idea**, or point, then you’ll write a paragraph that sticks to the reader’s mind (some books call this *cohesion*). Remember this writing mantra: “Good sentences stick together!”

Topic sentences or first sentences

Many effective paragraphs begin with topic sentences that signal an idea and argument: the two first sample paragraphs begin with topic sentences. Sometimes, however, writers begin with a transitioning sentence or bridge sentence before their topic sentence. When the topic sentence is the second or third sentence in a paragraph, you may call this a delayed topic sentence. In those cases, the first sentence provides the needed information to transition from the previous paragraph before the writer announces the current paragraph’s topic. However, writing teachers often use the term “topic sentence” as a way to emphasize the rhetorical, or writing, work that the first sentence in a paragraph typically must do.

Body sentences or main sentences

Through some recognizable or logical order, body sentences develop the topic of the paragraph. These sentences work to analyze data or quotations, describe a text or event, set up a comparison, showcase evidence, and sometimes they enumerate the logical points for readers to give them a sense of a paper’s bigger picture.

In body sentences, you need to consider how much quoted evidence or researched content to include so you can effectively demonstrate or prove your point. Body sentences also play a vital role by providing visual cues to organize a paragraph and help readers to stay focused on your point.

Concluding sentences or last sentences

When concluding a paragraph, writers may need to consider several factors. Depending on the paragraph's position in the paper, and often its function, your last sentence needs to accomplish one of several rhetorical, or writing, tasks. Last sentences may relate back to the paper's main argument by recasting the main argument in light of the work you accomplished in a particular paragraph. The last sentence may need to bring a section to its conclusion before you move on to the next section of a paper (without being *the* conclusion). Your last sentence or sentences may also be where you provide [transitions](#) to connect to the next paragraph. In sample one, above, the last sentence anticipates the next paragraph (see the **Manet paragraph**), and in sample two, McEvoy's last sentence restates his paragraph's point with force (see the **McEvoy paragraph**), and writers sometimes use last sentences in paragraphs to summarize their points.

SOME SAMPLE PARAGRAPHS

To illustrate these concepts, let's look at four more samples to see how effective paragraphs work.

SAMPLE A

A paragraph from a September 2006 article published in *The Atlantic*, by Marshall Poe. The article is about Jimmy Wales (the internet revolutionary), Wikipedia, and collaborative knowledge. Here's what to notice: it's an

expanded version of a McEvoy model paragraph that varies the basic form with six sentences instead of the five. Notice also how sentence four makes the reader pause and reflect, momentarily, before the paragraph concludes its unit of thought on Wales.

Wales was an advocate of what is generically termed “[openness](#)” online. An “open” online community is one with few restrictions on membership or posting—everyone is welcome, and anyone can say anything as long as it’s generally on point and doesn’t include gratuitous ad hominem attacks. Openness fit not only Wales’s idea of objectivism, with its emphasis on reason and rejection of force, but also his mild personality. He doesn’t like to fight. He would rather suffer fools in silence, waiting for them to talk themselves out, than confront them. This patience would serve Wales well in the years to come.

Poe, Marshall. “The Hive.” *Atlantic Magazine* (2006) n.pag. *The Atlantic*. Web. 17 July 2012.

SAMPLE B

As an example, a pair of contiguous paragraphs from an article by UW-Madison Psychology Professor Martha Alibali in which she presents empirical research on how children use physical gestures as part of the process to acquire mathematical problem-solving knowledge. Here’s what to notice in this pair of paragraphs: notice the clarity of expression in the first paragraph’s topic sentence with respect to how the research is presented. In this paragraph the authors guide and reinforce their arguments with such phrases as “This was indeed the case.” Notice also how the second paragraph’s topic sentence narrows the focus of its discussion from general predictions to the examination of their predictions on the individual level. In both paragraphs, the writer provides sufficient set-up to prepare readers for the data which comes at the end of each paragraph.

We predicted that participants in the gesture-allowed condition would be less likely than participants in the gesture-prohibited condition to generate the parity strategy, because the availability of gesture would promote use of perceptual-motor strategies instead. This was indeed the case; the proportion of participants who used the parity strategy on at least one trial was .74 in the gesture-allowed condition and .91 in the gesture-prohibited condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 85) = 4.17, p = .04$ (Fig. 1). Once they generated the parity strategy, most participants (89%) used it on all subsequent trials.

We also examined participants’ use of the parity strategy at the level of the individual trial. To do so, we compared three types of trials: (a) trials on which participants were allowed to gesture and did so; (b) trials on which participants were allowed to gesture but chose not to do so; and (c) trials on which participants were not allowed to gesture by design (i.e., the gesture-

prohibited condition). For these comparisons, we used mixed-effects logistic regression, with use of the parity strategy (yes/no) as the dependent variable, trial type as a fixed factor, and participant as a random factor. Parity was used on a smaller percentage of trials when participants were allowed to gesture and did so (30%) than when they did not gesture, either by choice (76%), $\beta = 3.28$, Wald $Z = 5.97$, $p < .001$, or by design (52%), $\beta = 1.18$, Wald $Z = 3.42$, $p < .001$.² In each case, the model with trial type as a factor provided a better fit to the data than the model without this factor, $\chi^2(1) = 42.7$ and $\chi^2(1) = 10.99$, respectively, both $ps < .001$.³

Alibali, Martha W., Robert C. Spencer, Lucy Knox, and Sotaro Kita. "Spontaneous Gestures Influence Strategy Choices in Problem Solving." *Psychological Science* 22.9 (2011): 1-7. *Sagepub*. Web. 9 August 2012.

SAMPLE C

A paragraph from near the end of a scientific article. Here's what to notice: (1) the complexity of evidence presented in this paragraph; (2) how the first sentence presents the point of the paragraph; (3) and how the penultimate two sentences set up the last, concluding, sentence of this paragraph, which signals the potential implications for their findings.

Mold, Jeff E. et al. "Fetal and Adult Hematopoietic Stem Cells Give Rise to Distinct T Cell Lineages in Humans." *Science* 330 (2010): 1695-1699. Web. 13 May 2012.

Our results support the hypothesis that, as in mice and birds (21, 25), in humans the development of the immune system is layered. This hypothesis suggests that hematopoiesis occurs in distinct waves, including an early one that is fetal and a later one that is adult, with each generating distinct populations of cells that may coexist (layer) for a period of time (fig. S7). The propensity for fetal CD4+ T cells to adopt a T fate upon stim-differentiation may favor a population of T cells whose role is to promote tolerance to self (and potentially foreign) antigens encountered during development. Whether these cells are enriched in a specific Treg precursor, which has been suggested to exist in the adult thymus and periphery in mice (26, 27), remains to be determined. Although the focus of this study has been CD4+ T cells, the fetal peripheral lymphoid tissues contain a full array of hematopoietic cells that have not been extensively studied and may also be distinct from their adult counterparts. For example, although our findings are different from those made in the mouse, the results of our study do not rule out the existence of a comparable population of gd DETCs in the human fetus. Our findings have broad implications for the understanding of human hematopoiesis and provide a framework for studying a range of biological processes, from infectious diseases to transplantation strategies and immune tolerance. (PAGE NUMBER GOES HERE)

SAMPLE D

For inspiration, a paragraph from UW-Madison English Professor Cherene Sherrard-Johnson’s 2012 *Dorothy West’s Paradise: A Biography of Class and Color*. Here’s what to notice: this paragraph from the beginning of chapter one—about the importance of the town of Oak Bluffs on Martha’s Vineyard—begins to announce the topic of her book. This paragraph starts with a topic sentence that sets up the subject of the paragraph, which treats a variety of different kinds of information from the historical to the theoretical. The paragraph then works effectively back and forth between her critical reflection on Wiltse’s work and her analysis of this work in order to weave a complex, layered discussion of the role public swimming pools have played in race relations in America and the way swimming pools can be read as a site for cultural change. In particular, note how the first two sentences set up for a delayed topic sentence, which is sentence three: the first two give crucial background information in order to arrive at the topic sentence of number three. Lastly, note how the paragraph itself almost pivots around the rhetorical question in the paragraph’s center.

Sherrard-Johnson, Cherene. *Dorothy West’s Paradise: A Biography of Class and Color*. Rutgers: Rutgers UP, 2012. Print.

In *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*, Jeff Wiltse examines how U.S. swimming pools were transformed from interracial single-sex spaces in which class and gender were more important than race to “leisure resorts, where practically everyone in the community except black Americans swam together.” His study then follows what he calls the second social transformation—“when black Americans gained access through legal and social protest” and “white swimmers generally abandoned them for private pools.”¹³ The various iterations of West’s story, which discuss the span from 1950 to 1980, fall between these two moments in social and legal history. I am particularly intrigued by how the national history of segregated bathing areas informs the local, particular event described by West. Does the exclusion of blacks from the high beach parallel the segregation of public pools? In the early twentieth century, public bathing spaces were notoriously violent. The Chicago Riot in 1919 was touched off when white bathers threw rocks at black teenagers who had drifted into a white beach on Lake Michigan. Northerners’ use of pools during the Progressive era reinforced class and gender but not racial distinction.¹⁴ Working-class folk did not swim with the upper classes, but they were not as concerned about color. Following the Great Migration, the concerns about intimacy and sexuality that have always been latent in conversations about public space (in particular the public space of the pool) were directed at blacks. The peculiar democracy of the beach—in bathing suits it is more difficult to determine class—worked against black Americans. Wiltse marks this shift between the years of 1920 and 1940. The social changes that took place during this period shape West’s complex politics. (26)