



# STRUCTURE OF A PARAGRAPH

This handout introduces you to paragraphs which are the writer's building blocks and the reader's signposts.

## The point of a paragraph

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A paragraph is a cluster of sentences that expresses one main topic, point, or idea. However, in an essay, this point is made in an expanded way.

## The elements of a paragraph

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Apart from the statement of the main idea or point (in the topic sentence), the paragraph should include explanation of this point (in one or more sentences) and illustration of and/or evidence in support of this idea or point (in further sentences).

This may help you to remember the elements of a paragraph:

- S** Statement, point, idea
- E** explanation or expansion
- X** examples, illustration or supporting evidence
- Y** your conclusion (optional)

## The other functions of paragraphs

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Paragraphs can have other functions besides developing one main topic. They can also:

- introduce the essay or major sections of the essay
- conclude the essay
- move the reader from one section of the essay to another (transitional paragraphs)

## Length of paragraphs

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Length of paragraphs varies depending on what you have to say. Because of the elements of the paragraph, it is uncommon to write paragraphs of much less than 100 words. Remember too that very short paragraphs will give your work a staccato feel, which makes it harder to read. On the other hand, in very long paragraphs it is easy for you, as the writer to lose your way. And if you lose yours, so too will your reader!

Another helpful hint is to make sure that any paragraph does not exceed one page because if it does the reader has to deal with a big chunk of unbroken text. This can be hard work. If you have written a very long paragraph (250 words or more), work through it to see if you can either make it more concise, or find a natural break to make it into two.

Having said all that, you can occasionally use single-sentence or two-sentence paragraphs for dramatic effect.



### Related resources:

Structure of an essay  
Introduction and conclusion

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## Linking paragraphs

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Linking paragraphs together makes written work flow and this, in turn, makes it easier for the reader to follow your line of thought. You can link paragraphs together by:

- using signal words (see handout)
- using sentences or phrases at the beginning and/or ends of paragraphs.
- by using pronouns (e.g. she, he, they, this) that refer back to someone or something talked about in the previous paragraph

## Marking the paragraph

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Making the paragraph visually for the reader is very important. This signals to them the introduction of a new idea. You can mark a new paragraph in either of the following ways:

- by indenting the first line (the traditional way, mostly used when writing by hand)
- by missing out a line between paragraphs (mostly used in typing and word processing)

## A good paragraph

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A good paragraph has the following characteristics:

- it develops one topic or main point/idea (or functions as an introduction or conclusion or transition)
- it has a unity of purpose around logically explaining and illustrating this topic
- it is linked to the paragraphs immediately before and after it
- it is clearly marked for the reader