

## How To Write Good Paragraphs

A good paragraph is a mini-essay. A paragraph is a component of fictional prose and non-fiction writings. When writing essays, research papers, books, etc., new paragraphs are indented to show their beginnings. Each new paragraph begins with a new indentation. The purpose of a paragraph is to express a speaker's thoughts on a particular point in a clear way that is unique and specific to that paragraph. In other words, paragraphs shouldn't be mixing thoughts or ideas. When a new idea is introduced, generally, a writer will introduce a new paragraph. (<https://writingexplained.org/grammar-dictionary/paragraph>).

It should demonstrate three components:

### 1. Introduction

Definition of Introduction. An introduction, or introductory paragraph, falls in the start of an essay. It is the first paragraph, which is also called "a gateway" of an essay. ... It also introduces the thesis statement of the essay, which is the heart of an essay, and tells what is to be discussed in the body paragraphs. (<https://literarydevices.net>)

### 2. Body, i.e., supporting details

Conclusion or a transitional sentence to the paragraph that follows. A good paragraph is characterized by unity, coherence, and adequate development.

Unity: State the main idea of the paragraph in a clearly constructed topic sentence. Make sure each sentence is related to the central thought.

Coherence: Arrange ideas in a clear, logical order. Provide appropriate transitions to the subsequent paragraph.

Adequate development: Develop your paragraphs with specific details and examples.

Strategies for adequate development:

- a. Elaborate: Spell out the details by defining, or by clarifying and adding relevant, pertinent information.
- b. Illustrate: Paint a verbal picture that helps make or clarify your point(s). Well illustrated pieces are easier to read and follow than those on a high level of abstraction.
- c. Argue: Give the reasons, justifications, and rationales for the position or view you have taken in the topic sentence. Draw inferences for the reader and explain the significance of assertions or claims being made.
- d. Narrate: Relate the historical development of the phenomenon at issue.
- e. Process: Describe how something works.
- f. Describe: Observe without preconceived categories.

- g. Classify: Organize phenomena or ideas into larger categories that share common characteristics.
- h. Analyze: Divide phenomena or ideas into elements.
- i. Compare and Contrast: Show similarities and differences between two or more phenomena or ideas.
- j. Relate: Show correlations and causes (beware of logical fallacies, however!)

A paragraph should be neither too short nor too long. A good paragraph should be 5-6 sentences long. As a general rule, avoid single-sentence paragraphs. If your paragraphs run longer than a page, you are probably straining the grader's thought span. Look for a logical place to make a break or reorganize the material. Indent each new paragraph five spaces. (<https://trinitysem.edu/how-to-write-good-paragraphs/>).

### 5-step process to paragraph development

Let's walk through a 5-step process for building a paragraph. For each step there is an explanation and example. Our example paragraph will be about slave spirituals, the original songs that African Americans created during slavery. The model paragraph uses illustration (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. This idea directs the paragraph's development. 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 expression of the rationale or the 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 the expression of some type of support or evidence for the idea and the explanation that came before it. The example serves as a sign or representation of the relationship established in the idea and explanation portions of the paragraph. Here are two examples that we could use to 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 and reminding the reader of the relevance of the information in this paragraph to the main or 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. It 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. So, the top slice of bread (the first sentence of the paragraph) explains the topic (or controlling idea) of the paragraph. And, 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 (the topic sentence is bold):

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 only one main idea. Watch our short video on reverse outlining to learn a quick way to test whether your paragraphs are unified. In the following paragraph, the final two sentences branch off into a different topic; so, 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. 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.

#### 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 are probably familiar with the idea that transitions may be needed between paragraphs or sections in a paper (see our handout on transitions). Sometimes they are also 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 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 to orient the reader:

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.

### Descriptive Paragraph

1. Describe: I am going to DESCRIBE a sunset!

Sunset is the time of day when our sky meets the outer space solar winds. There are blue, pink, and purple swirls, spinning and twisting, like clouds of balloons caught in a whirlwind. The sun moves slowly to hide behind the line of horizon, while the moon races to take its place in prominence atop the night sky. People slow to a crawl, entranced, fully forgetting the deeds that must still be done. There is a coolness, a calmness, when the sun does set.

2. Inform: I am going to INFORM you about the Apollo 11 space mission.

On July 16, 1969, the Apollo 11 spacecraft launched from the Kennedy Space Center in Florida. Its mission was to go where no human being had gone before—the moon! The crew consisted of Neil Armstrong, Michael Collins, and Buzz Aldrin. The spacecraft landed on the moon in the Sea of Tranquility, a basaltic flood plain, on July 20, 1969. The moonwalk took place the following day. On July 21, 1969, at precisely 10:56 EDT, Commander Neil Armstrong emerged from the Lunar Module and took his famous first step onto the moon’s surface. He declared, “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.” It was a monumental moment in human history!

Narrate: I am going to NARRATE a story about the Apollo 11 space mission.

It was July 21, 1969, and Neil Armstrong awoke with a start. It was the day he would become the first human being to ever walk on the moon. The journey had begun several days earlier, when on July 16th, the Apollo 11 launched from Earth headed into outer space. On board with Neil Armstrong were Michael Collins and Buzz Aldrin. The crew landed on the moon in the Sea of Tranquility a day before the actual walk. Upon Neil’s first step onto the

moon's surface, he declared, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." It sure was!

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