

How to create effective paragraphs

One of the most important techniques in editing your work is constructing and checking paragraphs. There is material on the disc about paragraphs, but here are some further notes that may be helpful.

What's a paragraph?

A paragraph is a group of sentences all supporting a single topic.

And what's a topic?

Well, it's **not** the subject of the paragraph.

The word 'topic' comes from the Greek word *topos*, meaning 'place'. A topic is 'the place where you stand in relation to the subject you are writing about'. In other words, the topic is what you want to **say** about the subject. And to say something, you will have to express it as a **sentence**.

So a paragraph addresses a single topic, and that topic must be expressed in a **topic sentence**.

Let's take an example. Suppose you are discussing earth dams: constructions to collect water in dry areas.

Your subject is 'earth dams'.

Now: what is your topic? It's whatever you want to say in the paragraph about earth dams.

For example, you might want to say:

Earth dams are efficient and effective alternatives to wells.

That would be your topic sentence.

Now you need to construct a paragraph to support that topic sentence.

How would you develop an explanation to support the sentence? The topic sentence provokes the question: 'How? In what ways are earth dams efficient and effective?'

You might have four answers to that question.

1. They are easy to maintain.
2. Livestock can use the dams directly.
3. The water is easier to collect than from wells.
4. The water from dams is of better quality than from wells.

We can put all those ideas into our paragraph.

The best place for the topic sentence is at the beginning of the paragraph. The rest of the paragraph can discuss the four ideas that support the topic sentence.

And here is the finished paragraph.

Earth dams are efficient and effective alternatives to wells. They are easy to maintain: the beneficiaries can simply de-silt them from time to time. The earth dams are easily accessible to all livestock species and wildlife. The water is also easy for people to collect: women and children can collect water with minimum support of their male relatives and neighbours. In other water sources, especially shallow wells, a chain of men must haul up the water. Finally, earth dams produce useful and pleasant-tasting water: it is soft compared to the water from shallow wells.

Effective paragraphs: four key features

When we edit paragraphs, we need to test for **four** key characteristics.

An effective paragraph has:

- unity;
- a topic sentence;
- coherence; and
- adequate development.

Unity

The paragraph should focus on one idea or topic. Everything in the paragraph should relate to that one idea.

A topic sentence

The topic sentence expresses the summarizing idea of the paragraph. It should be at the start of the paragraph, and can probably contain no more than about 15 words.

In a sequence of paragraphs - a section - you should be able to read the topic sentence of each paragraph, in order, and understand the whole section in summary form.

Coherence

All the sentences in the paragraph should fit together in a coherent way.

You can help create coherence in your paragraphs in various ways. Here are a few suggestions.

1. Repeat words and ideas in successive sentences.

Here is an example, where the idea of 'literacy' is carefully repeated across two complex sentences. (Indeed, so are the words 'women' and 'girls'.)

We believe that literacy is key to girls' and women's empowerment, an essential element for their self-esteem that helps them to speak out strongly and struggle together against violence. We have established literacy classes in many different areas of the country to address the problem of illiteracy of women and girls.

2. Construct successive sentences in the same way.

We call this 'parallel construction'. Two sentences - or groups of sentences - can be structured in the same way, so that the reader can find their way through the material more easily.

In this example of parallel construction, the writer uses a question-and-answer structure twice. Notice also how the writer echoes 'Why' and 'because, in part', to help the reader pick up the parallel structure.

Why do we have a "jobless recovery"? Because, in part, employers are using record levels of overtime instead of hiring new workers. Why are

many companies slashing their work forces by thousands? Because, in part, they believe the road to profit is to be lean and mean, to push their employees harder and longer.

3. Use transitional devices to link your sentences together.

Transitional devices are words and phrases that show how one sentence relates to the sentence before it. Here is a list of typical transitional devices. Use them to show your reader how your ideas connect together.

To add:

and, again, and then, besides, equally important, finally, further, furthermore, nor, too, next, lastly, what's more, moreover, in addition, first (second, etc.)

To compare:

whereas, but, yet, on the other hand, however, nevertheless, on the other hand, on the contrary, by comparison, where, compared to, up against, balanced against, vis à vis, but, although, conversely, meanwhile, after all, in contrast, although this may be true

To prove:

because, for, since, for the same reason, obviously, evidently, furthermore, moreover, besides, indeed, in fact, in addition, in any case, that is

To show exception:

yet, still, however, nevertheless, in spite of, despite, of course, once in a while, sometimes

To show time:

immediately, thereafter, soon, after a few hours, finally, then, later, previously, formerly, first (second, etc.), next, and then

To repeat:

in brief, as I have said, as I have noted, as has been noted

To emphasize:

definitely, extremely, obviously, in fact, indeed, in any case, absolutely, positively, naturally, surprisingly, always, forever, perennially, eternally, never, emphatically, unquestionably, without a doubt, certainly, undeniably, without reservation

To show sequence:

first, second, third, and so forth. A, B, C, and so forth. next, then, following this, at this time, now, at this point, after, afterward, subsequently, finally, consequently, previously, before this, simultaneously, concurrently, thus, therefore, hence, next, and then, soon

To give an example:

for example, for instance, in this case, in another case, on this occasion, in this situation, take the case of, to demonstrate, to illustrate, as an illustration, to illustrate

To summarize or conclude:

in brief, on the whole, summing up, to conclude, in conclusion, as I have shown, as I have said, hence, therefore, accordingly, thus, as a result, consequently, on the whole

Adequate development

Your paragraph should discuss the topic adequately. In other words, the reader should not feel, when they reach the end of the paragraph, that you have left anything out.

Adequacy is not easy to judge. It can be hard to decide whether you have said enough in the paragraph. You can develop your topic in a number of ways, but if you have written only two or three sentences in a paragraph, it is likely that development is not adequate.

Here are some ways of developing your topic within a paragraph.

- Use examples and illustrations
- Cite data (facts, statistics, evidence, details, and others)
- Examine testimony (what other people say such as quotes and paraphrases)
- Use an anecdote or story

- Define terms in the paragraph
- Compare and contrast
- Evaluate causes and reasons
- Examine effects and consequences
- Analyze the topic
- Describe the topic
- Offer a chronology of an event (time segments)

Work on **sentence length** within the paragraph. Usually, the topic sentence should be the shortest sentence in the paragraph. Sentence length will probably very gently increase as the paragraph proceeds. You might end the paragraph with a strikingly short sentence, both to signal the end of the paragraph and to energize the reader to pass on to the next paragraph. Short sentences can pack a punch!

Topic sentence: 15 words maximum

All other sentences: 25 words maximum