



OU Writing Center
The University of Oklahoma

Paragraph Structure

What is a Paragraph?

A paragraph is a section of writing, usually separated by indentation or a new line. Each paragraph focuses on one subject. Most longer compositions are made up of multiple paragraphs, and each paragraph is in turn made up of multiple sentences.

How Many Sentences are in a Paragraph?

While many people learn growing up that five sentences make up a paragraph, there is actually no hard and fast rule for how many sentences are in a paragraph. Some paragraphs may take up to a page while others may only be a few sentences. In certain types of writing, such as creative writing and journalism, paragraphs can even be only one sentence or a few words.

Rather than focusing on length, it's best to divide paragraphs by topics. Each paragraph should be focused on one topic or main idea. If you find yourself trying to tackle multiple topics in one paragraph, it might be time to either remove one of those topics or to split the paragraph into two or more separate paragraphs.

Parts of a Paragraph

While paragraph structure and length vary, most academic paragraphs are made up of four parts: **topic sentence**, **evidence**, **explanation**, and **conclusion**. Let's break those down.

1. **Topic Sentence:** This is a sentence that cues the reader into the goal of the paragraph. Not every paragraph has a topic sentence, but it is good to include one as a general rule. Topic sentences are typically the first sentence or located early in the paragraph to establish the focus and purpose of the paragraph. Topic

sentences can be found anywhere in the paragraph; however, readers will usually expect them at the start.

2. **Evidence:** This is the information you use to support your claims. This most often takes the form of quotes or statistics.
3. **Explanation:** This is the breakdown of that evidence. Here is where you explain the evidence and why it is relevant. Essentially, tell the reader why the evidence matters.
4. **Conclusion:** The paragraph wraps up in a natural place, usually leading into the next point, or leading directly to the concluding paragraph.

Additionally, a well-written paragraph has **unity, coherence, and adequate development**.

1. **Unity:** The paragraph focuses on one topic only. It is unified in its goal.
2. **Coherence:** The paragraph is easy to follow, utilizing relevant transitions and clear wording. It is in a logical order.
3. **Adequate Development:** The paragraph must explain itself thoroughly. It must contain enough information for its topic.

Now let's see how these parts apply to different types of paragraphs.

Types of Paragraphs

In **academic writing**, there are usually three major types of paragraphs. These are **introduction paragraphs, body paragraphs, and conclusions**.

Introduction: These paragraphs introduce the paper, typically as the opening paragraph. The introduction begins with a hook, sets up the focus of the paper, and includes the thesis statement, often with a transition sentence at the end. A hook is something that grabs the reader's attention, such as a quote, statistic, emotional statement, or anecdote. The paragraph then either alludes to or directly states what the paper will be about, and the thesis statement is usually found toward the end. Additionally, introductions will often provide background information about the topic though this can also be found in body paragraphs.

Body: Body paragraphs make up the majority of the paper. These are the paragraphs between the introduction and conclusion. There are many forms a body paragraph can take, but ideally, they will include the parts of a paragraph discussed above. They support the thesis. To do so, they contain evidence and examples that help build the main point of the essay.

Conclusion: Conclusions wrap up the paper. Traditionally, these paragraphs will restate the thesis statement as well as summarize the essential content of the paper. Conclusions offer the reader an idea of what to take with them when they leave the paper. They tell us what we talked about and where we should go from here. Conclusions should end with an interesting or impactful concluding sentence. They do not introduce new information, although they may include a call to action.

In **fiction writing**, there are also other types of paragraphs, such as paragraphs containing only action, dialogue, or description.

Paragraph Example

(1) Students at OU give the Writing Center high ratings for their services. (2) 86% of writers say that they received "excellent" help from the Writing Center, and many say they felt more confident after their appointment and earned higher grades on their papers. (3) The feedback shows that the Writing Center is serving its purpose of supporting academic writing success. (4) Providing quality feedback and helping students be more confident writers makes the Writing Center a valuable resource here at OU.

The first sentence is the topic sentence. It's letting us know that this paragraph is about students rating the OU Writing Center well. The next sentence is evidence, a statistic about writer feedback. The following sentence explains this evidence by telling us what the feedback shows us. Finally, the paragraph concludes by stating the OU Writing Center is a valuable resource, which we learned through this paragraph.



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