

Paragraphing: Some Guidelines

Dividing an essay into paragraphs makes it easier for your readers to understand your ideas and to grasp the relationships between them. In addition, focusing on the construction of paragraphs also helps you compose your essay, especially in the revision process. If you approach revision by looking at one paragraph at a time instead of trying to “fix” the whole essay at once, the process is more manageable and less intimidating.

In writing and revising your essay, forget the arbitrary “rules” you may have learned about paragraphing, such as how many paragraphs to have in an essay or how many words or sentences to have in a paragraph. Pay attention to **content** rather than form: instead of trying to follow a formula or worrying about the “correct” placement of topic sentences or thesis statements, think about *what* you want to say and what your *audience needs* from you. When you focus on meaning and the communication of ideas, things fall into place.

Here are some aspects of paragraphing to keep in mind as you are revising your essay (don’t worry about these things as you compose your first draft):

UNITY: Many of us have done the English class exercise of finding the “topic sentence” of a paragraph, but in fact, every paragraph may not have an easily identifiable topic sentence in a particular place. It should, however, have a clear topic. A unified paragraph is one in which all of the sentences relate to a single idea and work together to develop that idea. To see if your paragraphs are unified, ask yourself: What is the main point or idea of this paragraph? Do all of the sentences work to develop that idea? If any of the sentences that seem relevant to the topic of the essay but not to the paragraph in which they appear, you need to move or eliminate them.

COHERENCE: All of the sentences in a paragraph should be in a logical order. This sounds self-evident, but in the early stages of the writing process, ideas don’t come to us in the perfect order, so it is often necessary to go back and move things around. Adding or moving sentences is easily done on a computer, so you want to make sure that the sentences in your revised paragraphs appear in an order that is logical for your reader.

DEVELOPMENT: Good writing is distinguished by the amount and quality of the details, the specifics that make a piece memorable. A lack of adequate development and detail can leave a good idea vague or unclear, perhaps leading your audience to draw the wrong conclusions, to assume you haven’t thought your ideas through carefully, or to lose interest and give up on the piece entirely. You don’t want to bore your readers or insult their intelligence by belaboring the obvious, but you need to provide enough specific, concrete details and examples to give the readers a clear picture of what you’re talking about. As you develop your ideas, you need to decide what to include and what to take out; this is a difficult balancing act, one that requires careful thought and good judgment to determine who your audience is and what they need from you.

TRANSITIONS: Transitions are words or phrases that show the relationships between ideas as you move from sentence to sentence and from paragraph to paragraph. The right transitions are very important in making your writing clear. Here are a few examples:

1. To show alternatives and additions: and, or, and then, also, moreover, furthermore, besides, in addition, next, finally, last.
2. To indicate contrast: but, yet, or, however, nevertheless, on the other hand.
3. To show a cause or result: because, so, for, therefore, consequently, thus, as a result, then.
4. To provide a summary: in other words, to sum up, in short, in fact.