PARAGRAPHS

This handout will…

- Help you understand how paragraphs are formed
- Help you develop stronger paragraphs
- Help you learn how to completely and clearly express your ideas

What is a paragraph?

One of the central components of a paper is the paragraph. When most students think of a paragraph, they hold on to the old myths about length: a paragraph is at least 5 sentences, a paragraph is half a page, etc. A paragraph, however, is "a group of sentences or a single sentence that forms a unit" (Lunsford and Connors, 116). Length or appearance is **not** a factor in determining whether a section in a paper is a paragraph. In fact, it is not the number of sentences that construct a paragraph, but it is the unity and coherence of ideas among those sentences that makes a paragraph a paragraph. For instance, in some styles of writing, particularly journalistic styles, a paragraph can be one sentence. As long as that sentence expresses the paper's central idea, that sentence can serve the function of a paragraph. Ultimately, strong paragraphs contain a sentence or sentences unified around one central, controlling idea. When the paragraph reaches completion it should serve to bring the reader into your paper and guide his/her understanding of what has been read. Whether that completion happens with one sentence or with twenty, the end result is still a paragraph.

How do I decide what to put in a paragraph?

Before you can begin to determine what the composition of your paragraphs will be, you must first understand what is the controlling idea in your specific piece of writing. What is the main point that you are trying to convey to your reader? The information that comprises your paragraphs should always have a relationship to this controlling idea. In other words, your paragraphs should remind your reader, **at every possible point**, that there is a relationship between your controlling idea and the information in each paragraph. **The controlling idea functions like a seed through which your paper, and your ideas, will grow.** The whole process is an organic one-a natural progression from a seed to a full-blown paper where there are direct, familial relationships between all of the ideas in your paper. Once you have decided what your controlling idea will be, then you should choose information that will help to support that idea throughout the entire paper.

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That information takes the form of sentences that comprise each paragraph of your paper.

The decision about what to put into your paragraphs, ultimately, begins with the germination of a seed of ideas. This "germination process" is better known as the process of **brainstorming**. Whatever the topic of your paper may be, it is always a good idea to think about all of the issues that surround your topic and the ultimate goals that you want to express. This process can take on many forms. What form you choose will depend heavily on your style or approach to writing in the pre-writing stage of your writing process. For some writers, the key is writing down all of the relevant issues in a series of phrases or words that express some greater idea. For others, this process involves a collection of information in the form of sentences. Whatever your method for prewriting, this part of paragraph development cannot be avoided. Often, these prewriting efforts become the first signs of development. Building paragraphs can be just as involved as building a major skyscraper: there must be a careful foundation which supports each paragraph just as there must be a careful foundation which supports each building. Any cracks, inconsistencies, or other corruptions of the foundation, can cause the whole paper to crumble.

Every paragraph in a paper should be

- **Unified** - The sentences should all refer to the main idea, thesis, of the paper (Rosen and Behrens 119).
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- **Coherent**-The sentences should be arranged in a logical manner and should follow a definite plan for development (Rosen and Behrens 119).

- **Well-Developed** – Every idea discussed in the paragraph should be adequately explained and supported through evidence and detail which works together to explain the paper's controlling idea (Rosen and Behrens 119).

5-STEP PROCESS TO PARAGRAPH DEVELOPMENT

1. CONTROLLING IDEA- the expression of the main idea, topic, or focus of the paragraph in a sentence or a collection of sentences.

- 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. A topic sentence announces and controls the content of a paragraph (Rosen and Behrens 122). Topic sentences can occur at 4 major points in a paragraph: the beginning of the paragraph, the middle of the paragraph, the end of the paragraph, or at both the beginning and the

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end of the paragraph. Here's how you might begin a paragraph on handing in homework:

IDEA - *Learning how to turn in homework assignments on time is one of the invaluable skills that college students can take with them into the working world.*

2. EXPLANATION OF CONTROLLING IDEA- the writer's rationale into his/her thinking about the main topic, idea, or focus of the paragraph

- 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. Here's the sentence that would follow the controlling idea about homework deadlines:

EXPLANATION - *Though the workforce may not assign homework to its workers in the traditional sense, many of the objectives and jobs that need to be completed require that employees work with deadlines. The deadlines that students encounter in the classroom may be different in content when compared to the deadlines of the workforce, but the importance of meeting those deadlines is the same. In fact, failure to meet the deadlines in both the classroom and the workforce can mean instant termination.*

3. EXAMPLE - the example serves as a sign or representation of the relationship established in the idea and explanation portions of the paragraph

- Paragraph development progresses with the expression of some type of support or evidence for the idea and the explanation that came before it. Here are two examples that you might use to follow the homework deadline explanation:

EXAMPLE-*For example, in the classroom, students form a contract with the teacher and the university when they enroll in a class. That contract requires that students complete the assignments and objectives set forth by the course's instructor in a specified time to receive a grade and credit for the course.*

EXAMPLE-*Accordingly, just as a student risks termination in the classroom if he/she fails to meet the deadline for a homework assignment, so, too, does that student risk termination in the workforce.*

4. EXPLANATION (of EXAMPLE) - the reasoning behind why you chose to use this/or these particular examples as evidence to support the major claim, focus, in your paragraph.

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- The next movement in paragraph development is an explanation of each example and its relevance to the topic sentence and rationale given at the beginning of the paragraph. This pattern continues until all points/examples that the reader deems necessary have been made and explained. NONE of your examples should be left unexplained. The relationship between the example and the idea should always be expressed. Look at these two explanations for examples in the homework deadline paragraph:

EXPLANATION FOR EXAMPLE-*When a student fails to complete those assignments by the deadline, the student breaks her contract with the university and the teacher to complete the assignments and objectives of the course. This often leaves the teacher with no recourse than to fail the student and leaves the university with no other recourse than to terminate the student's credit for the course.*

EXPLANATION FOR EXAMPLE-*A former student's contract with his/her employer functions in much the same way as the contract that student had with his instructor and with the university in a particular course.*

5. COMPLETION OF PARAGRAPH'S IDEA OR TRANSITION INTO NEXT PARAGRAPH-a review for your reader about the relevance of the information that you just discussed in the paragraph, or a transition or preparation for your reader for the paragraph that follows.

- 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. 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 homework deadlines paragraph:

IDEA-*Developing good habits of turning in assignments in class now, as current students, will aid your performance and position as future participants in the working world.*

Notice that the example and explanation steps of this model (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.

Now here is a look at the completed paragraph:

Learning how to turn in homework assignments on time is one of the invaluable skills that college students can take with them into the working world. Though the workforce may not assign homework to its workers in

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the traditional sense, many of the objectives and jobs that need to be completed require that employees work with deadlines. The deadlines that students encounter in the classroom may be different in content when compared to the deadlines of the workforce, but the importance of meeting those deadlines is the same. In fact, failure to meet the deadlines in both the classroom and the workforce can mean instant termination. For example, in the classroom, students form a contract with the teacher and the university when they enroll in a class. That contract requires that students complete the assignments and objectives set forth by the course's instructor in a specified time to receive a grade and credit for the course. Accordingly, just as a student risks termination in the classroom if he/she fails to meet the deadline for a homework assignment, so, too, does that student risk termination in the workforce. When a student fails to complete those assignments by the deadline, the student breaks her contract with the university and the teacher to complete the assignments and objectives of the course. This often leaves the teacher with no recourse than to fail the student and leaves the university with no other recourse than to terminate the student's credit for the course. Developing good habits of turning in assignments in class now, as current students, will aid your performance and position as future participants in the working world.

Beneath the Formula for Paragraph Development

There are some other central components of paragraph development that help to make this formula work. These components are often overlooked, but developing the sentences that complete the steps of the process of paragraph development is not possible without these 2 components:

1) Topic Sentences - A topic sentence is a sentence that expresses the main idea of a paragraph. It tells the reader what to expect about the information that will follow. Without the use of a topic sentence, developing a paragraph can be extremely difficult. Topic sentences can appear at several points in a paragraph:

- the beginning of the paragraph
- the middle of the paragraph
- the end of the paragraph
- the beginning and the end of the paragraph

*Notice how the development of the paragraph (in the 5-Step example above) is framed by 2 topic sentences (beginning and end) which work to reinforce the same idea

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and close the discussion and multiple examples given by the writer.)

Here is an example of a topic sentence in the middle of a paragraph (in bold print):

Homework is one of those necessary evils of being a student. The one sure way that a teacher knows how to measure your progress in his/her course is to assign homework that tests your knowledge of the information that is taught. Some instructors, however, seem to use homework as a way of reassuring themselves that they have "taught" the information to the students. Many students, aware of these ideas about homework, tend to treat homework as a chore, with little or no thought into the work that is turned in. **Homework, however, like any designated task, is a reflection not only on you as a student, but also on you as an individual.** When an employer has to decide whether or not to hire you, he or she has to consider your ability to complete the demands of the working world. For many employers, the way that you handle your "homework" in college, often the way that you will handle your homework on the job. For example, often your grade in a class is determined by the quality of the homework that you do. That homework grade can be a significant part of your final grade for the course. In fact, many students can attest to that grade for a class where the homework grade made the difference in their final grade for the course. Once you leave college, and you attempt to find a job, those homework grades translate into final GPAs for your major. Those final GPAs show up on résumés and job applications and employers look to see if you have done your "homework" in school as a key factor in determining if you will do your "homework" on the job.

2) Transitions (see our separate handout on transitions) - Transitions come in the forms of single words, phrases, sentences, and even whole paragraphs. They help to establish relationships between ideas in a paragraph and to create a logical progression of those ideas in a paragraph. Without transitions, your paragraph will not be unified, coherent, or well developed. Look at the following paragraph and the transitions that it uses from idea to idea (in bold print):

Juggling the demands of a job with the demands of being a full-time student makes good academic performance difficult. Many students are forced to choose between good work on the job and good work in the classroom. **Often**, good work in the classroom is compromised for good work on the job because the job pays the rent. **In addition**, those students who do manage to perform well in both areas usually do so at the expense

of their health. **For example**, several students complain of the inability to handle the stress of both a job and school. **In fact**, the stress of both can often cause headaches, dizziness, fatigue, and other ailments that slow the body down and prevent adequate performance in either area. **To eliminate the threat of being in the middle between job and school**, students have to form a balance between the demands of work and the demands of the classroom. **Ultimately**, managing your time more effectively, working the same number of hours in smaller chunks, and planning ahead can all help in alleviating some of the stress to the body and to the mind.

In Review…

Paragraph development is more than just a few sentences that occupy the same space in a paper, it is an organic process which makes intricate links between various ideas. These links, ultimately, create one single idea which runs throughout the entire paper. There are many different components of the paragraph development model. All of your paragraphs should have one central idea, the idea should have a discussion of how it works, the explanation should be shown in an example, the example should be explained, and the final idea should be reiterated while preparing the reader for the development to come. Awareness of all of these components and utilization of them, will help to make your paragraphs more unified, more coherent, and most importantly, more developed.

Bibliography

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