

Study Skills: Paragraphing

Video transcript

This video is about paragraphing. It will help you to write clear and cohesive paragraphs that help your reader understand your assignments.

First, we'll talk about the purpose of paragraphs, and then the structure. To help you understand the structure of clear paragraphs, we will look at topic sentences, at the body of the paragraphs and at how we conclude our paragraphs.

So what are paragraphs and why do we use them?

It's important to remember that the purpose of a paragraph is to help our readers.

How do they do that?

A paragraph is a group of sentences about one particular idea. They are the building blocks of longer texts. When someone reads your assignment, they read one paragraph at a time, in order. Each paragraph presents one idea so your reader can read and understand one idea before they move to the next. That way, they more easily follow your arguments. So how you organise and sequence your paragraphs can help your reader understand the development of your ideas in your essays and reports.

Many students ask how long their paragraph should be. No firm rules exist about the number of sentences or words in a paragraph but, as a general guideline, most contain four to six sentences and between about a hundred to two hundred words.

What should you do if your paragraphs are much longer?

Well, you know that each paragraph focuses on one main idea, so read each carefully. You may find that you have included information that could be considered two ideas, so you could split a long paragraph into two.

Now let's focus on the structure of your paragraph. You know that essays usually have three main parts: the introduction, the body and the conclusion. You can think of paragraphs in the same way. One common structure for paragraphs is known as TEEL/C.

'T' means topic sentence, 'E' means explanation, elaboration evidence or example, and 'L' or 'C' means link to the next paragraph or conclusion.

First, we'll focus on topic sentences. You can think of the topic sentence as a sign post for the reader because they tell your reader what they're going to read. Topic sentences are very important because unlike some other cultures, English readers expect to be told the main point of a piece of writing before they read it. This is known as deductive organisation.

Here are some important points to remember about your topic sentences. They must introduce the topic of the paragraph, introduce the controlling idea or what aspect of the topic we will discuss, be located early in the paragraph, usually the first one or two sentences, and link closely to the thesis or aim in the introduction of the essay.

If your topic sentences are well written, you could create a summary of your essay by cutting and pasting your topic sentences into a new document.

Now let's think about the body. The body of your paragraph is where you expand on the topic and the controlling idea presented in the topic sentence. In the body of your paragraph, you will explain or elaborate on your ideas, or provide evidence or examples in support of your point. Often, your evidence includes facts and ideas paraphrased from published research and they must be referenced.

Turning now to the end of your paragraph. You may be surprised to know that, in fact, not every paragraph has an obvious conclusion. This is because paragraphs are part of a whole text, not distinct separate items, so a strong conclusion is less necessary. Overall, the last sentence in your paragraph could perform any of these functions, it could: conclude with a comment on the evidence, conclude with a summary of the evidence, link back to the topic sentence, which means it also links to the thesis, or link forward to the paragraph that's coming next.

If you're using the last sentence as a tool for linking you, should use keywords. A key word from the topic sentence will help the reader remember the point of the paragraph while a key word from the topic sentence of the next paragraph will give the reader a hint about what's coming up.

This video has provided an overview of paragraphs, their purpose and their structure. If you'd like to learn more or need further assistance with your paragraphs, contact a Language and Learning Advisor.