

Planning and Writing Paragraphs

View a slideshow titled *Writing Focused Paragraphs* at http://glory.gc.maricopa.edu/~mdesoto/Writing_Focused_Paragraphs.htm

A paragraph is a group of sentences, generally from 8 to 10, which develop a single topic. Writers use paragraphs as a means of organizing information on a page. The beginning of a new paragraph signals to the reader an introduction of a new idea. Paragraphing is really a writer's tool used to package ideas on a page to better communicate with the reader. A well-written paragraph is unified, coherent, and complete.

- Unified -- all of the sentences in the paragraph develop one idea, contained in the topic sentence;
- Coherent --the sentences are in a logical, understandable order and smoothly integrated;
- Complete -- enough facts, details, examples, quotations of authorities, and reasons to support the topic sentence are included to adequately develop the topic.

Paragraphs begin with a topic sentence that summarizes the single topic, or main idea, expressed in the paragraph. The remaining sentences of the paragraph explain and develop this idea or topic. Some paragraphs conclude with a restatement of the main idea, but this is not always necessary.

Topic Sentences

The topic sentence is the first sentence of the paragraph; it summarizes the single topic, or main idea, expressed in the paragraph. A topic sentence must do more than merely state what a paragraph is about. It must have focus - that is, it must indicate how the topic will be handled in the upcoming paragraph. For example, if we wish to write a paragraph with the topic of "hazing," we cannot simply write, "This paragraph will be about hazing."

Consider some of the many paragraphs that could result:

- Hazing is bad (and why)
- Hazing is good (and why)
- The controversy over hazing
- Legal penalties of hazing
- Definition of hazing
- History of hazing
- Why hazing continues
- Dangers of hazing
- Student attitudes toward hazing
- Parental attitudes toward hazing
- Teacher attitudes toward hazing

Paragraphs about each of the above topics would need very different topic sentences, such as:

- Hazing is a dangerous activity that threatens students' safety and well-being. or
- Students who haze others face a range of stiff punishments, including prison.

Each of these sentences indicate that "hazing" is the topic of the paragraph, but each leads the reader in a different direction. A focused topic sentence makes the reader expect something specific, which the rest of the paragraph should then deliver. The sentence above, for instance, leads us to expect examples of the dangers of hazing - how students can be or have been injured, the psychological effects of hazing, and other information making the case that hazing constitutes a threat. The second sentence leads readers to expect a list of penalties (perhaps in the writer's own state or school district) assessed for hazing. Since the sentence

mentions a "range," some of the penalties described will probably be mild, while others will be severe. The paragraph may address the punishments in order from weakest to strongest. Readers can get all this information from a single, focused topic sentence. The information helps guide readers through the rest of the paragraph.

When writing a paragraph about a person, the topic sentence includes the person's name, and the idea is the concept communicated about the person. For example, fill in any one of the blanks below and create different topic sentence that may be used in a paragraph describing a person.

John Smith enjoys _____

John Smith hates _____

John Smith loves _____

John Smith works _____

John Smith plays _____

John Smith makes _____

John Smith builds _____

John Smith expects _____

John Smith provides _____

Open your word processing program and write a summarizing topic sentence for each of the three assigned paragraphs. In the sentence, state the classmates' full name and describe the singular focused idea that the paragraph will develop.

Supporting Details

The supporting details are the remaining sentences of the paragraph, after the topic sentence. There are usually between 7 to 10 sentences that explain and develop the main idea or topic.

Some techniques used to develop a paragraph and provide supporting details include:

- Using examples and illustrations,
- Citing data (facts, statistics, evidence, details, and others),
- Examining testimony (what other people say such as quotes and paraphrases),
- Using an anecdote or story,
- Defining terms in the paragraph,
- Comparing and contrasting two ideas or items,
- Evaluating causes and reasons,
- Examining effects and consequences,
- Analyzing the topic,
- Describing the topic,
- Offering a chronology of an event (time segments).

Write a list of the supporting details for each paragraph about a classmate. It is helpful to write your topic sentence at the top of your list of details to keep your focus on the one main idea of the paragraph. If a detail or example does not explain the topic sentence, it does not belong in your paragraph

Paragraph 1 Topic Sentence: _____

Details about this topic:

Paragraph 2 Topic Sentence: _____

Details about this topic:

Paragraph 3 Topic Sentence: _____

Details about this topic:

Organizing the Details

Carefully analyze and organize your lists of details for each paragraph. Consider each detail to include and where it should be placed in the paragraph in relation to the other ideas.

Look for common or related ideas that should be grouped together in the paragraph

If one idea occurs first chronologically (in real time), then place this idea first in the list. Arrange the rest of the ideas by chronological order, if this applies.

In some paragraphs, it is more logical to arrange the ideas by their order of importance in the paragraph.

Every sentence in a paragraph must explain the main idea of the paragraph. If you have a detail that does not explain the main idea in the topic sentence, then cross it off and discard it.

Read your reorganized list of details, and decide if you have enough details to fully develop a paragraph of 8 to 10 sentences. If not, you must add more details (and maybe go back and talk to your classmate for more ideas!).

More Information

Some, but not all, paragraphs also contain a summary sentence. The summary sentence is the last sentence of the paragraph; it recaps the main idea.

Not every paragraph has or needs a summary sentence. If the topic sentence makes a clear point, and the details adequately explain and develop the main idea, then a summary sentence is not needed or desired. In fact, sometimes it appears repetitious.

Writing the Paragraphs

When you have sufficient details for the paragraphs, arranged in a logical order, type the details in your list as complete sentences. Use appropriate transition words between sentences to provide a sense of time (before, afterward), indicate a shift in idea or direction (in addition, as a result), and help a reader move from sentence to sentence, or idea to idea, within a paragraph. Finally, use your word processing program's spell checker and grammar checker to polish your writing and edit for mistakes.

Read the rubric for this assignment. A rubric is a grading tool that describes the criteria, or "what counts," for the assignment. It also describes each of the criteria according to gradations of quality, with descriptions of strong, middling, and problematic student work. You may use the rubric as a check list to determine if the writing meets the criteria of the assignment.