



Paragraphs

What is a paragraph?

Paragraphs are the building blocks of papers. Many students define paragraphs in terms of length: a paragraph is a group of at least five sentences, a paragraph is half a page long, etc. In reality, though, the unity and coherence of ideas among sentences is what constitutes a paragraph. A paragraph is defined as “a group of sentences or a single sentence that forms a unit” (Lunsford and Connors 116). Length and appearance do not determine whether a section in a paper is a paragraph. For instance, in some styles of writing, particularly journalistic styles, a paragraph can be just one sentence long. Ultimately, a paragraph is a sentence or group of sentences that support one main idea. In this handout, we will refer to this as the “controlling idea,” because it controls what happens in the rest of the paragraph.

How do I decide what to put in a paragraph?

Before you can begin to determine what the composition of a particular paragraph will be, you must first decide on an argument and a working thesis statement for your paper. What is the most important idea that you are trying to convey to your reader? The information in each paragraph must be related to that idea. In other words, your paragraphs should remind your reader that there is a recurrent relationship between your thesis and the information in each paragraph. A working thesis functions like a seed from 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 the paper.

The decision about what to put into your paragraphs begins with the germination of a seed of ideas; this “germination process” is better known as [brainstorming](#). There are many techniques for brainstorming; whichever one you choose, this stage of paragraph development cannot be skipped.

Building paragraphs can be lik(n)3(43 297.77 2 TmG{)JTET@MC /Span /MCID 11/Lang (en-US)BDC q01.03.04 020

Clearly related to the thesis: The sentences should all refer to the central idea, or thesis, of the paper (Rosen and Behrens 119).

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 details that work together to explain the paragraph's controlling idea (Rosen and Behrens 119).

How do I organize a paragraph?

There are many different ways to organize a paragraph. The organization you choose will depend on the controlling idea of the paragraph. Below are a few possibilities for organization, with links to brief examples:

Narration: Tell a story. Go chronologically, from start to finish.

Description: Provide specific details about what something looks, smells, tastes, sounds, or feels like. Organize spatially, in order of appearance, or by topic.

Process: Explain how something works, step by step. Perhaps follow a sequence—first, second, third.

Classification: Separate into groups or explain the various parts of a topic.

Illustration: Give examples and explain how those examples support your point. (See an example in the 5-step process below.)

Illustration paragraph: a 5-

