

# Paragraph Structure

In academic writing, **paragraphs** form the **building blocks** of your text. More explicitly, a paragraph is a **structured grouping of related sentences dealing with a single topic**. The length, number and order of paragraphs will depend on the written piece. Paragraphs are important because they fulfil the following functions:

- **Organisation:** They help to structure and outline your ideas.
- **Focus:** They keep you, the writer, focused on one topic at a time.
- **Coherence:** They assist readers in following the chain of thoughts, or argument, you are developing.

Paragraphs commonly follow a specific structure. To walk you through the process of writing a strong paragraph, we will use a step-by-step guide that will explain all the necessary components of a paragraph.

There are three main components to a paragraph:

## 1. The Topic Sentence

*The topic sentence presents the main idea of the paragraph. As the first sentence (in most cases), the topic sentence lets the reader know what you are discussing in the paragraph, while shedding light on how the idea relates to the overall focus of the writing piece.*

## 2. Supporting Evidence and Analysis

*These sentences discuss the main idea of the paragraph and support the topic sentence with evidence. Evidence will be made up of your research, including academic sources and direct examples from primary texts or studies that will support your claim (note: remember to reference these sources according to your prescribed referencing format). However, you will need to find a balance between the evidence you provide and the analysis (interpretation of evidence). As you progress in your academic career, the analysis of evidence will become increasingly important.*

## 3. The Concluding Observation (and/or Linking Sentence)

*The concluding observation closes your paragraph with an observation that is more than just a summary of the contents of the paragraph (note: do not restate content here because it will become repetitive). It is a final statement that ties together the ideas brought up in the paragraph and emphasizes the main idea, thereby leading to the next step in your argument. Therefore, it can also serve as a transition to the main idea of the next paragraph.*



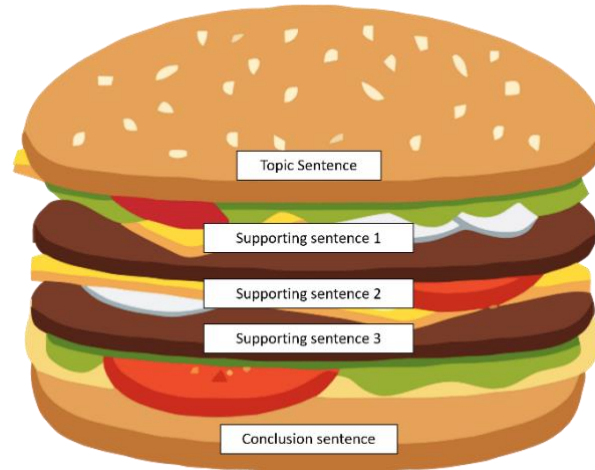
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**An interesting way to remember these three important aspects is through the ‘Burger Analogy’:**

The bun holding everything together is the **topic sentence** (top) and the **concluding observation** (bottom), and everything in between is made up by the **supporting evidence and analysis**. To have an efficient paragraph, or burger, it needs to have enough filling in it, but not so much that you cannot manage to eat it (or stay focused!).



**Some frequently asked questions:**

Question	Answer
<b>When do you start a new paragraph?</b>	<i>New ideas should always start in new paragraphs. When introducing a contrasting or different position use a new paragraph, but make sure to have a clear topic sentence to introduce the main idea.</i>
<b>What do you do if your paragraph is too short?</b>	<i>Writers should be wary of paragraphs that only have two or three sentences. The paragraph is not fully developed if it is too short. To determine how well the paragraph developed an idea, look at the topic sentence. If you turn the topic sentence into a question, the rest of the paragraph should answer that question fully.</i>
<b>What do you do if your paragraph is too long or complex?</b>	<i>If your paragraph becomes too long or overly complex, you will need to split that large paragraph in order to make your writing more readable or easy to understand. This means you will need to break up the large paragraph into two or three smaller paragraphs, each with their own topic sentence. To do this, identify the sentences in your paragraph which fall under the same general idea or</i>



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	<i>argument, then split the paragraph whenever there is a change from this original idea/argument.</i>
<b>What do you do if the ideas in your paragraph do not flow well?</b>	<p><i>If this is the case, you can use:</i></p> <p><i>(i) Repetition: repeat key words to emphasize the main idea.</i></p> <p><i>(ii) Pronouns: use pronouns and antecedents to form connections between sentences and avoid unnecessary repetition.</i></p> <p><i>(iii) Synonyms: use words that are close in meaning to refer back to preceding words/phrases.</i></p> <p><i>(iv) Transitional/cohesive words and phrases: use transitional words and phrases to link one idea with another and to show the relationship between them.</i></p>
<b>What do you do if your paragraph is not coherent?</b>	<p><i>If your paragraph is not coherent and does not make logical sense to your reader, you can use:</i></p> <p><i>(i) Chronological organisation: this is often used to describe a series of events, steps, or observations.</i></p> <p><i>(ii) Spatial organisation: presents details as they appear to a viewer; from top to bottom, outside to inside, east to west, etc.</i></p> <p><i>(iii) General-to-specific organisation: starts with a general topic sentence to give the main idea, then gives specifics to elaborate on the idea.</i></p>

### Examples of paragraph structure:

#### Example 1

Although currently popular among American drivers, Sport Utility Vehicles, or SUVs, damage the environment by emitting pollution and threatening to limit the supply of natural resources.

SUVs release more fumes into the atmosphere because the government does not regulate their fuel standards as strictly as those for cars. As global warming becomes more serious, perhaps the government should impose more limits on SUV emissions to protect citizens from air pollution. **In addition**, due to their size, SUVs use more gas than cars, which, **consequently**, harms the environment. Hummers or Land Rovers, **for example**, require much more gas than the average sedan. Consumer demand for more gas to fill SUVs' larger tanks has **also** resulted in the need to drill for more oil, potentially threatening the conservation



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of natural wildlife areas, such as in Alaska. **Further**, the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico exemplifies the environmental devastation that can result from oil drilling to meet the demand for energy. **To curb pollution and the threat to dwindling natural resources such as oil and gas, Americans might consider alternatives such as hybrid vehicles or even public transportation. Consumers should be aware that their choices in vehicles do impact the earth and the preservation of its resources.**

## Example 2

When I first heard that I had been accepted to study audiology I was so excited, I felt this amazing sense of possibility. My younger brother is hearing-impaired, and seeing the difference audiology has made to his life, is what inspired me to follow this path. **However**, now that I have started to learn more about what it means to be a well-developed Integrated Healthcare Professional (Olckers et al., 2007), I realise that I had a very narrow view of the profession of audiology and what it means to be a healthcare provider in general. As a patient or family member we tend to only pay attention to the things we see healthcare providers do, and often don't consciously think about how they made us feel or the activities they engage in 'behind the scenes' that enables them to treat patients with dignity, or not, as the case may be. **So**, initially I was frustrated to be learning about empathy and reflection and didn't really see the value in it, when what I wanted to be learning about were tools, tests, and procedures I had seen my brother's audiologist use. **However**, I am now starting to appreciate how important empathy, reflection, and knowledge is to the development of a good healthcare professional (Olckers et al. 2007), and how being an integrated healthcare professional is what enables the practice of dignity conserving care (Chochinov, 2007). **When I reflect, I realise that anyone can learn to perform a procedure, but only an IHP will keep consciously reflecting on their own attitudes and behaviours until they are able to perform a procedure with compassion and in a way that dignifies their patients, by keeping them informed, empathising with their fears, and ensuring their partnership throughout the treatment process (Chochinov, 2007).**

### The various components of the paragraphs in both examples:

**Topic sentence:** *The topic sentence conveys the paragraph's main point and previews the writer's treatment of the subject.*

**Supporting evidence and analysis:** *Supporting sentences include details, examples, and explanations that directly connect to the topic sentence and help to develop the topic sentence. Notice the use of **transition words** to help the writer's ideas flow smoothly, maintain organization, and shift to another supporting point.*

**Concluding observation:** *The final sentences refer back to the topic sentence and help to unify the paragraph.*

Adapted from:

Nesbitt-Johnston Writing Centre, Hamilton College, United States. Paragraph structure. Available at: <https://www.hamilton.edu/documents/writing-center/Paragraphs.PDF> (accessed: 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021)

University of West Georgia, United States. Developing strong eloquent paragraphs. Available at: <https://www.westga.edu> (accessed: 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021)

University College Cork, Ireland. Paragraph structure. Available at: <https://www.ucc.ie/en/media/support/skillscentre/pdfx27sampbookmarks/ParagraphStructure.pdf> (accessed: 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021)

Chestnut Hill College, United States. Paragraph structure. Available at: <https://chc.edu> (accessed: 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021)

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