

Using paragraphs

This guide explains how to make effective use of paragraphs in your writing. The function and features of a paragraph are explained, together with guidelines for using paragraphs to create a clear and coherent written structure.

Other useful guides from Student Learning Development: *Using the comma*; *Sentence structure*

What is a paragraph?

Writing of any length requires subdivision into a number of points or stages, and these stages are expressed in a paragraph. Paragraphs, whether denoted by a new line and an indentation or a line break, provide a structure for your writing. The end of a paragraph represents a significant pause in the flow of the writing. This pause is a signpost to the reader, indicating that the writing is about to move on to a different stage. Each paragraph should deal with one idea or aspect of an idea, and it should be clear to the reader what this main idea is.

How long should a paragraph be?

There is no absolute rule: very short or long paragraphs can work when used by an experienced writer. However, as a guideline, paragraphs should usually be no less than 2 or 3 sentences long and there should be 2 or 3 paragraphs per page of A4. The length of a paragraph depends on the idea being treated, but if a paragraph is shorter than 2 or 3 sentences, check to see if it is not really part of the previous or next paragraph. If your paragraph is longer than half a page, check to see if the idea would be better explained in two or more paragraphs.

When do I start a new paragraph?

Start a new paragraph for each new point or stage in your writing. When you begin a paragraph you should always be aware of the main idea being expressed in that paragraph. Be alert to digressions or details that belong either in a different paragraph or need a paragraph of their own.

How do I write a paragraph?

A paragraph can have an internal structure with an introduction, main body and conclusion in the same way as an essay. The example over the page shows a paragraph which:

- introduces the paragraph's main point;
- develops and supports the point;
- shows the significance of the point made

It is a useful rule always to have three stages in a paragraph: introduction, development and conclusion.



The introduction

The introduction makes the purpose of the paragraph clear so the reader can read the paragraph with this purpose in mind. It is usually necessary to show the place the paragraph has in the structure of the piece as a whole. This can be done with just a word (*Nevertheless, However, Furthermore*) or it may need a phrase (*Another point to consider is....*). In an essay, this might mean showing how the main idea of the paragraph answers the essay question. In some cases when the paragraph begins a new section, it may be necessary to write a separate paragraph which explains how the following section relates to the piece as a whole.

The development

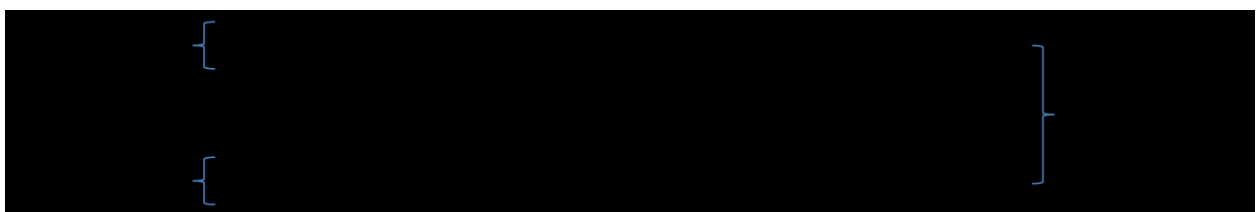
The body of the paragraph should develop the idea that has been introduced at the beginning of the paragraph. This can be done by:

- redefining the idea;
- giving examples;
- commenting on evidence;
- showing implications or consequences;
- examining opposing ideas.

The conclusion

The end of the paragraph can show the significance of the point, link back to the beginning of the paragraph, comment on the implications of the point as a whole, or make a link to the next paragraph. It is important not to end the paragraph with a digression or irrelevant detail. Each sentence in the paragraph should be part of the internal structure.

Another example of a paragraph using this three part structure is given below.



Summary

Paragraphs provide a structure for your writing which enables the reader to identify and follow the developing stages in your treatment of the material. Remember that paragraphs should have their own internal structure whilst fitting into the larger structure of the whole piece of writing. Be clear what the main idea for each paragraph is, deal with it as fully as is necessary for your purpose, but be alert to digression or irrelevancies. Check your own use of paragraphs by reading the first sentence to see if it outlines the paragraph's main idea. The effective use of paragraphs can be seen in writing when the reader can gain an overview of the content by reading the first sentence of each paragraph.