

Centre for English Teaching Specialization

MOOC 4: Communication Skills for University Success

4.2d Paragraph Structures

Paragraphs

To start with, one important thing to remember is that paragraphs come in all shapes and sizes: from a single sentence to Jack Kerouac's infamous original manuscript of *On the Road*, a single 300-page paragraph (or 120 foot scroll) with no breaks.

However, for academic essays, paragraphs generally have a very specific structure.

In general, there are three main parts to a paragraph: the topic sentence, the body and the linking sentence.

— Topic Sentence

The topic sentence is a sentence that usually occurs early on in your paragraph, often the first sentence, and details what the paragraph is about. It has two functions:

- (1) It ties all of the evidence and examples that make up the body of the paragraph into one cohesive argument.
- (2) It relates the paragraph back to the thesis statement of the overall essay.

— Body

The body of the paragraph, like the body of an essay, is where you find all of the evidence and examples that support the main idea of the paragraph. Bodies can be developed in a number of different ways. See below!

— Linking Sentence

Linking or transition sentences are another sentences that make your writing more cohesive. They occur either at the end or beginning of a paragraph and tie the ideas together.

For example, take the following outline of an essay (see over page).

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Introduction – *Rabbits are an invasive species that have had a detrimental effect on Australia's biodiversity.*

Argument 1 – *Topic Sentence:* Rabbits are a significant cause of the reduction in plant biodiversity in Australia.

- Takes less than 1 rabbit per hectare to prevent plant regeneration (Cooke, McPhee & Hart, 2008).
- Rabbits, because they eat so much plant material, including roots, and dig large underground burrows, cause erosion.

Linking sentence: *This erosion not only reduces plant growth and regeneration, but the sediment is then washed into waterways.*

Argument 2 – *Topic Sentence:* Increased levels of sediment in the waterways are having a destructive effect on aquatic ecosystems.

- Increased levels of silt poisons the water, leading to the death of aquatic animals and plants

Linking sentence: *These rivers and lakes provide an important source of water for Australia's unique native animals.*

Argument 2 – *Topic Sentence:* This adds to the already large and negative effect rabbits have had on the populations of native marsupials.

- Rabbits are a food source for introduced predators like foxes, wild dogs and wild cats, increasing their populations.
- Rabbits compete with native marsupials for food and shelter.
 - Decline of the hairy nosed wombat, bilby and others.

Conclusion – Introduced rabbits, particularly the wild European rabbit, have had a destructive impact on Australia's biodiversity.

Of course, this structure can be broken – but like all rules for writing, you need to know *what* you're breaking and *why*.

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Body

Types of paragraphs

The following are the basic types of paragraphs, adapted from McCuen and Winkler's (2004) *From idea to essay*. They should not be copied exactly, but rather serve as a general guide. Each of these types can be combined together to create a paragraph as well, and you will notice elements of other types in each of the examples.

– Causal Analysis

Paragraphs (or essays) developed using causal analysis are those that describe either the cause of something or the effect of something.

For example:

Rabbits destroy plant life, eat root systems and dig burrows, which causes erosion. The soil and clay is then washed into the waterways when it rains. This causes siltation, which pollutes the water, poisoning aquatic plants and animals. Thus, rabbits can be linked to the decline in aquatic ecosystems as well.

– Comparison/Contrast

Comparison paragraphs focus on finding similarities between two things, whereas contrast paragraphs focus on their differences. Both can be used within a single paragraph. The most important thing to remember when writing comparison/contrast paragraphs or essays is to compare using the same criteria. In addition, you should explicitly use the language of comparison/contrast. A basic list of this kind of language can be found in the reading in 3.4c *Basic Essay structures*.

For example:

*The introduction of wild cats and wild rabbits has had a destructive impact on Australia's biodiversity. Wild cats have had a detrimental effect on native marsupial populations because they hunt them for food. According to the Australian Wildlife Conservancy (2016), just one wild cat will hunt and kill between 5 and 30 animals every night. As there are approximately 4 million wild cats in Australia, wild cats are a danger to more than 100 native Australian species, from birds to fish (Australian Government Department of Energy and Environment, 2016). **Similarly**, wild rabbits have been linked to the decrease in many native marsupial populations, including the endangered hairy-nosed wombat. **However**, they do not hunt and kill **but rather** destroy habitat, making it more difficult for native species to find food and shelter. A single wild rabbit, according to Cooke, McPhee and Hart (2008), can prevent the regeneration plants over one hectare of land. As a result,*

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both wild rabbits and wild cats have been directly linked to the extinction of many unique Australian animals and plant life.

– Descriptive

A paragraph in which you are just describing something. Descriptive paragraphs are those that focus on particular aspects of one thing. Descriptive paragraphs tend to use categories and describe how something fits within that category but also how they are different to other things within that category. They are often written in the present tense and use 'be' as a verb.

Classification is a type of descriptive paragraph which attempts to list or cover all aspects of one category and nothing outside of it.

For example:

Rabbits belong to the lagomorph family. They are primarily vegetarians, favouring grasses, herbs and roots. Rabbits make quiet, clean pets. Rabbits are voracious breeders. For example, a single female rabbit is fertile from 6 months of age and will usually give birth to between 15 and 40 kits per year (Williams, Parer, Coman, Burley & Braysher, 1995). In Australia it is estimated that only 10% of those young survive more than a year but, despite this, their invasion of Australia is considered to be one of the worst by an introduced mammal in the world (Williams et al, 1995).

The highlighted sentence – *Rabbits make quiet, clean pets* – is irrelevant because it deals with domestic rabbits as pets. Even though it is true and related to the topic of rabbits, it doesn't make sense within the whole paragraph, which focuses on wild rabbits.

– Example

This is the most common type of paragraph and, in fact, its principles should be applied to all the following types.

Examples start off with a generalisation that is then supported with specific cases using phrases such as *for instance, as demonstrated by, as an example, this is exemplified by... etc.*

Generalisation: The number of native Australian marsupials is declining.

Example: The Australian northern hairy-nosed wombat is listed as critically endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (Department of Environment and Heritage Protection, 2016).

The number of native Australian marsupials is declining. For example, the Australian northern hairy-nosed wombat is listed as critically endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (Queensland Government Department of Environment and Heritage Protection, 2016).

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– Narrative/Procedure

Narratives and process paragraphs are often some of the easiest ones to write. Both kinds generally give chronological accounts of events. For both, being clear about what happens/happened and when is important. Narratives tend to be written more informally and relate events to their audience, while procedures give step-by-step guides on how to do something. They are generally written in the past tense unless relating the information back to the present.

For example:

Rabbits were first introduced as domestic animals to Australia with the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788. The first recorded instances of wild rabbits was in Tasmania in 1827. After this, according to the NSW Government Office of Environment and Heritage (2015), 12 pairs of rabbits were released in December 1859 in Victoria for hunting purposes. One century later, rabbits could be found in all states and territories in Australia, having invaded over 4 million square kilometres of land (NSW Government Office of Environment and Heritage, 2015).

References from *Rabbits as an invasive species* examples:

- Australian Government Department of the Environment and Energy. (2016). *Feral Cats*. Retrieved from: <https://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/invasive-species/feral-animals-australia/feral-cats>
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- Williams, K., Parer, I., Coman, B., Burley, J., & Braysher, M. (1995). *Managing Vertebrate Pests: Rabbits*. Bureau of Resource Sciences and CSIRO Division of Wildlife and Ecology. Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.

Reading references:

- McCuen, J. R., & Winkler, A. C. (2004). *From idea to essay: A rhetoric, reader, and handbook* (10th ed.). New York, NY: Longman.