Lecture notes: Body Paragraph Structure

 In formal academic English, paragraphs have three parts.  These three parts are the topic sentence, body/supporting sentences, and the concluding sentence (optional).

Transitional topic sentence

A topic sentence introduces the main idea of the paragraph. It has a topic and a controlling idea.

The topic sentence usually comes at the beginning of a paragraph.

Sample Topic Sentences

Because the Civil War was fought mostly on Southern soil, it had lasting effects on the region.

Education is important in lowering crime rates.

Qualities of a well-written topic sentence

Brevity: Long, rambling sentences can be confusing. Don’t pack your topic sentence too full of details.

Clarity: Likewise, don’t beat around the bush. Say exactly what you want to say.

Precision: Don’t be too broad or ambiguous when introducing the topic that you’re going to discuss. Be specific.

Topic Sentence

Always avoid facts in your topic sentence. While facts may be interesting, they do not introduce the reader to the opinion you want to present. Alternatively, save your facts to use as evidence in the body of your paragraph.

Improve:

All dogs need food.

Improved version:

Dogs need regular care, love and attention.

Dogs are good pets as they are friendly and loyal to humans.

Topic Sentence

The controlling idea presented in the topic sentence should not be too vague or general; otherwise it is impossible to discuss it in one paragraph.

Improve:

Smoking is bad.

Improve:

Drinking coffee is bad.

Sample Topic Sentences

Animals in the same family share common characteristics.

Commercial drivers should be required to pass a specialized test .

Effective teachers possess 3 specific qualities that help students achieve greater results.

 While some believe prevalence of teen alcohol abuse would die down if drinking age were lowered to 18, there is evidence to suggest quite the opposite.

Paragraph Structure

To be as effective as possible, a paragraph should be unified (developing one central idea) and Coherent (ideas flow smoothly), and the support should be adequate and effective. As you will see, all of these traits overlap. Using and adapting them to your individual purposes will help you construct effective paragraphs.

Unity

The paragraph develops one central idea and contains no irrelevant details.

Coherence

Coherence is the trait that makes the paragraph easily understandable to a reader. You can help create coherence in your paragraphs by creating logical bridges and verbal bridges.

Logical bridges

The same idea of a topic is carried over from sentence to sentence.

Transition words can be used to link ideas from different sentences and indicate the logical relationship between ideas.

Verbal bridges

Key words can be repeated in several sentences

Synonymous words can be repeated in several sentences

Pronouns can refer to nouns in previous sentences

Transition words can be used to link ideas from different sentences

Transition between paragraphs

Transitional Sentences

Transitional sentences are usually one or several sentences that "transition" from one idea to the next. Transitional sentences can be used at the end of most paragraphs to help the paragraphs flow from one into the next.

A transitional topic sentence can also be used to connect two paragraphs.

Exercise : Coherence

Identify the signaling words (transitional phrases) in the paragraph on the following slide, and decide what type of logical connection each of the phrases shows.

Pain has a devastating psychological effect. It debilitates you, it takes away your will and hope. We should be grateful that modern medicine has means to effectively control pain so that it wouldn‘t be completely unbearable. However, scientists from the University of Amsterdam, the University of Würzburg and the University of Zurich found that pain relief works better when administered by a person from different cultural background.

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