**WHAT ARE PARAGRAPHS?**

**Paragraphs are group related sentences around one main point, so the paragraphs can work together to prove the larger argument (the thesis) in an essay. Paragraphs provide visual breaks between ideas and signal a progression of ideas in the project.**

In an essay/project, you’ll have the following types of paragraphs:

* + **Introductions** capture your reader’s interest, establish a context for your topic, and smoothly lead your reader into your topic.
  + **Body paragraphs** develop each of the main points and sub-points needed to be credible. Body paragraphs contain topic sentences, evidence and analysis.
  + **Conclusions** help you bring together the points you’ve made in an essay, they delve into the larger significance or impact of your argument, and they should leave your reader convinced of that central argument.

**Paragraphs DO NOT**

* + **Consist of only quotes**
  + **Consist of only facts**
  + **Consist of only summary**
  + **Contain a series of sentences not related to one another**

# WHY USE PARAGRAPHS?

* **RELEVANCY:** Paragraphs help your reader to follow the logic of the report and clearly see how each of your body paragraphs is related to your topic.
* **FOCUS:** Paragraphs help your reader easily identify the one main idea in each paragraph and how each of the sentences within that paragraph contributes to this main idea.
* **ORGANIZATION:** Along with transitions and topic sentences, paragraph breaks help your reader understand you are moving on to a new point or aspect of your essay.
  + **DEVELOPMENT:** Paragraphs require critical thinking to prove the main point of the essay by making connections with textual evidence, outside evidence, and your own analysis.
  + **VOICE:** Paragraphs are a place where you get to say what you think and prove why you’re right.

WHAT IS A **TOPIC SENTENCE?**

The main point (claim) of a paragraph is often indicated in a single sentence called the topic sentence. A topic sentence is like a thesis in that you can also ask yourself: Can I disagree? You want to be able to answer YES to show that there is an arguable claim that needs to be proven. While it is true that in published writing, you’ll sometimes find topic sentences in the middle or even at the end of a paragraph, placing your topic sentences at the beginning of each of your paragraphs is useful because:

* **A strong topic sentence can help you, the writer,** to focus each paragraph on one main point.
* **A strong topic sentence can help your reader** to see where you are headed with your ideas in a particular paragraph; topic sentences help your reader form a mental map of your essay.

# HOW CAN I WRITE STRONG TOPIC SENTENCES?

The chart below points out some of the main differences between a topic sentence that is genuinely helpful to you and your readers, and one which is not:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **A weak topic sentence:** | **A strong topic sentence:** |
| * **Doesn’t “fit”** your paragraph—that is, it misleads your reader into thinking you will be writing about one thing, but the paragraph itself is about something else | * **“Fits”** your paragraph, accurately reflecting what you’ve actually written |
| * Is **so general** that your reader can’t form a clear image about what is to come | * Is **specific enough** that your reader can predict what you will cover in that paragraph |
| * Simply states a **fact,** a piece of information that can be confirmed with observation or reference to reputable sources. Your reader is left wondering, “What is the point of this paragraph? What is the writer trying to prove with this piece of information?” | * Like a thesis statement, it sets up the controlling idea of the paragraph, clearly indicating the **point** or **claim** the writer will illustrate, describe, explain, analyze in the body of the paragraph |
| * Does **not seem clearly related** to your thesis | * Helps your reader see how this paragraph relates to and **advances/supports your thesis** |

**GUIDE LINES FOR TOPIC SENTENCES:**

**A topic sentence must predict or promise what follows, so it cannot be a question. To orient the reader, you may use a question as the first sentence, with the topic sentence as the answer to that question.**

*Weak:* Should schools provide free computers for their students?

*Strong:* Schools must provide free computers for their students to assist them in their studies and prepare them for their future careers.

**Phrases such as “I think” or “in my opinion” may muddle or weaken topic sentences. Your writing is always your opinion, so you don’t need these phrases unless they are central to the idea that you are trying to convey.**

*Weak:* I think that it is important for every woman to carry pepper spray.

*Strong:* As violent criminals take over the city streets, women must carry pepper spray to protect themselves.

**The topic sentence should provide clear relationships among all of its elements so that it can provide a framework for understanding the rest of the paragraph.**

*Weak:* Historians record only dry statistics; we should read novels.

*Strong:* Accurate historical novels give us a deeper understanding of the past than do the dry collections of facts and statistics that pass for history texts.

**A topic sentence needs to be clear and specific, so that it can predict and summarize the rest of the paragraph for the reader.**

*Weak:* Public transit is terrible.

*Strong:* Incapable of providing reliable, comfortable service, the San Francisco Municipal Transit System is failing its ridership.