

W-4 Developing Paragraphs

Paragraphs help us organize our writing for our readers. Here one writer recalls when he first understood what a paragraph does.

I can remember picking up my father's books before I could read. The words themselves were mostly foreign, but I still remember the exact moment when I first understood, with a sudden clarity, the purpose of a paragraph. I didn't have the vocabulary to say "paragraph," but I realized that a paragraph was a fence that held words. The words inside a paragraph worked together for a common purpose. They had some specific reason for being inside the same fence. . . .

—Sherman Alexie, "The Joy of Reading and Writing"

This chapter will help you build "fences" around words that work together on a common topic. It offers tips and examples for composing strong paragraphs.

W-4a Focusing on the Main Point

All the sentences in a paragraph should focus on one main idea, as they do in this paragraph from an article about the Mall of America.

There is, of course, nothing naturally abhorrent in the human impulse to dwell in marketplaces or the urge to buy, sell, and trade. Rural Americans traditionally looked forward to the excitement and sensuality of market day; Native Americans traveled long distances to barter and trade at sprawling, festive encampments. In Persian bazaars and in the ancient Greek agoras the very soul of the community was preserved and could be seen, felt, heard, and smelled as it might be nowhere else. All over the planet the humblest of people have always gone to market with hope in their hearts and in expectation of something beyond mere goods—seeking a place where humanity is temporarily in ascendance, a palette for the senses, one another. —David Guterson, "Enclosed. Encyclopedic. Endured. One Week at the Mall of America"

Topic sentences. To help you focus a paragraph on one main point, state that point in a **TOPIC SENTENCE**. Often, but not always, you might start a paragraph with a topic sentence, as in this example from an essay about legalizing the sale of human kidneys.

Dialysis is harsh, expensive, and, worst of all, only temporary. Acting as an artificial kidney, dialysis mechanically filters the blood of a patient. It works, but not well. With treatment sessions lasting three hours, several times a week, those dependent on dialysis are, in a sense, shackled to a machine for the rest of their lives. Adding excessive stress to the body, dialysis causes patients to feel increasingly faint and tired, usually keeping them from work and other normal activities.

—Joanna MacKay, "Organ Sales Will Save Lives"

Sometimes, you may choose to put the topic sentence at the end of the paragraph. See how this strategy works in another paragraph in the essay about kidneys.

In a legal kidney transplant, everybody gains except the donor. The doctors and nurses are paid for the operation, the patient receives a new kidney, but the donor receives nothing. Sure, the donor will have the warm, uplifting feeling associated with helping a fellow human being, but this is not enough reward for most people to part with a piece of themselves. In an ideal world, the average person would be altruistic enough to donate a kidney with nothing expected in return. The real world, however, is run by money. We pay men for donating sperm, and we pay women for donating ova, yet we expect others to give away an entire organ with no compensation. If the sale of organs were allowed, people would have a greater incentive to help save the life of a stranger.

Occasionally, the main point is so obvious that you don't need a topic sentence. Especially in **NARRATIVE** writing, you may choose only to imply—not state—the main idea, as in this paragraph from an essay about one Latina writer's difficulty in learning Spanish.

I came to the United States in 1963 at age 3 with my family and immediately stopped speaking Spanish. College-educated and

seamlessly bilingual when they settled in west Texas, my parents (a psychology professor and an artist) wholeheartedly embraced the notion of the American melting pot. They declared that their two children would speak nothing but *inglés*. They'd read in English, write in English, and fit into Anglo society beautifully.

—Tanya Maria Barrientos, "Se Habla Español"

Sticking to the main point. Whether or not you announce the main point in a topic sentence, be sure that every sentence in a paragraph relates to that point. Edit out any sentences that stray off topic, such as those crossed out below.

In "Se Habla Español," Tanya Maria Barrientos notes some of the difficulties she ^{has} encounter^{ed} as a Latina who is not fluent in Spanish. ~~Previous generations of immigrants were encouraged to speak only English.~~ When someone poses a question to her in Spanish, she often has to respond in English. In other instances, she tries to speak Spanish but falters over the past and future tenses. Situations like these embarrass Barrientos and make her feel left out of the ^aLatino community she want^ed to be part of. ~~Native Guatemalans who are bilingual do not have such problems.~~

W-4b Strategies for Developing the Main Point

A good paragraph provides enough good details to develop its main point—to fill out and support that point. Following are some common strategies for fleshing out and organizing paragraphs—and sometimes even for organizing an entire essay.

Analyzing cause and effect. Sometimes, you can develop a paragraph on a topic by analyzing what **CAUSES** it—or what its **EFFECTS** might be. The following paragraph about air turbulence identifies some of its causes.

A variety of factors can cause turbulence, which is essentially a disturbance in the movement of air. Thunderstorms, the jet

stream, and mountains are some of the more common natural culprits, while what is known as wake turbulence is created by another plane. "Clear air turbulence" is the kind that comes up unexpectedly; it is difficult to detect because there is no moisture or particles to reveal the movement of air.

—Susan Stelling, "The Inevitability of Bumps"

Classifying and dividing. When we **CLASSIFY** something, we group it with things that share similar characteristics. See how two social scientists use classification to explain the ways that various types of social network websites (SNSs) make user profiles visible.

The visibility of a profile varies by site and according to user discretion. By default, profiles on *Friendster* and *Tribe.net* are crawled by search engines, making them visible to anyone, regardless of whether or not the viewer has an account. Alternatively, *LinkedIn* controls what a viewer might see based on whether she or he has a paid account. Sites like *MySpace* allow users to choose whether they want their profile to be public or "friends only." *Facebook* takes a different approach—by default, users who are part of the same "network" can view each other's profiles, unless a profile owner has decided to deny permission to those in their network. Structural variations around visibility and access are one of the primary ways that SNSs differentiate themselves from each other.

—Danah Boyd and Nicole Ellison,
"Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship"

As a writing strategy, **DIVISION** is a way of separating something into parts. See how the following paragraph divides the concept of pressure into four kinds.

I see four kinds of pressure working on college students today: economic pressure, parental pressure, peer pressure, and self-induced pressure. It is easy to look around for villains—to blame the colleges for charging too much money, the professors for assigning too much work, the parents for pushing their children too far, the students for driving themselves too hard. But there are no villains; only victims.

—William Zinsser, "College Pressures"

Comparing and contrasting. Comparing things looks at their similarities; contrasting them focuses on their differences—though often we use the word *comparison* to refer to both strategies. You can structure a paragraph that **COMPARES AND CONTRASTS** in two ways. One is to shift back and forth between each item, as in this paragraph contrasting the attention given to a football team and to academic teams.

The football team from Mountain View High School won the Arizona state championship last year. Again. Unbeknownst to the vast majority of the school's student body, so did the Science Bowl Team, the Speech and Debate Team, and the Academic Decathlon team. The football players enjoyed the attentions of an enthralled school, complete with banners, assemblies, and even video announcements in their honor, a virtual barrage of praise and downright deification. As for the three champion academic teams, they received a combined total of around ten minutes of recognition, tacked onto the beginning of a sports assembly. Nearly all of the graduating seniors will remember the name and escapades of their star quarterback; nearly none of them will ever even realize that their class produced Arizona's first national champion in Lincoln-Douglas Debate. After all, why should they? He and his teammates were "just the nerds."

—Grant Penrod,

"Anti-Intellectualism: Why We Hate the Smart Kids"

Another way to compare and contrast two items is to cover all the details about one and then all the details about the other. See how this approach works in the following example, which contrasts photographs of former president Bill Clinton and Hillary Clinton on the opening day of the 1994 baseball season.

The next day photos of the Clintons in action appeared in newspapers around the country. Many papers, including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, chose the same two photos to run. The one of Bill Clinton showed him wearing an Indians cap and warm-up jacket. The President, throwing lefty, had turned his shoulders sideways to the plate in preparation for delivery. He was bringing the ball forward from behind his head in a clean-looking throwing action as the photo was snapped. Hillary Clinton was pictured wearing a dark jacket, a scarf, and an oversized Cubs

hat. In preparation for her throw she was standing directly facing the plate. A right-hander, she had the elbow of her throwing arm pointed out in front of her. Her forearm was tilted back, toward her shoulder. The ball rested on her upturned palm. As the picture was taken, she was in the middle of an action that can only be described as throwing like a girl.

—James Fallows, "Throwing Like a Girl"

Another way to make a comparison is with an **ANALOGY**, explaining something unfamiliar by comparing it with something familiar. See how one writer uses analogy to explain the way DNA encodes genetic information.

Although the complexity of cells, tissues, and whole organisms is breathtaking, the way in which the basic DNA instructions are written is astonishingly simple. Like more familiar instruction systems such as language, numbers, or computer binary code, what matters is not so much the symbols themselves but the order in which they appear. Anagrams, for example, "derail" and "redial," contain exactly the same letters but in a different order, and so the words they spell out have completely different meanings. . . . In exactly the same way the order of the four chemical symbols in DNA embodies the message. "ACGGTA" and "GACAGT" are DNA anagrams that mean completely different things to a cell, just as "derail" and "redial" have different meanings for us.

—Bryan Sykes, "So, What Is DNA and What Does It Do?"

Defining. When you **DEFINE** something, you put it in a general category and then add characteristics that distinguish it from others in that group. The following paragraph provides brief definitions of three tropical fruits.

My grandfather died some years ago and, as is natural, my memories of our childhood spitting games receded from memory until this May, when I visited a friend's house in Mérida, in the Yucatán peninsula of Mexico. I walked onto a patio speckled with dark stains, as if the heavens had been spitting down on it. I looked up; there were the two trees responsible. One was a lollipop mango tree. Lollipop mangos are little heart-shaped mangos that you eat not by peeling and slicing the flesh, but by biting off their heads

and sucking out the juices. The other was a nispero tree. A nispero (called a loquat in English) is a golf-ball-sized tropical fruit, with a thin rind the color of a deer's coat and sweet golden flesh. Beyond the patio, I saw a mammee tree, which bears large, football-shaped fruit. The fruit's flesh is just as sweet as the nispero's, but it's much more suggestive—with its carmine hues and its ominous single black seed. My friend's black-spotted patio would have made my grandmother pull out all three of her mop buckets.

—Ernesto Mestre-Reed, "A Spitting Image of Cuba"

Describing. A **DESCRIPTIVE** paragraph provides specific details to show what something looks like—and perhaps how it sounds, feels, smells, and tastes. Here a paragraph weaves together details of background, appearance, and speech to create a vivid impression of Chuck Yeager, the first pilot to break the sound barrier.

Yeager grew up in Hamlin, West Virginia, a town on the Mud River not far from Nitro, Hurricane, Whirlwind, Salt Rock, Mud, Sod, Crum, Leet, Dollie, Ruth, and Alum Creek. His father was a gas driller (drilling for natural gas in the coalfields), his older brother was a gas driller, and he would have been a gas driller had he not enlisted in the Army Air Force in 1941 at the age of eighteen. In 1943, at twenty, he became a flight officer, i.e., a non-com who was allowed to fly, and went to England to fly fighter planes over France and Germany. Even in the tumult of the war Yeager was somewhat puzzling to a lot of other pilots. He was a short, wiry, but muscular little guy with dark curly hair and a tough-looking face that seemed (to strangers) to be saying: "You best not be lookin' me in the eye, you peckerwood, or I'll put four more holes in your nose." But that wasn't what was puzzling. What was puzzling was the way Yeager talked. He seemed to talk with some older forms of English elocution, syntax, and conjugation that had been preserved uphollow in the Appalachians. There were people up there who never said they disapproved of anything, they said: "I don't hold with it." In the present tense they were willing to *help* out, like anyone else; but in the past tense they only *holped*. "H'it weren't nothin' I hold with, but I holped him out with it, anyways."

—Tom Wolfe, *The Right Stuff*

Explaining a process. Sometimes you might write a paragraph that explains a process—telling someone how to do something, such as how to parallel park—or how something is done, such as how bees make honey. Cookbooks explain many processes step-by-step, as in this explanation of how to pit a mango.

The simplest method for pitting a mango is to hold it horizontally, then cut it in two lengthwise, slightly off-center, so the knife just misses the pit. Repeat the cut on the other side so a thin layer of flesh remains around the flat pit. Holding a half, flesh-side up, in the palm of your hand, slash the flesh into a lattice, cutting down to, but not through, the peel. Carefully push the center of the peel upward with your thumbs to turn it inside out, opening the cuts of the flesh. Then cut the mango cubes from the peel.

—Paulette Mitchell, *Vegetarian Appetizers*

Narrating. When you write a **NARRATIVE** paragraph in an essay, you tell a story to support a point. In the following paragraph, one author tells about being mistaken for a waitress and how that incident of stereotyping served “as a challenge” that provoked her to read her poetry with new confidence.

One such incident that has stayed with me, though I recognize it as a minor offense, happened on the day of my first public poetry reading. It took place in Miami in a boat-restaurant where we were having lunch before the event. I was nervous and excited as I walked in with my notebook in my hand. An older woman motioned me to her table. Thinking (foolish me) that she wanted me to autograph a copy of my brand-new slender volume of verse, I went over. She ordered a cup of coffee from me, assuming that I was the waitress. Easy enough to mistake my poems for menus, I suppose. I know that it wasn’t an intentional act of cruelty, yet of all the good things that happened that day, I remember that scene most clearly, because it reminded me of what I had to overcome before anyone would take me seriously. In retrospect, I understand that my anger gave my reading fire, that I have almost always taken doubts in my abilities as a challenge—and that the result is, most times, a feeling of satisfaction at having won a convert when I see the cold, appraising eyes warm to my words, the body language change, the smile that indicates that I have opened some avenue for communication. That day I read to that

woman and her lowered eyes told me that she was embarrassed at her little faux pas, and when I willed her to look up at me, it was my victory, and she graciously allowed me to punish her with my full attention. We shook hands at the end of the reading, and I never saw her again. She has probably forgotten the whole thing but maybe not.

—Judith Ortiz Cofer, *The Latin Deli*

Using examples. Illustrating a point with one or more examples is a common way to develop a paragraph, like the following one, which uses lyrics as examples to make a point about the similarities between two types of music.

On a happier note, both rap and [country-and-western] feature strong female voices as well. Women rappers are strong, confident, and raunchy: “I want a man, not a boy/to approach me/Your lame game really insults me. . . . I’ve got to sit on my feet to come down to your level,” taunt lady rappers Entice and Barbie at Too Short in their duet/duel, “Don’t Fight the Feeling.” Likewise, Loretta Lynn rose to C&W fame with defiant songs like “Don’t Come Home a-Drinkin’ with Lovin’ on Your Mind” and “Your Squaw Is on the Warpath Tonight.”

—Denise Noe, “Parallel Worlds: The Surprising Similarities (and Differences) of Country-and-Western and Rap”

W-4c Making Paragraphs Flow

There are several ways to make your paragraphs **COHERENT** so that readers can follow your train of thought. Repetition, parallelism, and transitions are three strategies for making paragraphs flow.

Repetition. One way to help readers follow your train of thought is to repeat key words and phrases, as well as pronouns referring to those key words.

Not that long ago, blogs were one of those annoying buzz words that you could safely get away with ignoring. The word *blog*—it works as both noun and verb—is short for *Web log*. It was coined in 1997 to describe a website where you could post daily scribbles, journal-style, about whatever you like—mostly critiquing and linking to other articles online

that may have sparked your thinking. Unlike a big media outlet, bloggers focus their efforts on narrow topics, often rising to become de facto watchdogs and self-proclaimed experts. Blogs can be about anything: politics, sex, baseball, haiku, car repair. There are blogs about blogs. —Lev Grossman, “Meet Joe Blog”

Instead of repeating one word, you can use synonyms.

Predictably, the love of cinema has waned. People still like going to the movies, and some people still care about and expect something special, necessary from a film. And wonderful films are still being made.... But one hardly finds anymore, at least among the young, the distinctive cinephilic love of movies, which is not simply love of but a certain taste in films.

—Susan Sontag, “A Century of Cinema”

Parallel structures. Putting similar items into the same grammatical structure helps readers see the connection among those elements and follow your sentences—and your thoughts.

The disease was bubonic plague, present in two forms: one that infected the bloodstream, causing the buboes and internal bleeding and was spread by contact; and a second, more virulent pneumonic type that infected the lungs and was spread by respiratory infection. The presence of both at once caused the high mortality and speed of contagion. So lethal was the disease that cases were known of persons going to bed well and dying before they woke, of doctors catching the illness at a bedside and dying before the patient. So rapidly did it spread from one to another that to a French physician, Simon de Covino, it seemed as if one sick person “could infect the whole world.”

—Barbara Tuchman, “‘This Is the End of the World’:
The Black Death”

Transitions help readers follow your train of thought—and move from sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph. Here are some common ones:

- **To show causes and effects:** accordingly, as a result, because, consequently, hence, so, then, therefore, thus
- **To show comparison:** along the same lines, also, in the same way, like, likewise, similarly

- **To show contrasts or exceptions:** although, but, even though, however, in contrast, instead, nevertheless, nonetheless, on the contrary, on the one hand . . . on the other hand, still, yet
- **To show examples:** for example, for instance, indeed, in fact, of course, such as
- **To show place or position:** above, adjacent to, below, beyond, elsewhere, here, inside, near, outside, there
- **To show sequence:** again, also, and, and then, besides, finally, first, furthermore, last, moreover, next, too
- **To show time:** after, as soon as, at first, at last, at the same time, before, eventually, finally, immediately, later, meanwhile, next, simultaneously, so far, soon, then, thereafter
- **To signal a summary or conclusion:** as a result, as we have seen, finally, in a word, in any event, in brief, in conclusion, in other words, in short, in the end, in the final analysis, on the whole, therefore, thus, to summarize

See how Julia Alvarez uses several transitions to show time and to move her ideas along.

Yolanda, the third of the four girls, became a schoolteacher but not on purpose. For years after graduate school, she wrote down poet under profession in questionnaires and income tax forms, and later amended it to *writer-slash-teacher*. Finally, acknowledging that she had not written much of anything in years, she announced to her family that she was not a poet anymore. —Julia Alvarez, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*

Transitions can also help readers move from paragraph to paragraph; they can even signal connections between paragraphs.

Today the used-book market is exceedingly well organized and efficient. Campus bookstores buy back not only the books that will be used at their university the next semester but also those that will not. Those that are no longer on their lists of required books they resell to national wholesalers, which in turn sell them to college bookstores on campuses where they will be required. This means that even if a text is being adopted for the first time at a particular college, there is almost certain to be an ample supply of used copies.

As a result, publishers have the chance to sell a book to only one of the multiple students who eventually use it. Hence, publishers must cover their costs and make their profit in the first semester their books are sold—before used copies swamp the market. That's why the prices are so high.

—Michael Granof, "Course Requirement: Extortion"

W-4d When to Start a New Paragraph

Paragraphs may be long or short, and there are no strict rules about how many sentences are necessary for a well-developed paragraph. But while a brief, one- or two-sentence paragraph can be used to set off an idea you want to emphasize, too many short paragraphs can make your writing choppy. Here are some reasons for beginning a new paragraph:

- to introduce a new subject or idea
- to signal a new speaker (in dialogue)
- to emphasize an idea
- to give readers a needed pause

W-4e Opening and Closing Paragraphs

A good opening engages readers and provides some indication of what's to come; a good closing leaves them feeling satisfied—that the story is complete, the questions have been answered, the argument has been made.

Opening paragraphs. Sometimes, you may begin with a general statement that provides context or background for your topic, and then proceed to state your **THESIS**. In the following opening paragraph, the writer begins with a generalization about academic architecture, then ends with a specific thesis stating what the rest of the essay will argue.

Academic architecture invariably projects an identity about campus and community to building users and to the world beyond.

Some institutions desire new buildings to be stand-alone statements, with ultramodern exteriors to symbolize the cutting-edge research to be conducted within. Yet in other cases, the architectural language established in surrounding precedents may be more appropriate, even for high-tech facilities. Simon Hall, a new \$46.6 million interdisciplinary science building on the Indiana University campus, designed by Flad Architects of Madison, Wisconsin, inserts state-of-the-art research infrastructure in a building mass and exterior crafted to respond to their surroundings in the established vernacular of the historic Bloomington campus.

—Gregory Hoadley, "Classic Nuance:
Simon Hall at Indiana University"

OTHER WAYS OF OPENING AN ESSAY

- with an **ANECDOTE**
- with a quotation
- with a question
- with a startling fact or opinion

Closing paragraphs. One approach is to conclude by summarizing the text's argument. The following paragraph reiterates the writer's main point and then issues a call for action.

The bottom line is that drastically reducing both crime rates and the number of people behind bars is technically feasible. Whether it is politically and organizationally feasible to achieve this remains an open question. It would be tragic if the politics proved prohibitive, but it would be genuinely criminal if we didn't even try.

—Mark A. R. Kleiman, "The Outpatient Prison"

OTHER WAYS OF CONCLUDING AN ESSAY

- by discussing the implications of your argument
- by asking a question
- by referring to something discussed at the beginning
- by proposing action

» SEE **W-4e** for help editing paragraphs.

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