

Understanding the Structure of a Paragraph

Structure

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1.1 Objectives

After going through the Unit you will be able to:

- Describe the principles of paragraph writing and properties of paragraphs
- Explain the importance of topic sentences in the construction of a paragraph
- Describe the significance of supporting arguments in the development of a paragraph
- State the relevance of conclusion or concluding observation in giving a final shape to paragraphs
- Write simple paragraphs on familiar themes in about 150-250 words with all the basic components

1.2 Introduction

Writing a correct word may be easy, but writing a correct sentence is not. And writing a paragraph is the most difficult as it requires us to take care of many things simultaneously. We have to take the ideas, language, rules of grammar and vocabulary into account at the same

time. Every idea we choose should be expressed with appropriate words. A paragraph is the foundation on which every pyramid of writing stands. No letter, essay, story, report, article or dissertation can be written without a sound knowledge of the craft of writing a paragraph. The size of a paragraph can vary from a single sentence to a full page. In formal and technical writing we use compact, smaller and less descriptive and ornamental paragraphs whereas in creative and informal writing we are tempted to speak out our hearts, least bothering about its length and breadth. Just like the first rainfall in monsoon, the first sentence of a paragraph tells us what to expect next. In a good paragraph, no sentence should be irrelevant and we should take care to keep all the sentences are inter-connected. Starting is not enough; we need to focus on each and every part of a paragraph to make it complete, coherent and comprehensive. Beginners are encouraged to start with writing paragraphs requiring 5 to 10 sentences. In course of time, they can be encouraged to write longer paragraphs or small essays. You should know what to write and how to write it. You are the best judge of your mastery over writing skills. You know what you can write and what you cannot. You should not dive into a deep swimming pool if you are not a good swimmer. You must start with shallow water where you can practice swimming without injuring yourself. In this Unit, we shall discuss in detail how important it is to understand the structure of a paragraph, the role of the topic sentence in a paragraph, the significance of evidence or supporting sentences to make the paragraph focused and importance of concluding observation in making a paragraph self-contained.

1.2 Paragraphs: Principles and Properties

1.2.1 Basic Principles for Writing a Paragraph

While writing a paragraph, we generally follow some basic principles. The following are some of the significant principles.

- A paragraph is a group of related sentences. .
- A good paragraph is thoughtful, unified, coherent, and well-developed.
- Each paragraph should contain one point
- Each paragraph should have its own internal structure and stand on its own
- Each paragraph should state its purpose in the form of a topic sentence
- Each paragraph should have a “headline” to help the readers keep the main argument in their minds throughout their reading of the paragraph.

- Each paragraph should have one clear focus. (Unity).
- All the concepts, propositions and examples within the paragraph should be clearly related to each other and go with the main idea of the paragraph expressed in the topic sentence. (Coherence)
- The readers should be able to identify the topic sentence easily and clearly. They should help the readers skim through a large piece of writing and easily follow the logical ‘flow’ of ideas.
- The topic sentence should be supported by examples, statistics, quotes, etc.

1.2.2 Properties of a Paragraph

Before we start writing a paragraph we should understand what elements constitute a paragraph and how its meaning changes because of the interaction between the text and the context. Say, for example, on reading the description of a fatal accident, a young man may fancy witnessing the accident, a weak-hearted timid woman may shout in fear and an old couple may foresee death. Just like any work of art, a paragraph can move around an idea, a concept, a graph, a picture or just a symbol.

Every paragraph, however small, contains a single idea or thought and is self-contained. It is a collection of related sentences dealing with a single topic. Sometimes we may have several points in a single paragraph provided they are all related to the main idea. It has a beginning, a middle and an end, not necessarily in a logical order. Some paragraphs may start from the beginning, some may start in the middle and some others may start with the end.

Let's have a look at the following paragraphs.

(A) *Many of Mohan's friends know him as a good batsman. But he is essentially a bowler. Whenever he has the ball in his hand, he is filled with fire and acts passionately. Before throwing the ball, he makes it a point to rub it thoroughly to put life into it. Immediately after the ball goes out of his hand, it moves with an extraordinary speed and hits the wicket or lands into the hands of his fellow fielders. For his Coach Selvin he is an all rounder who can be trusted in moments of crisis.*

(B) *Barack Obama is charismatic leader. Wherever he treads, he mesmerizes people with his*

words and actions. With his child like simplicity, youth-like activeness and old-man-like wisdom, he is able to win the hearts of millions. Being the first ever black American president, he has inspired the backward people in all cultures to follow him and pursue their dreams. He has spread the message of peace all around the world and has bagged the most coveted Nobel Prize for peace.

(C) None of the villagers approved of his arguments. The betrayer stood there in the middle, least bothering about poor villagers who had paid for his education and upbringing. They had expected him to speak like a wise man and argue in favour of his fellow people. But he spoke like a city bred dog, faithfully following the footprints of his false counterparts in the city. Speaking in tune with the opponent's advocate, he placed his arguments to weaken their stand and falsified their claims that he was their man.

We can clearly see that Paragraph A starts in the middle, paragraph B starts in the beginning and Paragraph C starts in the end.

A poorly-written paragraph can make it difficult for the reader to follow the main points or ideas presented in the passage. On the other hand, a well-written paragraph presents the author's ideas in a clear and comprehensive manner. It enhances the credibility of the writer in the eyes of the reader.

Whatever is the length of a paragraph, every paragraph has the following structure:

- **Topic Sentence:** Every sentence moves round a single topic which is contained in the topic sentence.
- **Supporting Evidence:** The topic sentence should be supported by supporting ideas with adequate evidence
- **Concluding Observation:** The sentences that closes the arguments and leads to the next paragraph in a given passage.

Self-Check Exercise-1

Tick the correct statements and cross out the wrong ones. Write the correct forms of the incorrect statements.

- (a) A good paragraph is thoughtful, unified, coherent, and poorly-developed.
- (b) The readers should be able to identify the topic sentence in a paragraph easily and clearly.
- (c) Every paragraph, however small, contains multiple ideas or thoughts and is self-contained
- (d) A well-written paragraph presents the reader's ideas in a clear and comprehensive manner.
- (e) A structured paragraph should have a topic sentence, supporting arguments and concluding observation.

1.3 Structure of a Paragraph

1.3.1 The Topic Sentence

Before we start writing a paragraph, we must choose the topic on which we are planning to write. Then we must decide what we want to say about the topic in the paragraph. Whatever we may want to say, it must have a main idea which is developed in course of a paragraph. Hence we can say that a paragraph stands on the main idea. The main idea is expressed through a topic sentence. The topic sentence tells us what the paragraph is about. It is either followed or preceded by supporting details. It is a good and focused topic sentence which provides magnitude to and decides the direction of the paragraph. On the other hand, if a topic sentence is too general, the paragraph may become lengthy, unfocused and without direction. The topic sentence is the main argument for the idea that we would like to focus on in the paragraph. It may come at the beginning, middle or end of a paragraph. Sometimes it is recognizable but often it is not. When it is not recognizable, the main idea gets distributed over a couple of sentences or over the whole paragraph.

Let's have a look at the following paragraphs to understand how topic sentences control them.

(A) Internet is the nicest gift of science. It has shrunk the world into the palm. With the help of a joss stick, we are able to probe into any problem infecting the planet, imagine a friend sitting by the fire or download thousand pages of documents of million gigabytes of visual data at the click of a mouse. From dawn to dusk, the internet has spread over all corners of our physical and non-physical world. Both the first cup of tea in the morning and the mosquito repellent in the night carry the mark of the mighty net.

(B) At lunch time children take out their lunch boxes and sit in circles. While eating in groups they forget their family identities. They share each other's dishes and wishes. After that some caricature their teachers, some caricature their friends, some sing songs, some cut jokes and the rest play with their friends. **Lunch hour is the right time for them to celebrate their freedom.** But the teachers are always scared of this hour. They think that this hour gives a chance to children invent ways to spoil their plans. They try their best to reduce the duration of this in order to prevent the misuse of freedom.

(C) Rural women wear simple clothes like salwar kameez and sarees whereas the urban women mostly wear salwar kameez, though some of them put on western outfits like jeans, tops, trousers, shirts and suits. They are also different in terms of their food and festivals. Village women resort to traditional food and festivals; urban women, on the other hand, make experiment with any food or festival that they come in contact with. **There is a great divide between the urban and rural women, in spite of all apparent similarities.**

What do we see in the above paragraphs? If we observe carefully, we will notice that the first one has the topic sentence in the beginning, the second has it in the middle and the third in the end. The sentences in bold are the topic sentences. Wherever is the topic sentence, the interest of a reader has to be sustained throughout a paragraph. In other words, after reading each sentence the reader should be tempted to read the sentences that follow. In order to achieve this we should ensure that the sentence is integrally connected to the preceding and following sentences. On the whole it should be a self-contained unit. Likewise, in a continuous text, there is more than one paragraph and each paragraph is connected to the preceding and following paragraphs.

The topic sentence in a paragraph should be an active argument, not an expression of an observation or statement of facts. Let's have a look at the following sentences.

- **A topic sentence based on a fact(Weak):** Participation of women in politics in Odisha is very high.
- **A topic sentence based on an active argument(strong):** Increasing participation of women in politics in Odisha is a sign of their empowerment.

The first sentence based on simple facts has a weak argument whereas the second sentence has a strong argument as it presumes that increasing participation of women in politics has the potential to empower women. The supporting arguments should tell how this empowerment has been or is possible through the participation of women in politics.

The topic introduced in the topic sentence should be fully and properly dealt with in the supporting arguments, in line with the purpose and audience. Very small paragraphs having two to three sentences may not be able to develop the main idea completely.

Self-Check Exercise-2

Answer the following questions in about 10-15 words.

(a) What happens when the topic sentence is too general?

(b) What kind of a topic sentence is said to be weak? Why?

1.3.2 The Evidence or Supporting Arguments

After stating the topic sentence, we need to provide information or argument to prove, illustrate, clarify, and/or explain the point presented in the topic sentence. This is done through the evidence or supporting arguments. As suggested in the previous section, the Evidence or

Supporting arguments should show that the argument presented through the main argument can be proved or justified. In order to prove the argument, we may need to provide facts, figures, polls, tables, data from research, quotations, examples, opinions of other people on the topic, personal experiences, anecdotes from the lives of great people or references to other relevant sources.

Supporting evidence is the body of the paragraph. It consists of detailed information relevant to the main idea and hence develops the main point presented in the topic sentence. In order to keep the paragraph focused, we usually have three to five supporting sentences or arguments. If all the evidences or supporting arguments are given from the same or single source, the argument becomes weak and less convincing. On the other hand, if we give evidence from multiple sources to justify or support the argument in the topic sentence, we have a strong argument.

Let's take for example, the following two paragraphs.

- A. Increasing participation of women in politics in Odisha is a sign of their empowerment. In the statistics made available by the Department of Statistics, Government of Odisha, the percentage of women participation in politics has risen from 24% in 2009 elections to 33% in the elections 2014. In the same handbook, it has been mentioned that 40% rural women participate in grassroots politics whereas their participation of urban women is grassroots politics in just 10%. On the basis of these facts, the government is optimistic that women participation will keep on increasing and lead to their empowerment.
- B. Increasing participation of women in politics in Odisha is a sign of their empowerment. In the statistics made available by the Department of Statistics, Government of Odisha, the percentage of women participation in politics has risen from 24% in 2009 elections to 33% in the elections 2014. In a similar survey by Swayam, a leading NGO, the percentage of participation is even higher..It was 35% in 2009 and 54% in 2014. Tapas Mehta, a research scholar on women empowerment, has the opinion that the increasing participation of women in politics in Odisha is due to the money that can get when they are in politics. Another scholar, Natasha D'Souza, on the other hand, feels that women come more and more to

politics because they do not find any solution to their problems when men are in power. On the basis of these facts, we can conclude that women participation will keep on increasing and lead to their empowerment.

What do we see? We see that in the first paragraph(Paragraph A) all the evidences are given from the Handbook of Statistics, published by the Department of Statistics, Government of Odisha. They don't show the depth of knowledge of the writer and hence weak. On the other hand, in the second paragraph (Paragraph B), the writer has referred to multiple sources: the Handbook of Statistics, Survey by an NGO, opinions of two research scholars to strengthen the argument given in the topic sentence. Hence it sounds more appealing, persuasive and convincing.

The supporting arguments or supporting sentences perform the following functions:

- expand or explain the main point
- define or describe the key terms
- offer explanations
- give examples or illustrations to strengthen the arguments
- give additional details to elaborate the main argument.

Often we have three sub-sections under this section: Elaboration of the main point, evidence and examples and explanation of evidence.. Though they look like three separate sub-sections, they are all linked in the sense that one closely follows the other.

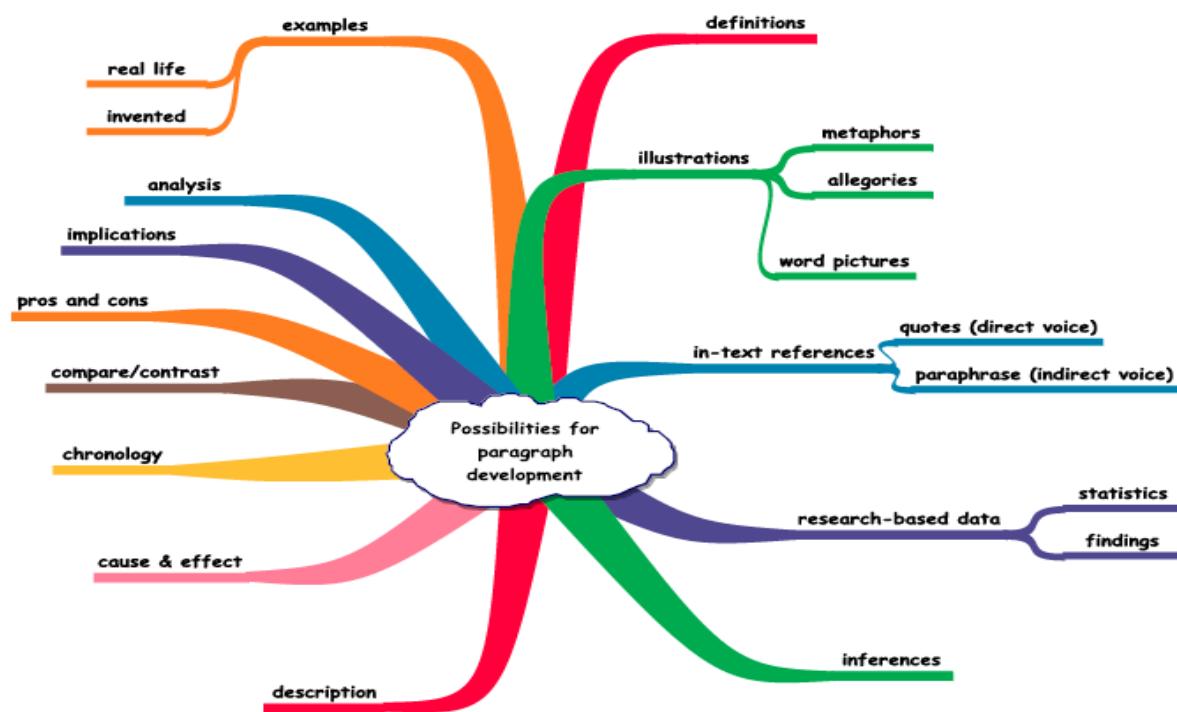
We can use the following methods to support or develop a topic sentence:

- Provide definitions of the terms being discussed
- Provide examples (from real life or imaginary) and illustrations (through words and pictures)
- Cite data (facts, statistics, polls, evidence, details)
- Use quotes and paraphrases to explain or elaborate points
- Use an anecdote or story or personal experience, examples from life to explain the idea
- Use comparison and contrast
- Evaluate causes and reasons

- Show cause and effect relationship between ideas
- Analyze the topic and show implications
- Describe the topic
- Provide chronology of an event (in time segments) to show logical relationships

Sometimes, we add transitional or introductory phrases like *for example*, *for instance*, *first*, *second*, or *last* to guide the reader.

The different ways of supporting or developing the topic sentence can be diametrically represented as follows.



Self-Check Exercise-3

Answer the following questions in about 10-15 words.

- (a) How can we make an argument strong?

(b) What are the principal functions of supporting arguments?

1.3.4 Concluding Observation and Proofreading

Concluding Observation

The concluding sentence of the paragraph should reinforce the main point of the paragraph or summarize the ideas presented in the paragraph to end the paragraph in the light of the supporting evidences. It expects the readers to connect the supporting sentences to the topic sentence and understand the whole passage as a unit. It may use linking words like *thus, so, therefore, hence* to indicate that it is the conclusion drawn on the basis of the evidences given. It also provides the link to the next paragraph when the paragraph is a part of a longer passage. If it is a part of a longer passage, we may also use words or phrases like *the following, another, other* to introduce the new paragraph to the readers. But we should take care that no new material or idea is added in the conclusion. Addition of a new idea or point will not only shift the focus of the paragraph but will also confuse the readers.

Proofreading and Revision

It is the last step in writing a good paragraph.. Before you submitting a piece of writing or finalizing a paragraph, we should look over it at least two times to check the spelling and grammatical errors and double check if the ideas are presented in a logical manner or not. If possible, we may read it out to someone else and take the feedback as to whether it makes any sense or not.

1.4 Summing Up

In this Unit we discussed the basic principles of paragraph writing in regard to its form and function, purpose and focus, the characteristics or properties of the paragraphs that distinguish it

from other forms of writing. In the next section we discussed the definition and role of the topic sentence, the importance of evidence or supporting sentences in furthering the main idea presented in the topic sentence and their principal functions, the significance of concluding observation and finally the need for proofreading and revision before submitting or finalizing the script of a paragraph. While discussing the topic sentences, we discussed the different places in a paragraph where topic sentences can occur, the role of the topic sentence in providing magnitude and direction to the paragraph, weak and strong topic sentences. Likewise, during our discussion of the evidence or supporting arguments we discussed the different methods used to support or develop the topic sentence and the pictorial representation of the different methods used for supporting or developing topic sentences. Finally we discussed the significance of the concluding observation in providing final direction to the paragraph and highlighted the importance of proofreading for ensuring the quality of the paragraph.

1.5 Unit-End Exercise

- 1. Why is paragraph writing considered the key to all good writing? What are some basic principles of paragraph writing?**
- 2. How does a topic sentence decide the magnitude and direction of a paragraph?**
- 3. What are the various methods that we can use to develop or support a topic sentence?**
- 4. What are the various functions of supportive sentences?**
- 5. Why is understanding of the structure of a paragraph important?**

1.6 Model Answers to Self-Check Exercises

Self-Check Exercise-1

- (a) Incorrect. Correct version: A good paragraph is thoughtful, unified, coherent, and well-developed.
- (b) Correct
- (c) Incorrect. Correct version: Every paragraph, however small, contains a single idea or thought and is self-contained
- (d) Incorrect. Correct version: A well-written paragraph presents the author's ideas in a clear and comprehensive manner.
- (e) Correct

Self-Check Exercise-2

Answer the following questions in about 10-15 words.

(c) What happens when the topic sentence is too general?

When the topic sentence is too general, the paragraph loses focus, becomes lengthy and is found to be without direction.

(d) What kind of a topic sentence is said to be weak? Why?

A topic sentence or argument which is only based on facts is said to be weak because it only states the facts but does not present any active argument.

Self-Check Exercise-3

Answer the following questions in about 10-15 words.

(a) How can we make an argument strong?

We can make an argument strong by giving evidence from multiple sources to justify or support the argument in the topic sentence.

(b) What are the principal functions of supporting arguments?

The following are the principal functions of supporting sentences.

- expand or explain the main point
- define or describe the key terms
- offer explanations
- give examples or illustrations to strengthen the arguments
- give additional details to elaborate the main argument.

1.7 Further Reading

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