

# The Paragraph I: Structure and Topic Sentence

## What Is a Paragraph?

**DEFINITION ➤**

A **paragraph** is a group of sentences that develops one main idea. A paragraph may stand by itself as a complete piece of writing, or it may be a section of a longer piece of writing, such as an essay.

No single rule will tell you how long a paragraph should be, but if a paragraph is too short, the reader will feel that basic information is missing. If the paragraph is too long, the reader will be bored or confused. An effective paragraph is always long enough to develop the main idea that is being presented. This textbook suggests that, as a rule, a healthy paragraph should consist of at least five sentences and no more than twelve sentences. You have undoubtedly read paragraphs in newspapers that are only one sentence long, but in fully developed writing, this is considered unacceptable.

## What Does a Paragraph Look Like?

Margins, new-paragraph indication, and complete sentences are essential parts of paragraph form. Study the following paragraph from Elizabeth Pollet's "A Cold-Water Flat" to observe the standard form.

I got the job. I worked in the bank's city collection department. For weeks, I was like a mouse in a maze: my feet scurried. Every seventh day, I received thirteen dollars. It wasn't much. But, standing beside the pneumatic tube, unloading the bundles of mail that pelted down and distributing them according to their texture, size, and colour to my superiors at their desks, I felt humble and useful.

A margin of adequate width is used on each side of the text (for a manuscript page, this margin should be 2.5 cm or 1 inch). If another paragraph is added, make sure there is proper indication of the new paragraph. If the first line of the

first paragraph is indented (as in the example on the previous page), ensure the first line of the second paragraph is also indented. If you follow the full-block style (no indentation of the first line of a paragraph), then make sure you skip a line between paragraphs. If you're already double-spacing, skip two lines between paragraphs. If you neither indent the first line of your paragraph nor skip an extra line between paragraphs, the reader cannot be expected to know you've written two paragraphs.

You will note that the layout of this book follows a different format than that suggested for your essays. The book industry has its own standards and norms relating to page layout.

Figure 15.1 illustrates the structure of the paragraph.

**Note:** Any space left over at the end of the last line of a paragraph, in itself, never properly indicates the end of a paragraph (if another paragraph follows). As mentioned, proper indication of a paragraph means either indenting the first line of the paragraph or skipping a line (or two, if you're already double-spacing) between paragraphs.

## What Is a Topic Sentence?

### DEFINITION >

A **topic sentence** states the main idea of the paragraph. It contains the topic of the paragraph and a controlling idea (the writer's attitude toward the topic). It is the most general sentence of the paragraph. All the other sentences of the paragraph serve to explain, describe, extend, or support the controlling idea in the topic sentence.

Most paragraphs you read will begin with the topic sentence. However, some topic sentences come in the middle of the paragraph; others come at the end. Some paragraphs have no stated topic sentence at all; in these cases, the main idea is implied. You are advised to use topic sentences in all your work in order to be certain that the writing has a focus and develops a single idea at a time. Whether you are taking an essay exam in a history course, doing a research paper for a sociology course, or writing an essay in a composition course, thoughtful use of the topic sentence will always bring better results. Good topic sentences help both the writer and the reader to think clearly about the main points.

The paragraph that follows makes a point, which is stated in its topic sentence. Read the paragraph and notice how the topic sentence is the most general sentence; it is the main idea of the paragraph. The other sentences explain, describe, extend, or support the topic sentence.

### Model Paragraph

We are the great "Let's junk it" society! Mountains of disposable diapers are thrown into garbage cans every day. Tonnes of yogurt containers, pop cans,

and plastic items are discarded without so much as a stomp to flatten them out. If the old Chevy is not worth fixing, tow it off to sit with thousands of others on hectares of fenced-in junkyards. Radios, televisions, and toasters get the same treatment because it is easier and often less expensive to buy a new product than to fix the old one. Who wants a comfortable old sweater if a new one can be bought on sale? No thought is given to the fact that the new one will look like the old one after two or three washings. After all, what's bad for the environment is probably good for the economy!

All the examples in this paragraph support the topic sentence, that we are a "throwaway" society. Although the concluding sentence does not repeat the topic sentence in this case, it gives the paragraph a sense of closure. (See more on concluding sentences on pages 191–92 in Chapter 16.)

### PRACTICE

#### Finding the Topic Sentence of a Paragraph

Each of the following paragraphs contains a topic sentence that states the main idea of the paragraph. Find this sentence and underline it. Check your answers against those in the Answer Key on p. 465.

1. Love is a crazy, complicated affair made trickier by the tangle of superstitions that go along with it. According to the book *Cross Your Fingers, Spit in Your Hat*, you must pull a hair from the head of the one you love to make him or her love you back. Or you can offer your loved one a glass of lemonade in which you have soaked your toenail clippings, or a bowl of soup to which you have added three drops of your blood. Once your sweetheart has devoured either of these concoctions, he or she will love you always.
2. When you remember something, your brain uses more than one method to store the information. You have short-term memory, which helps you recall recent events; you have long-term memory, which brings back items that are further in the past; and you have deep retrieval, which gives you access to long-buried information that is sometimes difficult to recall. Whether these processes are chemical or electrical, we do not yet know, and much research remains to be done before we can say which with any certainty. The brain is one of the most remarkable organs, a part of the body that we have only begun to investigate. It will be years before we start to understand all its complex processes.

#### How Do You Find the Topic in a Topic Sentence?

To find the topic in a topic sentence, ask yourself this question: What is the topic the writer is going to discuss? Below are two topic sentences. The first topic is underlined. Underline the topic in the second example.

Backpacking in the mountains last year was an exciting experience.  
College registration can be stressful.

**PRACTICE****Finding the Topic in the Topic Sentence**

Find the topic in each of the following topic sentences. For each example, ask yourself this question: What is the topic the writer is going to discuss? Then underline the topic. Check your answers against those in the Answer Key on p. 465.

1. Remodelling an old house can be frustrating.
2. College work demands more independence than high school work.
3. A well-made suit has three easily identified characteristics.
4. Growing up near a museum had a profound influence on my life.
5. My favourite room in the house would seem ugly to most people.
6. A student who goes to school full-time and also works part-time has to make careful use of every hour.
7. One of the disadvantages of skiing is the expense.
8. When we met for dinner that night, I was shocked at the change that had come over my friend.
9. According to the report, current tax laws greatly benefit those who own real estate.
10. Greek restaurants, to the delight of many Canadians, can be found in most of our cities.

**What Is a Controlling Idea?**

Every topic sentence contains not only the topic, but also a controlling idea.

**DEFINITION ➤**

The **controlling idea** tells us the position the writer has taken on the topic. It gives the paragraph direction. It is the writer's attitude toward the topic.

**Example:** Her trip to Kenya was *exciting*.

For example, in the topic sentence “Backpacking in the mountains last year was an exciting experience,” the topic is “backpacking” and the controlling idea is that this backpacking trip was “exciting.” Another person on the same trip might have had another attitude toward the trip. The person might have found the trip exhausting or boring. A single topic can therefore have any number of possibilities for development since the writer can choose from a limitless number of controlling ideas, depending on his or her attitude.

**How Do You Find the Controlling Idea of a Topic Sentence?**

When you look for the controlling idea in a topic sentence, ask yourself this question: What is the writer's attitude toward the topic?

In each of the following examples, the topic is underlined and the controlling idea is circled.

Identify

Sealfon's Department Store is my favourite store in town.

Sealfon's Department Store is too expensive for my budget.

**PRACTICE****Finding the Controlling Idea**

Below are seven topic sentences. For each sentence, underline the topic and circle the controlling idea. Check your answers against those in the Answer Key on p. 465.

1. Vigorous exercise is a good way to reduce the effect of stress on the body.
2. St. John's and Corner Brook differ in four major ways.
3. Many so-called wonder foods are less than wonderful.
4. Athletic scholarships available to women are increasing.
5. Caffeine has several adverse effects on the body.
6. Madame Benoit, a famous gourmet cook, had an amusing personality.
7. Computers will make newspapers obsolete by 2020.

**Choosing Your Own Controlling Idea**

Professors often assign one general topic on which all students must write. Likewise, when writing contests are announced, the topic is sometimes the same for all contestants. Since very few people have exactly the same view of or attitude toward a topic, it is likely that no two papers would have the same controlling idea. There could be as many controlling ideas as there are people to write them. The secret of writing a good topic sentence is to use a controlling idea that strongly and accurately expresses your attitude or feeling toward the topic.

**EXERCISE****Choosing Controlling Ideas for Topic Sentences**

Below are two topics. For each topic, think of three different possible controlling ideas, and then write a different topic sentence for each of these controlling ideas. An example is done for you.

**Topic: My mother****Three possible controlling ideas:**

1. Unusual childhood
2. Silent woman
3. Definite ideas about alcohol

1. warm
2. private
3. secure

**Three different topic sentences:**

1. My mother had a most unusual childhood.
2. My mother is a very silent woman.
3. My mother has definite ideas about alcohol.

1. The weather in my neighbourhood was warm.
2. You could live a private life in my neighbourhood.
3. My neighbourhood was excellent at security.

**Topic: My neighbourhood**

First controlling idea: \_\_\_\_\_

# The Paragraph II: Supporting Details

## What Is a Supporting Detail?

**DEFINITION ➤** A **supporting detail** is a piece of evidence used by the writer to make the controlling idea of the topic sentence convincing to the reader.

Once you have constructed your topic sentence with its topic and controlling idea, you are ready to move on to supporting your idea with details. These details will convince your readers that what you are claiming in the topic sentence is believable or reasonable.

### State Facts

As you choose these supporting details, realize that readers do not necessarily have to agree with your point of view. However, your supporting details must be good enough and numerous enough to convince your readers at least to respect your position. Remember to state facts rather than opinion. You are likely not the only one who has knowledge of a particular subject, so be sure that you don't present vague assertions that leave you open to contradiction. You may have had many problems with a particular make of car that you purchased, for example, and want to write a paragraph detailing its faults. However, your reader may have had a positive experience with this same make of car, or may work for the company that built it. Respect the possible point of view of your reader.

### Be Specific

Remember, too, that specific details tend to stay in readers' minds much longer than general ideas. The statement that over 34 600 males died of cancer in Canada in 2000 is much more effective and memorable than a statement saying only that cancer killed many people. Specific details also make a piece of writing more interesting. When the reader has concrete objects, particular people, or recognizable places to hang on to, the contents of the writing become a pleasure to read.

It is important to notice that longer paragraphs with complicated topics usually contain a large number of supporting details. The following paragraph is taken from an essay about the richness of Aboriginal people's languages. It begins with a good topic sentence. Then several strong details support the topic sentence.

Languages are remarkably adaptable, easily borrowing or coining new words as circumstances change. The horse, unknown to Aboriginals when the Spanish landed, soon took on a central role among Aboriginal peoples, and words for the horse and its many uses were introduced. One device was to borrow some form of the Spanish word *caballo*. Another was to invent a descriptive term. Native people of eastern New York State used a word meaning "one rides its back"; in the western part of the state, the word for horse means "it hauls out logs." Presumably these were the first uses of horses seen in the two areas. Among the Kwakiutl of British Columbia, a steamboat was "fire on its back moving in the water." To the Tsimshian of the same area, the word for rice was "looking like maggots."

Notice that the topic sentence gives us the topic (language) and the writer's attitude toward the topic (remarkably adaptable). Each of the sentences that follow this topic sentence is a supporting detail that convinces us that the controlling idea is a reasonable attitude. The writer provides more than one example and chooses these examples from more than one group of Aboriginal people. This wide range makes the topic sentence more convincing and interesting.

**Topic sentence:** Languages are remarkably adaptable, easily borrowing or coining new words as circumstances change.

**First supporting detail:** The word for "horse" was adapted to meet certain situations among Aboriginal peoples.

**Second supporting detail:** Spanish was adapted.

**Third supporting detail:** Descriptive terms were used.

**Fourth supporting detail:** The word "steamboat" was adapted by the First Nations peoples of British Columbia to serve a descriptive purpose.

**Fifth supporting detail:** Another British Columbia Nation had a descriptive word for "rice."

### EXERCISE

### Finding the Topic Sentence and Supporting Details

For the following paragraph, write down the topic sentence, and then list the supporting details.

The time when the darkness that envelops me is most disturbing is the moment when I roll over onto my back and face the ceiling, still encased in the web of drowsiness sleep has woven, and from which it is reluctant to release me. As I become more aware of the sounds around me in the darkness, the tick-

ing of my alarm clock draws my attention, and I look toward it to see what time this morning I have awakened. I am unable to comprehend why I can't locate its familiar face when I know it should be there. It is at this moment that reality crashes in, and reminds me, once again, that morning never comes for me anymore. Life has indeed abandoned me to the night, which is, and always will be, my constant companion. After this moment passes, I reach out into the void toward the sound of the clock. Grasping it and tracing the face that had eluded me moments ago, I sense it forfeit the time to my touch, and thus I broach another day.

Glenn David du Moulin, blind student, "Five Hours in a Life"

Topic sentence: The moment

First supporting detail: \_\_\_\_\_

Second supporting detail: \_\_\_\_\_

Third supporting detail: \_\_\_\_\_

Fourth supporting detail: \_\_\_\_\_

Fifth supporting detail: \_\_\_\_\_

## Using Examples as Supporting Details

### DEFINITION ➤

An **example** is a very specific illustration or piece of evidence that supports a writer's point of view. Examples make general ideas more concrete and therefore easier to comprehend and remember. An example may be part of a sentence, or an entire sentence on its own, or more than one sentence long.

### Respect Other Points of View

When you use examples in your writing, you are trying to convince your reader that what you are saying is true and worthy of belief. At the same time, you must assume that some readers will be knowledgeable in your subject area, so be sure to respect that, and make your examples as clear and concise as you can.

Remember that no matter how good your examples are, they might not convince some readers, who may have education and experience you lack. So don't "preach" to the reader or consider that your point of view is the only one that is valid.

### Use Specific Examples

Examples are supporting details that support or further explain main supporting details.

See the paragraph below that starts with "Not only are weather forecasters often wrong ..." The second sentence contains the first main supporting detail. The third sentence contains an example that supports the second sentence. The more precise your examples, the more clearly your reader will be able to see what you mean, and the more memorable your writing will be.

Examples may be given in more than one way. They may appear as lists of specific items to illustrate a particular point, or they may be written as extended examples.

#### DEFINITION ➤

**Extended examples** include lengthy descriptions or stories that are usually several sentences long (or even an entire paragraph long in a longer piece of writing, such as an essay).

A good piece of writing is filled with both kinds of examples—specific items and extended examples—that fit together to create a well-developed, convincing whole. Read the following paragraph on the terminology used in weather forecasting. As you read, look for different examples that show how listening to the weather forecast can be a challenge.

Not only are weather forecasters often wrong with their forecasts, but they speak a language that only the most knowledgeable meteorologist can understand. For the average television viewer or radio listener, a dictionary is a necessity when listening to the weather forecast. "Watch out for the Alberta clipper, folks. It's coming this way!" seems to be part of the forecasters' lexicon in the winter. Or maybe it's the summer. In any case, what is an Alberta clipper? Are we supposed to hide under a table when it approaches? I've never understood the term, nor have I understood the significance of the dew point or a temperature inversion. How could I ever understand these terms when no one has ever defined them for me? Yet they roll off the tongues of weather forecasters as if *everyone* should know what is happening. The relative humidity mystifies me, as do troughs and ridges of pressure. I know one thing, however: if the forecast is for a sunny day, be sure to take an umbrella.