

Paragraphs

A paragraph is an organized set of sentences that deal with a single topic. Well-organized paragraphs provide the structure in our writing, allowing us to develop the major points we wish to convey to the reader and move smoothly from one point to another. And they also provide *visual* structure to the page, indicating subdivisions of our theme or changes of topic.

Long, unbroken blocks of text often appear daunting to the reader. They look intimidating and can prove difficult to navigate. Paragraphs help remove some of that “intimidation factor.” They’re used to break the paper into manageable, accessible “chunks” of information that lead the reader through a logical progression of important points.

To be effective, paragraphs should contain certain elements. The **topic sentence** indicates the subject of the paragraph. All other sentences in the paragraph should support the idea introduced by the topic sentence, thus providing **unity**. In academic writing, the topic sentence often is located at the beginning of the paragraph; however, sometimes it can follow one or more **linking sentences**, which are used to provide a smooth transition from the previous paragraph.

A paragraph also should be **coherent**. A coherent paragraph is one in which each sentence relates to the topic sentence, and each sentence flows smoothly into the next, without obvious, awkward jumps in thought. To create a coherent paragraph, good writers use both logical and verbal bridges. A **logical bridge** is formed when an idea is carried over from sentence to sentence. A **verbal bridge** can be created by repeating key words or terms in several sentences. Also, **transitional words** can be used to construct a verbal bridge. Transitional words form a link to the previous sentence; they include words such as *also, although, likewise, however, subsequently, therefore, and for example*.

There is no minimum or maximum length for paragraphs. A paragraph can be quite long, or it can be a single sentence. As stated earlier, all the sentences within a paragraph should relate to the single topic introduced by the topic sentence. The key is to develop that topic completely, whether it takes many sentences or just one or a few. And once you’ve developed that topic fully and you’re ready to change the focus of your narrative or move on to a different topic, you should start your next paragraph and compose a new topic sentence.