

4c Developing the paragraph

In an essay that's understandable and interesting to readers, you will provide plenty of solid information to support your *general* statements. You work that information into the essay through the paragraph, as you build up each point relating to the thesis.

A paragraph may be unified and coherent but still be inadequate if you skimp on details. Take this example:

Untruths can serve as a kind of social oil when they smooth connections between people. In preventing confrontation and injured feelings, they allow everyone to go on as before.

General statements needing examples to be clear and convincing

This paragraph lacks **development**, completeness. It does not provide enough information for us to evaluate or even care about the writer's assertions.

1 Using specific information

If they are sound, the general statements you make in any writing will be based on what you have experienced, observed, read, and thought. Readers will assume as much and will expect you to provide the evidence for your statements—sensory details, facts, statistics, examples, quotations, reasons. Whatever helps you form your views you need, in turn, to share with readers.

Here is the actual version of the preceding sample paragraph. With examples, the paragraph is more interesting and convincing.

Untruths can serve as a kind of social oil when they smooth connections between people. Assuring a worried friend that his haircut is flattering, claiming an appointment to avoid an aunt's dinner invitation, pretending interest in an acquaintance's children—these lies may protect the liar, but they also protect the person lied to. In preventing confrontation and injured feelings, the lies allow everyone to go on as before.
—Joan Lar (student), "The Truth of Lies"

Examples specifying kinds of lies and consequences

3 Checking length

The average paragraph contains between 100 and 150 words, or between four and eight sentences. The actual length of a paragraph depends on the complexity of its topic, the role it plays in *developing* the thesis of the essay, and its position in the essay. Nevertheless, very short paragraphs are often inadequately developed; they may leave readers with a sense of incompleteness. And very long paragraphs often contain irrelevant details or develop two or more topics; readers may have difficulty following, sorting out, or remembering ideas.

When you are revising your essay, reread the paragraphs that seem very long or very short, checking them especially for unity and adequate development. If the paragraph wanders, cut everything from it that does not support your main idea (such as sentences that you might begin with *By the way*). If it is underdeveloped, supply the specific details, examples, or reasons needed, or try one of the methods of development we have discussed here.

EXERCISE 4.13 Analyzing paragraph development

Examine the paragraphs by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (p. 76), and Judith Wax (p. 81) to discover how the authors achieve paragraph development. What pattern or patterns of development does each author use? Where does each author support general statements with specific evidence?

1. Today many black Americans enjoy a measure of economic security beyond any we have known in the history of black America. But if they remain in a nasty blue funk, it's because their very existence seems an affront to the swelling ranks of the poor. Nor have black intellectuals ever quite made peace with the concept of the black bourgeoisie, a group that is typically seen as devoid of cultural authenticity, doomed to mimicry and pallid assimilation. I once gave a talk before an audience of black academics and educators, in the course of which I referred to black middle-class culture. Afterward, one of the academics in the audience, deeply affronted, had a question for me. "Professor Gates," he asked rhetorically, his voice dripping with sarcasm, "what is black middle-class culture?" I suggested that if he really wanted to know, he need only look around the room. But perhaps I should just have handed him a mirror: for just as nothing is more American than anti-Americanism, nothing is more characteristic of the black bourgeoisie than the sense of shame and denial that the identity inspires.

—Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Two Nations . . . Both Black"

It's disconcerting that so many college women, when asked how their children will be cared for if they themselves work, refer with vague confidence to "the day care center" as though there were some great amorphous kiddie watcher out there that the state provides. But such places, adequately funded, well run, and available to all, are still scarce in this country, particularly for middle-class women. And figures show that when she takes time off for family-connected reasons (births, child care), a woman's chances for career advancement plummet. In a job market that's steadily tightening and getting more competitive, these obstacles bode the kind of danger ahead that can shatter not only professions, but egos. A hard reality is that there's not much more support for our daughters who have family-plus-career goals than there was for us; there's simply a great deal more self and societal pressure.

—Judith Wax,
Starting in the Middle

EXERCISE 4.14 Analyzing and revising skimpy paragraphs

The following paragraphs are not well developed. Analyze them, looking especially for general statements that lack support or leave questions in your mind. Then rewrite one into a well-developed paragraph, supplying your own concrete details or examples. (You can do this exercise online at ablongman.com/littlebrown.)

1. One big difference between successful and unsuccessful teachers is the quality of communication. A successful teacher is sensitive to students' needs and excited by the course subject. In contrast, an unsuccessful teacher seems uninterested in students and bored by the subject.
2. Gestures are one of our most important means of communication. We use them instead of speech. We use them to supplement the words we speak. And we use them to communicate some feelings or meanings that words cannot adequately express.
3. I've discovered that a word processor can do much—but not everything—to help me improve my writing. I can easily make changes and try out different versions of a paper. But I still must do the hard work of revising.

Compare and contrast

- Compare – to show **similarities** between the chosen objects
- Contrast – to show **differences** between the chosen objects
- Transitional words are important!
- Two basic ways of organizing:
 - o A) the block method
 - o B) the point-by-point method

Exercise – write the following using either the block method or the point-by-point method

Topic sentence: Newest poll finds that book sales in general are increasing due to e-books and audio books; the sales of printed books have decreased by 8% since 2008, yet printed books are still popular according to the latest poll.

Sentences:

- Around 65% of readers like the feeling of a real book.
- E-readers are easier to carry around than printed books.
- E-readers often have a built-in dictionary that provides quick reference when needed.
- The physical aspect of a book is good for writing down notes.
- Shopping in bookstores rather than browsing online is for many a positive experience.
- E-readers can hold hundreds of books.
- Books can be resold, collected or given as a gift.
- Shopping online for e-book can be done from the convenience of your home.

Exercise – Writing with the patterns of development

Write at least three unified, coherent, and well-developed paragraphs, each one developed with a different pattern. Draw on the topics provided below:

- a) **Narration:** an experience of public speaking; a disappointment; leaving home; waking up
- b) **Description (objective or subjective):** your room; a crowded or deserted place; a food; an intimidating person
- c) **Illustration or support:** why study; having a headache; the best sports event; usefulness or uselessness of a self-help book
- d) **Definition:** humor; an adult; fear; authority
- e) **Division or analysis:** a television news show; a barn; a web site; a piece of music
- f) **Classification:** factions in a dispute; styles of playing poker; types of Web sites; kinds of teachers
- g) **Comparison and contrast:** surfing the Web and watching TV; radio/online DJs; youth and professional hockey/football; movies on TV and in a theater
- h) **Analogy:** paying taxes and giving blood; the US Constitution and a building's foundation; graduating from high school and being released from prison
- i) **Cause-and-effect analysis:** Connection between tension and anger; causes of failing or acing a course; connection between credit cards and debt; causes of a serious accident
- j) **Process analysis:** preparing for a job interview; setting up a web log; protecting your home from burglars; making a jump shot