

Paragraphs

A paragraph is a group of related sentences set off by a beginning indentation or, sometimes, by extra space. They provide relief from long sections of text, indicate changes in the development of your argument, and help organize and clarify ideas.

Use of paragraphs:

- To introduce and give evidence for a main point supporting your essay's central idea => thesis
- To shift approach – from pros to cons, from problem to solution, etc.
- To mark movement in a sequence – from step one to step two

Other uses of paragraphs

- to introduce/conclude your essay
- to highlight an important point or a transition from one point to another

Some people really like chili, apparently, but nobody can agree how the stuff should be made. C. V. Wood, twice winner at Terlingua, uses flank steak, pork chops, chicken, and green chilis. My friend Hughes Rudd of CBS News, who imported five hundred pounds of chili powder into Russia as a condition of accepting employment as Moscow correspondent, favors coarse-ground beef. Isadore Bleckman, the cameraman I must live with on the road, insists upon one-inch cubes of stew beef and puts garlic in his chili, an Illinois affectation. An Indian of my acquaintance, Mr. Fulton Batisse, who eats chili for breakfast when he can, uses buffalo meat and plays an Indian drum while it's cooking. I ask you.

—Charles Kuralt, *Dateline America*

General statement relating to thesis: announces topic of paragraph

Four specific examples, all providing evidence for general statement

1) Focusing on central idea

Your text as a whole has a central idea which you present to your readers in a thesis sentence. Similarly, each paragraph should have its thesis sentence which then the rest of the paragraph develops into a sound argument.

Read the following text. Did the author stick to his thesis sentence?

Some people really like chili, apparently, but nobody can agree how the stuff should be made. C. V. Wood, twice winner at Terlingua, uses flank steak, pork chops, chicken, and green chilis. My friend Hughes Rudd, who imported five hundred pounds of chili powder into Russia as a condition of accepting employment as Moscow correspondent, favors coarse-ground beef. He had some trouble finding the beef in Moscow, though. He sometimes had to scour all the markets and wait in long lines. For any American used to overstuffed supermarkets and department stores, Russia can be quite a shock.

Topic sentence:
general statement

Two examples support-
ing statement

Digression

When revising your paragraphs for unity, always make sure you follow through your intended idea.

Exercise: Finding the central idea

What is the central idea of each of the following paragraphs? In what sentence or sentences is it expressed?

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"

2. Though they do not know why the humpback whale sings, scientists do know something about the song itself. They have measured the length of a whale's song: from a few minutes to over half an hour. They have recorded and studied the variety and complex arrangements of low moans, high squeaks, and sliding squeals that make up the song. And they have learned that each whale sings in its own unique pattern.

—Janet Lieber (student), "Whales' Songs"

Exercise: Revising paragraph for unity

The following paragraph contains ideas or details that do not support its central idea. Identify the topic sentence of the paragraph and delete the unnecessary material

In the southern part of the state, some people still live much as they did a century ago. They use coal- or wood-burning stoves for heating and cooking. Their homes do not have electricity or indoor bathrooms or running water. The towns they live in don't receive adequate funding from the state and federal governments, so the schools are poor and in bad shape. Beside most homes there is a garden where fresh vegetables are gathered for canning. Small pastures nearby support livestock, including cattle, pigs, horses, and chickens. Most of the people have cars or trucks, but the vehicles are old and beat-up from traveling on unpaved roads.

Exercise: Writing a unified paragraph

Your task is to develop the topic sentence below into a unified paragraph by using the relevant information in the supporting statements. Delete each statement that does not relate directly to the topic, then rewrite and combine sentences as appropriate. Place the topic sentence in the order that seems the most effective to you.

Topic sentence:

Mozart's accomplishments in music seem remarkable even today.

Supporting information:

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was born in 1756 in Salzburg, Austria.

He began composing music at the age of five.

He lived most of his life in Salzburg and Vienna.

His first concert tour of Europe was at the age of six.

On his first tour he played harpsichord, organ, and violin.

He published numerous compositions before reaching adolescence.

He married in 1782.

Mozart and his wife were both poor managers of money.

They were plagued by debts.

Mozart composed over six hundred musical compositions.

His most notable works are his operas, symphonies, quartets, and piano concertos.

He died at the age of thirty-five.

Exercise: Developing topic sentences

Choose one of the following topic sentences and develop it into a detailed and unified paragraph

- 1) Men and women are different in at least one important respect.
- 2) The best Web search engine is [name].
- 3) Fans of _____ music [country, classical, rock, rap, jazz, etc.] come in [number] varieties.
- 4) Professional sports have [or have not] been helped by extending the regular season with championship play-offs.
- 5) Working for good grades can interfere with learning.