

# What is a paragraph?

## Layout

A paragraph in English is not quite the same as a paragraph in some other languages. These are paragraphs.

Don't read it, just look at it.

'Imagine yourself alone and starving. You're on a cement street surrounded by cement buildings. The buildings have no doors and no windows. The street is endless. There's no hope. That's what a lost or abandoned pet, a dog or a cat, faces when it's turned loose in the city.'

Those words were spoken to me by a man from a charitable organization in Los Angeles called Delta. I got the message and couldn't wait to write him a cheque. I remembered some of the terrified animals I had seen in the streets and how my wife and I had tried to save them. He brought back those memories and moved me emotionally. He painted a picture I was unable to resist.

A truly effective 30-second message is more than a hook, a few words, and a close. Those words should paint a picture your listener will remember. They should be words your listener will understand. They should relate to your own and your listener's personal experiences. And they should reach your listener's heart.

There are three complete paragraphs in the text above.

A paragraph is something you can *see*. It starts away from the margin.

## The Parts of a Paragraph

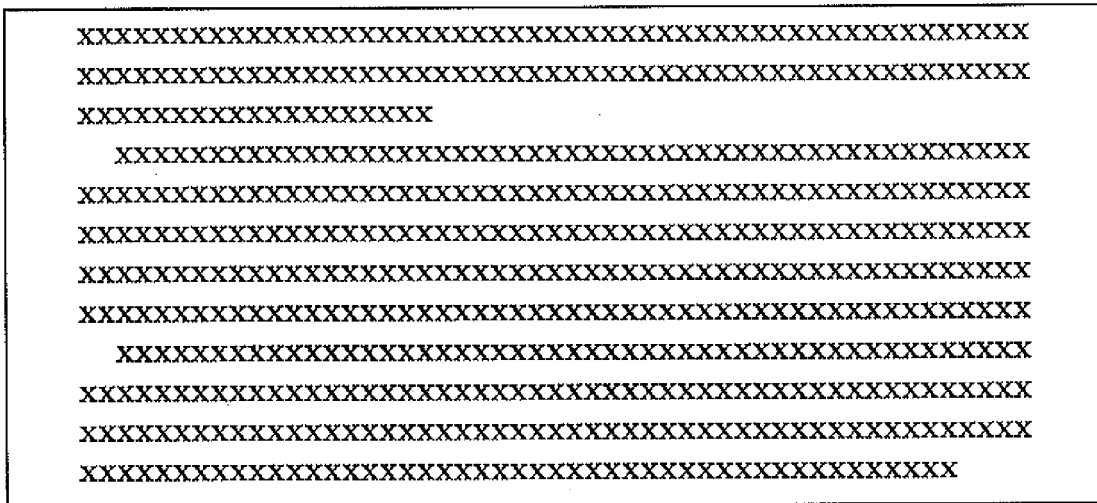
Most of the writing you do in college or at work consists of paragraphs. In academic writing, a **paragraph** is a small unit of writing that focuses on one idea. This one idea is explained and developed in the paragraph. The first line of each paragraph is indented. The indentation signals the beginning of a new paragraph.

A paragraph generally has three parts: a **topic sentence**, **support**, and a **conclusion**. The topic sentence tells the topic (what the paragraph is about) and the writer's attitude or idea about the topic. The supporting part of the paragraph explains, describes, or develops the main idea given in the topic sentence. The conclusion of the paragraph usually summarizes or comments on the main idea. The length of the paragraph depends upon the complexity of the topic.

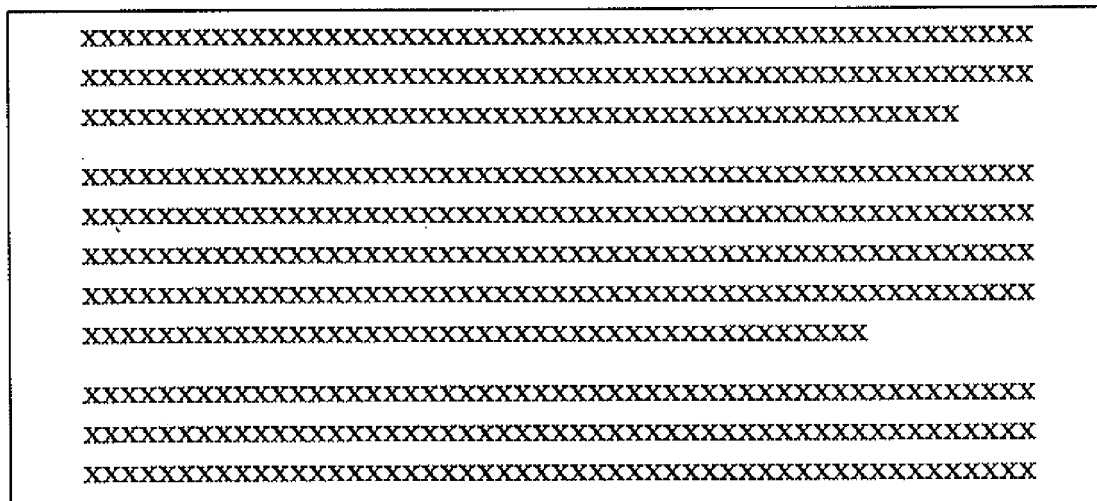
Starting away from the margin is called indentation. The paragraphs are indented. They start at a short distance from the margin set by the rest of the text.

Alternatively, the paragraph can start at the margin with the rest of the text, and be separated from the paragraph before by an empty line.

Paragraphs begin like this



Separate Paragraphs



The paragraphs in the lower box are not indented.

**ADVICE** *Since you are already writing your compositions double-spaced, we recommend that you indent your paragraphs.*

### Paragraphs and sentences

A paragraph usually contains several sentences. It is possible to have a one-sentence paragraph, but these are quite rare.

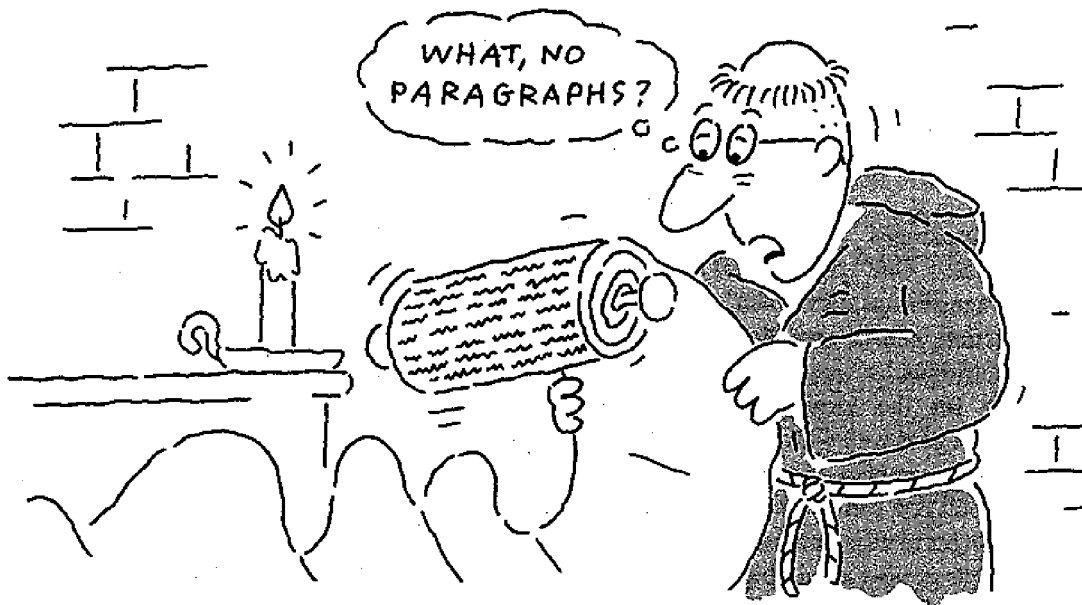
### Importance

Some languages are not very interested in paragraphs. By contrast, the world of normal written English is obsessed with paragraphs. (There is a reason, as we will see soon.)

As regards layout, the English therefore like all writing to be properly paragraphed according to the conventions we have described. They do not like:

- **no indentation**, where new paragraphs start at the margin so that you sometimes cannot be sure whether there is a new paragraph or not;

- **reverse indentation**, where the paragraph starts at the margin, but all the rest of the text is indented;
- **no paragraphing**, where the writing is not divided into paragraphs at all;
- **single-sentence paragraphs**, where there is one paragraph for every sentence.



Sherman, Jane: *Feedback. Essential writing skills for intermediate students*. OUP: 1994, pp. 71-73)