



How to Write a Good Paragraph: A Step-by-Step Guide

Writing well composed academic paragraphs can be tricky. The following is a guide on how to draft, expand, refine, and explain your ideas so that you write *clear, well-developed* paragraphs and discussion posts:

Step 1: Decide the Topic of Your Paragraph

Before you can begin writing, you need to know what you are writing about. First, look at the writing prompt or assignment topic. As you look at the prompt, note any key terms or repeated phrases because you will want to use those words in your response. Then ask yourself:

- On what topic am I supposed to be writing?
- What do I know about this topic already?
- If I don't know how to respond to this assignment, where can I go to find some answers?
- What does this assignment mean to me? How do I relate to it?

After looking at the prompt and doing some additional reading and research, you should better understand your topic and what you need to discuss.

Step 2: Develop a Topic Sentence

Before writing a paragraph, it is important to think first about the **topic** and then what you want to say about the topic. Most often, the topic is easy, but the question then turns to *what* you want to say about the topic. This concept is sometimes called the **controlling idea**.

Strong paragraphs are typically about one main idea or topic, which is often explicitly stated in a **topic sentence**. Good **topic sentences** should always contain both (1) a **topic** and (2) a **controlling idea**.

The **topic** – The main subject matter or idea covered in the paragraph.

The **controlling idea** – This idea focuses the topic by providing direction to the composition.

Read the following topic sentences. They all contain a **topic** (in orange) and a **controlling idea** (in purple). When your paragraphs contain a clearly stated **topic sentence** such as one of the following, your reader will know what to expect and, therefore, understand your ideas better.

Examples of **topic sentences**:

- People can avoid **plagiarizing by taking certain precautions**.
- There are **several advantages to online education**.
- **Effective leadership** requires **specific qualities that anyone can develop**.

Step 3: Demonstrate Your Point

After stating your topic sentence, you need to provide information to prove, illustrate, clarify, and/or exemplify your point.

Ask yourself:

- What examples can I use to support my point?
- What information can I provide to help clarify my thoughts?
- How can I support my point with specific data, experiences, or other factual material?
- What information does the reader need to know in order to see my point?

Here is a list of the kinds of information you can add to your paragraph:

- Facts, details, reasons, examples
- Information from the readings or class discussions
- Paraphrases or short quotations
- Statistics, polls, percentages, data from research studies
- Personal experience, stories, anecdotes, examples from your life

Sometimes, adding transitional or introductory phrases like: *for example, for instance, first, second, or last* can help guide the reader. Also, make sure you are citing your sources appropriately.

Step 4: Give Your Paragraph Meaning

After you have given the reader enough information to see and understand your point, you need to explain why this information is relevant, meaningful, or interesting.

Ask yourself:

- What does the provided information mean?
- How does it relate to your overall point, argument, or thesis?
- Why is this information important/significant/meaningful?
- How does this information relate to the assignment or course I am taking?

Step 5: Conclude

After illustrating your point with relevant information, add a **concluding sentence**. Concluding sentences link one paragraph to the next and provide another device for helping you ensure your paragraph is unified. While not all paragraphs include a concluding sentence, you should always consider whether one is appropriate. Concluding sentences have *two* crucial roles in paragraph writing:

First, they draw together the information you have presented to elaborate your controlling idea by:

- Summarizing the point(s) you have made.
- Repeating words or phrases from the topic sentence.
- Using linking words that indicate that conclusions are being drawn (e.g., therefore, thus, resulting).

Second, they often link the current paragraph to the following paragraph. They may anticipate the topic sentence of the next paragraph by:

- Introducing a word/phrase or new concept which will then be picked up in the topic sentence of the next paragraph.
- Using words or phrases that point ahead (e.g., the following, another, other).

Step 6: Look Over and Proofread

The last step in good paragraph writing is proofreading and revision. Before you submit your writing, look over your work at least one more time. Try reading your paragraph out loud to make sure it makes sense.

Also, ask yourself these questions:

- Does my paragraph answer the prompt and support my thesis?
- Does it make sense? Does it use the appropriate academic voice?

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