
Paragraphs, Argument and Structure

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Paragraphs, Argument and Structure

As units of thought that reflect and present the development of an author's ideas and argument, paragraphs are vital to the effective structure and progression of academic and scientific documents. There are no absolute rules for writing successful paragraphs and stringing them together into sections, chapters and articles, but as a general rule the first sentence of a paragraph should introduce the main idea or unit of thought that will be discussed in the paragraph, the following sentences should develop that idea in one or more ways and the final sentence should bring the paragraph and its main idea to an effective close, ideally in a manner that leads the reader on to the next paragraph and thus to the next main idea.

Focussing on paragraphs as you write can be an excellent strategy for following an outline with accuracy and ensuring that all important aspects of a topic or problem, your investigation of it and the conclusions you draw are discussed in an organised and thorough manner. Paragraphs are most effective for readers if they are neither too long nor too short, so if you need to present main ideas that are relatively simple, it may be best to combine two or more related ideas into a single paragraph. On the other hand, if a main idea is complicated and many different aspects of it require attention, the most effective strategy may be to deal with each

of those aspects in a separate paragraph to develop the idea in detail. The first and last sentences of each paragraph should play a transitional role, clarifying the progression of the argument from paragraph to paragraph.

Carefully structured paragraphs can also help you check, assess and revise your work. Reading over your draft and summarising in a single sentence the subject of each paragraph will provide you with a complete outline of what you have written. This outline can then be compared to your original outline and any other plans you had before you began writing. You will quickly be able to see the sequence of ideas and evidence as well as any digressions, how much space you have dedicated to each idea, and whether you have missed important elements of your argument or repeated concepts and discussions unnecessarily. Whether the revisions are minor or extensive, they will usually prove much easier when you focus on paragraphs in this way, and some authors find that simply trying to define what each paragraph contains can inspire revisions that clarify not only the content of each paragraph, but the overall argument of a piece of writing.

Such an approach can also be used to restructure a chapter or article in more significant ways. Perhaps you have shared your writing with colleagues or submitted it for publication, but it simply is not achieving the positive impact you envisioned, though no reader has indicated exactly why. Analysing your writing at the paragraph level enables you to make decisions about the best order in which to present the units of thought your paragraphs contain. Some fields and disciplines use standard structures for documents, a policy that allows less opportunity for restructuring, but even so there tends to be considerable leeway within each section of an article or chapter. Rearranging your paragraphs to present information in what may prove to be a more engaging order is therefore usually possible to some degree, but do be sure to adjust and rewrite the opening and closing sentences of each paragraph to reflect the new progression of your argument.

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