

Paragraphs: Definitions, Purposes, and Guidelines

DEFINITIONS OF PARAGRAPHS:

A simple dictionary definition declares that a paragraph is “a subdivision of a written composition that consists of one or more sentences, deals with one point or gives the words of one speaker” (Merriam-Webster). The Little Brown Handbook defines a paragraph as “a group of sentences set off by a beginning indention and developing a single idea” (Aaron and Fowler 70). H. W. Fowler offers a more personal definition, stating, “The purpose of paragraphing is to give the reader a rest. The writer is saying [. . .]: ‘Have you got that? If so, I’ll go on’” (LBH, Instructor’s Ed.).

Using a careful eye, we may detect a unifying thread between these three definitions: paragraphs deal with a **single topic**. This may explain why past essays have not succeeded as we hoped. Perhaps, in our excitement, we became carried away with our own thoughts and crammed too many ideas into one paragraph. Likewise, in our exhaustion or lack of enthusiasm for a certain topic, we may use too little information to complete the intended thought, moving on to new ideas without developing the one we already began.

Too Many Ideas

As any coffee lover knows, too many dark roasted, freshly ground Ethiopian beans in the morning’s first much desired pot can gurgle up a blackened-chary mess so bitter and biting the coffee ultimately devours the drinker instead of vice versa.

Too Little

Thin coffee tastes weak.

PURPOSES OF PARAGRAPHS:

Academic writing may seem to rest contingent on merely meeting the minimum number of words assigned by our teacher. We aim for 1,500 words - hoping to land a small cushion with 1,525-1,550. However, many of us fail to realize that essays are not constructed by a particular number of words; essays are constructed by solid ideas expressed in concise, well-structured forms. This is the purpose of the paragraph.

Paragraphs draw definitive boundaries around our ideas, giving each one a unique location in the landscape of the larger essay. Paragraphs also display our thoughts in singular frames where each one can be easily identified. Learning how to

craft well-written, explicitly transitioned paragraphs allows our writing to sound more purposeful and energetic. Our essay no longer feels like an impossible incline of slippery words and slurred speech; instead, paragraphs serve as a staircase in our essay, leading from the bottom floor of the introduction to the top floor of the conclusion.

Again, with a careful eye exploring the box to the left, one may notice that *movement* sums up the unifying purpose of the paragraph. Paragraphs introduce and conclude essays. Paragraphs draw mile markers between “important points” and “significant transitions” (Aaron and Fowler 70). Paragraphs merge and shift lanes between similar and opposing interpretations. However a writer chooses to view the paragraph, the most appropriate view shows the paragraph in motion, moving the reader through the paper like a passenger in a literary taxi cab.

According to *The Little Brown Handbook*, paragraphs serve several purposes:

- 1) to **introduce** or **conclude** an essay;
- 2) to **emphasize** an important point or to **indicate** a significant transition between points;
- 3) to **shift** approach – from pros to cons, or from problem to solution;
- 4) to **mark** movement in a sequence.

(pages 70-71)

GUIDELINES OF PARAGRAPHS:

Paragraphs need to follow three primary criteria (Aaron and Fowler 72):

- 1) Paragraphs should be ***unified***. Because paragraphs deal with one idea, paragraphs should contain a central topic statement or a thesis statement. Each paragraph stands as a tiny essay inside the larger essay. Just as the overall essay deals with a single thesis by exploring various ideas, paragraphs also deal with a single thesis by describing one thought thoroughly. Writers should ask themselves – *Does the paragraph I have written explore only the intended idea? Did I get off topic? Did I chase rabbits in pursuit of my ideas?* (See pages 72-77 for more on unity).
- 2) Paragraphs should be ***coherent***. This is one reason academic writing makes good use of *transitional expressions* between the ideas in paragraphs. Transitions connect ideas that may have very little relationship outside of the paragraph. Whether a paragraph shares a similar idea to a previous paragraph (*also, likewise, in the same way, similarly*), or differing ideas to the next paragraph (*although, in contrast, however, nevertheless, regardless*), by indicating the relationship with a transitional expression, a reader can more easily follow us into the places we desire to take them. (See pages 77-90 – list of transition phrases on pages 86-87).
- 3) Paragraphs should be ***well-developed***. As mentioned before in the coffee analogy, a paragraph should contain the necessary evidence to fully explore its unique central theme. The paragraph should explore no more, and it should certainly explore no less. Questions of development are difficult for writers to answer on their own. Development requires us to ask questions, such as – *Do I have the **right amount of information**? Have I **fully supported** my intended thesis? Have I used details, facts, and examples **appropriate** for my thesis?* These questions may be difficult for a writer to answer concerning their own writing, precisely for reasons highlighted in the rhetorical questions above. For us as writers, particularly after spending weeks meditating on the same essay topic, we may wrongly feel that we have included the right amount of information, or that we fully supported the thesis, or that all our sources are appropriate. Questions of development may best be answered by a neutral party: someone who may approach your essay or paragraph with fresh eyes. This person may be a friend or writing center tutor. (See pages 90-101 for more on paragraph development.)

One should note that the criteria checklist for successful paragraphs is a tool for revision – not for rough drafting. No writer yet has put pen to paper (or fingers to keypad) and immediately drafted the perfect paragraph. Writers must allow themselves “poor” rough drafts in order to bring their ideas to life. Grooming occurs later. The writer should consult the criteria checklist **only after** the initial draft is complete.