

PARAGRAPH WRITING

THE IMPORTANCE OF PARAGRAPHS

At university, paragraphs are the basic unit or building block of extended pieces of writing. Paragraph writing is a key skill that enables you to incorporate academic research into your written work. In an essay or report, each paragraph should have its own clearly identified topic which relates to the argument or case you are developing.

Paragraphs in academic writing frequently consist of a main idea, or topic, which is explained, elaborated, supported by evidence, and illustrated through the use of examples. Paragraphs are characterised by increasing specificity; that is, they move from the general to the specific thus increasingly refining the reader's understanding. A common structure for paragraphs in academic writing follows.

PARAGRAPH STRUCTURE MODEL

Paragraph Topic

The main idea of the paragraph is expressed as a generalisation

Explanation, Elaboration

The main idea is elaborated and its meaning explained

Illustration

The main idea is illustrated or supported by example, data or quote

Concluding Sentence

Explains why the topic of the paragraph is relevant to the essay or report question.

The **main idea or topic** of an academic paragraph should relate to the overall issue your writing addresses. Often it will be expressed as an assertion or claim, which supports the overall argument or purpose of your writing.

Look at the pairs of general essay/report topics and paragraph topics below. Notice that the paragraph topic is always a full sentence that makes a claim.

General essay or report topic

The relationship between home and school

Paragraph topic

The relationship between home and school is an important factor in a child's educational achievement.

General essay or report topic

The impact of cars on pollution levels

Paragraph topic

Cars are a major source of air pollution in large cities.

The **illustration** or example that supports the main idea can sometimes be provided in the form of a quotation. This can be either a direct quotation or an indirect quotation/paraphrase.

EXAMPLE OF AN EFFECTIVE PARAGRAPH

Notice that the main idea is general enough to allow the movement from general to more particular.

The individual rights approach argues that the individual is more important than society, the community or other social groups. Each individual is assumed to possess a set of rights that are natural in the sense that they exist prior to individuals forming together in social groups. Defenders of individual rights argue that those rights, which exist by nature, should not be taken away. According to Heywood (1992), in contemporary liberal democracies, individual rights are most frequently interpreted as freedom of choice. This choice is limited when governments intervene in individuals' lives through such measures as taxation and setting minimum wages and conditions. The individual rights approach argues that there is a need to "limit the powers and responsibilities of government in order to protect the natural freedom of the individual" (Ryan, Parker & Hutchings 1999, p.234).

ASSESS THE QUALITY OF A PARAGRAPH

To check if your paragraph has an effective structure, ask the following questions.

- Does the paragraph have a clear main idea?
- Is the main idea sufficiently general to generate a whole paragraph?
- Is everything in the paragraph related to the main idea?
- Do the sentences join together smoothly?
- Is the main idea adequately developed and explained?

OTHER RESOURCES

- Other QUICK TIPS FOR STUDENTS <http://www.usq.edu.au/learningcentre/tips.htm>
 - Essay – an overview
 - Thesis statement
 - Writing an essay introduction
 - Essay body and conclusion
- Online resources
<http://www.usq.edu.au/learningcentre/alsonline/acwrite/struct.htm>
- Talk with a tutor at The Learning Centre (tlc@usq.edu.au)