Paragraph Writing

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What is a Paragraph?
- A group of related sentences
  - Often between 3-6 sentences
- A ‘unit of thought’
  - Based on one single idea or theme
    - Rest of the paragraph develops this idea
- Usually part of a longer argument
  - BUT can be free-standing (single paragraph answer)
- Marked out visually in some way...
  - Indented (first line only)
  - Starts on a new line

Why bother?
- Good paragraphs help the reader understand and follow your argument
  - ‘It is difficult to see what you are trying to prove or disprove.’
  - ‘Your argument is difficult to follow.’
  - ‘You jump from point to point.’

‘Traditional’ Five Paragraph Essay

Short essays (1000 words):
- Introductory paragraph
  - Thematic overview of the essay or assignment
- Narration paragraph
  - Review of primary literature and other evidence
- Affirmation paragraph
  - Evidence in favour of key thesis
- Negation paragraph
  - Evidence against the key thesis
- Concluding paragraph
  - Summary of the argument and links to wider issues

Longer essays: variation on a theme…

When planning your essay

- Decide what you’ll need to cover
- Allocate words to each area (to be covered)
- Allocate topics/ points to individual paragraphs
  - One main point
  - Supporting evidence
- Use paragraph headings (later delete these)
- Craft topic sentences (one for each paragraph)

Paragraph Structure

A paragraph typically has three parts:
- One topic sentence
  - The main idea or theme of the paragraph
- Several supporting sentences
  - Explain or develop the main theme
  - Offer evidence (references or reasoning)
- One concluding sentence
  - Signals that the thought process is moving on
  - Either draws discussion towards a close
  - Or provides a ‘link’ to next paragraph
Factors that influence teenagers to smoke are complex and numerous. They include socio-demographic characteristics, family background, school performance, and other social and environmental factors. Among these factors, some are predetermined, such as age, gender, and ethnicity. Others can be affected through program implementation or policy initiatives such as prohibition of cigarette sales to minors or education about the effects of smoking. In 1990, the California Youth Tobacco Survey looked into the relationship between school performance, smoking, and attempts to quit smoking among teenagers. It accepted that a student’s school performance is inversely related to smoking status. That is, the better students do academically, the less likely they are to become smokers. School performance can be viewed as a broad indicator that reflects traits such as general educational commitment, motivation, competence in learning and value judgment, and academic success. It is therefore important to investigate in detail the issue of school performance in relation to smoking status.


Exercise: Write a Topic Sentence

Write an effective topic sentence introducing ONE of these themes:

- The current UK government (popularity)
  The popularity of the current UK Government has decreased for three main reasons.
- Iran’s relationship with the West (opportunities)
  While Rouhani’s election may have complicated the Western agenda on Iran, it also offers new opportunities.
- Homelessness (cost to society)
  Studies indicate that homelessness is more expensive to society than the costs of solving the problem.

Supporting Sentences (Evidence)

The topic MUST be discussed and backed up with adequate supporting evidence.

Supporting sentences should:

- explain ideas raised (why they are true)
- define terms more fully
- give additional information/details (evidence)
  - e.g. statistics or ‘facts’
- give examples or illustrations
- comment on/evaluate evidence
Since colonial times, Venezuela and Colombia have developed markedly divergent patterns of social and political organization. These differences have grown in this century and are reflected in the diametrically opposed role and status of the Church in each nation. The Colombian Church was and is much more powerful and well-established than its Venezuelan neighbor, which remains poor, weak, and lacking in influence. In colonial times, Colombia was a center of governmental, military, and ecclesiastical organization. The Church thus came into the period of independence with a dense net of organizations and great traditions of social, cultural, and political leadership. Although this predominant role was periodically challenged and reversed throughout the nineteenth century, by 1887 proclerical Conservatives gained a complete victory and used their power to consolidate and reinforce the position of the Church. Venezuela, in contrast, was a pastoral backwater in colonial times, and the ecclesiastical organization carried over into independence was weak for all practical purposes absent in broad regions of the nation. Moreover, anticlerical Liberals won the civil wars of nineteenth-century Venezuela, and what little the Church possessed in property, schools, and institutional support was taken away. The Venezuelan cultural and political patterns have been aggressively secular ever since, with civil registry, education, marriage, divorce, and cemeteries the norm.

(Levine 1997 p. 53)
Mainstream liberals can be found on both sides in assessing such military involvements [as Iraq], but they tend to employ similar just war tools of analysis in their assessments. Many mainstream liberals have publicly rejected the use of nuclear deterrence, increases in military budgets, and other examples of what they consider excessive militarism.

But mainstream liberals have also taken the positive tasks of peacemaking seriously. For instance, most mainstream liberals support the United Nations…

Linking your Paragraphs"...

Paragraph Structure: Example

A number of key theoretical influences helped shape Durkheim’s views on society. Of these, at least three influences are significant. First was Comte’s perspective on scientific methodology which helped Durkheim find an investigative method to examine society scientifically. Second were the debates related to the problem of individualism, which were common in France after the revolution. Third were the influences derived from the political writings of Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose individualist doctrines tended to trace the origins of society to individual human nature. Beginning with Comte, let us look at some of the influences on Durkheim’s work.

Paragraph Structure: Example

Concluding sentence:

Beginning with Comte, let us look at some of the influences on Durkheim’s work.

Paragraph Structure: Example

Supporting sentences:

Of these, at least three influences are significant. First was Comte’s perspective on scientific methodology which helped Durkheim find an investigative method to examine society scientifically. Second were the debates related to the problem of individualism, which were common in France after the revolution. Third were the influences derived from the political writings of Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose individualist doctrines tended to trace the origins of society to individual human nature.

Paragraph Structure: Example

Topic sentence:

A number of key theoretical influences helped shape Durkheim’s views on society.

- Lays out the theme for development in the paragraph: what were the main influences on the development of Durkheim’s social theory?
- This is the theme of the paragraph to be explored

Sentence linking the new paragraph to the previous one

Sentence progressing debate onto another aspect of the topic

Thank you.

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From K. Morrison 'Marx, Durkheim, Weber'

Preparing Good Paragraphs

Five preliminary steps...

1. Think carefully about what you want to say
   - Ask: What is the key point I want to develop?
   - How can I best state this topic?
   - What needs to be highlighted in this topic?
   - Have I got enough material to write on this topic?

2. Collect material related to the paragraph
   - Go through notes and gather relevant material – plan!

3. Develop your own supporting ideas
   - What might convince a reader about this point?

4. Identify the strongest bits of supporting evidence
   - Consider the best/most effective position for this

5. Draft an initial sketch of the paragraph