

Paragraphs



Paragraphs:

- provide a structure for your writing which enables the reader to identify and follow the developing stages in your assignment
- should have their own internal structure while fitting into the larger structure of the whole piece of writing.

Paragraph structure:

A paragraph normally develops one main idea usually introduced in the first (topic) sentence.

This idea is then developed and supported with information, examples, evidence.

There may be a concluding sentence, summing up the main point in the paragraph and showing its significance.

The effective use of paragraphs can be seen in writing when the reader can gain an overview of the content by reading the first sentence of each paragraph.

Check your own use of paragraphs by reading the first sentence to see if it outlines the paragraph's main idea.

Checklist:

Is the topic sentence clear and relevant?

Do the facts, details and examples explain/develop the topic sentence?

Is there enough support?

Is the material presented in a systematic way?

Does one sentence lead smoothly to the next?

Example 1

¹While many cancers are both treatable and curable, the nature of the treatment process may have important psychosocial dimensions. ²Many treatments, for example, are distressing and uncomfortable (e.g. radiotherapy and chemotherapy) or painful (e.g. surgery) or may be disfiguring (e.g. mastectomy, when the breast is removed). ³ Such procedures are carried out on patients and not simply on bodies. ⁴The reactions to such treatments may influence both their efficacy and the cooperation of the patient. ⁵ Furthermore, the care staff will have to deal with patients who are anxious or distressed and to participate in treatments which they themselves find distressing, despite the clinical benefits which may accrue to the patient.

Sentence 1 introduces the topic. The other sentences develop the topic by giving examples (2) and by setting out some of the implications of the topic (3) (4) (5). Notice how the underlined words link the ideas between the sentences together, helping to provide a 'flow' within the paragraph, and establishing a clear connection between ideas.

Paragraph 'flow':

Signalling phrases can be used to help show how sentences are linked to each other. These do not need to start a sentence but can be used within the sentence (see 'for example' in sentence 2).

addition	moreover, in addition, furthermore
reason and result	as a result, because of this, for this reason, therefore, consequently
comparison/similar ideas	in the same way, similarly, likewise
contrast/opposite ideas	in contrast, on the other hand
example	for example, for instance
explanation	in other words
generalization	as a result, generally, on the whole, in most cases, usually
summary/conclusion	finally, in brief, in short, overall, therefore, in conclusion
time/order	at first, initially, eventually, finally, lastly, next

Another way to maintain flow is to use **this/these + a noun** to join ideas together.

Example:

English lecturers know that students need to understand the differences between formal and informal language. However, ***this understanding*** cannot usually be acquired quickly.

What does '***this understanding***' refer to?

The writer could also have written '***such an understanding***' (see examples in sentences 3 and 4 in example 1 above).

Example:

In recent years, the number of students applying to PhD programmes has increased steadily, while the number of places available has remained constant. ***This situation*** has resulted in intense competition for admission.

The phrases in italics contain a summary noun or word that **refers back** to the idea in the previous sentence. These phrases summarise what has already been said and pick up where the previous sentence has left off.

Writer's own 'voice' in paragraph:

Read this paragraph; think about the purpose of each sentence.

Example 2

A number of problems associated with the traditional routines of handover practices for nurses have been identified. Baldwin and McGinnis (1994) find that many handovers are unnecessarily lengthy which means that there is an unacceptable period of time during each shift when nurses are not available in the ward or unit. **Another area that has received attention is the content and presentation of handover information.** Wills (1994, p. 36) observes that an unprofessional approach has been noted among some nurses, with "derogatory comments about patients or their families". **Lastly, there is the issue of what information nurses actually pass on during the handover.** It appears that they often report on their own activities during the shift rather than providing patient-centred information (Professional Nurse, 1997). **Thus, many serious problems have been identified in traditional handover practices which may reflect on the professional standing of nurses in this profession.**

It is important that in any writing you do your 'voice' is easily identified and clear throughout. Any 'voice' that is not acknowledged as being from another author is assumed to be yours. Notice how in the paragraph above the writer uses his/her 'voice' to make his/her point and then support with evidence. These sentences are highlighted in bold.

Linking ideas between paragraphs:

Paragraphs should not 'stand alone' in your academic writing. You need to show that the ideas they contain are connected to those in the paragraph before and the paragraph after. You need to lead your reader in a logical way through your argument.

Checklist for linking paragraphs:

- Does the start of the paragraph show the reader what it will be about?
- Does the paragraph add to a point made in the previous paragraph? If so, have I shown this with a linking word or phrase?
- Does the paragraph introduce a new or a different point? If so, have I shown this with a linking word or phrase?
- Does each paragraph 'flow' logically from the one before?

Useful websites:

Language and Learning Online: www.monash.edu.au/lis/lionline/writing/

Using English for Academic Purposes: uefap.com/writing/parag/

For more information on this and other aspects of academic study, please see our website at: www.els.qmu.ac.uk

If you would like to talk to someone in the Effective Learning Service then email us at els@qmu.ac.uk