

Paragraphs exist to give readers opportunities to process information. Most of the time, we don't consciously stop to think about it, but when we reach a paragraph break in our reading, we stop just long enough to process the information we have read. At that point, we do one of two things:

- Determine that we are okay with what we just read and begin reading the next paragraph
- Determine that something didn't quite register and go back and re-read the paragraph.

You can appreciate this if you think about times that you've re-read passages in a text book. You do that, because you are not satisfied that you fully understand the information you have read.

As writers, we can organize our thoughts to present a clear message, minimizing the amount of time our readers spend re-reading what we have written. To do that, we write in clearly focused paragraphs. Three elements that contribute to a clearly focused paragraph are topic sentences, support, and unity.

Topic Sentences

The topic sentence is the focal point of your paragraph. It's that one sentence you should be able to point to and say, "This is what my paragraph is about." While the topic sentence is frequently the first sentence in a paragraph, it can show up anywhere. In fact, not every paragraph needs a topic sentence; if the sentences that make up a paragraph make the topic indisputably clear, a topic sentence isn't necessary. However, topic sentences are helpful, especially in technical documents and academic writing, so, if you opt for an implied topic sentence, consider whether that may create difficulties for readers.

Sample Topic Sentence: To write well, I must be in a certain environment.

Support Sentences

While your topic sentence helps the reader identify what the paragraph is about, the support sentences help the reader understand or believe what you are saying. Support sentences include explanations, examples, statistics, evidence, testimony--anything that will help your reader accept and/or understand your topic sentence.

To write well, I must be in a certain environment. I mostly write in my basement where it is cold all the time. In the winter, I dress in at least two layers of clothes before

heading to the basement to write. I even wear a skull cap to keep my ears warm and fingerless gloves to keep my hands warm, but my fingers somewhat nimble at the keyboard. I can usually hear the TV in the background. It will be tuned to a TV show that I don't particularly enjoy. I will have lowered the volume to a level that allows me to hear the show, but not listen to it. While it may seem odd, I have to have just the right amount of noise in the background. I cannot write in complete silence, nor can I write when people are talking loudly, music is blaring, or dogs are barking. My mind will wander to anything but the topic I'm supposed to be focusing on. Food is often on my mind. It is best for me to write after I have eaten. If I wait too long after I eat to write, then I get drowsy. I definitely will not produce any great writing when I am tired. I am a "morning person" and can be the most creative when my mind is alert. I can even write more and for a longer period of time if I begin writing after I have awakened and just eaten breakfast.

Unity

If you've correctly utilized a topic sentence and support sentences, your paragraph will have unity. Unity means that all sentences revolve around the topic and that every sentence in your paragraph has a clear relationship to every other sentence in that paragraph. Transitions between ideas can help with that.

To further help with unity—and to give your paragraph the "sound" of finality, a summary sentence, sometimes referred to as a clincher sentence, is included at the end of the paragraph.

To write well, I must be in a certain environment. Because my computer is located in basement, I do most of my writing there. But, it is always cold in my basement, even in July. During winter months, I dress in at least layers of clothes before heading to the basement to write. I even wear a skull cap to keep my ears warm and fingerless gloves to keep my hands warm, but my fingers somewhat nimble at the keyboard. As I slowly type, I usually have the TV broadcasting a show that I don't particularly enjoy. I will have lowered the volume to a level that allows me to hear the show, but not listen to it. Now, I am able to write with relative ease. While it may seem odd, I have to have just the right amount of noise in the background. I cannot write in complete silence, nor can I write when people are talking loudly, music is blaring, or dogs are barking. My mind will wander to anything but the topic I'm supposed to be focusing on. My mind will also wander if I don't have food in my stomach. I like to eat, so food is often on my mind, especially when I am hungry. This is why the best time for me to write is after I have eaten. However, I can't wait too long after eating because then I get drowsy. I definitely will not produce any great writing when I am tired. That is also the reason why I write

best in the morning. I am a “morning person” and can be the most creative when my mind is alert. I can even write more and for a longer period of time if I begin writing after I have awakened and just eaten breakfast. Clearly, my environment – both external and internal – plays a critical role in my ability to create good writing

Paragraph Length

There is no prescribed length for a paragraph. It could be a single sentence, or it could be several pages long; in both cases, however, you might be doing your reader an injustice. The single sentence paragraph may lack the support needed to help the reader understand or accept what you have to say. The long paragraph may include too much information for the reader to process--resulting in confusion.

Look back at the paragraph that ended the previous section (“To write well...”). Is there a way to divide that paragraph into two or more logical paragraphs? Because the paragraph covers two aspects of the writer’s preferred writing environment, the writer could make a separate paragraph for each aspect, as follows:

To write well, two factors must be true of my external environment. First, I have to write where the temperature is comfortable. Because my computer is located in basement, I do most of my writing there. But, it is always cold in my basement, even in July. During winter months, I dress in at least layers of clothes before heading to the basement to write. I even wear a skull cap to keep my ears warm and fingerless gloves to keep my hands warm, but my fingers somewhat nimble at the keyboard. As I slowly type, I usually have the TV broadcasting a show that I don’t particularly enjoy. I will have lowered the volume to a level that allows me to hear the show, but not listen to it. Now, I am able to write with relative ease as long as there is some noise in the basement, too. While it may seem odd, I have to have just the right amount of noise in the background. I cannot write in complete silence, nor can I write when people are talking loudly, music is blaring, or dogs are barking. My mind will wander to anything but the topic I’m supposed to be focusing on. So, to help me stay on track with my writing, my physical environment must offer a comfortable temperature and some noise.

Just as important to my writing success is my internal environment. I must be well fed to stay on task. Otherwise, my mind will wander. Because I like to eat, food is often on my mind. This is always the case when I’m hungry. This is why the best time for me to write is after I have eaten. However, I can’t wait too long after eating because then I get drowsy. I definitely will not produce any great writing when I am tired. That is also the reason why I write best in the morning. I am a “morning person” and can be the most creative when my mind is alert. I can even write more and for a longer period of time if I begin writing after I have awakened and just eaten breakfast. Clearly, my

physiological state of being impacts my writing. I have internal, as well as external, expectations that must be met for me to create good writing.

Now, there are two paragraphs, each with a clear topic sentence, supporting detail, and a clincher sentence. Both paragraphs demonstrate good paragraph structure. There's even a transition between the two paragraphs, which is an added requirement when writing documents with multiple paragraphs.

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