

A short guide to paragraph structure



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1

The function of paragraphs

Paragraphs have several functions. These include:

- **breaking the text into manageable units**, so that the reader can clearly see the main sections
- **organising ideas** – each paragraph should have just **one main idea** within it
- **providing a narrative flow** through the document, as one idea links to the next.

Your essay is a journey through your argument or discussion. Your paragraphs are stepping stones in that journey, and they build up your argument, point by point.

2

The structure of paragraphs

You can think of paragraphs as mini essays, discussing a single idea. They will vary depending on your academic discipline and the nature of your essay, but here is a good basic paragraph structure:

1. **Introduce** your point: the first sentence of a paragraph should signpost the point to be made, using phrases such as: 'An alternative perspective to consider is...' or 'Another key issue is...'
2. **Elaborate** on the point you have introduced, making sure the argument that you are trying to put forward is clear.
3. **Evidence** – provide the evidence that supports the point you are making.
4. **Comment** on the evidence – criticise, analyse or engage with the evidence. How does it support your point?
5. **Conclude** your point and indicate what it means for your overall argument.

3

Essay problems: could it be a paragraph issue?

Some of the problems you may be having with your academic writing could be linked to your use of paragraphs. Do you ever struggle with any of the things below? If so, look at the right hand column for a possible solution to explore.

Your challenge	Could it be a paragraph-related issue?
Your tutor has commented that you do not develop your points fully enough.	Perhaps you are trying to make too many points within one paragraph. Make sure each paragraph deals with just one point, and that you have taken that point through the stages detailed on the previous page.
Your tutor has said that your arguments are not coherent.	Perhaps you need to think about the order in which you position your paragraphs. Try jotting down the key point that you want to explore in each paragraph. Then move these points around to find an order that will allow your argument to logically unfold. Make use of signposting words and phrases to guide the reader through your argument. See our Short Guide to Signposting in Essays for help with this.
You are unsure about when and how often you should be providing evidence or referencing other scholars.	If each paragraph explores one main point, then it follows that there should be at least one reference or piece of evidence within each paragraph. Otherwise you are in danger of making a key point without backing it up.
You often feel as if you are not answering the question you have been set.	Try looking at each paragraph and considering how it helps you to answer the question. If there are any paragraphs that seem irrelevant, consider cutting them, or making their relevance clearer to the reader. Look at the first and last sentences of your paragraphs. These should indicate a clear link to the original essay question.

4

Paragraphs on the page

You should differentiate your paragraphs by indenting them or leaving extra line space in between. Check whether your academic school has a style preference for this. Whichever style you choose, ensure that you apply it consistently.

Make sure your paragraphs are not too long or too short. Page-long paragraphs indicate that you are trying to make too many points in one paragraph, or perhaps not writing concisely enough. One-sentence paragraphs suggest that you are not developing your points properly, and will be pounced on by the marker.

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Conclusion

Consider the internal structure of paragraphs and how they link to one another. This is a key part of achieving an effective essay structure to convey your line of reasoning. Check each paragraph for structure, clarity, relevance and connection to its neighbours.

Further references on paragraphs and linking phrases

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