

PRINCIPLES OF ACADEMIC WRITING I: PARAGRAPHS & SENTENCES

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Introduction to principles of academic writing I: Paragraphs & Sentences

Academic writing is a genre of writing with its own conventions. This means that academic writers employ specific literary techniques which have been established by general consent and usage by the international scholarly community. As members of that scholarly community, we need to become familiar with these literary practices so that we can effectively communicate our research in a language that is acceptable to our readers. In this workshop we will be exploring:

- Paragraph construction
- Sentence structure

These workshop booklets are organized in such a way as to be a useful reference for your future writing. In addition to the instructional material, they provide many practical exercises. Our aim today is to develop your ‘writing muscles’. Writing is like physical or artistic activities such as football, ballet or playing the piano; you need to first learn the rules, and then perfect your skills through practice. You also need the appropriate ‘muscles’ for the activity, and these will only be developed through hours of exercise.

The techniques that you learn today can be applied to the writing of dissertations, or when writing for publication, such as in academic journals or books (which is an important aim for all serious researchers). The following material focuses on some of the most important principles of academic writing.



Mastering writing practices I: Paragraph construction in academic writing

Paragraphs ‘break up’ the information you want to present to your reader, structuring it in such a way that guides the reader through a series of related ideas. Each of these main ideas is used to advance your overall point of view, your position, or your thesis. Paragraphs make reading easier by providing visual cues. Each new paragraph shows the reader that a new idea is being presented. The first line of the paragraph may be indented, but if it is not, then an extra line space indicates the start of a new paragraph.



A single main idea may take many paragraphs to develop. Take one step at a time.

In academic paragraphs there is a movement from general assertion to specific details. That is, academic paragraphs of this type follow what is known as a 'general-to-specific' sequence whereby they begin with a general (or topic) sentence and become increasingly focused on more tightly focused information.

Paragraphs should relate to one another, as well as to the central theme of the essay, thesis or research paper. A paragraph is critically a unified piece of writing. It is unified because it expresses one central idea (again, a topic) which is expressed in a topic sentence

Well organized paragraphs in academic writing should contain:

A **topic sentence** appears at the beginning of the paragraph. The topic sentence conveys the main idea you wish to explore in the paragraph. It usually takes the form of a broad, general statement or assertion.

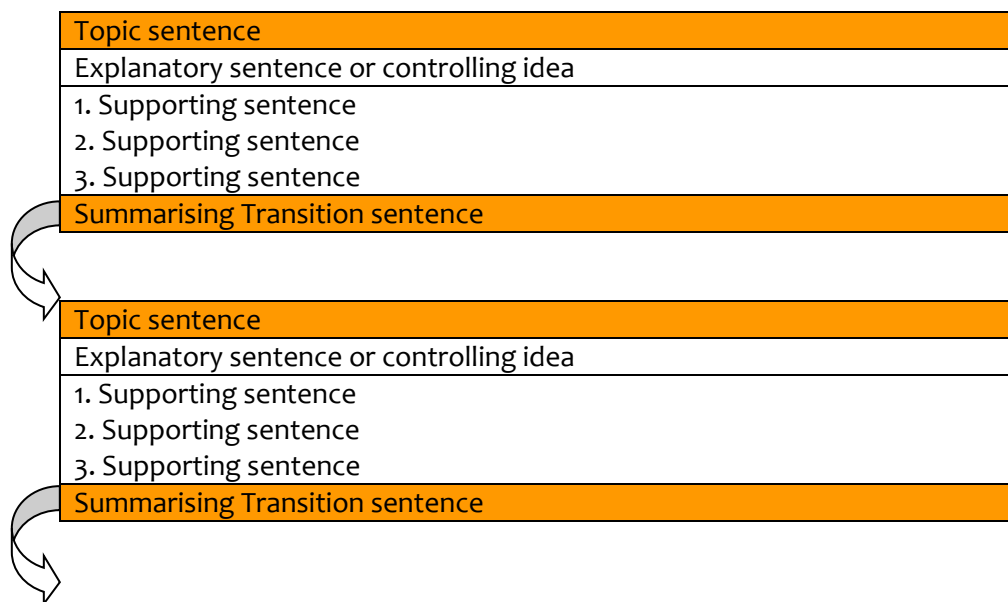
The topic sentence is followed by an **explanatory or 'controlling' sentence**. The function of the controlling sentence is to explain, elaborate on or focus the main idea you have introduced in the topic sentence. Its function is to direct the discussion or the reader's

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attention to a specific area of concern. The important thing to note is that the controlling sentence provides the reader with an aspect or element of the topic. The controlling sentence signals to the reader what it is the writer will develop.

Following the controlling idea are a group of sentences called **supporting sentences**. They are called supporting sentences because they provide evidence to support (or in some cases refute) the controlling idea/sentence. *This is needed because often the controlling idea takes the form of an opinion or viewpoint which needs substantiating.* Supporting details may include examples, statistics, citations from published research and quotations. The supporting details serve to strengthen your argument; they persuade the reader of the validity of your reasoning!

Finally, academic paragraphs include a concluding sentence (sometimes called a **summarizing transition**) that summarizes or rounds off the points made in the paragraph and leads into the topic sentence of the next paragraph. This final sentence is also known as a 'summarizing transition'.



Topic sentence

At the beginning of semester, college students need to register for their classes. However, this can be a frustrating experience for new students who do not understand the current registration system.

Explanatory sentence or controlling idea

At the beginning of semester, college students need to register for their classes. However, this can be a frustrating experience for new students who do not understand the current registration system. For example the results of a national youth survey aimed at understanding the challenges in making the transition from high school to college show that 65% of new students have difficulty in navigating complex registration procedures (Harris & Jones 2006). Data from our own research with administrative staff at Newman College confirms these findings. For instance the manager of student services remarked that ‘the procedures we currently have in place to register students are confusing because the course code don’t resemble the course title’.

Here is an example of a concluding sentence for the paragraph above:

Whilst it is clear that the practice of using course codes is making registration problematic for some students, is it the primary reason for their difficulties?

Summarizing Transition: The last sentence of the paragraph

Possible first sentence of the next paragraph

Thomson (2007), for instance, in her analysis of registration protocols in Scottish colleges found that students became anxious when faced with complicated on-line enrolment procedures.

Linking words between paragraphs:

Once you have produced paragraphs with clearly unified ideas you might like to think about how to link these paragraphs together. Firstly the ideas must be arranged so that

their logical relationships are clear. Now, adding a transitional word or phrase to the topping sentence of a paragraph can provide an effective link. For instance:

In addition, a number of athletes have achieved prominence in politics and law.....

But more than any other field, business has attracted athletes seeking success after their careers in sport have ended.....

Workshop exercise– Can you suggest some transitional words or phrases to connect the following paragraphs?

PARTICIPANTS SHOULD COMPLETE EXERCISE ONE FOR THIS WORKSHOP

The MEAL Plan: a formula for evaluating academic paragraphs

Main idea: The main idea of a paragraph is called the topic sentence. Like an arguable thesis statement, the topic sentence is a debatable claim that requires relevant support or evidence. The topic sentence should appear near the beginning of the paragraph since that sentence states the claim or idea to be discussed and developed in the content of the paragraph. This placement assures writers that the audience will not miss the significance of anything being presented and developed in the paragraph. For help with crafting topic sentences, writers should see [Crafting a Topic Sentence for Each Paragraph](#).

Evidence: After the main idea (the topic sentence) is stated, relevant evidence must be provided to support the debatable claim made in the topic sentence. The primary tools of evidence in rhetorical construction are definitions, examples, and opposing views. These forms of evidence will typically be presented in the form of studies, reports, data, statistics, interviews, examples or illustrations. Evidence should be relevant and directly support the writer's topic sentence and the thesis statement for the essay. The writer may choose to present source evidence through summary, paraphrase, or direct quotation, and the writer may also use modes of development such as description, definition, example, analogy, cause and effect, or comparison and contrast.

Analysis: Following the evidence, the writer must provide an analysis of the evidence that has been provided. Analysis is the writer's evaluation, interpretation, judgment, or conclusion of how the evidence supports the paragraph's main idea or topic. The writer should never expect the audience to interpret the evidence provided. In fact, as the leading voice in the paper, the writer is required to explain how the audience is meant to interpret the evidence in the context of the writer's argument. Such an explanation helps the audience to conclude that the topic sentence is a credible claim in the context of the evidence provided.

Link: The final sentence or sentences of the paragraph link the current paragraph's main idea to the main idea in the next paragraph. This type of foreshadowing also prepares the audience for the next main idea. Since most body paragraphs are going to be followed by another body paragraph, the writer should consider using transitional phrases that help

to link paragraphs. For example, transitional words such as *however, so, thus, still, despite, nonetheless, although, but, even though* or *in spite* of signal relationships between paragraphs and the relationship between the main ideas of all paragraphs.

Mastering writing practices II: Sentences

When a writer tries to pack too much information into one sentence it increases the density and reduces the readability of the work. This is likely to reduce the clarity of the message and confuse the reader. Long, complicated sentences often mean that you aren't sure about what you want to say. Shorter sentences are better for conveying complex information; they break the information up into smaller, easier-to-process units. Never the less, it is advisable to vary the length of your sentences to include both long and short sentences. (The rule of thumb is to keep most sentences short – 12-20 words, but vary the length and structure to avoid sounding ‘choppy’).

Standard or simple sentence

Let's consider the standard sentence; the sentence in its simplest form. The standard sentence consists of one independent clause made up of a subject and a predicate.

For example:

Freshwater boils at 100 degrees Celsius.

The dog + *barked*

The dog + *bit* + the postman

The dog + *was* + vicious

The standard sentence conveys a clear and simple message. To enrich a sentence by adding specific details we expand the basic sentence by adding modifying statements which give additional information. These modifying statements can be either another independent clause (to form a compound sentence) or a dependent clause (to form a complex sentence).

Complex sentences


A dependent (or subordinate) clause is a group of words that contains a subject and verb but does not express a complete thought. A dependent clause cannot stand alone as a complete sentence. A dependent clause is formed through the use of what is called a subordinator or a type of punctuation.

For example:

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The river rose overnight *because* of the torrential rain.

The dog barked **because** *it heard the rattle of the postman's bicycle.*


Independent clause and dependent clause linked by a subordinator (because).

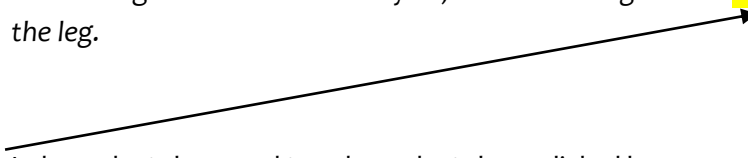
OR

Poland was the first Eastern European country to abandon Communism; others soon followed


Independent clause and one dependent clauses linked by a semi-colon.

OR

On hearing the rattle of the bicycle, *the vicious dog barked* **before** *biting the postman on the leg.*


Independent clause and two dependent clauses linked by a comma and then a subordinator (before).

The general rule is that it is better to not construct a complex sentence which has more than two dependent clauses (simple sentence + two dependent clauses joined by a subordinator or punctuation). Sentences loaded with dependent clauses often confuse the reader by losing the main point in a forest of words. Resist the temptation to put everything in one sentence; break up your idea into its parts and make each one the subject of its own sentence.

Compound sentence

A compound sentence is formed when two independent clauses are joined with a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so).

For example:

Saltwater boils at a higher temperature than freshwater; so food cooks faster in saltwater.

Two independent clauses linked by a coordinating conjunction

It is also better not to write compound sentences which have more than two independent clauses. If you do, the information becomes too dense and it will be

difficult for the reader to cognitively absorb the volume of information you are trying to communicate.

As a rule of thumb, avoid complicated sentence structure. This means that your sentences will or should rarely have more than approximately 25 words.

Exercise: A lack of clarity occurs when a writer tries to pack too much information into one sentence. The following example below illustrates this problem. Read the sentence below and simplify it by: 1). Distributing the clauses into two or more sentences; and 2). Omitting redundant material.

“Elizabeth, New Jersey, when my mother was being raised there in a flat over her father’s grocery store, was an industrial port a quarter the size of Newark, dominated by the Irish working class and their politicians and the tightly knit parish life that revolved around the town’s many churches, and though I never heard her complain of having been pointedly ill-treated in Elizabeth as a girl, it was not until she married and moved to Newark’s new Jewish neighborhood that she discovered the confidence that led her to become first a PTA “grade mother,” then a PTA vice president in charge of establishing a Kindergarten Mothers’ Club, and finally the PTA president, who, after attending a conference in Trenton on infantile paralysis, proposed an annual March of Dimes dance on January 30 – President Roosevelt’s birthday – that was accepted by most schools.” (140 words)

Sentences to Avoid

Choppy Sentences – are sentences that are too short. Short sentences can be effective in certain situations. However, many short sentences in succession make it appear that a writer is incapable of sustaining a complex thought. Rather than small, choppy sentences, construct ones that have some weight and depth. That doesn't always mean length, but formal academic writing tends to avoid, for instance, more than three sentences in a row with fewer than ten words in them. While an occasional short sentence is good because it delivers a strong 'punch', to have that punch the short sentence must be set off by longer ones so its brevity stands out. Choppy sentences are easy to correct. Just combine two or three short sentences to make one compound or complex sentence.

Example:

- 1). Wind is an enduring source of power. Water is also an unlimited energy source. Dams produce hydraulic power. They have existed for a long time. Windmills are relatively new.
- 2). Both wind and water are enduring sources of power. Dams have produced hydraulic power for a long time, but windmills are relatively new.

Stringy Sentences – are sentences with too many clauses, usually connected with a comma or a coordinating conjunction (often *and*, *but*, *so*, and *because*). It often results from writing the way you speak, going on and on like a string without an end.

Example:

- 1). Many students attend classes all morning, and then they work all afternoon, and they also have to study at night so they are usually exhausted by the weekend.
- 2). Many students attend classes all morning and work all afternoon. Since they also have to study at night, they are usually exhausted by the weekend.

Run-on Sentences – is a sentence in which two or more independent clauses (complete sentences) are joined without appropriate punctuation or conjunction.

Example:

- 1). My family went to Australia then they emigrated to Canada.
- 2). My family went to Australia, [: or .] then they emigrated to Canada.

Sentence Fragments – are incomplete sentences or parts of sentences. Remember that a complete sentence must contain at least one main or independent clause. A sentence fragment does not contain an independent clause.

Example:

- 1). Because some students work part-time while taking a full load of classes.

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2). Because some students work part-time while taking a full load of classes, **they have little free time.** (Alternatively you could drop the subordinator *because*)

Active & passive Voice

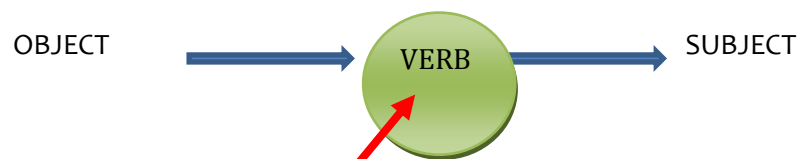
Write mainly in the active voice where you can. The active voice involves constructing sentences that conform to the following word order:

SUBJECT  VERB  OBJECT

For example: 'Michael read the book'.

The advantages of using the active voice include conciseness and confidence. It's especially appropriate for those in the social sciences whose discipline allows for the use of first person narrative.

In contrast to this there are sentences written in the passive voice.



For example: 'The book was read by Michael'.

The passive voice can be convoluted and can take the energy out of your message. It also 'kills' people by depersonalizing your writing (the subject is often ambiguous or completely absent).

Verbs are the batteries that power your sentences. Flat, predictable verbs produce flat, predictable prose. Use 'muscular verbs' and vary them to obtain vigour and verve.