

Writing a Killer Paragraph

This module will take you through the process of scaffolding and writing a cohesive paragraph that fits within the broader context of your article. This skill is imperative to scholarly writing because weak paragraphs will make for a weak, unpublishable paper. After completing this module you will know:

- 1. The different types of paragraphs you can include in an article.
- 2. How to construct a cohesive paragraph.
- 3. How to link paragraphs together.

1. Types of Paragraphs

Paragraphs can serve different purposes in your research article. We developed the following typologies from the University of North Carolina Writing Center and Kirszner and Mandell (2005). The types of paragraphs below are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, you might want to define a complex topic, so you would begin with a definition paragraph but then use an illustration to better clarify the definition.

- 1. Narrative paragraphs tell stories from start to finish. Usually you will want to tell a story to make a point.
- Descriptive paragraphs give details about the characteristics of something. You can describe something based on the five senses: sight, touch, smell, sound, taste.

- 3. Process paragraphs explain how something works or is done, or provide instruction on how to perform the process.
- 4. Classification paragraphs group things into categories or explain a particular aspect of something.
- 5. Compare and contrast paragraphs examine the similarities or differences between things. Sometimes you'll compare both the similarities and differences.
- 6. Illustration (or exemplification) paragraphs provide examples and explain how those examples support your topic.
- 7. Definition paragraphs tell what a word or concept means. Some concepts, like *happiness*, or*empowerment*, are difficult to define because there are multiple interpretations, so defining how you use the term is important.
- 8. Cause and effect paragraphs explain why or how something happened. A caveat here is you must have good evidence that a causal relationship actually occurred, which can be difficult. See the module Tempering Your Results and Discussion for more on this.
- 9. Argument paragraphs make an opinion statement and defend that opinion.

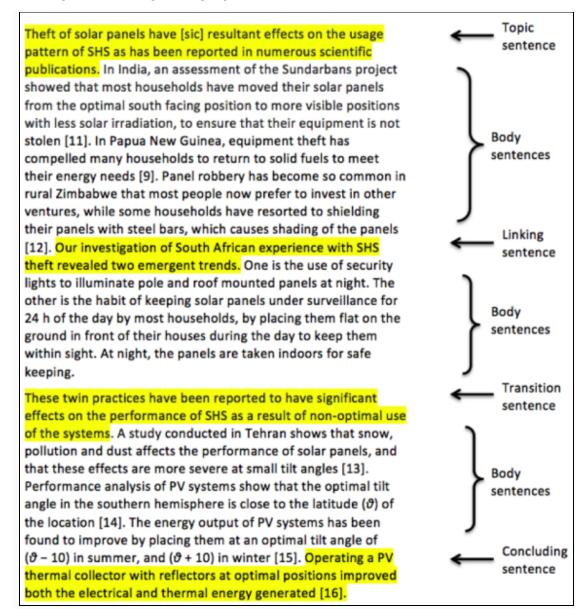
2. Building Blocks of a Paragraph

Davis (1983) states that the three basic elements of a good paragraph are unity, coherence, and emphasis (p. 126). There are specific types of sentences that will help you write strong paragraphs. The University of Wisconsin Writing Center identifies 5 of these:

- 1. A transition sentence that serves as a signpost to guide your reader from the previous paragraph into the new paragraph.
- 2. A topic sentence that explains what the paragraph is about.
- 3. Body sentences that support the topic sentence.
- 4. Linking sentences that connect the paragraph back to your article's main idea.
- 5. A concluding sentence that wraps up the paragraph.

Example 1 shows how connectivity between types sentences makes strong transitions between ideas. The authors begin with a topic sentence about solar panels, with the particular thesis that theft influences their use. With that in mind, we begin specific examples of altered solar panel use. Then a linking sentence links the paragraph to the overall case, which is in South Africa. Descriptive body sentences continue after that. The second paragraph transitions seamlessly into examples supporting the findings.

Example 1: Strong Paragraphs



Source: Azimoh, C. L., Wallin, F., Klintenberg, P., & Karlsson, B. (2014). An assessment of unforeseen losses resulting from inappropriate use of solar home systems in South Africa. *Applied Energy*, *13*6, 336-346.

3. Develop a Topic Sentence

- 1. Topic sentences begin a paragraph, and introduce what the paragraph is about and make a claim about the topic.
- 2. Many times developing a topic sentence will come naturally since you already know what point you want to make in the paragraph.
- 3. Where the paragraph is located in your manuscript will affect the topic. Is it in the introduction, methods, literature review, etc.?
- 4. Think about what you need to share in your paper at this point. What do you already know about the topic and where can you look to learn more?
- 5. Ashford University Writing Center suggests that a topic sentence have two pieces: the topic and the controlling idea about the topic.

Example 2: Topic Sentences

Weak:

1: Now we will talk about newspaper journalism.

2: Dogs are household pets.

Strong:

1: Newspaper journalism has declined in the past decade due to the rapid popularization of social media.

2: There are several advantages to having a dog as a pet instead of a cat.

Strongest:

1: Newspaper journalism has seen a decrease in readership of 22% over the past decade due to the rise of news-sharing through social media.

2: There are three striking advantages to having a dog as a pet instead of a cat: energy level, amount of allergens, and social interaction.

4. Support Your Topic Sentence

Now it's time to convince the reader to agree with your topic sentence throughout the body of the paragraph.

- Connect the idea to a broader context. Answer: "Why should we care about your idea?"
- 2. Refer to recent studies and their published data.
- 3. Define unfamiliar terms.
- 4. Use examples to illustrate your main idea.
- 5. The Purdue OWL urges you to stick to the main idea within a paragraph, you don't want to confuse readers by bringing up too many ideas at once.
- 6. You can make several points about your idea, but if the points become too long, you might want to split them into separate paragraphs. You don't want your ideas to become a winding road, but rather have a clear pattern of logic to them.

5. Make Good Transitions

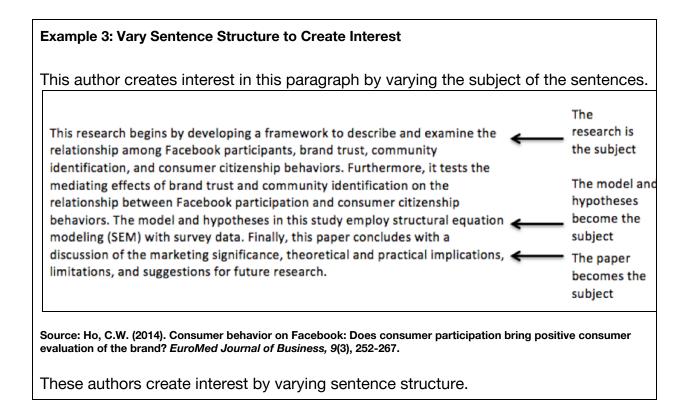
- Transitions within and between paragraphs are imperative to good research writing. They keep your article moving along and serve as signposts to guide the reader through.
- Experts at Duke University have a great resource about the cohesion of sentences. To make sentences cohere, you need to create structure that builds from what you previously said, and leads into what you will say next.

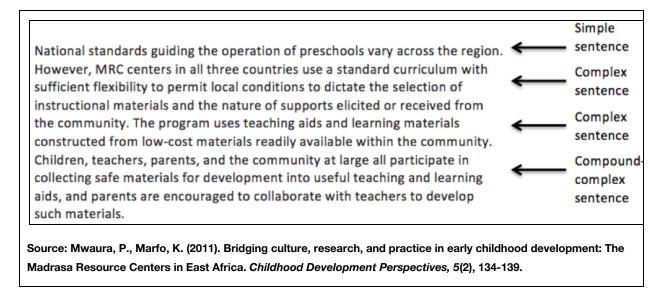
6. Conclude the Paragraph

 According to Ashford University Writing Center, a concluding sentence is a necessity since it ties together the points you've made in the paragraph. It can mirror the topic sentence, but not repeat it verbatim. You can use a transition (see the module Making Smooth Transitions) to wrap up your point or to expand the conversation to a new point in the next paragraph.

7. Vary Your Sentences

- 1. A reader will get bored quickly if every sentence in a paragraph reads the same way.
- Two ways to vary your sentences are to change the subject of the sentences, and to use different sentences structures. The University of Alabama has a super tipsheet on the different sentence structures. See Examples 3 and 4 below.

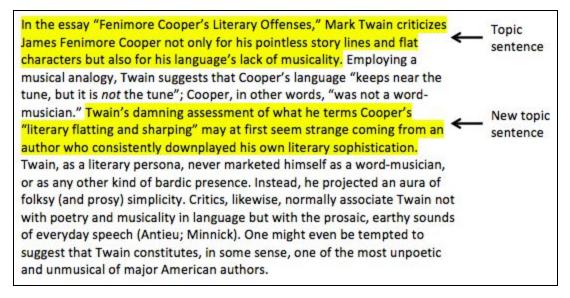




3. The following examples provide a more extensive look at (1) how paragraphs should be structured and (2) how sequential paragraphs should flow together.

Example 4: Writing Cohesive Paragraphs

A Weak Paragraph:



Source: Sevik, G. (2015). Poetry, prosody, parody: Mark Twain's rhythmic though. The Mark Twain Annual, 13, 130-148.

Critique: This paragraph starts strong with a topic sentence that includes the topic (Fenimore's essay) and the main idea about the topic (Twain's criticism of the essay). The author then explains what Twain criticized about the essay. But next the paragraph moves into a new idea, Twain's own writing style, and should therefore be separated into a new paragraph.

Strong Paragraph Transition:

Instead, Emmeline's poem provides another poor example of how to	
relate and respond to death, anticipating, like the feuding raftsmen, the	
kinds of unreflective attitudes and gendered social constructs that make	Transitional topic sentence
possible the Grangerfords' reckless violence in Chapter 18.	
It is worthwhile to note that Huck seems at first to embrace and	
internalize both of these poor models. He clearly admires the raftsmen,	
commenting at the beginning of Chapter 16, "It amounted to something	
being a raftsman" (106). He expresses a similar respect for Emmeline,	
albeit respect tinged with some skepticism, especially toward her macabre	
"pictures" (137–39). Still, Huck finds himself touched by Emmeline's	
melancholy interest in others' deaths and expresses a desire to carry out	
the same gesture. As he explains, "Poor Emmeline made poetry about all	
the dead people when she was alive, and it didn't seem right that there	
warn't nobody to make some about her, now she was gone; so I tried to	
sweat out a verse or two myself but I couldn't seem to make it go,	
somehow" (141). Huck's inability to "sweat out a verse"— that is, to think	
effectively in verse prosody-reflects not just his lack of education but	
also his unformed attitudes concerning death at this point in the novel. Of	
course, Huck had encountered death before: he has some memory of	
what his mother was like before she died (Tom Sawyer 179); he had	
witnessed the murder of Dr. Robinson in Chapter 9 of Tom Sawyer; and he	
had caught a glimpse-unbeknownst to himself-of his dead father in	
Chapter 9 of Huckleberry Finn. Apparently, however, he had yet to	
experience the death of someone toward whom he had overwhelmingly	
positive feeling. Huck has a more intimate encounter with death at the	
end of Chapter 18, when he witnesses the murder of his friend Buck	
Grangerford and another boy.	

Source: Sevik, G. (2015). Poetry, prosody, parody: Mark Twain's rhythmic though. The Mark Twain Annual, 13, 130-148.

Critique: This paragraph has a topic sentence that clearly builds off of the previous paragraph's concluding sentence. It then contains several pieces of supporting evidence, and has a concluding sentence that leads the conversation into the following paragraph.

Strong Methodology Paragraphs:

Germination trials involved four treatments, following the recommendations of Samuels & Levey (2005), namely: seeds taken directly from fruit and planted in pulp ('Fruit', F), ingested seeds planted in the tortoise dung pile in which they were found ('Dung', D); seeds taken from fallen fruit and washed in rainwater ('Washed Fruit', WF); and seeds from tortoise dung that were washed in rainwater ('Washed Dung', WD). Seeds were washed by gently removing traces of fruit pulp or dung with wet paper tissue, followed by thorough rinsing in rainwater.

Germination trials were conducted in a shade house in a randomized block design of four blocks \cdot four treatments to avoid potential bias due to local microclimate. Each treatment consisted of 10 seeds planted in plastic horticultural bags (12 \cdot 20 cm), in a consistent quantity of locally collected soil thoroughly mixed across all treatments. Ten seeds were planted in each bag, with the exception of *H. mancinella*, the woody nuts of which were planted one per bag due to their large size. For two species, *O. echios* and *Psidium guajava*, we planted 20 seeds per treatment (in two bags, 10 seeds per bag) per block because we had a surplus of seeds. In the 'dung' treatment, we planted each set of 10 seeds in a 50-g (wet weight) bolus of dung, with the exception of *H. mancinella*, for which each nut was planted in a 50-g dung bolus. During planting, we attempted to approximate the natural seed density in dung; however, the variation in seed numbers in tortoise dung is huge (0 to over 5000!), so our planting density should only be considered 'within the natural range.'

For a given species, all seeds were planted within a 2-h period on the same date, which was within 3 days of seed collection from the field whether from dung or intact fruit. Bags were watered three times per week with all pots receiving the same volume (50 mm) of rainwater. Seeds were checked daily for signs of germination and we defined germination to be successful if cotyledons emerged. Trials continued for 6 months from the day of planting, with the exception of the *H. mancinella* trial, which terminated after 1 year because seeds of this species did not begin germinating until nearly 9 months after planting. At the end of the germination trials, we did not conduct a viability analysis for remaining non-germinated seeds.

Source: Blake, St., Wikelski, M., Cabrera, F., Guezou, A., Silva, M., Sadeghayobi, E., Yackulic, C., & Jaramillo, P. (2012). Seed dispersal by Galapagos tortoises. *Journal of Biogeography*, *39*, 1961-1972.

Critique: These paragraphs describe a scientific methodology. They are each strong independently and in sequence for three reasons. (1) Each paragraph sticks to one main activity in the methodology. (2) They flow together because they describe a temporal process of germination trials. (3) Each paragraph has a concluding sentence that wraps up one part of the methodology in preparation to move onto the next part.

Sources and Additional Resources:

- 1. Penn State Writing Center
- 2. Ashford: How to Write a Good Paragraph
- 3. Purdue OWL: On Paragraphs
- 4. Duke University: Cohesion, Coherence, and Emphasis
- 5. University of Wisconsin Writing Center: Paragraphing
- 6. University of Richmond: Writing Effective Paragraphs
- 7. University of Maryland University College: Paragraph Structure
- 8. University of Alabama: Sentence Structure and Purpose
- 9. Davis, K. (1983). Sentence combining and paragraph construction. New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Co, Inc.
- 10. Kirszner, L. G. & Mandell, S. R. (2005). *Foundations first: Sentences and paragraphs* (2nd ed.). Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's.