

How to Structure a Perfect Paragraph

A workshop for

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Introduction

In this workshop, we are going to look at some of the classic notions of what constitutes a perfect paragraph. We will then use these notions to examine a series of paragraphs to see to what degree these sample paragraphs live up the perfect paragraph model.

The features of the perfect paragraph that we are going to look at are:

1. What is a paragraph?
2. The topic sentence
 - topic
 - controlling idea
3. Body of the paragraph
 - 3.1 Paragraph unity
 - unity of thought
 - unity of tone
 - unity of point of view
 - 3.2 Paragraph coherence
 - The arrangement of ideas
 - The connection between ideas
4. Paragraph development: major and minor support
5. The closing sentence

1. What is a paragraph?

A paragraph is a group of sentences that make a complete statement on a single topic or idea. **A paragraph deals with one topic or idea only.** Starting a new paragraph is a signal to the reader that you are dealing with a new topic or idea.

The main parts of a paragraph are:

1. topic sentence
2. body
3. concluding (or clincher) sentence

2. The topic sentence

The topic or main idea of a paragraph is stated in the topic sentence. This is usually the first sentence in the paragraph, but it need not be. A good topic sentence does two things:

1. It states clearly what the **general topic** of the paragraph is.
2. It provides a **controlling idea**. The controlling idea focuses on the aspect of the general topic that is to be developed in the paragraph; it limits what is to be said about the general topic.

Exercise: Topic Sentences

For each of the following topic sentences (a) underline the topic once, (b) underline the controlling idea twice, and (c) briefly suggest how, given the topic and controlling idea, the paragraph would be developed.

1. One problem in administering justice is that First Nation governments are not equipped with legal services departments.
2. Create clearer documents by using simpler words; that is, words everyone will understand.
3. The “master gland,” the pituitary, dominates the human endocrine system.
4. Medical discoveries not only lead to improvement in our health, but also have lucrative commercial applications.

3. Body of the paragraph

The body of the paragraph expands the topic by providing details, examples, or explanations. It is developed directly from the controlling idea and follows the plan suggested by the controlling idea. The body of a good paragraph has two important qualities: **unity** and **coherence**.

3.1 Paragraph unity

The paragraph is **unified** in three ways:

- unity of thought
- unity of tone
- unity of point of view

A paragraph has **unity of thought** if it sticks to one topic. For each idea or example in a paragraph, you should ask: “Is this on the topic as stated in the topic sentence and is it limited by the controlling idea?” If the answer is “no,” then the idea or example should be left out.

A paragraph has **unity of tone** if every word, image and idea contributes to one dominant feeling, mood or impression. Any word, image or idea, which does not contribute to this feeling, mood or impression, should be removed.

Unity of point of view is maintained in two ways.

- 1) The “voice” speaking in the paragraph should maintain the same **person**. If the paragraph starts off in the third person (*he, she, they, it*), it should not then change to second person (*you*) or first person (*I, we*).
- 2) The **physical perspective** of the paragraph should not change. A paragraph describing a building as seen from the front, at street level, should not suddenly shift to describing the building as seen from the air or from the back.

Exercise: Paragraph Unity

Comment on the lack of unity in the following paragraphs. Identify specific passages where unity is violated and state the kind of unity that is violated.

1. As our plane began its descent, more and more details of the ground came into view. Once we were below the clouds, roads looking like narrow ribbons with tiny dots moving along them could be clearly discerned. At this point, our plane was only a tiny speck in the sky. Soon, people, houses, cars and fences could be easily identified. In the distance, we could see the edge of the runway and at its end, the terminal building. In that building, friends and relatives gathered, eager to meet their loved ones. The pilot was now in contact with the control tower obtaining permission to land. The wheels of the plane were down and its approach path was set. By this time, we were low enough to read signs and pick out the most precise details on the ground. A great sigh of relief went up as a “thud” announced that our wheels had touched the ground. Airport buildings and vehicles whizzed past us until we reached full stop and then slowly taxied to the terminal building.
2. One obstacle to implementation of self-government has been the lack of training and the lack of qualified, top-rate personnel. The band provided a startling example of foul-ups with personnel in their attempt to establish administrative structures. As luck would have it, these problems coincided with their difficulties establishing a local land registry system. The band sought the services of a non-native consultant to design a local administrative structure. The consultant was recommended by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and appeared to be the kind of guy they needed. However, the results were a disaster, we were told, since the band was put into a position of frightening financial vulnerability. The consultant, for his part, insisted that he had provided legitimate services at a reasonable rate. To remedy the situation, the band sought the assistance of the courts and a native consultant who had experience in Indian band financial and administrative matters. The band chief stated that progress to date on this matter has been encouraging but warned that you cannot accept recommendations from the Department without further investigation.

3.2 Paragraph coherence

A paragraph is coherent if it “hangs together” properly. Coherence is achieved in two important ways:

- the proper arrangement of ideas
- the connection of ideas.

The arrangement of ideas

The points or ideas in a paragraph should always follow a natural and sensible order. Here are some of the ways in which ideas can be ordered.

1. **Giving reasons:** A general statement is made in the topic statement and then supported by a series of reasons or examples in the body of the paragraph.
2. **Time or chronology:** Events or ideas are arranged in the order in which they happen.
3. **Space:** Items are described according to how they are placed or arranged in their setting.
4. **Importance:** Ideas are arranged from most important to least important or vice versa.
5. **Leading to a conclusion:** Items are arranged so that they lead naturally to some final statement.

Whichever arrangement of ideas you use, always be sure that the reader knows what the arrangement is.

The connection between ideas

Coherence is not simply a matter of putting ideas in the right order. You must also show the connection between ideas. Various techniques enable you do this.

- **Use simple repetition of a key word or a variation of it.**

Example: One of the greatest disappointments of *childhood* is a *broken promise*. An adult who *breaks his word* never fully regains a *child's* confidence.

- **Use demonstrative pronouns** (*this, that, those*) **and the personal pronouns** (*he, them, it, they*) to refer to nouns in the preceding sentence.

Example: Word has spread recently that the government will increase funding for social services. *This* rumour is false.

- **Use connecting words and phrases** (connectives) such as the following:

To add an idea:	also, besides, moreover, in addition, another way
To contrast ideas:	but, yet, nevertheless, conversely, still, however
To compare ideas:	like, similarly, equally, likewise
To show result:	therefore, thus, consequently, as a result, hence, for this reason
To show time:	then, afterwards, later, somewhat later, meanwhile, now
To show frequency:	often, frequently, sometimes, now and then
To show order:	first, next, in the second place, to begin with, finally
To show spatial relation:	to the right, in the distance, straight ahead, above, below, between
To illustrate:	for instance, for example
To repeat:	briefly, that is to say, in fact, indeed, in other words

Exercise: Paragraph Coherence

Read the passage below.

- 1) Determine the kind of arrangement of ideas the writer has used.*
- 2) Identify how the writer has achieved coherence through:*
 - a) the repetition of key words (underline these once);*
 - b) the use of demonstrative or personal pronouns (underline these twice);*
 - c) the use of connecting words and phrases (circle these).*

Passage

By world standards, Canada has an admirable record of promoting acceptance and understanding within a multicultural society. There is also little doubt that great progress has been made since 1948, the year of the Universal Declaration, when it was common to exclude people from jobs or services because of their religion or race. There is, however, little reason to be smug, because we still have some distance to go. By any measure, the past year was not a banner year in terms of progress. For example, we saw outbreaks of inter-racial violence in schools, the persistence of discrimination in hiring, and the continuing dissemination of hate propaganda. All of these show us that acts of intolerance persist in Canadian society.

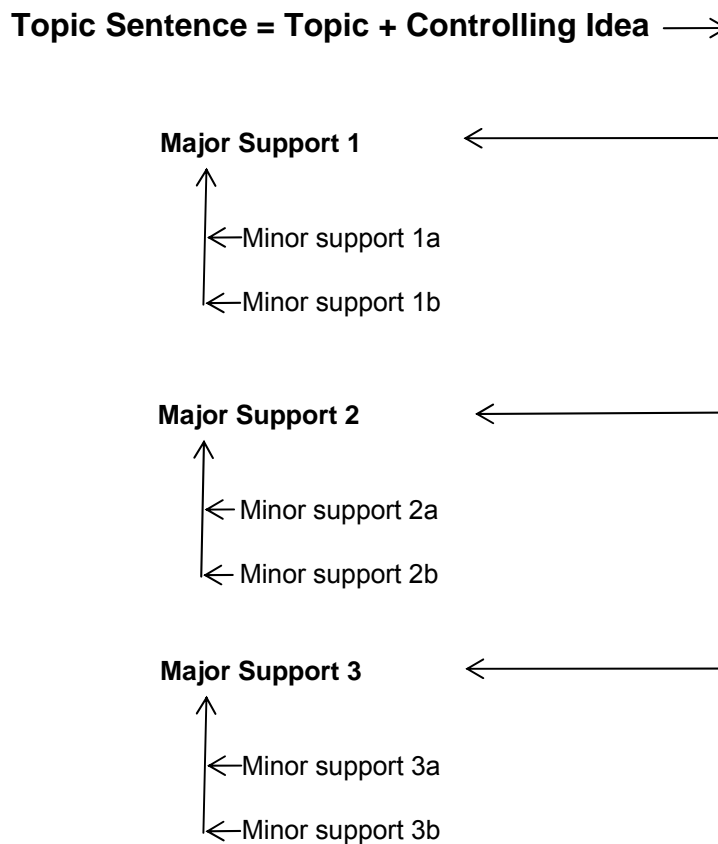
Type of arrangement: _____

4. Paragraph development: major and minor support

Major and minor (or “general” and “specific”) support provides a highly structured and very clear way of developing a paragraph. Under this method of development, a paragraph has the following structure:

- From the controlling idea in the topic sentence, the writer derives two or three major (or general) support statements.
- Every major support statement in the paragraph is a direct and definite explanation or expansion of one aspect of the controlling idea.
- For each major support statement, there are one or two minor (or specific) support statements. Each minor support statement explains, expands, clarifies or reinforces its major statement.

The following illustration shows the relationships between the controlling idea and the major and minor supports.



Example: Paragraph Structured by Major and Minor Supports

It is surprising how fighting fish differ in their manner of attacking the bait and in the times at which they bite. The bass will bite at any time it pleases. “As moody as a *prima donna*,” says one expert, “as wary as a lynx, and fighting to the last gasp is the true black bass.” It has a habit of mumbling the bait; that is, running with the bait held in front of its mouth, so that if you try to set the hook, you’ll pull it right out of the mouth. Once this happens to a bass, it rarely bites again. With trout, however, it’s a different story. The best time to fish for trout is in the early morning or at night. It rises lazily to the bait and sucks it down; then the challenge begins. When you have seven kilograms of mad trout at the end of your line, there’s no time to think of anything else. It will race away from you, then suddenly turn about and race back. You have to work fast with a full-grown muskellunge too. As soon as the bait touches the water, the musky hits it hard with its full twelve to twenty-four kilograms. Once you hook a muskellunge, you need between forty minutes and an hour and forty minutes to end the argument. All three of these fish, and particularly the bass, have a way of shooting out of the water and shaking themselves so that they often rip themselves away from the hook.

Exercise: Major and Minor Support

Supply minor support statements for each major support statement in this paragraph.

- Topic sentence:** In order to stay healthy, you must do more than visit the doctor for regular medical checkups.
- Major support:** First, you must eat a healthy, balanced diet.
1. minor support
2. minor support
- Major support:** Second, you should exercise regularly.
1. minor support
2. minor support
- Major support:** Finally, you must learn to relax and escape the stresses of jobs and family.
1. minor support
2. minor support

5. The closing sentence

Some paragraphs end with a closing or “clincher” sentence. A good closing sentence either sums up the main idea of the paragraph, emphasizes the main point, or leads into the thought of the next paragraph. A good ending may point back to the beginning of the paragraph, but it will not merely repeat it.

Example

It is a widely held but erroneous belief that meteorites arrive at ground level in a very hot condition. In space, meteorites are extremely cold and their temperature on entering the Earth’s atmosphere is well below zero. At roughly 20 km from the Earth’s surface, the meteorite spends a minute and a half falling at about 200 km/hour through some of the coldest layers of the Earth’s atmosphere, and this cools the outer skin rapidly. The meteorite arrives cold—usually very cold indeed.

In this example, the first sentence introduces the topic in the negative: meteorites are not hot when they hit the ground. The closing sentence restates this point, but in the affirmative: meteorites are cold when they hit the ground.

Exercise: Paragraph Structure

Instructions

Read through “Canada Takes a Stand: Agriculture Negotiations and the World Trade Organization.” Then answer the following questions.

1. What is the role of the paragraph (1) in relation to the whole piece?

2. Does each paragraph begin with a proper topic sentence that contains a topic and a controlling idea?

3. Is each paragraph properly unified?

4. Are any of the paragraphs developed by major and minor supports?

5. What instructions would you give the graphic designer about how to handle the sidebar elements?

Canada Takes a Stand: Agriculture Negotiations and the World Trade Organization

- (1) As a major agricultural exporter and importer, Canada will play a fundamental role in November's World Trade Organization (WTO) Ministerial Trade Talks on agriculture. Through consultations with our agri-food sector, the federal government has developed a negotiating strategy that reflects the sector's needs. The strategy is based on three objectives:
 - making trade rules between countries more fair
 - keeping control of subsidies in Canada
 - improving access to markets for our processed food products.In addition, Canada will promote creating a working group to study trade rules for genetically enhanced products.
- (2) Canada's agriculture and agri-food industry is the third largest employer in Canada. Its products range from milk and eggs, to beef, grains and ice wine. With some \$95 billion in domestic retail and food service sales each year, its products play a large role in Canadians' daily lives. A huge export market for our agricultural and food products abroad—\$22 billion—is especially important. Four out of every ten dollars' worth of Canadian agricultural products are exported.
- (3) Understanding the important role that the agriculture and agri-food industry plays, the government has consulted with industry members and the provinces for two years. The consultations have sought to determine how Canada's negotiating position can best represent the sector's interests. The government will keep members informed and consult with them during the talks. It wants to ensure that—together—we secure the greatest benefits for the industry.
- (4) Based on these consultations, Canada's negotiations strategy has three main objectives. The first objective is to "level the playing field" in trade. This objective was the one most strongly sought by industry members. Canada's aim is to reduce the inequities between countries in subsidies and access to markets. Achieving this aim would make trade equal and fair for all. The second objective is to maintain Canada's control over subsidies and how we market our agricultural and food products. While Canada is prepared to discuss other countries' concerns about our marketing practices, the federal government believes that the industry will be best served by keeping agri-food marketing decisions in Canada. Canada's third objective is to promote more WTO rules and policies that apply to processed food products. Such changes will allow Canada's agri-food sector to capture greater market share in this area.

- (5) Canada will also encourage the WTO to create a working group to study existing trade rules for genetically enhanced products. We want to ensure that consumers can make informed choices about the foods they eat. Issues such as product labeling will have to be discussed.

[Sidebar] Did You Know? Agriculture and Agri-Food Facts

- **Apples** are Canada's number one fruit crop. We grow about 530,000 tonnes each year.
- **Wild blueberries.** Canada is the world's largest producer. In 1996, we produced 32,000 tonnes, worth almost \$44 million.
- **Potatoes** are Canada's most valuable vegetable crop. We produce about \$600 million worth of potatoes each year.
- **Ginseng.** Canada has exported North American ginseng to the Orient since the 18th century, when Jesuits discovered the plant growing wild in Canadian forests.
- **Eggs.** There are close to six billion eggs produced in Canada each year by about 22 million hens.
- **Honey.** Canada is the fifth largest producer of honey in the world after China, the United States, Mexico and Argentina.
- **Maple syrup.** It takes 40 litres of sap to make one litre of syrup. Canada has maple syrup 12,000 producers.
- **Pasta.** Many of the world's top pasta producers—including Italy and Turkey—import large quantities of Canadian durum wheat to make pasta.
- **Snack foods.** In 1996, Canadian manufacturers of potato chips, pretzels, popcorn, etc. shipped products valued at \$952.2 million.
- **Aid.** In 1996-97, Canada provided \$250 million worth of food aid to countries in need.
- **Farms.** An average Canadian farm produces enough food to feed 120 people.