

THE WRITING PROCESS

Guidelines for Paragraphing

Just as it is hard to formulate a satisfactory definition of a sentence, so is it difficult to define the term **paragraph**. Perhaps the easiest way to identify a paragraph is visually—as a group of sentences set off from other groups of sentences by an indentation of its first line.

Indent or tab first line 5 spaces	→	The taste of McDonald’s French fries has long been praised by customers, competitors, and even food critics. Their distinctive taste does not stem from the type of potatoes that McDonald’s buys, the technology that processes them, or the restaurant equipment that fries them. Other chains buy their French fries from the same large processing companies, use Russet Burbanks, and have similar fryers in their restaurant kitchens. The taste of a fast food fry is largely determined by the cooking oil. For decades, McDonald’s cooked its French fries in a mixture of about 7% soy and 93% beef fat. The mix gave the fries their unique flavor—and more saturated beef fat per ounce than a McDonald’s hamburger.
Only one space after a period	→	Amid a barrage of criticism over the amount of cholesterol in their fries, McDonald’s switched to pure vegetable oil in 1990. The switch presented the company with an enormous challenge: how to make fries that taste subtly like beef without cooking them in beef fat.
Capitalize first letter of each new sentence	→	(This rule is implicitly covered by the text above, which uses capital letters for the start of new sentences.)

Excerpt: Schlosser, Eric. *Fast Food Nation*. Mariner, 2001.

Though a paragraph may be only one sentence long, it is usually comprised of several sentences which develop one idea, one point, or one aspect of a subject. Very often this idea or subject is stated in a **topic sentence**—a sentence that focuses the paragraph. The topic sentence is usually the first sentence of the paragraph, but it may come at the end or even in the middle of a paragraph. Furthermore, a long paragraph may have several sub-topics, each introduced by its own “sub-topic sentence.” Sometimes a paragraph may have no topic sentence if it’s organized around a theme that the writer has in mind but does not state explicitly. Even if a paragraph has no explicit topic sentence, however, it should have a clear focus.

Paragraphs are most often used to mark the introduction of a new idea or a new section in a piece of writing. However, they are sometimes used to break up long sections of writing into shorter, easier to read pieces. How to break up an essay into paragraphs depends upon the organization and relationship of ideas or information in that piece of writing. Indeed, most writing can be divided into paragraphs in several different ways.

Three essential qualities of a good paragraph are **unity**, **development**, and **coherence**. A unified paragraph develops one main point, with all the sentences relating to that point. A developed paragraph includes sufficient explanation and support of its point for the reader to understand it fully. A coherent paragraph develops its point in an organized, logical way, showing the sequence of ideas and connections among them.

SPECIAL PURPOSE PARAGRAPHS

Introductory Paragraphs

The chief function of an introductory paragraph is to introduce the topic, narrow the focus, and present the thesis or main idea of an essay. This point or thesis may be a single sentence that states the main argument or idea the essay will develop, or it may be several sentences long, not only stating a main idea, but also introducing the main divisions of a paper and/or outlining the proposed method of development.

An effective introduction must interest the reader, introducing the subject in a way that will convince the reader that the paper will be worth reading. Below are some ways this might be accomplished:

- Narrate an anecdote that relates to the subject of the essay. The anecdote may be humorous or serious, but it should involve your reader immediately in a story that suggests the issues to be discussed.
- Cite a quotation and discuss its relevance to the topic.
- Describe historical background relevant to the topic.
- Describe the current situation in the area you are addressing.
- Describe a person, place, or object relevant to the topic.
- Explain assumptions about the subject of the essay.

Transitional Paragraphs

Transitional paragraphs connect sections of essays. They may summarize a preceding section briefly and introduce a new section, or they may show some logical connection between sections, much as transitional words do between sentences. Transitional paragraphs are usually quite short, sometimes only a sentence in length. They are most often used in longer essays that develop several complex issues. In shorter essays, the transitional function is usually served by a transitional word, phrase, or sentence at the end of one paragraph or the beginning of the next paragraph.

Concluding Paragraphs

A concluding paragraph brings an essay to a close, leaving the reader with a sense of completion. Often the conclusion will restate the thesis of an essay, sometimes reformulating the thesis in light of evidence presented in the essay. But concluding paragraphs may work in other ways. If the essay deals with a subject that can be approached in several ways and the essay has chosen one approach over others, the concluding paragraph may defend that approach. A particularly effective kind of concluding paragraph demonstrates the larger implications of a thesis by placing it in the context of some larger issue. Finally, a concluding paragraph may speculate about future developments or leave the reader with something to think about.