

Creating Effective Paragraphs

Effective Paragraphs Have Two Parts

Effective paragraphs give readers all the information they need to understand the purpose and direction of an argument. All paragraphs should include two well-defined parts:

1. An **Introduction** that offers a transition from the previous paragraph and that describes the direction and purpose of the paragraph.
2. A second part called the **Discussion** that explains, describes, illustrates, or otherwise develops the matters announced in the introduction.

The introduction and discussion are in fixed positions – the introduction controls coherence and always comes before the discussion. Readers use the information in the introduction as an organizing principle for the information they find in the rest of the paragraph. When it succeeds, the introduction helps to control readers’ sense of the coherence and their understanding of the meaning of that paragraph.

Readers recognize the introduction of paragraphs, essays, and books as the basis for (and as the most important section of) the rest of that paragraph, essay, or book.

Many paragraphs have a 1-sentence introduction, as though the introduction were a traditional “topic sentence.” But it’s also common for writers to use a 2-3-sentence introduction (I just did). If you are writing about a complex topic, you may need a sentence or two just to transition from the previous paragraph and to prepare readers for the ideas you plan to discuss.

Effective Paragraphs Have Main Points

Each paragraph has a main point that captures the gist of that paragraph. The main point in a paragraph is usually just a single sentence or even part of a sentence. In addition, that main point is usually clearly identifiable – a sentence that readers can point to, underline, or read aloud. Main points in paragraphs can be structured in one of three ways.

Main Point First

“Reader, I am telling you my main point right up front to lay out the direction of this paragraph. You know from the start what this paragraph will argue, so you are in control of this text.”

Main Point First and Last

“Reader, I am telling you my main point right up front in order to carefully lay out the direction of this paragraph. Because you know right from the start what this paragraph will argue, you are in control of this text. But because this is a long paragraph, I will repeat my main point at the end of the paragraph just to make sure you remember it.”

Promise First, Main Point Last

“Reader, I promise you up front that I will tell you the overall intention of this paragraph. But the main point won’t come until the end. Because you don’t know exactly where I’ll lead you, you’ll need to pay close attention and stay with me until the end.”

Effective Paragraphs Are Well-Structured

In most academic and professional settings, readers expect the main point of a paragraph to appear at the end of the paragraph's introduction. Sometimes writers save the main point for the end of the paragraph. Keep in mind, though, that such paragraphs usually are harder to read than paragraphs that put the main point at the end of the introduction. So if you do save your main point for the end, you must promise to pay off readers for the attention you are demanding, and you must use language to lead readers to the main point.

Effective Paragraphs Are the Appropriate Length

As Diana Hacker describes in *The Bedford Handbook*, "Most readers feel comfortable reading paragraphs that range between 100 and 200 words [around ½ to 1 double-spaced page long]. Shorter paragraphs force too much starting and stopping, and longer ones strain the reader's attention span. There are exceptions to this guideline, however. Paragraphs longer than 200 words frequently appear in scholarly writing, where they suggest seriousness and depth. Paragraphs shorter than 100 words occur in newspapers because of narrow columns; in informal essays to quicken the pace; and in business letters ..." (106).

Effective Paragraphs Have Transitions and Repeat Key Words

As Hacker notes, "Like the sentences within paragraphs, the paragraphs within an essay should be arranged in a clear hierarchy. ... [By scanning the introduction] of each paragraph ..., readers hope to understand how each paragraph connects with what has come before" (99). Transitions and repeated key words help readers make such connections between the main point in one paragraph and the main point in the next, as well as between each sentence in each paragraph.

Paragraph and Sentence Transitions (*Bedford Handbook* 103-104)

To Show Addition

and, also, besides, furthermore, in addition, moreover, next, too, first, second

To Give Examples

for example, for instance, to illustrate, in fact, specifically

To Compare

also, in the same manner, similarly, likewise

To Contrast

but, however, on the other hand, in contrast, nevertheless, still, even though, on the contrary, yet, although

To Summarize or Conclude

in other words, in short, in summary, in conclusion, to sum up, that is, therefore

To Show Time

after, as, before, next, during, later, finally, meanwhile, then, when, while

To Indicate Logical Relationship

if, so, therefore, consequently, thus, as a result, for this reason, since

Paragraphs Move from General to Specific Information

Readers like to see old information before they see new. They like to see basic, high-level information before they see particular, specific examples that show that the high-level information is true. By situating high-level information before specifics, writers go a long way toward helping readers understand an argument. Reversing this expected order only tends to confuse readers.