



Figure 1 The Writing Center and Academic Resource Center logo

**PARAGRAPH DEVELOPMENT**

A *paragraph* is a group of sentences that work together to develop an idea. The beginning of a paragraph should be *indented*, like the beginning of this one. A paragraph usually includes a *topic sentence*, a *body*, and a *concluding sentence*. The *topic sentence* states the main idea of the paragraph. The *body* is made up of sentences that support and/or develop the main idea. If a *concluding sentence* is necessary, it will summarize the information presented in the paragraph, state the solution to the problem introduced in the paragraph, or state a conclusion drawn from the information presented in the paragraph. The following are the general steps to take when planning and writing a paragraph:

- **Choosing a topic**

Before attempting to write a paragraph, you will need to choose a topic. Depending on the assignment, you will be given a topic or a broad subject by your instructor, or you will be permitted to write about a topic of your choice. If you have been given a topic, you can move on to the next step. Otherwise, you will need to do some thinking about what you wish to write about.

It is very important that your topic be neither too broad nor too narrow. If it is too broad, you will not be able to limit your writing to a paragraph, and if it is too narrow, you will not be able to come up with enough writing to fill up a paragraph.

Tips for selecting a topic for your paragraph:

- Choose something that you are interested in and know something about.
  - Think of people you know, hobbies, ideas you find interesting, or experiences from your life when searching for a topic.

- **Narrowing your topic**

A paragraph is a relatively short piece of writing; it will usually be between five and twelve sentences long. Because you are limited in length, you should select a single, manageable idea that you can cover in the space that you have.

*Example of a topic too broad for a single paragraph:*

- Why good people do bad things

The example above is too broad for a paragraph, because you could write several paragraphs about it. If you find that your topic is too broad, think about a few ideas that you would include under your topic and see if one of them might work as a topic for a single paragraph.

*Example of a topic too narrow for a paragraph;*

- My cat is striped

Who cares? This topic is too narrow because it leaves no questions in the reader's mind. There is nothing more to write about because the statement leaves no room for interpretation.

*Examples of topics suitable for a paragraph:*

- Why it is rude to talk on a cell phone in public
- How to cut a rabbit's toenails

- **Writing your topic sentence**

Once you have chosen a topic, you will need to write a complete topic sentence. You will make your topic into a statement at this time, which will direct the body of the paragraph.

Example of topics with related topic sentences:

- Why it is rude to talk on a cell phone in public  
*Talking on a cell phone in public is rude because it is inconsiderate of others.*
- How to cut a rabbit's toenails

*Cutting your rabbit's toenails yourself is simple and can save you a lot of money.*



Figure 2 Rabbit

- **Generating ideas for the body of your paragraph**

After you have written your topic sentence, you will need to gather supporting ideas for the body of the paragraph.

*Brainstorming* is a good technique to use at this stage. To *brainstorm*, think about your topic and write down anything that comes to mind that relates to it.

Example of topic sentences and ideas generated by brainstorming:

- *Talking on a cell phone in public is rude because it is inconsiderate of others.*

People may be disturbed by your talking out loud/people talk louder on cell phones

Cell phones are convenient

It makes the people you are with feel left out or ignored

You can't pay attention to what you are doing when you are on the phone

You can crash your car if you are on the phone

- *Cutting your rabbit's toenails yourself is simple and can save you a lot of money.*

It costs \$10 to have a rabbit's toenails cut at a shop and needs to be done often

You will need two people to do it

You have to hold the rabbit on its back

Be careful not to clip them too short and make them bleed / use clippers made for animals

The rabbit will not like it



Figure 3 Studying student

- **Choosing ideas to include in your paragraph**

After you have a list of ideas that relate to your topic sentence, you will need to decide which ones to include in your paragraph. Include any ideas that give examples or facts that directly relate to the topic sentence or prove that it is correct. Exclude any ideas that simply restate the topic sentence or any that seem irrelevant. These can take up space and make your paragraph mundane.

Example topic sentences and ideas that could be included in the body of the corresponding paragraphs:

- *Talking on a cell phone in public is rude because it is inconsiderate of others.*

People may be disturbed by your talking out loud/people talk louder on cell phones

It makes the people you are with feel left out or ignored

You can't pay attention to what you are doing when you are on the phone

You can crash your car if you are on the phone

In this example, each idea on the list helps argue that the topic sentence is correct. The idea that was left out, "cell phones are convenient," doesn't help prove that the topic sentence is correct. In fact, it could be seen as a point against the topic sentence.

- *Cutting your rabbit's toenails yourself is simple and can save you a lot of money.*

It costs \$10 to have a rabbit's toenails cut at a shop and needs to be done often

You will need two people to do it

You have to hold the rabbit on its back

Be careful not to clip them too short and make them bleed / use clippers made for animals

In this example, each idea listed helps argue that it is a good idea to cut your rabbit's toenails yourself and explains how to do it. The idea that was left out, "the rabbit will not like it," was left out because it would not help convince the reader that cutting their rabbit's toenails is a good idea; it could actually make them not want to try.

- **Putting your ideas in order**

Once you have chosen the ideas you will use to support your topic sentence, you will need to plan the order in which you will present them. This is usually the part that gives students the most trouble, but it becomes easier with practice. If your points come in chronological order, this step will be easy. If not, you will have to decide on the best order to present them in. First, determine the points you want to emphasize the most. Then, order your paragraph, so these ideas come at the beginning and the end of the paragraph with the less important ideas in the middle.

Example of a topic sentence with supporting ideas put into order of emphasis:

- *Talking on a cell phone in public is rude because it is inconsiderate of others.*
  1. You can't pay attention to what you are doing when you are on the phone
  2. You can crash your car if you are on the phone
  3. It makes the people you are with feel left out or ignored
  4. People may be disturbed by your talking out loud/people talk louder on cell phones

Example of a topic sentence with supporting ideas put into chronological order:

- *Cutting your rabbit's toenails yourself is simple and can save you a lot of money.*
  1. It costs \$10 to have a rabbit's toenails cut at a shop and needs to be done often

2. You will need 2 people to do it
3. You have to hold the rabbit on its back
4. Be careful not to clip them too short and make them bleed / use clippers made for animals

In this example, the ideas listed to convince the reader to cut their rabbit's toenails themselves are listed first, followed by instructions for doing so.

**Exercise:**

**Within the broad subject given, choose a topic narrow enough for a paragraph, and then write a topic sentence. Next, come up with a list of supporting ideas and list them in the spaces provided. Decide which ideas to include in your paragraph, then decide on the order to put them in and number them on the right. An example has been done for you.**

1. Subject: College

Topic: Why registering for college is frustrating  
 Topic sentence: Registering for classes at college is very time-consuming \_\_\_\_\_ and inconvenient.  
 Supporting ideas: \_\_\_\_\_ Order:  
You must take placement tests \_\_\_\_\_ 2  
You have to apply \_\_\_\_\_ 1  
You must meet prerequisites \_\_\_\_\_ 3  
Sometimes classes you want are full \_\_\_\_\_ 5  
You must wait in line to register \_\_\_\_\_ 4  
You have to go to a separate office to pay for classes \_\_\_\_\_ 6

2. Subject: Food

Topic sentence:  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 Supporting ideas: \_\_\_\_\_ Order  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

- **Writing the draft**

After you have ordered your ideas, it is time to write the first draft of your paragraph. Start with your topic sentence, and then write each of your

supporting ideas in order as a complete sentence. If your paragraph requires a conclusion, write it last. Don't worry about making each sentence perfect, because you will have a chance to revise later.

- **Revising**

When your draft is complete, you can look it over and decide what changes need to be made to make it more understandable and interesting.

Things to check for when revising:

- Support- Make sure all examples and details support the topic sentence.
  - Unity- Make sure none of the sentences stray from the topic.
    - Does each sentence relate to the topic sentence?

- **Editing/proofreading**

After revising, proofread your paragraph for spelling and grammar mistakes, then write out your final draft

**This handout is based on the following texts:**

Fawcett, Susan and Alvin Sandberg. Evergreen with Readings: A guide to Writing. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992. 16-33.

Roth, Audrey. The Elements of basic Writing with Readings. Boston: Allyn andBacon, 1994. 65-107.

**All of the above texts are available in The Writing Center.**

**Last Revised: 06/14/18**