

- Be respectful and tactful. This is especially important when collaborating online. Without tone of voice, facial expressions, and other body language, your words carry all the weight. Remember also that what you write may be forwarded to others.
- When collaborating online, decide as a group how best to exchange drafts and comments. Group members may not all have access to the same equipment and software. Name files carefully.
- Each meeting needs an agenda—and careful attention to the clock. Appoint one person as timekeeper and another person as group leader; a third member should keep a record of the discussion and send around a summary afterward.

Working on a group writing project

- Define the overall project as clearly as possible, and divide the work into parts.
- Assign each group member specific tasks with deadlines.
- Try to accommodate everyone's style of working, but make sure everyone performs.
- Work for consensus, if not necessarily total agreement.

W-5 Developing Paragraphs

Paragraphs help us organize our writing for our readers. Here one writer recalls when he first understood what a paragraph does.

I still remember the exact moment when I first understood, with a sudden clarity, the purpose of a paragraph. I didn't have the vocabulary to say "paragraph," but I realized that a paragraph was a fence that held words. The words inside a paragraph worked together for a common purpose. They had some specific reason for being inside the same fence. . . .

—Sherman Alexie, "The Joy of Reading and Writing"

This chapter will help you build "fences" around words that work together on a common topic. It offers tips and examples for composing strong paragraphs.

W-5a Focusing on the Main Point

All the sentences in a paragraph should focus on one main idea, as they do in this paragraph from an article about the Mall of America.

There is, of course, nothing naturally abhorrent in the human impulse to dwell in marketplaces or the urge to buy, sell, and trade. Rural Americans traditionally looked forward to the excitement and sensuality of market day; Native Americans traveled long distances to barter and trade at sprawling, festive encampments. In Persian bazaars and in the ancient Greek agoras the very soul of the community was preserved and could be seen, felt, heard, and smelled as it might be nowhere else. All over the planet the humblest of people have always gone to market with hope in their hearts and in expectation of something beyond mere goods—seeking a place where humanity is temporarily in ascendance, a palette for the senses, one another. —David Guterson, "Enclosed. Encyclopedic. Endured. One Week at the Mall of America"

Topic sentences. To help you focus a paragraph on one main point, state that point in a **TOPIC SENTENCE**. Often, but not always, you might

start a paragraph with a topic sentence, as in this example from an essay arguing in favor of the American Electoral College.

The Electoral College was created by our nation's founders to prevent one region from controlling the country. When the United States was founded, most of the population was concentrated within a few states, and those states would be able to dominate the country if the government were a pure democracy. Because of this population disparity, many small-population states feared that the larger ones would force them to conform to any laws and legislation that the larger states desired, creating a tyranny of the majority. So the founders put multiple measures in place to avoid this imbalance. One of those measures is the Electoral College, which gives each state a voice while also reflecting the opinion of the general population.

—Gavin Reid, "The Electoral College Embodies American Ideals"

Sometimes, you may choose to put the topic sentence at the end of the paragraph. See how this strategy works in a paragraph about "high-concept pitches," brief descriptions of potential movie scripts.

Jane Espenson, who has written for television shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, reveals an interesting fact: Though TV writers don't use high-concept pitches for episodes—they're expected to present worked-out story ideas—the concepts that actually get picked up and turned into episodes are often not the fully worked-out ones. Instead, they're the ones based on single sentences thrown out at the end of a longer pitch. Jane sold two ideas to *Star Trek: The Next Generation* using single sentences. One was "Data is stranded on a Luddite planet," and the other was "Every time we go warp speed we're actually destroying the fabric of the universe." Jane speculates that the one-sentence pitches are bought because the writers who hear them are able to flesh them out in their own minds. They want to be able to fill in the details. In this case, there was a benefit to leaving out information. Clarity means finding the right level of detail for the circumstances.

—Christopher Johnson, *Microstyle: The Art of Writing Little*

Occasionally, the main point is so obvious that you don't need a topic sentence. Especially in **NARRATIVE** writing, you may choose only to

imply—not state—the main idea, as in this paragraph from an essay describing a young man's realization about his cousin's life choices.

College Point, Queens. They called it "Garbage Point." I didn't agree with that for a while because it was home, but when I turned sixteen, I looked at College Point differently. Sure, it wasn't Compton or Chicago, but as in any city, it was easy to slip up if you hung out in the wrong places. I was still sixteen when a family member I'll call "T" shot up heroin right in front of me. He was driving, and I was unlucky enough to be in the passenger seat beside him; I was in for a rough ride.

—Mohammed Masoom Shah, "One Last Ride"

Sticking to the main point. Whether or not you announce the main point in a topic sentence, be sure that every sentence in a paragraph relates to that point. Edit out any sentences that stray off topic, such as those crossed out below.

In "Se Habla Español," Tanya Maria Barrientos notes some of the difficulties she encounters as a Latina who is not fluent in Spanish. ~~Previous generations of immigrants were encouraged to speak only English.~~ When someone poses a question to her in Spanish, she often has to respond in English. In other instances, she tries to speak Spanish but falters over the past and future tenses. Situations like these embarrass Barrientos and make her feel left out of a community she wants to be part of. ~~Native Guatemalans who are bilingual do not have such problems.~~

W-5b Developing the Main Point

A good paragraph provides enough good details to develop its main point—to fill out and support that point. Following are some common strategies for fleshing out and organizing paragraphs—and sometimes even for organizing an entire essay.

Analyzing cause and effect. Sometimes, you can develop a paragraph on a topic by analyzing what **CAUSES** it—or what its **EFFECTS**

might be. The following paragraph about air turbulence identifies some of its causes.

A variety of factors can cause turbulence, which is essentially a disturbance in the movement of air. Thunderstorms, the jet stream, and mountains are some of the more common natural culprits, while what is known as wake turbulence is created by another plane. "Clear air turbulence" is the kind that comes up unexpectedly.

—Susan Stellan, "The Inevitability of Bumps"

Classifying and dividing. When we **CLASSIFY** something, we group it with things that share similar characteristics. The following paragraph uses classification to describe the various features formed by hydrothermal vents, cracks in Earth's surface through which heated water is released.

Under the sea, hydrothermal vents can form features called black smokers and white smokers. The colour depends on the minerals present in the water. On land these cracks form land hot springs, fumaroles (holes in a volcanic area from which hot smoke and gases escape) and geysers.

—Peter Biro, "Questions and Answers about Hydrothermal Vents"

As a writing strategy, **DIVISION** is a way of separating something into parts. See how the following paragraph divides the concept of pressure into four kinds.

I see four kinds of pressure working on college students today: economic pressure, parental pressure, peer pressure, and self-induced pressure. It is easy to look around for villains—to blame the colleges for charging too much money, the professors for assigning too much work, the parents for pushing their children too far, the students for driving themselves too hard. But there are no villains; only victims.

—William Zinsser, "College Pressures"

Comparing and contrasting. Comparing things looks at their similarities; contrasting them focuses on their differences—though often we use the word "comparison" to refer to both strategies. You

can structure a paragraph that **COMPARES AND CONTRASTS** in two ways. One is to shift back and forth between each item point by point, as in this paragraph contrasting the ways men and women "cyberloaf," or use the internet at work for non-work activities.

Although the consequences of cyberloafing are similar across different populations, Lim and Chen's 2012 study demonstrated there are some meaningful differences based on gender. Men are more likely to cyberloaf than women, but when it comes to switching back to work, women take around eight minutes, while men take only four (pp. 346–347). There are differences, too, in how men and women think cyberloafing affects their work: men are more likely to say cyberloafing activities have a positive impact while women tend to say they have a negative impact (p. 347). However, Kim and Chen's results also show overall that many workers—men and women—believe there are some positive effects: 75% of participants say that cyberloafing increases their engagement at work, and 49% say that cyberloafing helps them to solve problems at work (p. 348). And most respondents believe it's not breaking any rules to browse the internet for personal reasons while at work (p. 346).

—Rocio Celeste Mejia Avila, "Cyberloafing: Distraction or Motivation?"

Another way to compare and contrast two items is to use the "block method," covering all the details about one and then all the details about the other. See how this approach works in the following example, which contrasts photographs of Bill Clinton and Hillary Clinton on the opening day of the 1994 baseball season.

The next day photos of the Clintons in action appeared in newspapers around the country. Many papers, including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, chose the same two photos to run. The one of Bill Clinton showed him wearing an Indians cap and warm-up jacket. The President, throwing lefty, had turned his shoulders sideways to the plate in preparation for delivery. He was bringing the ball forward from behind his head in a clean-looking throwing action as the photo was snapped. Hillary Clinton was pictured wearing a dark jacket, a scarf, and an oversized Cubs hat. In preparation for her throw she was standing directly facing the plate. A right-hander, she had the elbow of her throwing arm

pointed out in front of her. Her forearm was tilted back, toward her shoulder. The ball rested on her upturned palm. As the picture was taken, she was in the middle of an action that can only be described as throwing like a girl.

—James Fallows, "Throwing Like a Girl"

Another way to make a comparison is with an **ANALOGY**, explaining something unfamiliar by comparing it with something familiar. See how one writer uses analogy to explain the way DNA encodes genetic information.

Although the complexity of cells, tissues, and whole organisms is breathtaking, the way in which the basic DNA instructions are written is astonishingly simple. Like more familiar instruction systems such as language, numbers, or computer binary code, what matters is not so much the symbols themselves but the order in which they appear. Anagrams, for example, "derail" and "redial," contain exactly the same letters but in a different order, and so the words they spell out have completely different meanings. . . . In exactly the same way the order of the four chemical symbols in DNA embodies the message. "ACGGTA" and "GACAGT" are DNA anagrams that mean completely different things to a cell, just as "derail" and "redial" have different meanings for us.

—Bryan Sykes, "So, What Is DNA and What Does It Do?"

Defining. When you **DEFINE** something, you put it in a general category and then add characteristics that distinguish it from others in that group. The following paragraph provides a definition of anhydrobiosis, one way that desert organisms stay alive during droughts.

Anhydrobiosis is dehydrated life—life shrunk down to its most primary aspects. No energy is spent on what would normally be considered to be living. The participants become sealed containers against the world, cells turning from living structures into reinforcement material. Sensitive organs are tucked away into specialized membranes, like wine glasses wrapped in newspaper for a move. Molecules, mostly a disaccharide called trehalose, are produced to shore up the shriveling internal structures. The organism's insides become crystalline, a material very similar to the liquid crystal in

digital watches. A dehydrating roundworm converts a quarter of its body weight into this trehalose material before going completely dry, coiling into a compact circle and reducing its surface area to a hardened bulb about seven percent of the original size.

—Craig Childs, *The Secret Knowledge of Water*

Describing. A **DESCRIPTIVE** paragraph provides specific details to show what something looks like—and perhaps how it sounds, feels, smells, and tastes. Here a paragraph weaves together details of background, appearance, and speech to create a vivid impression of Chuck Yeager, the first pilot to break the sound barrier.

Yeager grew up in Hamlin, West Virginia, a town on the Mud River. His father was a gas driller (drilling for natural gas in the coalfields), his older brother was a gas driller, and he would have been a gas driller had he not enlisted in the Army Air Force in 1941 at the age of eighteen. In 1943, at twenty, he became a flight officer and went to England to fly fighter planes over France and Germany. Even in the tumult of the war Yeager was somewhat puzzling to a lot of other pilots. He was a short, wiry, but muscular little guy with dark curly hair and a tough-looking face that seemed (to strangers) to be saying: "You best not be lookin' me in the eye, you peckerwood, or I'll put four more holes in your nose." But that wasn't what was puzzling. What was puzzling was the way Yeager talked. He seemed to talk with some older forms of English elocution, syntax, and conjugation that had been preserved uphollow in the Appalachians. There were people up there who never said they disapproved of anything, they said: "I don't hold with it." In the present tense they were willing to *help* out, like anyone else; but in the past tense they only *helped*. "H't weren't nothin' I hold with, but I helped him out with it, anyways."

—Tom Wolfe, *The Right Stuff*

Explaining a process. Sometimes you might write a paragraph that explains a process—telling someone how to do something, such as how to parallel park—or how something is done, such as how bees make honey. Cookbooks explain many processes step-by-step, as in this explanation of how to pit a mango.

The simplest method for pitting a mango is to hold it horizontally, then cut it in two lengthwise, slightly off-center, so the knife just misses the pit. Repeat the cut on the other side so a thin layer of flesh remains around the flat pit. Holding a half, flesh-side up, in the palm of your hand, slash the flesh into a lattice, cutting down to, but not through, the peel. Carefully push the center of the peel upward with your thumbs to turn it inside out, opening the cuts of the flesh. Then cut the mango cubes from the peel.

—Paulette Mitchell, *Vegetarian Appetizers*

Narrating. When you write a **NARRATIVE** paragraph in an essay, you tell a story to support a point. In the following paragraph, one author tells about being mistaken for a waitress and how that incident of stereotyping served “as a challenge” that provoked her to read her poetry with new confidence.

One such incident . . . happened on the day of my first public poetry reading. It took place in Miami in a boat-restaurant where we were having lunch before the event. I was nervous and excited as I walked in with my notebook in my hand. An older woman motioned me to her table. Thinking (foolish me) that she wanted me to autograph a copy of my brand-new slender volume of verse, I went over. She ordered a cup of coffee from me, assuming that I was the waitress. Easy enough to mistake my poems for menus, I suppose. I know that it wasn't an intentional act of cruelty, yet of all the good things that happened that day, I remember that scene most clearly, because it reminded me of what I had to overcome before anyone would take me seriously. In retrospect, I understand that my anger gave my reading fire, that I have almost always taken doubts in my abilities as a challenge—and that the result is, most times, a feeling of satisfaction at having won a convert when I see the cold, appraising eyes warm to my words, the body language change, the smile that indicates that I have opened some avenue for communication.

—Judith Ortiz Cofer, *The Latin Deli*

Using examples. Illustrating a point with one or more examples is a common way to develop a paragraph, like the following one, which presents several examples of country musicians whose music

includes elements of pop, rock, and rap to make a point about the exclusion of “Old Town Road,” a rap/country song by rapper Lil Nas X, from the Billboard Hot Country Songs chart.

Country music gatekeepers are selective about how they use this muscle. Universal Nashville's (white) hip-pop raconteur Sam Hunt is embraced by Billboard's Hot Country Songs, and “Meant to Be,” a pop-leaning ballad by Bebe Rexha with Florida Georgia Line is played ad nauseam. Taylor Swift could also lasso the country albums top spot for 16 weeks with her career-realigning pop-rock masterpiece *Red*. White country artists' rap collaborations also tend to get a pass. Jason Aldean tapped Ludacris for a remix of his country No 1 “Dirt Road Anthem”; Nelly's feature on Florida Georgia Line's bro-country classic “Cruise” helped it become country music's best selling US single of the digital era. Yet when black rappers draw from country styles . . . they are denied a seat at the table.

—Owen Myers, “Fight for Your Right to Yeehaw:
Lil Nas X and Country's Race Problem”

W-5c Making Paragraphs Flow

There are several ways to make your paragraphs **COHERENT** so that readers can follow your train of thought. Repetition, parallelism, and transitions are three strategies for making paragraphs flow.

Repetition. One way to help readers follow your train of thought is to repeat key words and phrases, as well as pronouns referring to those key words.

Not that long ago, **blogs** were one of those annoying buzz words that you could safely get away with ignoring. The word “blog”—it works as both noun and verb—is short for “Web log.” It was coined in 1997 to describe a website where you could post daily scribbles, journal-style, about whatever you like—mostly critiquing and linking to other articles online that may have sparked your thinking. Unlike a big media outlet, **bloggers** focus their efforts on narrow topics, often rising to become de facto watchdogs and self-proclaimed experts. Blogs

can be about anything: politics, sex, baseball, haiku, car repair. There are blogs about blogs. —Lev Grossman, “Meet Joe Blog”

Instead of repeating one word, you can use synonyms.

Predictably, the love of cinema has waned. People still like going to the movies, and some people still care about and expect something special, necessary from a film. And wonderful films are still being made.... But one hardly finds anymore, at least among the young, the distinctive cinephilic love of movies, which is not simply love of but a certain *taste* in films.

—Susan Sontag, “A Century of Cinema”

Parallel structures. Putting similar items into the same grammatical structure helps readers see the connection among those elements and follow your sentences—and your thoughts.

The disease was bubonic plague, present in two forms: one that infected the bloodstream, causing the buboes and internal bleeding and was spread by contact; and a second, more virulent pneumonic type that infected the lungs and was spread by respiratory infection. The presence of both at once caused the high mortality and speed of contagion. So lethal was the disease that cases were known of persons going to bed well and dying before they woke, of doctors catching the illness at a bedside and dying before the patient. So rapidly did it spread from one to another that to a French physician, Simon de Covino, it seemed as if one sick person “could infect the whole world.”

—Barbara Tuchman, “This Is the End of the World: The Black Death”

Transitions help readers follow your train of thought—and move from sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph. Here are some common ones:

- **To show causes and effects:** accordingly, as a result, because, consequently, hence, so, then, therefore, thus
- **To show comparison:** along the same lines, also, in the same way, like, likewise, similarly
- **To show contrasts or exceptions:** although, but, even though, however, in contrast, instead, nevertheless, nonetheless, on the contrary, on the one hand . . . on the other hand, still, yet

- **To show examples:** for example, for instance, indeed, in fact, of course, such as
- **To show place or position:** above, adjacent to, below, beyond, elsewhere, here, inside, near, outside, there
- **To show sequence:** again, also, and, and then, besides, finally, first, furthermore, last, moreover, next, too
- **To show time:** after, as soon as, at first, at last, at the same time, before, eventually, finally, immediately, later, meanwhile, next, simultaneously, so far, soon, then, thereafter
- **To signal a summary or conclusion:** as a result, as we have seen, finally, in a word, in any event, in brief, in conclusion, in other words, in short, in the end, in the final analysis, on the whole, therefore, thus, to summarize

See how Julia Alvarez uses several transitions to show time and to move her ideas along.

Yolanda, the third of the four girls, became a schoolteacher but not on purpose. For years after graduate school, she wrote down *poet* under profession in questionnaires and income tax forms, and later amended it to *writer-slash-teacher*. Finally, acknowledging that she had not written much of anything in years, she announced to her family that she was not a poet anymore. —Julia Alvarez, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*

Transitions can also help readers move from paragraph to paragraph and, by summing up the previous paragraph’s main point, show how the paragraphs are connected. A common way to summarize is to use phrases like “this/these ____” and “such ____.” Here’s an example, from an anthropologist’s study of American college students:

When I asked students in interviews whether they felt they had a “community” at AnyU, most said yes. But what they meant by community were these personal networks of friends that some referred to as my “homeys.” It was these small, ego-centered groups that were the backbone of most students’ social experience in the university.

On a daily basis these personal networks were easily recognizable within the dorm and on campus. “Where are you now?” says the cell phone caller walking back to the dorm from class. “I’m on

my way home, so ask Jeffrey and Mark to come, and I'll meet you at my room at 8." Such conversations are everywhere. . . .

—Rebekah Nathan, *My Freshman Year*

W-5d Starting a New Paragraph

Paragraphs may be long or short, and there are no strict rules about how many sentences are necessary for a well-developed paragraph. But while a brief, one- or two-sentence paragraph can be used to set off an idea you want to emphasize, too many short paragraphs can make your writing choppy. Here are some reasons for beginning a new paragraph:

- to introduce a new subject or idea
- to signal a new speaker (in dialogue)
- to emphasize an idea
- to give readers a needed pause

W-5e Writing Opening and Closing Paragraphs

A good opening engages readers and provides some indication of what's to come; a good closing leaves them feeling satisfied—that the story is complete, the questions have been answered, the argument has been made.

Opening paragraphs. Sometimes, you may begin with a brief anecdote or story that provides context for your topic and then proceed to state your **THESIS**. In the following opening paragraph, the writer describes a meeting of “scientific management” experts to introduce Frederick Taylor and other early efficiency experts:

Ordering people around, which used to be just a way to get things done, was elevated to a science in October 1910 when Louis Brandeis, a fifty-three-year-old lawyer from Boston, held a meeting in an apartment in New York with a bunch of experts, including Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, who, at Brandeis's urging, decided to call what they were experts at “Scientific Management.” Every-

one there, including Brandeis, had contracted “Tayloritis”: they were enthralled by an industrial engineer from Philadelphia named Frederick Winslow Taylor, who had been ordering people around, scientifically, for years. He made work fast, and even faster. “Speedy Taylor,” as he was called, had invented a whole new way to make money. He would get himself hired by some business; spend a while watching everyone work, stopwatch and slide rule in hand; write a report telling them how to do their work faster; and then submit an astronomical bill for his invaluable services. He is the “Father of Scientific Management” (at least, that's what it says on his tombstone) and, by any rational calculation, the grandfather of management consulting.

—Jill Lepore, *The Mansion of Happiness*

OTHER WAYS OF OPENING AN ESSAY

- with a quotation
- with a question
- with a startling fact or opinion

Concluding paragraphs. One approach is to conclude by summarizing the text's argument. The following paragraph reiterates the writer's main point and then issues a call for action.

The bottom line is that drastically reducing both crime rates and the number of people behind bars is technically feasible. Whether it is politically and organizationally feasible to achieve this remains an open question. It would be tragic if the politics proved prohibitive, but it would be genuinely criminal if we didn't even try.

—Mark A. R. Kleiman, “The Outpatient Prison”

OTHER WAYS OF CONCLUDING AN ESSAY

- by discussing the implications of your argument
- by asking a question
- by referring to something discussed at the beginning
- by proposing action

» SEE **W-4f** for help editing paragraphs.