Dalhousie Writing Centre: Writing Effective Paragraphs

A paragraph is a group of sentences that are clearly related in meaning. Paragraphs vary in length, structure, and style, so you should think about the following advice as good practice instead of “rules.” Generally, experienced writers understand that effective paragraphs are: well-organized, fully developed, unified, and coherent.

1) Organization & Development

a. **Develop your paragraph around a single main idea**, usually contained in a **topic sentence**. Typically, the topic sentence appears at the beginning of the paragraph, but it may appear elsewhere—and it may only be implied.

b. **Develop the topic sentence**. All the other sentences in your paragraph should support the central idea identified in your topic sentence. You provide such support through, definition of a key term, facts and examples, reasons, or a comparison or contrast of facts or points of view.

   **TIP:** Inexperienced writers are often unable to fully develop their paragraphs. They may repeat the general idea several times in different words, or make unsupported generalizations based on the topic sentence. Avoid undeveloped paragraphs by including enough detail to convince the reader of the validity of your topic sentence.

c. **Organize your ideas**. The order of your sentences depends on the type and topic of the paragraph. You may use spatial order (describing physical space), chronological order (narrating events in time or explaining a process), or logical order (showing relationships such as division/classification, comparison/contrast, cause–effect, and problem–solution). Two other commonly-used logical patterns are **general-to-specific** and **specific-to-general**.

2) Unity

In a unified paragraph, each sentence must be clearly related to the topic sentence. When you are revising your work, try to identify any sentences that diverge from the main idea of the paragraph. **Delete them**. Begin a new paragraph when you begin talking about a new idea.

3) Coherence

Your paragraph is coherent when your thought flows smoothly from the first sentence through the last. **Transitional expressions, pronouns, and repetition of key words and phrases** will help you achieve coherence in a paragraph.

a. **Transitional expressions**. Think about the relationship between sentences and among supporting sentences and your topic sentence.

Here are some examples:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To signal sequence and additional information</th>
<th>in addition, additionally, also, and, or, as well, besides, equally important, further, furthermore, next, too, moreover, then, first, second, third, initially, later, finally</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To signal similarity or comparison</td>
<td>also, again, in the same way, likewise, similarly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To signal opposition or contrast</td>
<td>but, however, despite, regardless, instead, on the one hand . . . on the other hand, nevertheless, nonetheless, notwithstanding, in contrast, on the contrary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To signal time</td>
<td>after, afterwards, at last, before, currently, presently, during, as, earlier, immediately, next, later, meanwhile, while, now, recently, immediately, simultaneously, subsequently, then, when, until</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To signal examples</td>
<td>for example, for instance, namely, in fact, specifically, such as, to illustrate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To signal emphasis</td>
<td>even, indeed, in fact, of course, truly, clearly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To signal cause and effect</td>
<td>accordingly, it follows that, for this reason, as a consequence, consequently, hence, if, so, since, therefore, thus, as a result, to this end</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To signal summary, repetition, or conclusion</td>
<td>that is, in other words, again, in short, clearly, finally, thus, in a word, in brief, therefore, in the end, on the whole, thus, as noted, to summarize, to conclude, in conclusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

b) **Repetition of key words.** Words and phrases that are essential to the unifying idea of the paragraph act as signposts for your reader. To achieve coherence, you can repeat key words or rephrase key words with recognizable synonyms. You can also use pronouns that clearly refer to previously mentioned nouns to help you improve the flow from sentence to sentence.

**TIP:** Inexperienced writers may begin *every* sentence in their paragraph with a transition expression. Remember that transition expressions can also be used midway through the sentence and that some sentences will *not need a transition expression* at all. Try to balance these expressions with pronouns and repetition of key words and phrases.

Now practice revising your paragraphs so they are well-organized, unified, and coherent. Here are some questions you can use to evaluate and improve your paragraphing skills:

1. What is the topic sentence of the paragraph? Is it stated or implied, and if implied, would it be better to state it directly? Would the paragraph be improved if the topic sentence were moved to some other point?

2. Which sentences are too vague or somehow unrelated to the topic sentence? Is there a way to justify leaving these sentences in the paragraph? Should they be deleted or elaborated on to show how they are related?

3. Is the paragraph organized in a way that is easy for readers to follow? How are sentences linked in the paragraph? Are more links needed? Do any of the transitional expressions create connections that do not really exist?

4. Is the topic sentence developed completely? Does the paragraph need more material? How could the paragraph be developed and organized more effectively?
For more information and practice on writing paragraphs, please refer to:

Purdue OWL--Paragraph Writing:
https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/paragraphs_and_paragraphing/index.html

Using English for Academic Purposes:
http://www.uefap.com/writing/exercise/exwripar.htm

University College (U of T) on using topic sentences:
http://www.uc.utoronto.ca/topic-sentences

University of New England on Paragraphs: