

Paragraphs and Transitions

A good paragraph has three central elements:

1. A topic sentence

As most of you learned in high school, topic sentences tell your reader what the paragraph will concern. They must do this, but they should also act as signposts through your paper, gently guiding your readers through your argument by letting them know where you are and where you are headed. A reader (including you) should be able to get the gist of your paper and its developing argument by reading the opening sentences of each paragraph.

Topic sentences should accomplish three things:

i. They should give the reader a sense of what the paragraph will cover, ideally not in a mechanical way.

ii. They should give the reader a clear sense of how the over-all argument is progressing.

iii. And if necessary, they should orient the reader as to where in the text the elements in question take place (Are you discussing the opening chapter? The first section of the novel? The conclusion?)

Beware. . .

Broad openings. You can't hope to cover, for example, the way Joyce uses imagery in one paragraph. Be sure you've chosen a topic that you can reasonably discuss in a short space.

Examples:

a. In the next chapter, however, Conrad subtly hints that despite Marlow's vulnerability, he remains a potent source of disruption.

**Here, the author does a good job introducing the reader to the paragraph's subject (Marlow as a source of disruption); how this next point relates to the previous point (offering a contrast to Marlow's vulnerability discussed in the previous paragraph), and what point in the novel the discussion has reached (the next chapter).

b. All the characters in *Heart of Darkness* are affected by imperialism.

**This is true, but it's too broad a subject to cover in a paragraph, and a reader would have little sense of how this point relates to the developing argument.

c. In many poems, Yeats observes the numerous difficulties that art can bring, including the tension between an imagined world and the real one, the exhausting quality of producing art, and the many other challenges artists must face.

**In addition to being far too broad, this sentence suffers from the "tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em" dullness factor. One would expect the writer to go through the difficulties of art and end by restating that Yeats discusses these difficulties in the poems. This problem is harder to pin down than others, but as a rule of thumb, if you are bored

writing it, think of how bored your reader will be reading it. Clarify instead what part of your argument you've reached, and how this next paragraph will advance that argument.

2. Support:

Once you've presented your topic, you can then offer evidence from the text in the form of quotations or brief descriptions of plot elements. If you are presenting a contrast, you'll need to offer evidence on both sides. It's not enough, of course, simply to muster a list of evidence; alongside this evidence, you have to offer your own analysis. How do these plot details support your point? How should a reader interpret the details you offer?

Beware. . .

No support: You need to support your argument with specific quotations and examples from the text.

Only support: Be sure your quotations don't overtake your paragraphs. In general, you should have at least one sentence of analysis for every sentence of quotation. It's your paper, and you should be in charge of the prose.

Wandering: Usually as a result of broad openings. This is a paragraph that jumps from topic to topic.

3. Conclusion:

Concluding sentences to paragraphs are tricky. You don't want to be too mechanical (tell 'em what you've told 'em), but you also don't want to leave your reader hanging. The best thing to aim for is a modest reflection on the significance of the support. Now that you've shown your evidence, what can you conclude?

Examples:

- a. The soldier ends the meeting with this final act of charity, one that confirms his underlying humanity.

**The author has finished the discussion of the meeting and the paragraph at the same time—a good technique—and has also offered the reader a sense of the larger significance of the evidence to the overall argument.

- b. Thus, Conrad has conveyed the Company's evil role.

**This is serviceable, but dull, summarizing the paragraph but not offering any sense that the paragraph has *developed* an interesting idea.

- c. The atmosphere is also a kind of hell.

**An interesting detail, but this conclusion leaves the reader hanging as to the significance of the paragraph or the final point; some version of this sentence might work as a topic sentence to the following paragraph, but it doesn't work as a conclusion.

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