

What is a Paragraph?

A paragraph is a group of sentences that convey an idea. Each sentence works together as part of a unit to create an overall thought or impression. A paragraph is the smallest unit or cluster of sentences in which *one idea* can be developed adequately. Paragraphs can stand alone or function as part of an essay, but each paragraph covers only *one main idea*.

The most important sentence in your paragraph is the **topic sentence**, which clearly states the subject of the whole paragraph. The topic sentence is usually the first sentence of the paragraph because it gives an overview of the sentences to follow. The *supporting sentences* after the topic sentence help to develop the main idea. These sentences give specific details related to the topic sentence. A final or *concluding* sentence often restates or summarizes the main idea of the topic sentence.

A good paragraph has:

- a topic sentence stating the main point of the paragraph,
- supporting sentences with details and specific examples as proof of your point,
- logical, coherent thoughts that are developed in order from one sentence to the next, and
- a concluding idea that wraps up the point of the paragraph.

Read the following paragraph model. Look for the topic sentence, concrete details and examples in the supporting sentences, and see how the writer sums up the point of the paragraph with a concluding sentence. (Also, because this is academic writing, the writer indents the first line five spaces to mark the beginning of a paragraph. This practice is not always followed in commercial or instructive writing or in business letters or memos.)

My First Day

My first day of college was a disaster. First, I went to the wrong classroom for math. I was sitting in the class, surrounded by people taking notes and paying attention to how to do equations, which would have been okay if I was supposed to be in an algebra class. In reality, I was supposed to be in geometry, and when I discovered my

error, I had already missed the first twenty minutes of a one-hour class. When I got to the correct class, all twenty-five students turned and looked at me as the teacher said, “You’re late.” That would have been bad enough, but in my next class my history teacher spoke so fast I could not follow most of what he said. The only thing I did hear was that we were having a quiz tomorrow over today’s lecture. My day seemed to be going better during botany class, that is, until we visited the lab. I had a sneezing fit because of one of the plants in the lab and had to leave the room. When I finally finished my classes for the day, I discovered I had locked my keys in the car and had to wait for my brother to bring another set. *My first day of school was so bad that I know the rest will have to be better.*

In the above paragraph, the topic sentence appears in bold and the concluding sentence in italics. Notice how the sentences in between support and develop the topic sentence by giving specific examples and details. These examples are the writer’s “proof” of his bad first day of school.

A good topic sentence:

- informs the reader of the subject that will be discussed in the paragraph,
- asserts the writer’s point of view or attitude,
- intrigues the reader to continue reading,
- creates a sense of action, and
- is not vague, rambling, too narrow or too broad.