

# Rutgers Learning Centers

At Camden Campus

## Paragraph Overview:

Paragraphs should be unified, developed, coherent and complete. Standing free from its context, a paragraph should still be understandable because it has a beginning that states a central idea, a middle that provides supporting details for the central idea, and an end which summarizes the writer's attitude toward the subject.

## UNITY in the paragraph:

In each paragraph, the reader expects to examine one topic only; the topic should be restricted to a specific issue. This restricted topic is generally but not always signaled in the first sentence of the paragraph. As the reader reviews the paragraph, he or she will search for a clear identification and clear expansion of one specific idea. If the reader's attention is frustrated by a shift in focus from one topic or idea to another, he or she will become confused and will be unwilling to completely accept the writer's originally intended point of view. When developing a paragraph, therefore, make sure that each sentence supports the unifying topic.

Often, it is the writer's descriptive enthusiasm for the subject that causes him or her to stray from the central idea. If that is the case, devote a separate paragraph to your emotions or reactions and remember to use emotions or reactions as the unifying topic of another individual paragraph. Be sure to use your reactions to support your central idea.

## DEVELOPMENT of the paragraph:

A fully developed paragraph is complete if it provides enough information to evaluate the writer's assertion (the main idea.) Information should be supplied through supporting details, examples and reasons for the writer's assertions. Use concrete examples as evidence to support general statements.

Some methods for developing the central idea are:

- Provide reasons for making the general statement.
- Define, divide, and classify the components of the general statement.
- Analyze or compare and contrast the divisions or classifications.
- Analyze cause and effect of the central idea.
- Analyze the process by steps.

**Q: How long is a good paragraph? A: As long as necessary but no longer than necessary.**

A Good paragraph generally runs from about four to eight **complete** sentences. If the paragraph has only three sentences, it is probably not fully developed. If the paragraph has more than eight sentences, it probably contains a sub-topic that should be examined separately, or contains straying sentences that do not support the main idea. Eliminate all unnecessary sentences that detract from the point you are trying to make. Short paragraphs are acceptable only when showing a transition from one idea to another. Short paragraphs are generally introduced by words like:

In contrast,  
However,  
Conversely,

Consequently,  
Then, (or) Now,  
Accordingly,

Despite  
Opposed to . . .  
Consistently,

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## COHERENCE in the Paragraph:

A paragraph is coherent if the reader can see how each sentence relates to the central idea (topic idea) and how each sentence within the paragraph relates to each of the others. Relationships among sentences are established through the use of:

**Spatial Relationships** - - examine how we look at a place for the first time. Description moves from top to bottom, side to side, far to near, or near to far. Use words like: between, beyond, and over.

**Chronological Relationships** - - examine events as they unfold in time. Earliest events come first, followed by recent ones. Use words like: Within a [decade], now, still, and before.

### General to Specific or Specific to General Relationships

- General to specific **states** the conclusion as the opening statement **and** then **supports** the conclusion with detail. Use words like: For example, To Illustrate, To demonstrate.
- Specific to general **analyzes** individual statements and **draws a final conclusion** based on evidence. Uses words like: Conclusively, Overall, We can determine, In conclusion, In summary.

Coherence is also maintained by:

- transitional words: moreover, furthermore, in addition
- parallelism of sentence structure and ideas
- restatement of words or phrases used in the preceding sentence

## COMPLETION of the Paragraph:

A paragraph should be able to stand independently; therefore, it should include either conclusions within the body or a summary evaluation at the end. The final sentence of the paragraph should reconnect with the central idea but should leave the reader with a sense of completion. When moving on to a new paragraph, the final sentence should include brief phrasing that indicates a transition.

After writing a paragraph, read each sentence aloud. Reading aloud often helps us to detect many grammatical errors because we evaluate our writing by using the voice, the sight and the hearing. A rise or a fall in the voice frequently indicates a need for punctuation. Read long words by exaggerating each syllable to check for obvious spelling errors. If you are unsure about spelling, use a dictionary.

As you read each sentence, ask yourself:

- Does the sentence deal with the central idea?
- Does the sentence connect somehow with all the other paragraph sentences?
- Does the sentence refine, explain or add something new?

If you can answer “no” to any of the above questions, you need to rework or eliminate the sentence.

**Being able to write a paragraph that is unified, developed, coherent and complete is the first step to writing an essay or term paper, because the same rules apply equally to the paragraph and the essay.**