**What is a paragraph?**

Paragraphs are comprised of sentences, but not random sentences. A paragraph is a group of sentences organized around a central topic. In fact, the cardinal rule of paragraph writing is to focus on one idea. A solidly written paragraph takes its readers on a clear path, without detours. Master the paragraph, and you’ll be on your way to writing “gold-star” essays, term papers, and stories.

**How do you write a paragraph?**

A basic paragraph structure usually consists of five sentences: the topic sentence, three supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence. But the secrets to paragraph writing lay in four essential elements, which when used correctly, can make a *okay* paragraph into a *great* paragraph.

1. **Element #1: Unity.** Unity in a paragraph begins with the topic sentence. Every paragraph has one single, controlling idea that is expressed in its topic sentence, which is typically the first sentence of the paragraph. A paragraph is unified around this main idea, with the supporting sentences providing detail and discussion. In order to write a good topic sentence, think about your theme and all the points you want to make. Decide which point drives the rest, and then write it as your topic sentence.
2. **Element #2: Order.** Order refers to the way you organize your supporting sentences. Whether you choose chronological order, order of importance, or another logical presentation of detail, a solid paragraph always has a definite organization. In a well-ordered paragraph, the reader follows along easily, aided by the pattern you’ve established. Order helps the reader grasp your meaning and avoid confusion.
3. **Element #3: Coherence.** Coherence is the quality that makes your writing understandable. Sentences within a paragraph need to connect to each other and work together as a whole. One of the best ways to achieve coherency is to use transition words. These words create bridges from one sentence to the next. You can use transition words that show order (first, second, third); spatial relationships (above, below) or logic (furthermore, in addition, in fact). Also, in writing a paragraph, using a consistent verb tense and point of view are important ingredients for coherency**.**
4. **Element #4: Completeness.** Completeness means a paragraph is well-developed. If all sentences clearly and sufficiently support the main idea, then your paragraph is complete. If there are not enough sentences or enough information to prove your thesis, then the paragraph is incomplete. Usually three supporting sentences, in addition to a topic sentence and concluding sentence, are needed for a paragraph to be complete. The concluding sentence or last sentence of the paragraph should summarize your main idea by reinforcing your topic sentence.

Necessary Skills

Beginning writers have the skills necessary to write effective paragraphs. Paragraphs are usually made up of four to seven related sentences that advance a particular point about a topic. This group of sentences consists of three main elements: the topic sentence, the body -- or evidence -- sentences and the concluding sentence.

## The Topic Sentence

Paragraphs usually begin with topic sentences that will grab the reader’s attention -- with an interesting fact, anecdote, statistic or maxim, for example. A topic sentence might read, for instance, “Beaches are the most popular vacation spots for Americans during the summer.” The sentence should be clear and focused. Sometimes topic sentences may also be used to transition smoothly from the idea in the previous paragraph to the new idea in the next paragraph. Beginning writers might find it helpful to use transition phrases such as "equally important," "second," "in addition to," "likewise," "meanwhile" and "subsequently" to do this.

## The Body Sentences

After the topic sentence, the body of the paragraph must be built. This group of sentences will consist of details that support the claim made in the topic sentence. Depending on the genre of writing, the body of the paragraph should grow progressively narrower and focused. The evidence that is used to support your claim can be personal -- sensory or experiential -- or sourced -- outside research -- and might fall into one or more of these categories: illustrations, examples, facts, analyses, data, statistics, anecdotes, stories or descriptions. Continuing the example of the popular beach vacation for Americans, you might expect to read statistics proving that most Americans do, in fact, travel to the beach in the summer as well as a short anecdote about a trip to the beach.

## The Concluding Sentence

The last sentence in the paragraph should provide closure to the topic before moving on to the next paragraph. This sentence should draw the reader’s focus back to the main point of the paragraph while also bringing all of the elements of the paragraph together. It is important not to introduce a new topic at the end of the paragraph; that should be done using a topic sentence in the next paragraph. An example concluding sentence might read, “It is no surprise that with the relaxing environment, beautiful weather and excellent food that most Americans enjoy vacationing at the beach.”

## Coherence and Unity

After writing a paragraph, you must reread the text to ensure that it has coherence and unity. This means that all of the sentences should work together to advance the main idea presented in the topic sentence. As the writer, you must decide how to best organize your sentences -- topically, chronologically or spatially -- so as to transition from one sentence to the next without jolting your reader. Parallel structures, repetition of key words and elements, transition words and consistency in tense and point of view all aid in making your paragraph coherent and understandable for your reader.