



Paragraph structure

When you're writing for a university assignment, you need to organise your ideas as clearly and logically as possible. Paragraphs are an essential part of the organisation of your ideas.

A paragraph is made up of sentences that are all related to the same point. Each paragraph in a piece of academic writing should have one main point or function, e.g. introducing the argument or purpose of the writing, making a point in the argument, proposing a course of action, or concluding the argument.

Before you can write a paragraph, you need to know what the main points in your essay should be.

Organising your ideas in paragraphs

There are different ways of organising your ideas in paragraphs, depending on the purpose of the paragraph and the kind of text you're writing. But all paragraphs should start with a sentence that signals to the reader what the paragraph is about, and shows a relationship between the paragraph and the text as a whole. This sentence is sometimes called a 'topic sentence'.

The example paragraph below is taken from an essay on second language acquisition in adults and children. It's the first body paragraph after the introduction. The **topic sentence** is in bold, and the right hand column of the table provides an explanation of what each sentence contributes to the paragraph.

Paragraph 1	Comments
(1) Pronunciation is one area of second language acquisition where children seem to have an advantage over adults. (2) Whereas adults normally retain an accent long after they have reached fluency, children usually manage to speak a second language with little or no accent (McLaughlin, 1984, p. 53). (3) This difference has been attributed to biological causes. (4) For example, Lenneberg (1967, cited in McLaughlin, 1984, p. 46) claims that after puberty 'the brain has lost its plasticity'. (5) The result is that children possess a capacity for excellent phonological representation, which adults have lost.	(1) Topic sentence introduces the topic of the paragraph: pronunciation. It also links the point to the essay's overall argument about differences between adults and children in learning a second language. (2) Explanation of the advantage/difference introduced in (1). (3) Summary of (2) and link to (4), which gives an example of evidence from biological research. (5) Summary/conclusion of whole paragraph.

(Example adapted from Inglis, 2007, p. 247).



Try it yourself

The following paragraphs do not have topic sentences. After reading each paragraph, select the most appropriate topic sentence from the options given. The answers can be found at the end of this document.

Paragraph 2

The Federal Government deals with matters such as defence and immigration. State governments deal with matters such as public transport and public education. Local government deals with matters such as provision of garbage services and maintenance of local roads and parks.

Which of the following sentences could function as a topic sentence for this paragraph? Why?

- a. The Federal government is the most important level of government.
- b. Australia has a unique system of government.
- c. There are three levels of government in Australia, with different responsibilities.

Paragraph 3

On the one hand, there are those who believe that soil erosion is linked to ‘...exploitation by national and international elites, rich landowners, large companies and so on [which] push the poor below subsistence level. They are then forced to mine the soil – extracting fertility without restoring it – simply to survive’ (Blaikie, in Harrison, 1996, p. 265). On the other hand are the Neo-Malthusians, who argue that it is population growth that leads to soil erosion in West and Central Africa and South Asia, where increased numbers of people place pressure on marginal areas (Harrison, 1996, p. 265). In this situation, technology is a factor that can help reduce erosion, rather than contribute to it, through the use of conservation techniques.

Which of the following sentences could function as a topic sentence for this paragraph? Why?

- a. There is debate as to the factors which contribute to soil erosion, with arguments being split down ideological lines.
- b. It has been confirmed that population growth contributes to soil erosion and not technology which can actually help reduce erosion.
- c. In many countries population growth has resulted in soil erosion.

(Activity adapted from Inglis, 2007, pp. 247-8).

Paragraph organisation principles

Different ways of organising ideas in a paragraph include:

General to specific

Start with the most general idea in your topic sentence and then use the following sentences to bring in specific examples. Paragraphs 1 and 2 above are both examples of this organising principle.

Problem and solution

Start by stating a problem in the topic sentence and then use the following sentences to explain how the problem might be solved.

Claim and evidence

Present a claim in your topic sentence and then provide evidence in the following sentences.

Claim and counter-claim or counter-argument

Present a claim in your topic sentence that you don't agree with and then present an opposing claim or argument against that claim. This is used when you are trying to argue against an objection that your reader might make to your argument.

Chronological order (time)

Start with the topic or main point in your topic sentence, then introduce events relating to that topic or point in time sequence in the following sentences. This is especially useful when you need to present a historical overview of something.

Most important to least important

Start with the topic or main point in your topic sentence, then introduce supporting points in order of importance in the following sentences.

(Adapted from Inglis, 2007, p. 256).

Examples

The paragraphs below provide further examples of how the sentences in a paragraph relate to each other and contribute to the purpose of the paragraph.

Paragraph 4	Comments
(1) In research on approaches to learning, a distinction is often made between deep learning and surface learning. (2) The basic difference in approaches is that deep learning is an active process whereas surface learning is passive. (3) Active learning involves skills such as planning and relating new information to previously learned information. (4) Surface or passive learners tend to be dependent on teachers and lack organisational skills. (5) The learning strategies of deep learners include looking for main ideas, and reading critically. (6) Surface learners, on the other hand, adopt strategies such as focusing on 'facts' and learning by rote. (7) Although surface learning strategies can be important in some subjects or in some stages of learning, deep learning is more likely to lead to understanding and success in university studies.	(1) Topic sentence signals that the paragraph is going to compare and contrast two kinds of learning: deep and surface learning. The terms 'distinction' and 'between' signal the comparison/contrast purpose of the paragraph. (2) Identification of the main point of contrast: whether the process involved in learning is active or passive. (3) Explanation of active learning. (4) Explanation of passive learning. (5) Description of learning strategies in deep learning. (6) Description of learning strategies in surface learning. Note use of 'On the other hand' to signal contrast. (7) Conclusion acknowledging that both learning approaches can be useful. Note how the writer alternates between deep/active and surface/passive learning in the explanation (sentences 3-6). Note also that no references are used – you should refer to the sources of information to support your point and to maintain academic integrity.

(Example adapted from Inglis, 2007, p. 253).

Paragraph 5	Comments
<p>(1) To understand why some countries have higher birth rates than others it is necessary to appreciate some economic and cultural factors peculiar to those countries. (2) Levels of education and affluence, for example, are known to have an impact because birth rates are usually lower in developed countries than they are in less developed countries. (3) Birth rates are higher in countries where children are a necessary part of the family labour force. (4) Families are more likely to have children if the children are needed to work the farm. (5) This factor may be relevant also to the observation that countries which have higher levels of urbanisation tend to have lower birth rates. (6) Another factor relevant in developed countries seems to be the high cost of educating and raising children. (7) In countries where education is valued and costs are high, families tend to restrict the number of children that they have.</p>	<p>(1) Topic sentence signals that the paragraph is going to explain some of the causes of higher birth rates in some countries than others. The focus will be on economic and cultural factors in those countries. (2) Identification of cause 1: levels of education and affluence. (3) Identification of cause 2: children needed to work for the family. (4) Expansion of (3): more information about cause 2. (5) Identification of cause 3: levels of urbanisation. (6) Identification of cause 4: cost of education and raising children. (7) Expansion of (6): more information about cause 4.</p> <p>Note the use of terms such as 'impact' and 'factor', which help describe the cause and effect relationships.</p>

(Example adapted from Inglis, 2007, p. 255).

Solution to Topic Sentence activity

Paragraph 2: The answer is (c) because the paragraph identifies the three different levels of government in Australia (federal, state, local) and the matters they deal with, i.e. their different responsibilities.

Paragraph 3: The answer is (a) because the paragraph describes the different arguments in the debate about causes of soil erosion. The use of the phrases 'On the one hand' and 'On the other hand' is a clue that two different ways of thinking are being introduced. The writer also uses the term 'Neo-Malthusians', which relates to the 'ideological lines' mentioned in the topic sentence.

More information

→ The PDF [Learning Guides from Adelaide University's Writing Centre](#) include help for introductions and conclusions, and paragraph writing.

References

Inglis, M. (2007). *Unistep. Academic skills guide*. (4th ed.). Sydney, Australia.