

Essay and Paragraph Development Tutorial:

Tutorial #30:
Paragraph Basics
Topic Sentences and Unity

Writing Center

English 800 Center

**YOU DO NOT NEED TO PRINT THIS
TUTORIAL!**

**All notes and exercises should be
done on separate sheets of paper, which
you will bring to your conference with
an instructor in the center.**

**As you work through the tutorial, make sure to
see an instructional aide at the front desk in the
Writing Center or English 800 Lab
if you have any questions or difficulties.**

Paragraph Basics: Topic Sentences and Unity

The major goal of this tutorial is to help you write clear, well-focused paragraphs. You will learn to do this by practicing with a few simple principles and by writing some original paragraphs either for this tutorial or for an essay you are currently working on for your writing class.

It is important to note that the “principles” you will be learning are suggestions, strategies that will help you stay focused when you are in doubt. Professional writers do not always follow these principles (though some should), and as you gain confidence as a writer, you may find that you feel more free to approach paragraphs in a more open-ended way than you are practicing here. However, these principles are useful for college writers who are learning how to write essays.

This tutorial focuses mainly on a type of writing called *expository*—writing that makes points and supports them—because this is the kind of writing students do in most college classes. It is important that you see how this is different from narrative writing because in each type of writing, the paragraphs have different purposes.

Narrative: Telling Stories in Chronological Order

Storytelling, though it is not always easy, comes naturally to most of us. Whenever we talk for a long time, we are usually telling a story about something that happened to us, and we simply tell things in the order they happened. For example, here is a story that Martin told his friend Jose after Martin received a speeding ticket:

So, I was driving my mom’s minivan over to my friend’s house, and then this cop pulled me over and he said that I was driving 95 miles an hour in a school zone. I couldn’t lie of course, since the van was still smoking. So then I said, “But, dude, it’s Saturday! There aren’t any kids in school right now!” And then the cop got really angry, and she wrote me a ticket. Now my mom won’t let me drive the minivan anymore, and now no girl will want to go out with me. Life is so unfair!

Notice that Martin tells the story in the order that things happened:

- First: He was driving his mom’s minivan.
- Second: He was pulled over by a police officer.
- Third: She said he was driving 95 miles an hour in a school zone.
- Fourth: Martin agreed, but tried to argue.
- Finally: Martin got a ticket.

This type of organization is called **chronological order**—telling things in the order that they happened.

Most narrative writing uses some form of chronological order; it tells what happened to the speaker or to someone the speaker is writing about, and it usually describes things in the order that they happened.

What does this have to do with paragraphs?

In narrative writing, a writer will often start a new paragraph when it is time to describe a new point in the story.

For example:

First paragraph: Goldilocks is walking through the woods, minding her own business, but she is getting tired.

Second paragraph: Goldilocks tries to book a room at a Motel 6, but there is no vacancy because there is a convention of bears in town.

Third paragraph: Goldilocks steals one of the bear's cars and races off down the highway in search of a motel with vacancy.

And so on...

The preceding example could keep going, but we all know what happens to Goldilocks. What's important to notice is that the whole story is written in chronological order: the writer tells us what happened in the order that things happened. The paragraphs throughout the story do the same.

Expository Paragraphs: Making Points and Backing Them Up

The term **expository writing** includes paragraphs that

- give information in some other way than telling a story about an event
- try to persuade readers to agree with the writer about a topic, **or**
- explain how something works.

Much of what you read in college, including textbooks in all courses, is expository. Most of the writing you will be asked to do in college is also expository.

The basic principle of expository writing is that you are making points and providing support for them. The sentence that states the main point of an expository essay is the **thesis statement**. It is usually in the introductory paragraph of the essay. The rest of the essay provides support for the thesis.

Paragraphs are a good way to organize your supporting ideas in an essay. When you want to stress a new point, you may begin a new paragraph. For example, Martin, the young man who received a speeding ticket earlier in this tutorial, might decide that he wants to create an opinion essay for his college writing class. In this essay, he wants to convince his readers that people should be allowed to drive as fast as they want on Saturdays. The organization for his essay might look like this:

Introductory Paragraph: Martin might briefly tell the story of getting a speeding ticket, or he might provide some other form of background information, such as points about why fast driving is fun.

Thesis: Martin simply states his case: People should be allowed to drive as fast as they can on Saturday.

First body paragraph: This makes Martin's first major point, that Saturday is supposed to be a day of relaxation and fun. To support this point, Martin may provide details about how most people he knows spend Saturdays.

Second body paragraph: Now Martin makes the point that it is hard to have fun when you have to drive slow, provides support in the form of details about how fun it is to drive fast, and how boring it is to drive slow.

And so on...

Martin can keep going until he runs out of ideas or runs out of space to write them. Also, note that Martin needs a **thesis statement** to help his readers keep his main point in mind.

Principle I. Create topic sentences that make the main point of each of your paragraphs.

One important purpose of expository paragraphs is to make points that support your thesis statement, the sentence that states the main point of your essay.

Readers will find each of your paragraphs clear and easy to follow if you state the main point of the paragraph in a **topic sentence**. All of your topic sentences must offer direct support of some aspect of your thesis.

The topic sentence:

- is a complete sentence that supports the thesis
- is usually the first sentence in the paragraph
- accurately summarizes the main point of the paragraph in one sentence
- is the most general point in the paragraph—the supporting details are more specific.

To see how your thesis statement and topic sentences should work together, review the following example of an essay. In the introductory paragraph, the thesis statement is boldfaced and the topic sentence of each body paragraph is underlined. Also, the introductory and concluding paragraphs typically do not have topic sentences because the purposes of those paragraphs are simply to introduce and conclude the essay.

Example Essay:

Although I'm happy to be in college, college life does have its drawbacks. For one thing, I can see that passing all my classes will require a lot of hard work. In addition, going to college can be expensive. Another unpleasant part of going to school is that I have to miss out on things I would love to do. But perhaps the worst part of attending college is living in the dorms. **In fact, many unwitting freshman eventually discover the many troubles with living in the dorms.**

For one thing, privacy is a very precious commodity. Ever since I was ten, I have had my own room to retreat to whenever I needed to be alone. So it's difficult adjusting to sharing a tiny cubicle with one other person. My roommate always seems to be around. So if I want to listen to the new No Doubt album, I have to ask whether it's okay first. But if she's around, I usually can't enjoy the music because I know that she only likes hip hop and shows her resentment and judgment of my taste in music.

Another problem with living in the dorms is that such close quarters can always result in friction between roommates especially if personality clashes exist. For instance, my roommate is a big slob while I'm known as compulsively neat. So I am so tired of having to step over her piles of clothes littering the floor and hunting for my books and papers among her empty soda bottles, banana peels, and candy wrappers that are always scattered all over our desk. I'm fed up with spending any time or energy arguing with her about having to clean up her messes when I could be using this valuable time getting schoolwork done.

Equally as bad as sharing a room with a sloppy roommate is living in a dorm with paper-thin walls through which we can hear everything going on in adjacent rooms. It always seems to be before a big test or exam that my neighbors on one side always manage to turn up their music after midnight, have all-night noisy and romantic interludes, or have a loud argument at the strangest times. Begging them for quiet and even banging on their walls don't seem to help much. And unfortunately for me, the next morning my frustration and growing anger make it more difficult for me to concentrate on anything in class.

Worst of all, especially for someone who enjoys good food, is the experience of eating in the dining halls. First of all, the lines are usually so long before class that I usually end up not eating any breakfast. And when I do wait in line, the waits are definitely not worth it. It is difficult

for me to even order the stale, dry sandwiches, the soggy and wilted salads, and the tasteless and sometime unidentifiable main courses. If I want to have a good meal, I end up having to go off campus.

Yet despite all the problems with living in the dorms, I still feel that I am accomplishing something worthwhile going to school. My only hope is that when I am a junior, I will be able to find a small off-campus apartment of my own. In the meantime, I guess I just have to put up with the myriad troubles with living in a dorm and pray that in the upcoming semester, my fellow dormies don't like to party too much.

Exercise 1

Instructions: Recall that the most general point in a body paragraph is the topic sentence while the supporting details are more specific. This exercise will give you some practice in noticing the difference between general and specific statements. On a separate sheet of paper, for each numbered item, write out the sentence that you believe is *the most general statement*.

1.
 - A. For example, in 1986, San Francisco 49ers quarterback Joe Montana suffered a back injury that was so severe that doctors suggested he retire.
 - B. Many pro football players are sidelined due to injuries each year, and some experience problems long after they stop playing.
 - C. American football is an aggressive contact sport.
 - D. Montana also missed the entire 1991 season after getting hit by defensive linebacker Leonard Marshall in a 1990 game.
 - E. Though fatalities are rare, injuries sustained by players are often severe.
 - F. While Montana is apparently healthy since retirement, other players are not so lucky.
2.
 - A. Ballet movements such as the turnout of the hips and rising on the toes are beyond the natural range of human movement and place stress on the body when not performed correctly.
 - B. Ballet is an extremely difficult form of dance that may lead to serious injuries.
 - C. Eighty percent of professional ballet dancers will be injured in some way during their careers; 50 percent of dancers from large companies and 40 percent from small companies will miss performances due to injury.

- D. Though many people don't think of dancing as dangerous, professional and amateur dancers get hurt every year.
- E. The ballet practice of bending one's knees deeply after landing each jump may seem simple, but failing to do so may result in shin splints or knee injuries, all of which occur among professional dancers.
- F. Amateur dancers who attempt professional moves without proper training are also likely to be injured.
- G. My friend Sally was severely injured while attempting to pole dance on an electric fence, but this type of injury is probably rare.

3.

- A. One activity that rarely leads to injury is watching TV.
- B. Although I once bruised my thumb when pounding the remote control too aggressively, I don't think this kind of injury is very common or very serious.
- C. When you play cards in the safety of your living room, you do risk getting a paper cut.
- D. The best way to avoid playing-card paper cuts is to sand the cards so that the edges are smooth.
- E. Given how dangerous the world is, you are probably most safe if you just stay home.
- F. You may also risk dropping a soda can or beer bottle on your toes, and due to this risk it is probably wise to wear solid-top shoes at home.
- G. Reading books might be dangerous, because some books teach dangerous things or might make you want to go out of the house and be around other people.
- H. Stick to TV shows that portray characters doing safe things, like singing on American Idol, so that you will not be tempted to engage in risky behavior.

Note that each sentence that you have written would probably make the best topic sentence for a paragraph on the topic that all of the other sentences discuss.

Exercise 2

Instructions: This exercise should help you to see the importance of using topic sentences to make your main point. Read the following two paragraphs, and on a separate sheet of paper answer the questions that follow.

Paragraph A

Overpopulation was a major worry for many people during the late 1960's and throughout the 1970's. During that time, Paul Ehrlich wrote *The Population Bomb*, a book that described how people were reproducing at rates that could not be sustained—if population growth continued on such a scale, Ehrlich claimed that we would see an epidemic of starvation. In spite of this depressing premise, the book was a major bestseller and Ehrlich was invited on entertainment programs such as *The Tonight Show* to discuss his work. Partially as a result of Ehrlich's popularity, thousands of people in the U.S. and other countries advocated for increased birth control and awareness of the problem.

What is the main point of this paragraph?

Paragraph B

Games have taught young people different life skills in a fun way. In the past, games such as *Risk*, *Monopoly*, and *Life* gave families a way to spend time and have fun together, but they also taught young people about the challenges of living in the real world. *Monopoly*, by far the most popular, required players to pretend to do things that may not seem like fun—like going to the bank—but in the context of competing against friends or other family members, children were not likely to think of these things as anything but fun. The even more popular video games of today also sometimes teach about difficult subjects. In role-playing video games, players learn to plot strategies and make complex plans.

What is the main point of this paragraph?

Exercise 3

Instructions: Another way to understand and learn about how to use topic sentences is to look at a paragraph that lacks a topic sentence and create one for it. For each of the following paragraphs, on a separate sheet of paper create an accurate topic sentence that states the main point.

1. _____

During the first week of class, many students are nervous about their new teachers' expectations. It does not help that students may get lost on a big, unfamiliar campus and struggle to find their classes. Students may also worry about making new friends during the first week of college, especially if they have moved far away from home to go to school in a new environment. As if all this is not enough, students have to deal with challenges like parking their cars far away from campus on the first day, moving into dorms with new roommates shortly before classes start, and even trying to add classes when many are full. All in all, students do survive the first week of college, but it is not always a fun experience.

2. _____

In his carefully researched book about SUVs, *Taken for a Ride*, author Keith Bradsher cites market research gathered by advertising agencies that supports this claim. SUV owners are typically "insecure and vain. They are frequently nervous about their marriages and uncomfortable about parenthood. They often lack confidence in their driving skills. Above all, they are apt to be self-centered and self-absorbed, with little interest in their neighbors and communities; they seldom go to church and have limited interest in doing volunteer work to help others." As one reviewer of Bradshaw's book put it, "Unlike any other vehicle before it, the SUV is the car of choice for the nation's most self-centered people."

3. _____

The lyrics of most popular songs from the 1920s, '30s and '40s are about love and are clear and easy to understand. Think of Cole Porter's lines "Every time we say goodbye, I die a little. Every time we say goodbye, I wonder why a little." By the late 1960s, songwriters seemed to decide that making sense was no longer a priority. Consider Bob Dylan's immortal lines "Your dancing child with the Chinese suit. He spoke to me, and I took his flute. Now, I wasn't very cute to him, was I?" Can anyone figure out what exactly Bob is talking about here? Could Bob figure it out? Better yet, popular singer Michael Stipe sang these lines in the early 1990s: "Swan, swan, hummingbird what noisy cats are we. Long, long time ago, girl and dog he bore his cross." Excuse me? And today, some songwriters just run words together. Consider the Black Eyed Peas' "Lady Lumps," a song described by one reviewer as "so awful it hurts the mind:" "I mix your milk with my cocoa puff, Milky, milky cocoa, Mix your milk with my cocoa puff." Can we just forget about words and go back to grunting? Until then, I'll stick with my grandma's record collection.

4. _____

Among the most noteworthy of the new celebrities is Paris Hilton, who is famous for doing absolutely nothing that any respectable parent would want his or her daughter doing. She can't really sing, nor can she dance, nor can she do much of anything, but she's famous! She also has a friend, Nicole Richie, who is almost as famous and has also done next to nothing that anyone considers admirable. There are also celebrities who once accomplished things that required some actual talent, but who no longer do much more than provide material for trashy gossip magazines. Britney Spears is the queen of this group, but Lindsay Lohan sometimes competes with her for status as fodder for gossip. These celebrities may one day regain their status as actual talents, but for now, they are famous mainly for their apparent lack of intelligence.

5. _____

While the health effects of short-term marijuana use seem to be minor, there are serious consequences to long-term heavy use, according to many studies. In July 2007, British medical journal *The Lancet* published a study that indicates that cannabis users have, on average, a 41% greater risk of developing psychosis than non-users. However, these cases mostly occurred in users with family histories of mental illness. Most of the non-medical public seems to agree that the main side effect of marijuana use is a tolerance, even preference, for long, sloppy guitar solos and incoherent "freestyle" raps. Frequent marijuana use also seems to encourage young men to make bad fashion choices, though most young men seem to do this regardless of their drug histories.

6. _____

A Pew Research Center poll of 109 leading historians found that 61 percent of them rank George W. Bush as "worst ever" among U.S. presidents. Bush's key competition comes from 15th president James Buchanan, but a further 2 percent of the sample puts Bush right behind Buchanan as runner-up for "worst ever." A total of 96 percent of the respondents place the Bush presidency in the bottom tier of American presidencies. And was his presidency a success or failure? On that score the numbers are still more resounding: 98 percent label it a "failure."

Adapted from Scott Horton at Harpers.com

7. _____

Specifically, some studies found that listening to music could improve performance on certain intelligence tests given immediately after the listening session. Because of these results, the U.S. Congress was passing resolutions, and the governor of Georgia appropriated funds to buy a Mozart CD for every newborn baby in Georgia. Most scientists like myself found themselves in an uncomfortable position. Although we do believe that music can enhance thinking, and although we

would all like to see more government funding for music programs, the actual study that claimed Mozart made you smarter contained many serious flaws. The experiment showed that listening to music made a slight difference but only when compared to doing nothing. When compared to any other form of mental stimulation like hearing a book on tape or reading, there was no advantage for music listening.

Adapted from *This is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession* by Daniel J. Levitin

8. _____

Many students find themselves having to take “remedial” or developmental classes in English and Math when enrolled in college. The ratio of students enrolled in these classes may be as high as 70-80 percent at some colleges. Even students who are not enrolled in these classes often complain that high school has not prepared them well for college work. First-year students in college writing classes, for example, learn that the essay formats they were taught to follow in high school are not often used in college, while students in science classes find that they are expected to do more hands-on work in experiments. And many students discover that the college workload can be unpredictable, but that some classes require far more studying, reading, and writing than they are used to. This lack of preparation may explain the high rate of college dropouts.

9. _____

While the public is well aware that some professional athletes take steroids and other performance enhancing substances, why don't we ask what keeps those cheerleaders so perky? I know that the police would at least stop and talk to me if I walked around smiling like that, for that long, or jumping up and down as cheerleaders do. Think also about the mascots of most sports teams. Surely someone besides me has noticed that Brutus the Buckeye, Ohio State's beloved mascot, has big, red eyes. I don't think they got that way naturally. And what about the fans? I suspect the guys wearing nothing but letters on their bare chests are staying warm with something other than herbal tea. The only solution is to start drug testing of everyone who gets near any sports stadium.

10. _____

Millions of children looked up to Barney, the Dinosaur, for support and love and as a model for “how to be a friend.” No doubt this is why the line around the cemetery was so long. Thousands of people wept as they sang “I Love You, You Love Me” over the gravesite. Although some found him irritating, it is indeed tragic that the nation has lost Barney. If only he hadn't used his cell phone while driving, Barney, the Dinosaur, would still be with us.

Principle II: Stay focused in paragraphs by sticking to the main point, as stated in the topic sentence.

Readers can become confused if your paragraph suddenly shifts focus. For example, if your topic sentence makes the point that microwave ovens don't cause cancer, it is important to stay on the subject of microwave ovens and cancer rather than suddenly discussing how smoking cigarettes is related to cancer.

Body paragraphs should supply details and explanations related to their main points or topic sentences. When students go "off topic" in a paragraph, it is often because they are trying to say too much in one paragraph. **Remember, when you have something new to say, you should start a new paragraph.**

It is not a good idea to plan ahead how many paragraphs you will write before you actually start your essay. This is because as you are thinking and writing your essay, you will come up with new ideas and will then decide when a new paragraph should begin.

Exercise 4

Instructions: Identify anywhere in the following paragraphs where the writer goes “off topic” by making a statement that does not fit with the topic sentence. For each paragraph below, on a separate sheet of paper, write out any sentence that does not fit in the paragraph.

1. Whitman’s book *Leaves of Grass* gave rise to the expression “banned in Boston,” but it was not banned there for long. By 1883, both the Boston and the Cambridge public libraries had placed the book on the open shelves. The movie *Boogie Nights* was also controversial. Because it was now available to many readers, *Leaves of Grass* found a new audience including anarchist Emma Goldman. For Goldman, Whitman was one of the three American writers—the others being Emerson and Thoreau—who bridged the gap between her Russian-bred radicalism and the anarchist side of the American tradition.

Adapted from *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* by Susan Jacoby

2. Augustine can be called the founder of the Western spirit. We can call him this because no other theologian, aside from St. Paul, has been more influential in the West. We know him more intimately than any other thinker of antiquity, largely because of his *Confessions*, the eloquent and passionate book about his discovery of God. Another important thinker is Plato. In this book, Augustine describes how he came to see God as essential to humanity.

Adapted from *A History of God: The 4,000 Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* by Karen Armstrong

3. In their 1997 book, *Talking About Leaving: Why Undergraduates Leave the Sciences*, Seymour and Hewitt present the results of a three-year study of more than 450 science and engineering students. English is not as demanding a major as science. The researchers gathered the data on the students using interviews and focus groups, which were divided equally between men and women. Some of these men and women chose to stay in science and engineering, but many, particularly women, chose to transfer to other fields.

Adapted from *Who’s Afraid of Marie Curie? The Challenges Facing Women in Science and Technology* by Linely Erin Hall

4. Some people believe that we live in the worst of times, that the horrors we in the 20th century have endured—or at least have heard and read about—are the worst in human history. But is it really true that the two world wars, the terror famines, the Gulag, and the extermination camps of the 20th century were worse than all other horrors in history? The United States is currently considering legislation to address the serious problems with global warming. Should we not remember that the Thirty Years War of the 17th century resulted in the death of a third of the population of Germany? During this war alone, fields were abandoned, corpses rotted by the roadside, villages were destroyed, and entire towns were put to death.

Adapted from *Our Culture, What’s Left of It* by Theodore Dalrymple

5. For the poor in many countries, dogs were the best transport animals they could have. Dogs were easy to obtain, small enough to keep in a family’s living quarters, and could survive on whatever scraps of food might be available. On the other hand, cats are smelly, in part because they miss the litter box. In addition to being inexpensive to keep, dogs were good guards, good at hauling goods, and good companions.

Adapted from *The Intelligence of Dogs* by Stanley Coren

Exercise 5

Instructions:

1. What is the main point of an essay?
2. In relation to the thesis statement of an essay, what should topic sentences of body paragraphs do?
3. In relation to the rest of the sentences in a body paragraph, what does the topic sentence do?
4. When should you start a new paragraph in an essay?
5. How do you stay focused in body paragraphs?
6. Look back at the principles and exercises in this tutorial and make notes on a separate sheet of paper. You will bring these notes and the essay to your conference.
7. Make an appointment for a conference with an instructor in the Writing Center (18-104) or English 800 Center (18-102). To make this appointment, stop by the Centers or call (650) 574-6436. During this appointment, the professor will make sure you understand the concepts covered in this tutorial, answer any questions that you might have, review your answers to these exercises, and check to see if you can incorporate the skill into your writing.

Reminder:

For this appointment, bring

- any notes about the tutorial that you have taken
- your completed tutorial exercises
- and the essay