

Writing Effective Paragraphs

Paragraphs are a critical unit of discourse in writing. This handout gives an overview of paragraphs in English academic writing with a focus on **argumentative body paragraphs**.

Why are paragraphs so important?

Readers rely on paragraphs to understand and process texts. Papers without well-developed paragraphs of a meaningful length are difficult to read and often incoherent. Focused, well-written paragraphs on the other hand

- discuss and develop a **single controlling idea**;
- thus signaling to the reader where **one idea begins and another ends**
- and creating **order, logic, and cohesion**.

How long should a paragraph be?

A paragraph's length should never be determined solely by the number of lines or the space they take up on a page. Paragraphs should be as long as they need to be in order **to make a single, coherent point**. Thus;

- A paragraph is **too short** if its main idea is underdeveloped (e.g., if there is not enough evidence to support its claim, or if the evidence has not been explained well enough);
- It is **too long** if it makes more than one point or has more than one significant idea.

Here is a rule of thumb: if your paragraph is longer than a page, it likely has more than one idea and is thus too long; if your paragraph is shorter than 3 or 4 lines, its idea is likely underdeveloped and is thus too short. Shoot for paragraphs that take up $\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{3}{4}$ of a page.

Kinds of paragraphs

Every one of your paragraphs should **serve a clear purpose** to your argument; that purpose will determine each paragraph's internal structure as well as its logical position in the paper. These purposes may include:

- Introducing the paper's topic and stating its central argument,
- reviewing relevant literature,
- establishing theoretical/methodological, historical, or biographical context,
- arguing a supporting claim by analyzing, interpreting, or evaluating an object of study (data, text, etc.),
- transitioning between elements of your argument,
- presenting/refuting a counterargument, and
- concluding your paper.



Elements of an Argumentative Body Paragraph

Most of the paragraphs you write for a paper will be its argumentative body paragraphs, which substantiate a single claim in support of your thesis statement. In order to fully elaborate a body paragraph's internal argument and integrate it cohesively into the rest of your paper, you will need to develop the following elements:

Topic sentence	A sentence that states the main argumentative point, or claim , of the paragraph. The rest of the paragraph supports and develops this claim.
Transitions	Sentences or phrases that connect the ideas in the paragraph to other ideas in the paper. Transitions might also include signposts , which signal to the reader how a paragraph fits in to the paper's larger structure.
Evidence	Material cited in support of the paragraph's main idea: quotations, summary, data, examples, testimony, etc.
Analysis	Explanation of how a paragraph's evidence supports its claims. Evidence cannot stand alone and must be <i>analyzed, interpreted, evaluated, and/or elaborated</i> .
Internal connectors	Words that link ideas <i>within</i> a paragraph and create internal cohesion: therefore, thus, in any case, in other words, however, but, indeed, etc.
Conclusion	The final sentence of the paragraph that sums up its argument and states its <i>evolved</i> claim.

Some of these elements do not necessarily need to be in this order; for example, paragraphs typically feature transitions both at the beginning and the end, and internal connectors could be placed anywhere. Topic sentences, however, should be one of the first sentences of a paragraph, and the conclusion should end the paragraph. The pattern **claim – evidence – analysis** is very common in English academic writing but is by no means the *only* way to structure your paragraph's argument.



Annotated Example of an Argumentative Body Paragraph

The paragraph below was taken from a student essay titled “Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Troubled Attitude Toward Nonviolent Resistance” by Lisa Wang (Harvard College), written for a history class.

Signpost that signals structure to reader

Before we ask why Martin Luther King, Jr. shifted his stance on nonviolence, let’s take a closer look at his troubled attitude toward it. In the 1960s, King reversed his original vision on race relations from a horizontal connection focused on reciprocity, brotherly love, and redemption to a more vertical, contractual, and antagonistic relationship. Despite King’s earlier prostrations for *agape*, or brotherly love, to define the African American’s relationship to the prevailing culture of the United States, the term is not mentioned in his 1960s writings. Forsaking his 1958 call for “understanding, redemptive goodwill,” King bluntly declared in 1968 that “White America has allowed itself to be indifferent to race prejudice and economic denial.” This marks an important shift in King’s thinking. He previously had placed the burden of change on African Americans, and his writings reflected the belief that African Americans needed to forgive, love and exist peacefully with the prevailing culture of America. In 1958, King writes: “*Agape* is not a weak, passive love. It is love in action. *Agape* is love seeking to preserve and create community. It is insistence on community even when one seeks to break it...It is a willingness to forgive, not seven times, but seventy times seven to restore community.” By 1968, however, he begins to transfer that sense of agency to whites. By referring to “[t]he future [that Americans] are asked to inaugurate...To end poverty [and] extirpate prejudice” in 1968, King attached important conditions to a race relationship that he previously approached with the language of unconditional love. King’s change in language here can be described as a shift from a focus on religious goodwill and cohabitation to a more contractual obligation. The shift in King’s thinking is clear: *agape* was beginning to fade as a reality by the late 1960s.

Points of elaboration and **development** of the paragraph’s central claim

Connectors that create cohesion

Topic sentence states the **claim** controlling the direction of the paragraph

Evidence supporting the paragraph’s claim

These sentences also **interpret** the evidence, **analyzing** its significance for readers

A satisfying **conclusion** that restates the paragraph’s claim in an evolved form

Works consulted:

University of Wisconsin Madison Writing Center handout on “Paragraphing,” <https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook>.

Wang, Lisa: “Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Troubled Attitude Toward Nonviolent Resistance.” <https://www.harvardwrites.com/>.

Wepler, Ryan: “Body Paragraphs,” a handout from the Yale University Writing Center. 2013.

<https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/undergraduates/writing-handouts-and-model-papers/writing-handouts>.



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