Organization:

Paragraphs
## Table of Contents

The following information is meant as a guide/table of contents to the rest of this module on paragraph organization. On this page, you will see the basic components of a paragraph with a brief description of each one. You will also find the page numbers that correspond to this component. You will find exercises for each component on the pages listed.

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Writing Center Module: Organizing Paragraphs

Introduction to the Paragraph: A Holistic View

What is a paragraph? According to Odyssey, “A paragraph is a series of sentences that work together to develop main idea. Paragraphs vary in length, depending on the point you are trying to make. Generally they are between five and ten sentences long” (36).

What is the purpose of the paragraph? Paragraphs can stand alone as pieces that communicate to an audience, or they can be part of a larger work such as an essay that communicates to an audience. Most often, paragraphs will be part of a larger work such as an essay or report, and their purpose is to help inform the reader of the larger point that the paper is making.

Paragraphs can also be seen as small versions of an entire paper because the basic building blocks of an essay can also be found in a paragraph. For example, where a paper needs a main point, so too does a paragraph. Where a paper needs to be organized, so too does a paragraph.

What are the main components of a paragraph?

- **Topic Sentence:** This sentence provides the main topic of the paragraph. It informs the reader of what will be said in the paragraph. In addition, the topic sentence should provide some opinion or stance about that topic.
- **Supporting Details:** The supporting details can be facts, examples, statistics, stories, quotes, descriptions, or any other material that backs up and illustrates the topic sentence. This will comprise the majority of your paragraph. It is the “meat” of your paragraph.
- **Analysis/Commentary:** Analysis or commentary provides the explanation of how the support illustrates or explains the topic sentence. While many writers think that this connection is obvious and don’t feel the need to state it, many readers can be left confused when commentary is omitted. Writers always need to provide some explanation of their support.
- **Organization:** Organization can include several things. It can include making sure that sentences stay to one idea. It can include making sure that transitions are between ideas. It can include arranging your ideas in various organizational styles or structures such as narrative structure or descriptive structure.

Note that organizational patterns for both paragraphs and papers differ in different countries. For example, Americans like to have an explicit point stated at the beginning of an essay or paragraph, and they expect this point to control the meaning of the rest of the written piece. Japanese expect a more circular form of writing in which the primary point is not stated explicitly but rather hinted at throughout the written piece. Therefore, be mindful of the fact that you are learning an American organizational structure here, but that is not the only structure available or accepted in the world.
Introduction to the Paragraph:
A Holistic View

You try! Read the following paragraph. Then highlight each component (topic sentence, support, and commentary) in different colored pens. Then answer the questions that follow regarding the organizational structure of the paragraph.

A sunset two years ago at Horseneck Beach was the most beautiful sight I have ever seen. During most of the day, the sky was full of clouds, but the temperature was in the 80s, so it was still comfortable. At about 6:00 p.m., just after I had packed up all my stuff, the sky cleared completely. Instead of heading home, I decided to take a walk to the end of the beach. As I reached the point where the Westport River flows into the bay, I looked out across the bay to see a beautiful rose-colored sun. For the next twenty minutes I watched as the softly glowing sun seemed to sink into the water. I had never seen anything so wonderful, and I probably never will again (Odyssey 36).

1. Does the paragraph stay to one topic? If so, what is that topic?

2. Does the paragraph provide words to link ideas in different sentences? If so, what are those words?

3. What structure does this paragraph seem to illustrate? (Select one below)
   - Argue a point?
   - Describe a scene?
   - Tell a story of an experience?
Finding a Focused Topic

**What is a focused topic?** Paragraphs should be 5-7 sentences in length, so a writer needs to select a focused topic that is succinct enough to fully discuss within the space of 5-7 sentences. For example, the following topic sentence would be too broad for a paragraph. *The media can be harmful.* Since many different aspects of the media exist (radio, TV, advertisements, etc.), one paragraph is not sufficient to discuss them all. This sentence would need to be focused on one type of media in order to be useful for a topic of a paragraph.

**What is wrong with having a broad topic?** When writers choose a topic that is too broad, they will have a weak paragraph because it will either be too superficial and not well developed or be incoherent and not stay to one topic.
Finding a Focused Topic

You Try! Identify which of the following topics are too broad for a paragraph. Then rewrite those that you think need to be narrowed by providing a sub-topic that is more appropriate to talk about in 5-7 sentences.

1. The media
2. Computers
3. Sports
4. The weather
5. My childhood
6. The President of the US
7. Traveling
8. Music
9. Reality TV Shows
10. Careers
Finding a Focused Topic

Application: Now go to a piece of your own writing and select a paragraph within that writing. In the margins next to the paragraph, summarize the paragraph in one word. In other words, what is the one topic you are talking about in this paragraph? Then look closely at that word and answer the following questions.

- What are some sub-topics of this idea?

- Given your answer for the previous question, do you think your topic for your paragraph is focused enough?

- If not, how might you revise your paragraph to be more focused?

- Repeat for each paragraph in your paper.
Writing the Topic Sentence

**What is a topic sentence?** A topic sentence is one sentence that provides for the reader the topic of the paragraph as well as the writer’s stance/opinion/argument about that topic. Usually a topic sentence will provide only one topic, but in some cases it may provide two topics. For example, a comparison contrast paragraph would need two topics to compare or contrast.

\[ \text{Topic Sentence} = \text{Topic} + \text{Opinion/Argument/Stance about topic} \]

**How is the topic sentence related to organization?** A topic sentence should control the content of the entire paragraph. Each sentence in your paragraph should relate to the topic sentence. In addition, the topic of the paragraph is also related to the organizational structure of the paragraph. For example, if you are writing a narrative paragraph, you will need a topic that is appropriate to that structure.

**How can I tell if my topic sentence controls the content of my paragraph?** Try turning your topic sentence into a question. The rest of your paragraph should answer the question formed when you convert your topic sentence into a question. If the rest of your paragraph doesn’t answer this question, your topic sentence most likely doesn’t fit the content of your paragraph or the content doesn’t fit the topic sentence.
Writing Center Module: Organizing Paragraphs

Writing the Topic Sentence

You Try! Circle the topic and underline the opinion/argument/stance in the following sentences. This will give you practice identifying the parts of a topic sentence.

1. I’ve developed a system for buying groceries that saves me time and money.
   - Topic = ________________________________
   - Opinion/stance/argument = ________________________________

2. Some owners treat their pets like people.
   - Topic = ________________________________
   - Opinion/stance/argument = ________________________________

3. Insufficient parking is a serious problem for students and faculty at Green River Community College.
   - Topic = ________________________________
   - Opinion/stance/argument = ________________________________

4. Dark and rainy days are the number one cause of depression in the Pacific Northwest.
   - Topic = ________________________________
   - Opinion/stance/argument = ________________________________

5. The Dell computer is a better buy than is the Gateway computer.
   - Topic = ________________________________
   - Opinion/stance/argument = ________________________________
You Try! Find the topic sentence in the following three paragraphs. Remember that topic sentences often come at the beginning of a paragraph, but not always. Sometimes they come in the middle or at the end. Use the questions that follow each paragraph to double-check your answer.

1. A car is stolen somewhere in this country every thirty-seven seconds. Despite this fact, you can use a few simple precautions to prevent theft. You can avoid tempting thieves by locking all valuables in the trunk or glove compartment. Also, you can discourage thieves with tow trucks by parking in the middle of a block on a busy, well-lit street. Lastly, don’t forget the obvious precaution of locking the car and taking your keys – even if you’re stopping for just a minute. One out of every five stolen cars was left unlocked with the keys in the ignition.

**Topic Sentence:**

**Turn that sentence into a question:**

**Does the rest of the paragraph answer this question?**

(Remember, if it doesn’t, you probably chose the wrong topic sentence.)
2. Have you ever read an entire page of something only to turn to the next page and realize you have no idea of what you just read? Such absent-minded reading is something we all do at one time or another. Luckily, there are ways to conquer this habit of reading on automatic pilot. Highlighting passages — underlining or using a highlighter pen — is one way to involve yourself more in the reading process. Another, more unusual way to focus your attention on what you’re reading is to read while standing. To improve his concentration, John F. Kennedy often read while standing at a lectern.

**Topic Sentence:**

**Turn that sentence into a question:**

**Does the rest of the paragraph answer this question?**

(Remember, if it doesn’t, you probably chose the wrong topic sentence.)
3. Small animals can eat more in relation to their own size than large animals do. For instance, a field mouse eats as much as its own body weight every day. That is, a one-ounce mouse will eat one ounce of food a day, or 100 percent of its body weight. However, an elephant that may weigh twelve thousand pounds will eat about six hundred pounds of food a day. As astounding an amount of food as that is to eat, it is still only five percent of the elephant’s body weight.

**Topic Sentence:**

**Turn that sentence into a question:**

**Does the rest of the paragraph answer this question?**

(Remember, if it doesn’t, you probably chose the wrong topic sentence.)
Writing Center Module: Organizing Paragraphs

Writing the Topic Sentence

**Application:** Go to a piece of your own writing. Looking at the body paragraphs of an essay that you have written, highlight the topic sentence in each paragraph. Then answer the following questions. Repeat this for each paragraph in your paper.

1. What is the topic in your topic sentence?
2. What is the opinion/argument/stance in your topic sentence?
3. Does each sentence in your paragraph stay to the topic you state in your topic sentence?
   (Remember to use the technique of converting the topic sentence into a question in order to check your work.) Note those that don’t.
4. Where does your topic sentence come in your paragraph? Is it clear to the reader?
Supporting Details

What can one use as support in a paragraph? Support can take many forms. In some paragraphs, support is a story. In other paragraphs, support can be facts, statistics, or data. In other paragraphs, support may be the steps in a process. Therefore, when determining what to use as support, you need to ask yourself some questions.

- **What type of paragraph are you constructing?** If you are constructing a narrative paragraph, for example, you will need to use details that tell a story. If you are constructing an argumentative paragraph, you need to use details like facts, quotes, and statistics that back up your claim.

- **What does your topic sentence say?** Your support needs to back up your topic sentence, so ultimately your support needs to address what is said in your topic sentence.

How does support connect to organization? Support and organization connect to one another in several ways.

- **Supporting points must match the structure of the paragraph:** As stated earlier in this page, the type of support you use in a paragraph needs to match the type of paragraph you are writing. If you have chosen to organize your paragraph in comparison contrast structure, you need to include support that allows you to do this.

- **Support must all match the topic sentence:** Each sentence in your paragraph must go with every other sentence and ultimately with the topic sentence.

- **Support needs to be consistent in amount:** If you provide minor points for one supporting point, you need to do so for each point. You don’t want to provide a lot of supporting evidence for one point and not do the same for other points within the paragraph.
Supporting Details

You Try! In each of the following two paragraphs, the topic sentence is underlined. You need to identify the supporting points for that topic sentence. Then answer the questions following each paragraph that ask about the support you highlighted.

1. My girlfriend Elise has some annoying habits. For instance, she never lets me finish a sentence. Whenever I start to say something, Elise jumps in with her own idea or with what she thinks I am about to say. She also likes red clothes. I bought her a red sweater for her birthday, and she loved it! In another instance, she likes to plan too far ahead. On Monday, she wants to know exactly what we’ll be doing on Saturday night. I’m more spontaneous and like to wait until Friday or Saturday to decide. In addition, she worries too much. For example, she worries when I am late for school. She also worries when I have a cold. She is afraid it may turn into pneumonia. Finally, we like to go to the movies together. Action flicks are our favorite. Elise is clearly a talker, a planner, and a worrier, but these are all minor flaws. She isn’t perfect, but she is perfect for me.

➢ Is the support consistent in amount? (For each major point, has the author provided a minor supporting idea? Has the author been consistent in doing this throughout?)

➢ Does each supporting sentence in the paragraph go with the topic sentence and the sentences around it? Note any that don’t seem to belong and explain why.
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(cont.)

2. **My family is not like the families I see on television.** For example, television families eat cereal for breakfast, or they eat full meals of bacon, eggs, and toast. My brother eats cookies for breakfast, and my father eats leftovers from last night’s dinner. On television, children spill food on the floor, and their mothers smile and clean up the mess with a paper towel. The best paper towel that seems to work for this is Bounty. Bounty is really strong and seems to pass all kinds of tests. It is the type of towel I would buy if given the chance. When my brother spills some food on the floor, the dog licks it up before anyone can clean it up. In addition, television families are always busy. They are always playing sports or cooking or rushing to school or cleaning the bathroom. No one on television ever sleeps in an old chair in the front of the television or lounges around on the bed. I like to lounge around on the bed. It’s my favorite thing to do, especially when I’m supposed to go to school. It’s too bad I can’t do that more often!

➢ **Is the support consistent in amount?** (For each major point, has the author provided a minor supporting idea? Has the author been consistent in doing this throughout?)

➢ **Does each supporting sentence in the paragraph go with the topic sentence and the sentences around it?** Note any that don’t seem to belong and explain why.
Supporting Details

**Application:** Go to a paragraph of your own writing. Underline the topic sentence and then highlight the supporting points within one paragraph. Then answer the following questions regarding the support. Repeat this for several of your paragraphs.

1. **Is the support consistent in amount?** (For each major point, have you provided a minor supporting idea? Have you been consistent in doing this throughout?)

   [Blank lines for answers]

2. **Does each supporting sentence in the paragraph go with the topic sentence and the sentences around it?** Note any that don’t seem to belong and explain why.

   [Blank lines for answers]
Application: Complete a backwards outline for your paragraph. A backwards outline asks you to outline a paragraph that you have already written. You do this by writing key words or short summaries of sentences in outline form. This technique allows you to see which ideas might not fit with the overall paragraph by breaking down the overall paragraph into a more succinct and visible format.

You may use the following form for your outline, or you may write one on your own. Just make sure to identify in your outline your topic sentence and major/minor supporting details.

I. Topic Sentence:

A. Major Supporting Detail #1:

   a. Minor Supporting Detail for #1:
   b. Minor Supporting Detail for #1:

B. Major Supporting Detail #2:

   a. Minor Supporting Detail for #2:
   b. Minor Supporting Detail for #2:

C. Major Supporting Detail #3:

   a. Minor Supporting Detail for #3:
   b. Minor Supporting Detail for #3:
Different Organizational Structures

What are some different organizational structures for paragraphs? There are numerous ways to organize your ideas in your paragraphs. For a comprehensive review, refer to textbooks such as Odyssey or Steps in Composition. Both of these texts devote entire chapters to distinct types of organizational structures. This module will introduce you to several different types of structures that you will likely use most frequently.

- Descriptive structure

- Comparison/contrast structure

- Argumentative structure.
Different Organizational Structures:
Description

➢ Descriptive Paragraph:
  o The purpose of the descriptive structure is to allow a writer to describe a person, place, or thing as it is fixed in time. It’s important to note that for the descriptive structure, a writer shouldn’t write about process or chronological order. There is no movement in time or action within a descriptive paragraph. The purpose is to paint a picture with words – a picture that doesn’t move unless it describes a behavior.

  o The supporting details of the paragraph itself usually include vivid sensory details (taste, smell, sound, etc.). For example, if you were describing a spaghetti dinner, you would describe it in terms of how it smelled, tasted, felt on your tongue, etc. However, details of a descriptive paragraph can also focus on spatial aspects of the thing being described. For example, if you were describing a car, you may describe it from top to bottom or from inside to outside.

  o The organizational structure of the paragraph should follow a logical pattern of either sensory details or spatial order. If you are describing a spaghetti dinner, for example, describe the way it smells in one or two sentences and then move onto the way it looks. Don’t jump back and forth between how it smells to how it looks and then back to how it smells again. Keep details about one aspect of the topic together. Similarly, if you are describing something as it exists in space (spatial order), move logically through space. For example, if you begin by describing the outside of your car, complete all of the details regarding the outside before moving to the inside of the car. Again, don’t jump around and confuse your reader. Try to keep details in a logical order.
Different Organizational Structures:
Comparison/Contrast

- **The Comparison/Contrast Paragraph:**
  - *The purpose* of the comparison/contrast paragraph is to allow you to discuss the similarities or differences between two different topics. While most other organizational patterns will allow you to only focus on one topic, the comparison contrast paragraph asks that you have two different topics. This then allows you to discuss the relationship between these two topics.

  - *The supporting details* of the paragraph need to focus on the same bases of comparison or bases of contrast. For example, if you were comparing two cars, you would want to compare the same three aspects of those cars – let’s say the age, miles per gallon, and overall cost. These three things are your bases for comparison. While the details for each car will differ, the information you will gather regarding each car will be about the same general topics (or bases of comparison). Therefore, the first thing you need to determine is your bases of comparison.

  - *The organizational structure* of comparison/contrast paragraphs can come in two different forms, alternating structure or block structure.

    Alternating structure means that you go back and forth between your two topics, looking at one bases of comparison/contrast at a time. For example, if you were contrasting two cars, a Datsun B-210 and a Honda Civic, you would begin by contrasting how the two differed in age. Then you would move to your next bases of contrast and tell how the two differed in miles per gallon. Your final point in the paragraph would be how the two differed in overall cost. In this way, you are going back and forth between your two topics (the two cars) according to the bases of contrast you established.
Block structure is different in that you talk about everything regarding topic #1 first and then move to topic #2. For example, you would list the age, miles per gallon, and overall cost for the first car in the opening of your paragraph. Then you would list these details for the second car in the end of your paragraph. Block structure requires that you stick to one topic at a time and exhaust all that you have to say about that topic before moving to the next one. The trick, though, is that you still need to have similar points of comparison or contrast. You can’t talk about miles per gallon, color, and speed of one car and then switch to miles per gallon, age, and overall cost of the other. You still need to talk about the same points of comparison or contrast, even though you are doing it in block structure.
Different Organizational Structures:

Argument

➢ The Argument Paragraph:

- The purpose of the argument paragraph is to convince or persuade your reader of some point.

- The supporting details of an argument paragraph can be varied. As a writer, you can use any details that will help you to convince or persuade your reader of your point. To do this, writers often use a mix of objective data such as statistics, facts, and dates with subjective data such as stories, personal opinions, and interviews. The more details, the better. Remember that you are writing to a reader who most likely doesn’t agree with your argument. Therefore, you need to provide ample support from a variety of sources to back up your claim.

- The organizational structure of an argument paragraph can also be varied. One singular prescribed form for argument does not exist. Writers need to keep in mind their purpose, to convince their reader, and organize appropriately. For example, if your reader is mostly scientists and mathematicians, you would want to lead with strong statistical evidence for your argument since this would best appeal to this audience. Some writers choose to disguise a weaker supporting point by hiding it in the middle of their paragraph. This is a technique sometimes used by politicians in their public speeches. Just make sure that your paragraph has a clear topic sentence that identifies your topic and your argument about that topic. Then determine the best order of your supporting points. It’s often wise to have someone else that doesn’t agree with your opinion read your paragraph. This reader can help you see where you need to add more support or rearrange supporting points.
1. Anthropologists Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker point out that boys and girls socialize differently. Little girls tend to play in small groups or, even more common, in pairs. Little boys tend to play in larger groups, often outdoors, and they spend more time doing things than talking. Little girls’ social lives tend to center around a best friend, and friendships are made, maintained, and broken by talk – especially “secrets.” Little boys, on the other hand, jockey for status within their group of friends through competitive talk. Competitive talk includes telling stories and jokes, challenging and sidetracking the verbal displays of other boys. Girls like to play cooperatively. If they can’t cooperate, the group breaks up. In contrast, boys like to compete with one another in their play groups in order to establish their status within the group.

What type of paragraph is this?
- Descriptive?
- Argument?
- Comparison/Contrast?

Why? ___________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
2. They could see the house was empty at first glance. It was only one rectangular room with whitewashed walls and a little gas stove in the middle. They had already come through the cooking lean-to with the other stove and washstand potatoes and a package of turkey necks. Vicki Koob noted that in her perfect-bound notebook. The beds along the walls of the big room were covered with quilts that Albertine’s mother, Sophie, had made from bits of old wool coats and pants that the Sisters sold in bundles at the mission. There was no one hiding beneath the beds. No one was under the little aluminum dinette table covered with a green oilcloth or the soft brown wood chairs tucked up to it. One wall of the big room was filled with neatly stacked crates of things – old tools and springs and small half-dismantled appliances. Five or six television sets were stacked against the wall. Their control panels spewed colored wires, and at least one was cracked all the way across. Only the topmost set, with coat-hanger antenna angled sensitively to catch the bounding signals around Little Shell, looked like it could possible work. (Louise Erdrich)

What type of paragraph is this?

- Descriptive?
- Argument?
- Comparison/Contrast?

Why? 

______________________________________________________________
3. If our goal is educational and economic equity and parity – and it is – then we need affirmative action to catch up. We are behind as a result of discrimination and denial of opportunity. There is one white attorney for every 680 whites, but only one black attorney for every 4,000 blacks; one white physician for every 659 whites, but only one black physician for every 5,000 blacks; and one white dentist for every 1,900 whites, but only one black dentist for every 8,400 blacks. Less than 1 percent of all engineers – or all of practicing chemists – is black. Cruel and uncompassionate injustice created gaps like these. We need creative justice and compassion to help us close them. (Jesse Jackson)

What type of paragraph is this?

☐ Descriptive?

☐ Argument?

☐ Comparison/Contrast?

Why? 

____________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________
Different Organizational Structures

Application: Use the following process to write your own descriptive paragraph.

➢ Topic: Select a topic that fits description. Remember that this should be a person, place, or thing. Note that here:

➢ Opinion/Mood: Note what mood or opinion you will take regarding that topic. Remember that even descriptive paragraphs should have some opinion regarding the thing being described. Note that here:

➢ Supporting Details: List sensory and/or spatial details that have to do with your topic.
1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 
6. 

➢ Put it together: Using the items you just brainstormed, put together your own descriptive paragraph. When you are done, have a tutor or instructor review it with you.
Different Organizational Structures

Application: Use the following process to write your own comparison/contrast paragraph.

➢ Topics: Select two topics that you want to compare or contrast. Note them here:

    Topic #1: ________________________________________________________________

    Topic #2: ________________________________________________________________

➢ Opinion/Mood: Note what mood or opinion you will take regarding your topics. (If you want to wait to do this until after you have generated support, feel free to do so. Sometimes it’s hard to tell what your opinion is prior to thinking more about your topics.)

    Note that here: __________________________________________________________

    __________________________________________________________

    __________________________________________________________
Supporting Details: Establish three bases for comparison/contrast. List these in the column marked “bases for comparison/contrast.” Then fill in the grid moving to the right by providing information for each topic as it relates to your bases for comparison/contrast.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bases for Comp/Cont</th>
<th>Topic #1:</th>
<th>Topic #2:</th>
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Put it together: Using the items you just brainstormed, put together your own comparison/contrast paragraph. When you are done, have a tutor or instructor review it with you.
Different Organizational Structures

Application: Use the following process to write your own argument paragraph.

➢ Topic: Select a topic upon which you would like to form an argument. Note that here: ____________________________________________________________________________________________

➢ Opinion/Mood: Note what opinion you will take regarding that topic. Note that here: ____________________________________________________________________________________________

➢ Supporting Details: List facts, statistics, quotes, personal stories, etc. that support your argument.
1. ____________________________________________________________________________________________
2. ____________________________________________________________________________________________
3. ____________________________________________________________________________________________
4. ____________________________________________________________________________________________
5. ____________________________________________________________________________________________
6. ____________________________________________________________________________________________

➢ Put it together: Using the items you just brainstormed, put together your own descriptive paragraph. When you are done, have a tutor or instructor review it with you.