

Help Sheet

What is a paragraph?

A paragraph is a group of connected sentences which develops one new topic, idea or theme. They are the “building blocks” of your writing, dividing it into easy-to-follow, comprehensible parts.

Essays are usually made up entirely of paragraphs; reports or other types of more technical writing will be written in sections, but within the sections there will be paragraphs as well as bullet points, lists, figures etc.

How long should a paragraph be?

As noted above, a paragraph needs to develop an idea or new aspect of an argument, and it is impossible to do this in just a sentence or two. It is usually recommended, therefore, that in typical student writing a paragraph should be a minimum of five or six sentences. It shouldn't normally be shorter than this, but may be longer, depending on the overall length of the writing (the longer the writing, the longer the paragraphs can be: books may contain some very long paragraphs).

The most common mistake made in student writing is to make paragraphs too short. If you just write a sentence or two, two or three lines, and then start what looks like a new paragraph, it leaves a bad impression. Your writing may tend to look, and read, more like a series of notes or a list of simple points, possibly indicating that you have not thought through the ideas and have not developed them sufficiently. Alternatively, it may just mean putting some of these fragments together to make one paragraph, as long as they are linked. Don't put unrelated ideas or information together in a paragraph. A typical 1.5 or double spaced page would normally contain just 2-3 paragraphs.

Don't go to the opposite extreme and make your paragraphs too long. Over-long paragraphs make your writing difficult to follow and indicate that you are probably not in control of your ideas. And remember that one paragraph = one point, so if your essay just contains three or four paragraphs, this may mean just three or four ideas.

What is the structure of a paragraph?

It would be wrong to say that all paragraphs must follow a set structure; this would make your writing very mechanical, boring to read and would hinder your flexibility in answering the specific question. Instead, paragraphs need to contain some, or all, of the following components in order to sufficiently develop the point:

- some sort of “topic sentence” or introduction stating what the paragraph is about. This would normally, but not always, come at the beginning of the paragraph.
- explanation or definition of any terms which may be unclear.
- evidence for any assertions you make: references to the sources you have used; examples, data, statistics, illustrations etc.

• evaluation of this evidence or data; comparison or contrast with other information; analysis of causes and reasons; examination of effects and consequences; discussion of issues raised.

• awareness of the implications of any of the above.

• drawing of conclusions if appropriate

Your paragraphs should always be coherent, with the sentences linked together (see Guide 1.39). The end of the paragraph may link back to the introduction to show how the argument has developed, and may also link forward to the following paragraph. And particularly in shorter pieces, you may want to make regular reference to the specific question you are answering.

How to separate paragraphs

You must make it clear when one paragraph ends and a new one begins. Traditionally, you would “indent” the first line of the new paragraph, start it a few spaces in. Nowadays, most people leave a line space between paragraphs, without indenting the first line: this is probably the easiest thing to do. Remember that if you are double spacing your writing already, you’ll need to put in an extra space. Don’t mix the two possibilities.

Some linking words and phrases

To add a point

- Also...
- In addition, ...
- Similarly, ...
- Not only did ..., but ... also
- Moreover, ...
- Furthermore, ...

To contrast two points

- However, ...
- Although ...
- On the other hand ...
- Yet, ...
- Nevertheless, ...
- In contrast, ...

To illustrate, or to give an example

- For example, ...
- Clearly, ...
- That is, ...
- ..., namely,

To move on to the next point

- Then, ...
- After this / that ...
- Subsequently, ...

To note consequences

- So, ...
- Therefore, ...
- As a result, ...
- Consequently, ...
- Despite ...
- Since ...

To summarise or conclude

- Finally, ...
- In conclusion, ...
- To conclude, ...
- To summarise, ...

To introduce a list of ideas

- Firstly, ... (or 'The first point to note is ...')
- Secondly, ... (or 'The second point to note is ...')
- Finally, ... (or 'The next point to note is ...')

<http://www2.open.ac.uk/students/skillsforstudy/linking-words-activity-accessible.php>

<http://www2.open.ac.uk/students/skillsforstudy/paragraphs-activity-accessible.php>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise/topic/building-up-paragraphs>

Video on paragraphing.