

Most students can significantly improve their essay by focusing on one simple part of it: the paragraphs! The basic rule is that each paragraph should express a single idea, and there are a few tips to help you do this. In most cases, following the four simple guidelines below will not only improve the paragraph that you are working on, but also refine the paper in general. Having strong paragraphs will almost certainly lead to a paper with a strong argument...which will almost certainly lead to a strong grade!



1. Express a single idea with a clear topic sentence

Since a paragraph usually expresses only one idea, why not put that idea right at the beginning?

When you do this, you give the reader a clear sign-post towards what is significant in the sentences that follow.

2. Use the body of the paragraph to demonstrate or expand the topic sentence

If your paper is a road, the turns should happen from one paragraph to the next instead of within the body of a paragraph. If you aren't sure what to write in the body of a paragraph, ask yourself how you can expand, simplify, exemplify, or demonstrate the importance of the topic sentence...these are all great things to do in the middle of a paragraph!

3. Tie the concluding sentence back to the topic sentence, then do your best to link it to the next paragraph

The most important function of the concluding sentence of the paragraph is to reinforce the importance of the topic sentence. Since you may have strayed a little from the main point of the paragraph when you extended and/or exemplified it in the middle sentences, the concluding sentence serves to remind the reader (and you!) what the purpose of the paragraph is. *Once you are sure that your concluding sentence does this*, go through it again and see if there are any little changes that you can make that will point to where your argument is headed in the next paragraph.

4. Check your work by going through your entire paper and reading only the first and last sentence of every paragraph.

If you have acted on the first three tips, you should be able to understand your paper by reading only the first and last sentence of every paragraph. Even better, you should be able to read the first and last sentences to a friend and have *them* understand what you are arguing. The reality is, when professors have large numbers of papers to mark this is what they sometimes do (not on purpose, of course); if it doesn't make sense to you, it won't make sense to them!

Examples:

(1) Often, writing out a couple of well-structured paragraphs when you are in the beginning stages of your paper can help you to craft the type of argument that you want: subtle, coherent, and directed towards a logical completion. **(2A)** Having well-crafted paragraphs is like having exact change for bus fare: it isn't completely necessary, but if you don't have it you end up paying more than you need to! **(2B)** In any case, you have to know what you *have* before you can know what you *need*, and capturing an idea in a superb paragraph is the best way to figure that out. **(3)** If you write a paper that follows all four of the guidelines above, you'll be taking the bus home from the library in time for dinner instead of at 1 AM... and with a great paper in your hands!

(1) The paragraph starts with a topic sentence that expresses a clear idea.

(2A) The first sentence of the paragraph body gives an *example* of the topic sentence by using a simile. Other ways to provide examples would be to *compare* your topic to something else or to *describe* a specific case that is like the one you are discussing.

(2B) The second sentence *demonstrates* why the topic sentence is important.

(3) The concluding sentence re-states the topic sentence. Notice that the paragraph makes sense even if you only read the first and last sentences.

(1) Writing strong paragraphs requires you to express one single idea by expanding on it through description, example, and explanation. **(2A)** Logically, starting with the key idea will help you introduce it to your readers, and everything that follows will then seem more familiar to them. **(2B)** On the other hand, if I suddenly started writing about the life-cycle of honey bees in this sentence, you might feel confused and wonder what the real topic of this paragraph is. **(2C)** But, if I continue to explain the importance of topic sentences, then my paragraph will make more sense. **(3)** Expressing one clear topic in each paragraph helps your reader follow your ideas.

(1) The paragraph starts with a topic sentence.

(2A) The first sentence of the paragraph body further *explains* the topic in a general way.

(2B & 2C) The second and third sentences *clarify* the topic by giving a specific comparative *example*.

(3) The concluding sentence re-states the main point of the paragraph.