

Paragraph Structure

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Regard the paragraph as the unit of organization for your essay (Strunk and White 15). Paragraphs can be of varying lengths, but they must present a **coherent argument** unified under a **single topic**. Paragraphs are hardly ever longer than one page, double-spaced and usually are much shorter. Lengthy paragraphs usually indicate a lack of structure. Identify the main ideas in the paragraph to see if they make more sense as separate topics in separate paragraphs. Shorter paragraphs usually indicate a lack of substance; you don't have enough evidence or analysis to prove your point. Develop your idea or integrate the idea into another paragraph.

The **structure of a paragraph** parallels the structure of an essay in order as well as content. Both contain a coherent argument, supporting evidence/analysis, and a conclusion. Specifically, the contents of a paragraph are as follows:

The Topic Sentence serves two functions: first, it functions as the thesis of your paragraph; second, it pushes the thesis of your essay forward and presents an arguable point. The topic sentence is usually the first or second sentence of a paragraph. *Occasionally*, you may find it interesting or necessary to place the topic sentence at the end of the paragraph, but don't make a habit of it!

Supporting Evidence/Analysis makes your claim digestible. You need to find a balance between evidence you provide (facts, quotations, summary of events/plot, etc.) and analysis (interpretation of evidence). If your paragraph is evidence-heavy, you haven't presented an argument; if it is analysis-heavy, you haven't adequately supported your claim.

The Concluding Observation closes your paragraph with an observation that is more than just summary of the contents of the paragraph. The concluding observation provides a final idea that leads to the next step in your argument. The observation is usually the last or second-to-last sentence in the paragraph.

The following paragraph has been broken down into its constituent parts:

Topic Sentence

The means by which environmentalists seek to achieve their political goals demonstrate a willingness to operate within traditional political channels. *[point arguable: some people may believe environmentalists largely use anti-democratic strategies.]*

Supporting Analysis and Evidence

Like many other special interest groups, advocates for the environmentalist movement use lobbying tactics such as contributing financially to the campaigns of environmentally friendly candidates. Lobbying provides a source of political influence and power. As one analyst of environmental politics notes, in “making some commitment to work within the political system. . .[environmental lobby groups] succumb to. . .pressure to play ‘by the rules of the game’ in the compromise world of Washington, D.C.” (Vig and Kraft 70). *[blend of supporting evidence/analysis]*

Concluding Observation

Some might argue that environmentalists have taken a distinctly anti-American approach to policy change, claiming that lobbying is inherently undemocratic in its bias towards certain segments of the population; however, lobbying remains a constitutionally legitimate form of political activism. *[more than just summary, the point is arguable and could easily lead to another point.]*

Acknowledgment

Thank you to Jennifer Rose '04 for permission to use the above paragraph.

Works Cited

Strunk, William, and E.B. White. *The Elements of Style*, fourth edition. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000.