

## Paragraphs

Paragraphs are the basic compositional units of an essay. Each paragraph in your essay should build on the previous paragraph and develop a different aspect of the argument. They organize the development and flow of the argument, and they bundle the detailed sentence-level work into coherent groups.

Many of us were taught to write “five-paragraph essays.” Think of that model not as wrong, but as too small and simple. As your essays get longer and your ideas more complex, three body paragraphs are insufficient to present your argument in a clear and coherent manner. For a short essay (4-7 pages), it is better to think of your essay in terms of *sections*: introduction, several body sections, and conclusion. Each section develops one of the main argument’s sub-claims. A section is usually composed of more than one paragraph. The number of sections in your essay depends on what makes the most sense for your argument. Given the length of a Humanities essay, aim for two to four sections.

### Qualities of a Good Paragraph

- **Advances the argument.** Every paragraph is a subunit of the section, which is, in turn, a subunit of the essay’s whole argument. Each paragraph should concentrate on developing a single idea that contributes to the case in favor of the thesis.
- **Structure.** Every paragraph has three parts: a topic sentence, sentences that present and explain the evidence, and a closing sentence. The topic sentence states the claim that the paragraph will defend. Topic sentences are discussed in more detail below. The middle of a paragraph is where you show your work. You set the context, present the evidence (quotations), and analyze it. The closing sentence completes the connection between the evidence and the claim made in the topic sentence.
- **Conceptual unity.** Does the paragraph only develop *one* idea? Test each component of your paragraph. Is the topic sentence narrow enough or does it try to cover too much? For example, if you are writing an essay that compares the piety of Aeneas and Jesus, then you should have multiple paragraphs on each person. Since piety, Aeneas, and Jesus are the major components of your argument, each paragraph can only handle *part* of them. If your topic sentence is simply about Aeneas’ piety, then you know the paragraph is going to be too general. One sign that you are maintaining conceptual unity is that the key words used in the topic sentence recur and are developed throughout the paragraph.
- **Coherence.** Not only should a paragraph have a conceptual unity, but it should also *read* as a unity. Paragraph coherence comes from paying attention to the flow between sentences. As you write, the process of editing and rewriting can make for a choppy final product. Pay attention to coherence in the final edit of your essay.

- **Length.** The length of a paragraph depends on many things, such as the length of your essay and the complexity of the idea you are discussing. In a Humanities essay, your paragraphs should be less than one page long. If you find a paragraph stretching over a page, scan it and look for a natural break. Do you change topics in the middle of the paragraph? Shift focus? If there is not an easy division point, then revisit your topic sentence, make it narrower, and only keep the material that directly develops the new narrower claim.

## Topic Sentences

A topic sentence (TS) makes the claim that a paragraph will defend. In an argumentative essay, it is important that topic sentences contain claims that need to be argued for. Facts and general attitudes toward a subject are ineffective topic sentences because they do not frame a specific argument.

*Fact Ex.* In 1611, Shakespeare wrote the romance *The Winter's Tale*.

What will this paragraph be about? A summary of the play? The reader has no idea what argument will follow.

*General Attitude Ex.* The final act of *The Winter's Tale* is interesting.

What will this paragraph be about? It will contain “interesting” information about Act V of the play. What does *interesting* mean? Again, the reader is uncertain what direction the argument will go.

*Claim Ex.* In the final act of *The Winter's Tale*, Leontes' kingdom is restored only when he acts from faith, rather than jealousy.

This topic sentence gives the reader a precise claim that has a clear **subject** and **controlling idea**. The subject is what the paragraph is about: Leontes' change and the restoration of the kingdom. The controlling idea sets limits on the scope of the discussion: the final act of the play. Here are two examples of narrowing your topic sentence by limiting the subject and controlling idea:

*General TS #1.* TS Eliot's poetry contains references and allusions to many other works.

*Limiting subject.* TS Eliot's “The Waste Land” contains references and allusions to many other works.

*Limiting controlling idea.* TS Eliot's “The Waste Land” contains references and allusions to Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

*General TS #2.* Philosophers have many ideas about the source of morality.

*Limiting subject.* Immanuel Kant has many ideas about the source of morality.

*Limiting controlling idea.* Immanuel Kant thinks that morality is determined in accordance with universal reason.

Notice how limiting the subject and controlling idea produces a topic sentence that makes more specific claims that can be defended in the course of one paragraph.

Finally, a good topic sentence not only advances a claim, but it also serves as a transition between paragraphs. It links to the previous paragraph in a way that draws attention to the development of the argument.

*Poor transition.* Machiavelli also dislikes mercenaries because they are contrary to human nature.

This is not a bad topic sentence. It makes a claim and has a limited, though vague, subject and controlling idea. However, it is a poor transition. The only sign of transition is “also.” The “also” makes it unclear what the essay’s main argument is about. Things Machiavelli dislikes? Maybe why he dislikes mercenaries? The topic sentence has failed to connect this paragraph to the unified argument of the essay.

*Stronger transition.* Machiavelli dislikes mercenaries not only because they lack loyalty, but because this disloyalty is also contrary to human nature.

The transition is improved here. The inclusion of “loyalty” becomes the connecting thread between this paragraph and the one before. This new paragraph will show the reader a new reason why Machiavelli dislikes mercenaries for their lack of loyalty.