



Strategies for Structuring Paragraphs

Paragraphs in an essay should build your argument and provide a logical flow of ideas. From the title and first sentence, your reader should know what you are arguing and what ideas you will use to support your claims. Strong structure in an essay helps create connections between ideas and guides your reader through your paper. This handout provides guidance structuring essay paragraphs in a way that that enhances your argument and analysis.

Informative Titles

Draw your reader in with a title that is both interesting and informative. Titles should give an insight into the topic of the paper and hints at the thesis statement. Some students prefer to have a title that explains the topic right away.

Examples:

Weak Title: Mythology Course Final Essay

Better Title: Symbolism in Classic Literature and Mythology

In the example above the first title is weak because it does not provide any information about the paper. The second title is stronger because it indicates the topic of the paper. Note: Even though the second title provides more information, the topic of “Symbolism in Classic Literature and Mythology” is still very broad. This title could be strengthened further by narrowing down the topic further and indicating what the paper will argue.

Another common title style entices the reader to read your paper with two parts. The first half of the title includes a witty or creative lead-in before a colon, while the second half is informative and states the topic of the paper.

Example:

Merely Literate and Unusual: Paradise Lost and the Creature in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*

In the example above, the first part of the title catches the reader’s attention, while the second part elaborates on what the paper will be about. Without the clarification after the colon, the title would be vague and confusing. On the other hand, without the interesting lead-in the title would seem less interesting.

Topic Sentences

Within the body of your essay, it can be useful to limit yourself to one main idea or argument per paragraph and to begin each new paragraph with a **topic sentence**, which states your main

idea for the paragraph. Keeping your paragraph focused on one idea, with each sentence building and supporting the idea, helps your reader understand the paragraph's purpose and your argument's flow. For focus and coherence, edit carefully to create links between sentences or try to keep the subject of the paragraph consistent from sentence to sentence.

Example:

Aquifers are beds of sand and gravel in glacial deposits or bedrock formations which contain groundwater. They can exist as small, localized occurrences or can extend for many kilometres and be up to 30 metres thick. **Major aquifers** include the Ravenscrag Formation in southern Saskatchewan, the Judith River Formation to the west, and the Swan River Formation in the north. These in particular are very extensive and are reliable long-term water supplies. (Sask. Environment, Water, n.d.).

In the example above, the first sentence is a topic sentence which clearly indicates that the paragraph will be about aquifers and provides the essential information needed for readers understand what aquifers are. The remainder of the paragraph expands on this topic by providing more specific information about particular aquifers and their contribution to water supplies in Saskatchewan. As the connections between sentences within the paragraph are clear, the paragraph flows well and is easy for readers to understand.

Sentence Order and Chronology

Within a paragraph, each sentence should build off one another and give the reader an idea of your argument's development. Place new information near the end of sentences. Begin sentences with a link back to the "old" or previously provided information. When appropriate, begin sentences with a logical transition word or phrase, but do not overuse this strategy.

Examples:

Example 1 (weak structure): The images are a crucial aspect of the story. Comic art elevates the story and brings it to life.

Example 2 (better structure): "Images are a crucial aspect of storytelling in comics **because** they portray mood, tone, and characterization in visual ways. **Moreover, the visual impact** of art inside a comic holds the power to elevate the story and bring it to life.

In the examples above, Example 1 had a weak structure because the author did not create connections between the sentences to indicate how the second sentence builds and support the argument of the first sentence. Example 2 had better structure because it provided explanation and justification of the claim in the first sentence and used transition words to link the second sentence to the first sentence which helps the reader understand how the second sentence builds and supports the argument.

Vary Sentence Structure and Length

Writing should reflect your individual voice through word choice and sentence structure. By using a mix of long and short sentences, your writing gains a rhythm that reveals your voice as a researcher and writer. This also prevents paragraphs from sounding monotone and repetitive which, ultimately, keeps your reader interested in what they are reading. Some things to remember about varying your sentences are:

- The majority of your sentences should be average in length (between 20-30 words).
- Short sentences (15 words or less) can be used effectively to create emphasis but avoid overuse of short sentences. A series of short sentences can make your writing appear choppy, abrupt, or incomplete.
- Long sentences (35 words or more) can be useful for explanation, but avoid overuse of long sentences. Long sentences can become confusing and can make it difficult for a reader to follow your argument.
- Short sentences can become sentence fragments (i.e. incomplete sentences) and long sentences can become run-on sentences (i.e. a sentence that joins complete thoughts without proper punctuation or linking words). Always check that sentences are clear and grammatical.
- You don't need to count the words of every sentence in your paper. Instead, read your work aloud to check for sentence rhythm, clarity, and effectiveness. Reading aloud can help you identify incomplete and run-on sentences.

Examples:

Example 1 (weak structure): The sun rose over the quiet town. Birds chirped in the tall trees. Cars drove in the empty street. Shops opened to first customers. It seemed like it would be a good day.

Example 2 (better structure): The sun rose over the quiet town. Birds chirped in the trees, filling the still morning air with the sound of a new day. A few cars rolled slowly down the deserted streets. Shops opened. The town was waking up—peaceful, steady, full of promise.

In the examples above, example 1 is weak because it makes use of a uniform and repetitive sentence structure. Additionally, the use of repeated short sentences make the passage feel choppy and disconnected. Example 2 is stronger because it employed a variety of sentence lengths which creates better flow and makes the passage more interesting to read.