

# Paragraph Organization & Flow - Vidcast Transcript

## Slide 1

Hi, everyone! This is Heather from the Purdue Writing Lab. In this video, we will be talking about paragraph organization and flow. Whether you're still drafting your thesis or dissertation or in the process of revising your project, it's important to think about your writing on a paragraph-level. Strong, clear paragraphs act like solid building blocks that create the foundation for your argument. Throughout this video, we'll talk about 3 major components of paragraph-level writing to consider including unity, coherence, and development.

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To begin, let's start with a five-minute warm up activity. For this exercise, choose one paragraph from your current project. If you're still drafting, you're welcome to either look at a paragraph from your own written work or from one of your sources.

Take a few minutes to read carefully through your chosen paragraph. Try to locate the different components of the paragraph. Do you see a clear introductory sentence? Does the paragraph have a clear sense of focus, meaning does it address one topic in a clear way? What is the main point being expressed through that paragraph, and where, specifically, do you see where that point being made?

Because this is a time for self-reflection, it would also be helpful to assess the strengths and growth areas of your chosen paragraph, especially if you are looking at your own writing. We'll discuss our reflections in our small group discussion.

Please pause the video here and set a five-minute timer for yourself. See you soon!

## Slide 3

Welcome back!

The first component of strong paragraph writing is the idea of unity. When we think about unity in paragraph writing, we're talking about the importance of addressing one idea per paragraph. When you're writing a long and complex body of work, it can feel tempting to try to cram of stuff multiple ideas together.

Thinking of unity reminds us that each paragraph should concern itself with a single focus. If you find that your paragraphs tend to introduce one idea or major point of discussion before wandering off topic, try to invite yourself to rethink the pacing of your writing.

The chart on this slide represents a paragraph outline for a thesis or dissertation chapter. During your next writing period, it might be helpful to revisit this chart and map out the singular point you will or are addressing in each of your paragraphs. Keep in mind that complex ideas might have to unfold over multiple paragraphs, and that's okay!

One of the most helpful ways to motivate you to maintain a sense of unity in your paragraphs is to use clear topic sentences. A topic sentence is a sentence that indicates in a general way what idea or thesis the paragraph is going to deal with.

Despite the fact that topic sentences can occur anywhere in the paragraph (as the first sentence, the last sentence, or somewhere in the middle), an easy way to make sure your reader understands the topic of the paragraph is to put your topic sentence near the beginning of the paragraph. In addition to using the chart on this slide to specify which specific topic you're going to cover in each paragraph, it might be helpful to also locate the topic sentence for each paragraph as well.

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If you need an example of a topic sentence, here are two paragraphs borrowed from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's writing lab.

The first paragraph reads:

Piranhas rarely feed on large animals; they eat smaller fish and aquatic plants. When confronted with humans, piranhas' first instinct is to flee, not attack. Their fear of humans makes sense. Far more piranhas are eaten by people than people are eaten by piranhas. If the fish are well-fed, they won't bite humans.

The second example shown here is the same except that it offers a clear topic sentence: Although most people consider piranhas to be quite dangerous, they are, for the most part, entirely harmless.

This example shows how topic sentences zero in on the "so what" of a paragraph, meaning that they highlight and synthesize the main point or argument for that particular paragraph. If you find that your paragraphs are missing topic sentences, try to challenge yourself to draft or revise with this in mind during your next

writing time.

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Moving on from unity, the second component of strong writing that we'll talk about today is coherence. Coherence in paragraph writing is the trait that makes the paragraph easily understandable to a reader. You can help create coherence in your paragraphs by creating logical bridges in your writing

For example, I just offered a logical bridge when I said that we were moving on to this videos' second point. Here, one of the most straightforward ways to outline a sense of logic in your paragraphs is to use clear transition words and phrases.

Transitions can be used at the end of most paragraphs to help the paragraphs flow one into the next.

- Transition sentences or bridge sentences offer important cues to readers to help them trace your argument. To demonstrate a cause-effect relationship, for example, you can use words like "consequentially," "therefore," "thus," or "accordingly".
- Transition words like "however," "then again," "whereas," "although" or "nevertheless" establish a sense of contrast between concepts.
- Transitions like "furthermore," "in addition" or "similarly" help you further expand an idea and indicate a sense of continuation.
- Finally, transition words can also indicate that you're moving to summarize to reassert your main point. Here, you can use phrases like "as such" or "ultimately."

In addition to using clear transition words, there are other verbal bridges that can also help you to create a sense of coherence in your paragraphs. You can help make your paragraphs more coherent by defining and repeating key words to help your reader follow your ideas. If you find that you are repeating key words to the point of sounding repetitive, try to alternate between a small collection of synonyms.

Another helpful reminder about verbal bridges is to ensure a clear use of pronouns. You can do this by making sure your referents are clear. If you find yourself using multiple pronouns in a row, this might be an invitation to restate who you are talking about.

Coherent paragraphs are important because they make sure your reader can follow your point. Your reader shouldn't have to work hard to follow your argument. Instead, it's our job as writers to deliver our points in a clear way.

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The third component about strong paragraph writing is development. Well-developed paragraphs ensure that the topic of a paragraph—which is introduced by a topic sentence, of course—is discussed fully and adequately.

A good paragraph should contain at least the following four elements: You can think of the acronym TTEB: Transition, Topic sentence, specific Evidence and analysis, and a Brief wrap-up sentence (also known as a warrant).

- A Transition sentence leading in from a previous paragraph to assure smooth reading. This acts as a hand-off from one idea to the next.
- A Topic sentence, like we've talked about before, tells the reader what you will be discussing in the paragraph.
- Specific Evidence and analysis that supports one of your claims and that provides a deeper level of detail than your topic sentence.
- A Brief wrap-up sentence that tells the reader how and why this information supports the paper's thesis. The brief wrap-up is also known as the warrant. The warrant is important to your argument because it connects your reasoning and support to your thesis, and it shows that the information in the paragraph is related to your thesis and helps defend it.

Let's pause for a moment to dive a little into the idea of providing evidence in your paragraphs. You can develop your paragraphs by giving evidence by considering the following:

- Use clear examples
- Cite data (by providing facts and statistics, for example)
- And offer quotes from experts

Remember that when you're providing evidence by quoting an expert that you "unpack" or explain or illustrate the importance of that quote. How does it support your argument? As always, be sure to properly cite your evidence to help maintain your academic and professional ethos.

As you can see in the graphic here, you can help to organize your paragraph development by starting with broad information and then homing in on your point with specific detail.

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Thinking about paragraph development also helps us to consider BALANCE in our writing.

- Make your paragraphs proportional to your paper. Since paragraphs do less work in short papers, have short paragraphs for short papers and longer paragraphs for longer papers.
- If you have a few very short paragraphs, think about whether they are really parts of a larger paragraph—and can be combined—or whether you can add details to support each point and thus make each into a more fully developed paragraph.
- While paragraph length will vary from paragraph to paragraph, depending on the author's purpose and writing style, try to be wary of paragraphs that only have two sentences or so because there's a pretty good bet that that paragraph is not fully developed.
- Similarly, paragraphs that span over pages might indicate that you need to split up that paragraph into smaller parts.

If you're curious about when you should start a new paragraph, look for moments in your writing when:

- You begin a new idea or point. New ideas should always start in new paragraphs. If you have an extended idea that spans multiple paragraphs, each new point within that idea should have its own paragraph.
- You can also look for moments in your writing when you're trying to contrast information or ideas. Separate paragraphs can serve to contrast sides in a debate, different points in an argument, or any other difference.

## Slide 8

We've made it to the end of our presentation on paragraphs. Thank you for learning with me! I look forward to discussing paragraphs with you in our small group.

Happy writing and revising, everyone. Until next time...