

Helpsheet

PARAGRAPHS

Use this sheet to help you:

- understand what makes a good paragraph
- write paragraphs that are unified, coherent and clear

5 minute self test

Read the paragraph checklist below. This checklist is based on the principles outlined in this helpsheet. If you feel you need to learn more about these points, this helpsheet is for you:

- ☐ Does the paragraph directly to the question or thesis statement?
- ☐ Does the paragraph just have one main idea?
- ☐ Is there a topic sentence which has a topic and controlling idea?
- ☐ Is the topic sentence supported?
- ☐ Are nouns and pronouns used appropriately?
- ☐ Are sentences arranged in a logical order?
- ☐ Are linking words used?
- ☐ Is the paragraph clearly linked to the other paragraphs?
- ☐ Is the paragraph layout correct?

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Introduction

This helpsheet provides advice concerning paragraphs for academic work. Specifically, it is designed to help you produce better essays, reports, literature reviews and short answers to questions.

Please note, however, that paragraphs in different genres (such as newspaper articles and novels) may not follow the principles described below. It is also worth noting that not every important writer writes well-structured paragraphs, and that a lot of academic texts are actually bad examples of academic writing style. That is, while many texts may be notable for containing great insights, they are not always models of good writing that you should try and emulate.

As you read the helpsheet, remember this too: while learning about paragraphing is easy, writing good paragraphs is difficult—difficult for native English speakers as well as for people whose first language is not English.

Avoiding the challenge of writing a good paragraph is a mistake given that paragraphs are the building blocks of almost all written genres. If you can't produce a good paragraph, you won't be able to produce a good essay, report or literature review, or almost any other type of text.

What makes a good paragraph?

Every paragraph you write should follow the principles listed below:

1. The paragraph must contain a topic sentence
2. All remaining sentences should support and develop the topic sentence
3. Only one main idea should be developed
4. The sentences should flow smoothly and logically
5. A concluding sentence may be added but is not essential

Paragraph word length can and should vary. However, be aware that paragraphs that are too long can be hard to read, and that paragraphs that are too short look 'choppy' and can read like a list. To be more specific, a one sentence paragraph is usually too short, and writing only two paragraphs on one A4 page indicates paragraphs may be too long.

However, there is no fixed rule about the number of sentences that should make up a paragraph. What is important is that the paragraph only develops one main idea. This is this factor which should be the primary determinant of paragraph length. When you need to say something else, start a new paragraph.

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Paragraph structure

Now, let's look at paragraph structure in more detail.

Think of a paragraph as having two, or possibly three sections:

1. **A topic sentence:** this states the main topic of the paragraph and the controlling idea
2. **Supporting sentences:** these develop the topic sentence
3. **A concluding sentence:** this signals the end of the paragraph and leaves the reader with important points to remember, but is often unnecessary.

Activity 1: Read the following paragraphs and try to identify the topic sentence in each one.

1. Synonyms, words that have the same basic meaning, do not always have the same emotional meaning. For example, the words "stingy" and "frugal" both mean "careful with money." However, to call a person stingy is an insult, while the word frugal has a much more positive connotation. Similarly, a person wants to be slender but not skinny, and aggressive, but not pushy. Therefore, you should be careful in choosing words because many so-called synonyms are not really synonymous at all.

2. HRM policies affect certain immediate organisational outcomes and have long-term consequences. For example, policy choices made by managers affect the overall competence of employees, the commitment of employees, the degree of congruence between the goals of employees and those of the organisation, and the overall cost effectiveness of HRM practices. These four Cs are not exhaustive of the criteria that HRM policy makers may find useful in evaluating the effectiveness of human resource management. However, they are reasonably comprehensive.

3. Gold, a precious metal, is prized for two important reasons: it is both beautiful and useful. First of all, gold has a lustrous beauty that is resistant to corrosion. For example, a Macedonian coin remains as untarnished today as the day it was minted twenty three centuries ago. Another important characteristic of gold is its utility in industry and science. The most recent application of gold is in astronauts' suits.

4. Albert Einstein, one of the world's geniuses, failed his university entrance examinations on his first attempt. William Faulkner, one of America's noted writers, never finished college because he could not pass his English courses. Sir Winston Churchill, who is considered one of the masters of the English language, had to have special tutoring in English during elementary school. These few examples show that failure in school does not always predict failure in life.

Check your answers on Page 10.

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As can be seen from these paragraphs, the topic sentence gives the reader a clear idea of what the paragraph is about and is thereby the most important sentence in the paragraph.

The topic sentence does not have to be the first sentence of the paragraph. However, this is the clearest way to present your points. For this reason, there is no danger in making the first sentence of almost every paragraph you write your topic sentence.

Writing the topic sentence

When writing the topic sentence, try to state the main point of the paragraph as clearly and as accurately as possible. Do not make the topic sentence too general or too specific.

Too general

Studying overseas was deemed to be very difficult.

Too specific

Studying overseas was deemed to be very difficult for 63% of the people surveyed who cited a range of difficulties including homesickness, loneliness, difficulty making Australian friends, changes to diets, health problems, weight gain, and difficulties with money and jobs.

Good #1

Studying overseas was deemed to be very difficult in three main respects for 63% of the people surveyed.

Good #2

Studying overseas was deemed to be very difficult for 63% of the people surveyed due to the impacts of culture shock, financial concerns and health concerns.

The two parts of the topic sentence

A topic sentence contains:

1. A topic

eg. *Studying overseas*

2. A controlling idea (what you say about the topic)

eg. *...was deemed to be very difficult...*

The topic is best placed at or near the start of the sentence. The topic should not be a pronoun (he, she, his, this, it) as starting with a pronoun often makes the focus of the paragraph unclear.

The controlling idea 'controls' everything else in the paragraph; it indicates what you want to say about the topic.

Studying overseas was deemed to be very difficult...

In this case, do not talk about such things as the benefits of studying overseas, or statistics about the overseas student population. If you want to do this, start a new paragraph.

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Linking ideas between paragraphs

The topic sentence may contain language which helps link it to other paragraphs, eg:

- Firstly,
- The most important reason,
- The next step,
- In addition to...
- The result of...

See the example below for an idea of how to link ideas between paragraphs:

Unlike many countries in Europe, multiple voting shares do not exist in Thailand. Thai law prohibits the issuance of such shares. Therefore, when I identify who owns and controls the sample firms, I focus only on **three control mechanisms**, namely, direct, pyramidal, and cross-shareholdings.

The first form of control mechanism, "direct ownership", means a shareholder who owns shares under his own name or via a private company owned by him. "Indirect ownership" is when a company is owned via other public firms or a chain of public firms. ...

Indicating the structure of the paragraph

The topic sentence may contain language which indicates the structure of the paragraph. eg.

- ...for three main reasons.
- ...in the following respects...
- There are two methods of...
- ...has two advantage and one disadvantage

Activity 2: Write topic sentences for the following paragraphs (you will need to read the supporting sentences very carefully).

For example, paragraphs could be structured in terms of comparison and contrast. They could also be structured to show a process. Furthermore, the organization of a paragraph may be based in the writer's need to describe. In this particular case, the structure is one which is based in the writer's need to enumerate.

This is not always necessary. However, the concluding sentence can be useful in reminding the reader of the main point of the paragraph (especially useful in a long paragraph). It can also leave the reader with a thought which may provoke further reflection on the topic.

Check your answers on Page 10.

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Rhetorical questions

In some languages, rhetorical questions are often used to emphasise points. For example: "Why is this important? There are three main reasons. Firstly..."

Rhetorical questions can occasionally be used to add dramatic flair. However, it is generally not a good idea to get into the habit of using them. Good, clear, precise topic sentences and supporting sentences are almost always more effective.

Concluding sentences

Concluding sentences are optional, but can sometimes help by summarising the main point of the paragraph.

You may begin a concluding sentence with such signals as:

- *In short,*
- *In summary,*
- *Indeed,*
- *Therefore, it is clear that...*

Paragraph unity

Unity (noun): "oneness"

All paragraphs should have unity, that is, they should only discuss one idea. If you have more than one idea, start a new paragraph.

Activity 3: Read the following paragraph and identify where it could be divided into two paragraphs.

High emotional intelligence can help a manager improve workplace communication skills, employee motivation and organisational effectiveness. If a manager has high empathy, a key component of emotional intelligence, he or she will be able to listen to the concerns of employees and will be more understanding of their needs, wants and concerns. This will most likely translate into increased motivation and satisfaction of employees and ultimately will have a positive effect on the effectiveness of the business. It is important to note, however, that emotional intelligence is a concept that is not universally understood to have the same meaning and is not universally believed to be a key determiner of business success. Highly authoritarian, top down approaches are employed in many successful businesses today.

Check your answers on Page 10.

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Activity 4: Read the following paragraph and try to identify which sentence does not fit within it:

HRM policies affect certain immediate organisational outcomes and have long-term consequences. For example, policy choices made by managers affect the overall competence of employees, the commitment of employees, the degree of congruence between the goals of employees and those of the organisation, and the overall cost effectiveness of HRM practices. HRM policies have been subject to considerable change in throughout the western world in recent years. HRM policy makers may find the four Cs useful means to enhance effectiveness of human resource management in organisations.

Check your answers on Page 10.

Paragraph coherence

Cohere (verb): "stick together"

Sentences in a paragraph should flow smoothly and logically.

Below are some ways you can make a paragraph become coherent:

1. Use nouns and pronouns appropriately
2. Arrange ideas in a logical order
3. Use linking words
4. Repeat key nouns regularly

Activity 5: Rewrite the following paragraph using linking words to make the paragraph more coherent:

Hofstede's theories have been hugely influential. They have encouraged people to think more deeply about cultural differences. They have helped provide people with effective 'ways of seeing' cultural differences. They have helped provide people with an effective way of discussing cultural differences. They have given organisations ideas about how to manage workplace diversity. Not every one agrees with Hofstede's model of cultural differences. His concept of 'masculine vs. feminine' cultures has been subject to great criticism. Some people have argued that his ideas are based on research of atypical groups. They are atypical in terms of career and class. These groups are not reflective of the different people who make up the different national cultures. Hofstede's theories continue to be useful. They are hard to ignore.

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Note, however, that you can use all the connectives you want and still not have a cohesive paragraph as the terrible paragraph below shows:

Because the press is the major medium of interaction between the Prime Minister and the people, how it portrays him influences his popularity. Therefore, it should report on the Prime Minister objectively. Both reporters and the Prime Minister are human, however, subject to error and favouritism. Also, people act differently in public than they do in private. Hence, to understand a person, it is important to know the whole person, his environment, upbringing, and education. Indeed, from the correspondence with his family, we can learn much about John Howard. (adapted from Williams 1997, p.105)

Use of pronouns

Be careful when using pronouns (words such as it, they, them, he, him, she, and her). If pronouns are overused, the focus can be hard for the reader (What is 'it'? Who is 'he'? What are 'they').

Another common mistake that involves use of pronouns is singular/plural confusion.

*The company embarked on an unrelated diversification strategy. **They** had decided that previous strategies had been ineffective.*

The company is actually singular. The second sentence should also start with "The company" or "it".

Another mistake involving involves using a pronoun which could refer to more that one subject.

*A number of people support the new systems and new processes. **They** (?) might be considered to increase organisational effectiveness.*

These are certainly problematic and if you do it, this may confuse them and it make hard to understand them. Unfortunately, it is something they often do no matter how often these are told to them and this can even lead to them failing it. (Joke! Don't write sentences like this!)

Activity 6: Correct the pronouns in the following paragraph:

Olympic athletes must be strong both physically and mentally. First of all, if you hope to compete in an Olympic Sport, you must be physically strong. Furthermore, aspiring Olympians must train rigorously for many years. For the most demanding sports, they train several hours a day, five or six days a week, for ten or more years. In addition to being physically strong, athletes must also be mentally tough. This means that you have to be totally dedicated to your sport, often giving up normal school, family and social life. Being mentally strong, also means that he or she must be able to withstand the intense pressure of international competition with the accompanying media coverage. (Oshima and Hogue 1999, p.25)

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Language to develop ideas within paragraphs

Use the language below to help you structure your paragraphs in the ways described above.

1. Classification • is a kind of ... • can be divided into... • is a type of... • falls under.. • belongs to... • is a part of... • fits into... • is grouped with... • is related to... • is associated with...	2. Comparison/Contrast • is similar to... • On the other hand... • Both... • However... • But... • While • in contrast... • as well ... • differs from ... • Unlike...
3. Process • First(ly)/second(ly) ... • Recently... • Previously... • Before... • When... • After... • Finally... • subsequently ...	4. Definition • Is a kind of ... • Can be defined as... • Is like... • Is similar to...
5. Description • Is like ... • Resembles ... • Above the ... • Below the ... • The purpose ... • Besides/ next to ... • Near/ nearby ...	6. Choice • In my opinion ... • I like/dislike ... • I believe ... • I hope ... • I feel ... • I think that ... • I consider ... • I believe ... • I prefer ...
7. Explanation • Because ... • Therefore... • Since... • Thus... • As a result of... • Consequently... • ...is due to... • Hence • It follows that ... • If ... then...	8. Evaluation • I suggest • I recommend • I advise

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Paragraph layout

In order to signify where a paragraph begins and ends, you have a choice of two methods.

1. Indent the paragraph	2. Leave a space between paragraphs
text text	text text

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Answers

Activity 1: The topic sentences are the first sentences of paragraphs 1, 2 and 3 and the last sentence of paragraph 4.

Activity 2: (*example answers*) a. Paragraphs can be structured in a number of ways.
b. A paragraph may feature a concluding sentence.

Activity 3: A new paragraph needs to be started from: "It is important to note, however..."

Activity 4: the following sentence needs to be cut from the paragraph: "HRM policies have been subject to considerable change in throughout the western world in recent years."

Activity 5: (*example answer*) Hofstede's theories have been hugely influential for several reasons. Perhaps most importantly, they have encouraged people to think more deeply about cultural differences. Furthermore, they have helped provide people with effective 'ways of seeing' and discussing cultural differences. In the business world, Hofstede's theories have given organisations ideas about how to manage workplace diversity. However, not every one agrees with Hofstede's model of cultural differences. In particular, his concept of 'masculine vs. feminine' cultures has been subject to great criticism. In addition, some people have argued that his ideas are based on research of groups that are atypical in terms of career and class and are not reflective of the different people who make up the different national cultures. However, despite such criticisms, Hofstede's theories continue to be useful and are hard to ignore.

Activity 6: (*example answer*) Olympic athletes must be strong both physically and mentally. First of all, if athletes hope to compete in an Olympic Sport, they must be physically strong. Furthermore, aspiring Olympians must train rigorously for many years. For the most demanding sports, Olympic athletes train several hours a day, five or six days a week, for ten or more years. In addition to being physically strong, athletes must also be mentally tough. This means that they have to be totally dedicated to their sport, often giving up normal school, family and social life. Being mentally strong, also means that Olympic athletes must be able to withstand the intense pressure of international competition with the accompanying media coverage. (Oshima and Hogue 1999, p.25)

References

Oshima, A. and Hogue, A. (1999), Writing Academic English, 3rd Edition, USA: Pearson