

Developing Academic Paragraphs

The UNA University Writing Center
Writing & Research Process
Workshop Series

Dr. Robert T. Koch Jr.

Director, University Writing Center

University of North Alabama

3 March, 2008

Goals

- Understand the components of an academic paragraph
- Develop a strategy for writing academic paragraphs
- Use a checklist to identify the components of your paragraphs

What is an undergraduate "academic" paragraph?

An academic paragraph, particularly in business and most traditional research, includes the following characteristics:

1. A focusing sentence, claim, or argument driving the paragraph as either the opening (topic sentence) or closing (summarizing) sentence
2. Supporting evidence such as explanations, illustrations, and data, often taken from credible academic sources such as journals and book-length research studies
3. Clear and precise discussion that ties these explanations, illustrations, and data to both the focusing sentence and the overall thesis

Focusing Sentence

- This is often called the topic sentence of the essay. It explains what the paragraph is about, most often by making a single claim or statement.
- Most topic sentences are the first sentence of the paragraph. They transition from the content of the prior paragraph, establishing a relevant connection between the two ideas.
- A topic sentence may appear at the end of a paragraph only if a substantial connection to the prior paragraph has been established at the start of the current paragraph.

Supporting Evidence

- This is the proof from other academic sources used to support each topic sentence. Forms of this include
 - Data, facts, and figures
 - Charts, graphs, and tables
 - Illustrations, anecdotes, and descriptions
- In all cases, proper summarizing, paraphrasing, or quoting using the appropriate style for in-text citation and documentation is expected.

Discussion

- Discussion involves the use of your own words and ideas to build connections between each item of support, between each item of support and the topic sentence, and between the topic sentence and the primary goal of the assignment (the purpose and/or thesis)
- Discussion explains a connection which the writer sees but which the reader might not see. Discussion must precede and follow each item of support evidence, which is the reason why two or more quotes cannot be stuck together back-to-back-to-back.

A Strategy for Paragraph Development

- Identify the topic sentence or main idea of each paragraph (paragraphs only have one main idea). Using word processor software, type each of these in a list separate from the rest of your text, making sure each is a complete and focused thought.
- Under each sentence, indent and list the sources you intend to use as support – Note whether or not you will summarize, paraphrase, or quote them, and note the author and page where you found them. Find multiple types of support for each sentence.
- Under each type of source support, indent and describe how it connects to the evidence above and below it, and how it connects to the topic sentence.

A Rule about Length

Instead of asking how long a well developed paragraph should be, think of it in terms of cascading ideas:

- Do you have a clear topic sentence?
- Do you spend 2-3 sentences developing and discussing each component of that topic sentence in your own words and using your own arguments?
- Do you spend 3-4 sentences providing and discussing different types of support that have been properly documented for each of the 2-3 sentences that develop the topic sentence?

If you start adding the sentences, you discover that a well developed paragraph is not very short.

Idea Clarity

- In everything you write, clarity is essential. This means that what you write must be understood by the reader, who does not know exactly what you are thinking. Ideas must be spelled out completely and clearly, using accurate and correct words.
 - Know your terms – use the glossary in your book, definitions at the ends of chapters, and the dictionary (online or print) to find accurate and correct meanings.
 - Know the difference among signal phrase verbs in your in-text citations: An author who writes, states, says, suggests, argues, shows, illustrates, or proves does something different in each case – understand what the differences are!

Checklist

- For each paragraph in your draft, ask yourself the following questions and mark each part:
- Do I have a clear, focused topic sentence in each paragraph?
- Do I use multiple forms of support in each paragraph?
- Do I clearly discuss how each support item ties to the other support items and to the topic sentence?

Developing Paragraphs

Quiz

1. What are the component parts of any paragraph? (3 points)
2. Name three strategies for developing academic paragraph support. (3 points)
3. Quoted, paraphrased, or summarized evidence is part of what paragraph component? (1 point)
4. Discussion develops relationships between what parts of the paragraph or essay? (3 points)

Developing Paragraphs

Quiz (Answer #1)

1. What are the component parts of any paragraph? (3 points)
 1. Focusing Sentence (Topic sentence/Summarizing sentence)
 2. Support (Evidence/Proof)
 3. Discussion (Explanation/Analysis of Support)

Developing Paragraphs

Quiz (Answers #2 & #3)

2. Name four strategies for developing academic paragraphs. (4 points)

Answers from any of the following:

Data, facts, figures, charts, graphs, tables, illustrations, anecdotes, and descriptions

3. Quoted, paraphrased, or summarized evidence is part of what paragraph component? (1 point)

Support

Developing Paragraphs

Quiz (Answer #4)

4. Discussion develops relationships between what parts of the paragraph or essay? (3 points)
 1. Types of Support (Evidence/Proof)
 2. Focusing Sentence (Topic sentence/Summarizing sentence) and Support (Evidence/Proof)
 3. Paragraph Support/Focusing Sentence and Thesis (Main Point of Essay/Essay Purpose/ Goal of Paper)