

Many students will see a paragraph just as a group of sentences put together. This is inaccurate. The paragraph is the core of organized writing. It has a specific function defined by the writer, and the structure of the paragraph ought to support that function. The structure presented here is effective for analytical and argumentative writing and academic essays in general.

Here are the elements of a structured paragraph:

- **topic sentence**
explanation and/or clarification of topic sentence if needed
- **example**
- **analysis**

topic sentence

The topic sentence is a statement of what the paragraph will support or prove. It should be clear and direct, focusing on the important issues. It is the first sentence of the paragraph.

If I have been asked to write about my opinion, the topic sentence ought to state that opinion, but also give a reason for that belief. For example, "I think school uniforms are a good idea" is too broad as a topic sentence. You can write an entire essay on that topic, giving different reasons for that opinion. Here's a better one: "I think school uniforms are a good idea because they encourage students to focus on their studies." Remember that good writing is assertive—it answers the question "how" or "why."

In the case of literary analysis, the question usually asks you to say something about theme and technique. A specific theme and/or a specific technique ought to be named in the topic sentence, depending on the question. If you need to explain the use of metaphors in a poem, here is a good topic sentence: "The metaphors in the poem 'Lilacs' demonstrate that love can make someone immortal." Metaphors are a technique; "love can make someone immortal" is a theme.

If the paragraph is part of a longer essay, the topic sentence should be an aspect of the thesis statement, and the important words in the topic sentence should come directly out of the thesis statement. Here's an example:

thesis: Cats are better pets than dogs because they are easier to care for and less noisy.

topic sentence: One reason cats make better pets is because they are easy to care for.

The topic sentence should not introduce the example; it should identify one aspect of the thesis statement, and then use the example to illustrate that point.

explanation and/or clarification of topic sentence

In some cases, it may be useful to clarify, define or explain the ideas in your topic sentence. However, this is not always necessary. Consider your reader and what he or she might find confusing. For instance, if you are writing a literary essay and your English teacher is the reader, he has read the book, so you do not need to explain who major characters are. On the other hand, if your topic sentence is about the Boer Wars and the audience is your classmates who have probably not studied the war, a one-sentence summary might be useful.

example

You will generally prove your point through specific examples. If I want to show that power makes people behave a certain way, an example of a powerful person will prove that.

Here are some guidelines:

- The example should be about somebody doing something. "People often act crazy when they get power" is not an example. You need one person, like Robespierre, doing something, like cutting off people's heads.
- The example should provide enough detail to be clear and make the point you want to make and no more. In the above example, briefly tell who Robespierre was, what he did, and why he did it. You don't need to tell us his wife's name, where he was born, or that you think he was rude.

- In literary analysis, the examples might be passages from the text. In that case, explain the context--who said it (if a quotation of dialogue) and/or what was going on. As above, provide enough information to make your point and nothing else.
- Hypothetical examples are things that may not have exactly happened, but could have. I might say, "Suppose a man is walking down the street and is bitten by a dog." This is a good idea as long as it is likely that this could happen and that the behavior of the hypothetical people is typical of human behavior. A hypothetical situation involving unpredictable or insane behavior is not useful as an example.
- A negative example might be useful as well. If my topic sentence is that people should be careful when living in the city, I might use an example of someone who is not careful and the terrible things that happen to her.
- You can have more than one example in a paragraph, but analyze each one separately.

analysis

This is the most difficult part of the writing process: it is when you really have to show that you have something to say. Your job is to connect your example to the ideas in your topic sentence.

- The difference between good analysis and poor analysis is the ability to focus on details. If you use key words from both the example and the thesis, you are more likely to have strong, focused analysis.
- Remember that any detail mentioned in the example ought to be analyzed.
- Analysis should do more than summarize the information in the example. If that is all you need to do to make the connection to the topic sentence, then your topic sentence is too broad or not assertive enough.
- The analysis should also give a nice sense of closure or "wrap-up" to the paragraph by using the same words that appear in the first sentence. In a multi-paragraph essay, the next paragraph's topic sentence will probably use some of the same key words as the last sentence of the analysis, creating cohesion.

sample paragraphs

Question: Do you think teachers should give homework over holidays?

(topic sentence) Teachers should not give homework during holidays because holidays exist to give students a chance to do something besides focus on school. (explanation) If people thought students should be constantly involved in school, they wouldn't have created the holidays. (example) For instance, imagine that a student is very interested in electronics, but her school does not offer that as a class. She does her homework carefully and consistently, and so she does not have a chance to work on her own electronics projects. Holidays are her opportunity to work on those projects, but if she is required to do homework, she does not have a chance to do things that interest her. (analysis) This student needs holidays as a break from school so she can work on the things that interest her and will be valuable some day. If she did not have that time, she would not develop those skills. Many students have outside interests: sports, traveling, independent reading and religion, to name a few. Homework-free holidays give them a chance to work on those things without the worry of homework. If schools are meant to encourage life-long learning and want students to learn outside the classroom, then they should not assign homework for holidays.

Question: Analyze the symbol of the wall in Robert Frost's "The Mending Wall."

(topic sentence) In "The Mending Wall," Frost uses the metaphor of the wall to show the barriers people put up between each other are artificial and unnatural. (explanation) The metaphor of the wall represents social barriers in general, as the two men walk on their own sides of the wall, reconstructing a wall that serves no real purpose except to placate the insecurity of the neighbor, whose world view is summed up with the aphorism, "Good fences make good neighbors." (example) The fact that these walls are unnatural is emphasized in the first line, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." (analysis) Before the narrative about the wall starts, we already see that the wall is somehow artificial, and the vague word "something" suggests a general force of things in the world. (example) The speaker repeats this idea later to the neighbor: "'Something there is that doesn't love a wall, /That wants it down.'" (analysis) These lines suggest that the wall comes down of its own accord--that nature itself dislikes the wall. Indeed, the fact that they need to rebuild the wall every year reinforces that. The work involved of building the wall seems silly to the speaker because the act opposes natural forces without any seeming benefit. What Frost is suggesting is that the social and emotional separation from others so prevalent in the modern world is artificial, and perhaps we should not "set the wall between us once again."