Paragraphs

WHAT THEY ARE AND HOW TO USE THEM EFFECTIVELY

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WHAT IS A PARAGRAPH?

Just like words make up sentences, sentences make up paragraphs. A paragraph is a grouping of sentences that have a common theme. In a paper for a class, an introductory paragraph has sentences that all relate to introducing the topic: one sentence introduces the content area (for example: the book title), another introduces the relevance (the "why this fits the assignment"), and another introduces your thesis statement (for example: Through their attitudes, the characters on *Spongebob* show that it is important to have fun). *No matter where a paragraph comes in your paper, all of the sentences in a paragraph should relate strongly to one idea -- or a couple of closely-related ideas*.

THE COMPONENTS OF A PARAGRAPH

Let's go more in-depth and look at how a paragraph is formed. The first sentence, or one very close to the beginning, should orient the reader, letting them know just what it is they're about to read. This is called the topic sentence ("On Paragraphs"). The next part of a paragraph is the support. This is the bulk of the paragraph, with all the sentences helping you describe/support your topic. For ex.:

"People tie their identities with many things throughout their life -- a specific sports team, a home town, a certain club. Most people proudly state their high school, and then declare the name of their college with even more pride, becoming walking advertisements for their college with all their logoed apparel. I graduated high school, but I never separated it from my identity, as most young adults do. To this day I think first of Stillwater when people say school, instead of my college."

This is a longer example. Introductions don't always require so much text before the thesis, but notice that the sentences all work together. They build on each other. Once the reader has an understanding of the writer's experience, the introduction ends with the thesis:

"My high school had a powerful impact on my life, and I will defend its merit whenever it is challenged. John Taylor Gatto's piece "Against School" is an attack on the school system in general, a system that includes my high school. Call me the defender, because Gatto is wrong: school is completely necessary."

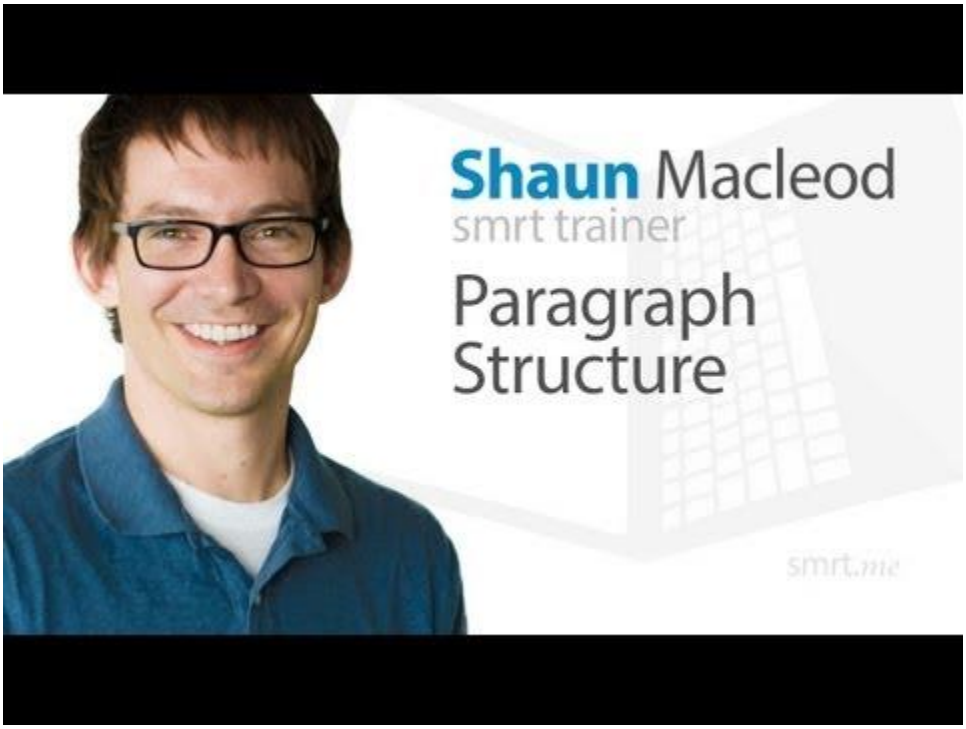
This introduction is complete, with a clear topic and a good preview of what the writer will prove.

Start each paragraph with a strong transition sentence: show us what's coming and suggest how it's connected to what came before. Avoid putting your transitions at the end of the paragraph, because we can't follow your thought through.

LET THE PARAGRAPH DO THE WORK, NOT THE SENTENCES.

Don't worry about making long, complex sentences. The benefit of writing a paragraph is that all of the sentences go together, to support one idea. Short sentences are good. They express things clearly. A paragraph of short, to-the-point sentences is usually better than one with long-winded sentences. Write the short sentences. Just remember to fully explain your point within the paragraph.

IF YOU WANT TO WATCH A VIDEO:



RESPONSE EXERCISE ONE

Watch this video on paragraphs. Summarize 2-3 you think are most helpful to you.

WHY ARE PARAGRAPHS IMPORTANT?

Imagine you're having a conversation with someone about dogs. If they start talking about birds in the middle of it, you become confused. Did you mention something that would make them think of birds? No. But the other person wanted to talk about them next, and moved on before you realized it. The conversation about dogs didn't really stop. Paragraphs work kind of the same way. If you're writing a paragraph about Spongebob, you can't just start writing about Squidward. If you did, it would read something like this:

"Spongebob's laugh is loud and childlike, expressing his amusement clearly. He laughs easily. Squidward is a blue octopus."

It seems off, doesn't it? The paragraph is about Spongebob, so talking about Squidward so suddenly disrupts the flow of it. In college papers, the flow of ideas is important. Teachers want to make sure that you can organize your thoughts, and then explain them clearly. Proper paragraphs, which focus on one main idea at a time, demonstrate that.

Take the theme we've been talking about: Spongebob. If you're writing a paper with the above thesis statement ("Through their attitudes, the characters on *Spongebob* show that it is important to have fun"), you could organize the paper like this:

- Introductory paragraph
- Paragraph on Spongebob's behavior
- Paragraph on Squidward's behavior
- Paragraph comparing Spongebob's and Squidward's behavior
- Concluding paragraph

See how each paragraph has a single idea? One paragraph is devoted to describing Spongebob, and explaining how he behaves. Another is dedicated to Squidward, explaining how he behaves. The two paragraphs have the same goal (explaining how the characters behave), but by keeping them separate, it's clearer than one big paragraph would be.

After explaining the behaviors of both Spongebob and Squidward in early paragraphs, THEN you can compare them! You can say something like "Spongebob's positive attitude makes him seem much happier than Squidward, and since Spongebob has more fun, it can be assumed that having fun makes a person happier."

College expectations: This is a very basic model, with only three body paragraphs. Most college writing requires more than three body paragraphs. A lot of the writing we do seems so hard because we try to fit it into the models we're used to. The most important part of writing any paper is expressing your idea clearly, and supporting it thoroughly. This might mean you have three paragraphs analyzing Spongebob, and only one for Squidward. It doesn't fit the models you know. It's okay for it to be that way.

RESPONSE EXERCISE TWO

Think of two characters from a TV show. How are they similar? How are they different? Make an outline for an essay that compares them, and separate the information into good paragraphs. Just list each main point and the supporting points you'll put in a paragraph with it. Remember that each paragraph focuses on one main idea.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I NEED TO USE A DIFFERENT PARAGRAPH?

Sometimes papers aren't as easy to organize as the Spongebob example. You might have a lot to say about one specific topic. If each paragraph is about one main idea, how do you keep it from becoming most of the paper?

The answer is thinking through what you're trying to say. Whenever there is a shift in what you're writing (even if it seems like the same topic), consider making it a different paragraph. ***Paragraphs are contained units of sentences, relating to one idea.*** A single topic can have different supporting ideas. Having multiple, smaller paragraphs that really go in-depth is much better than a single, large paragraph that doesn't really make your point. This shows the reader that you really know what you're writing about, and makes it easier for them to understand.

> Remember that reader! Thinking of the reader is important. Your paper is for them. As you write, you think of more things you want to say. You remember examples that would really help prove your point. Use them, and make the paper better. Part of the revision process is deciding where to put that new information you think of. Should you make it a new paragraph, or just add it in somewhere?

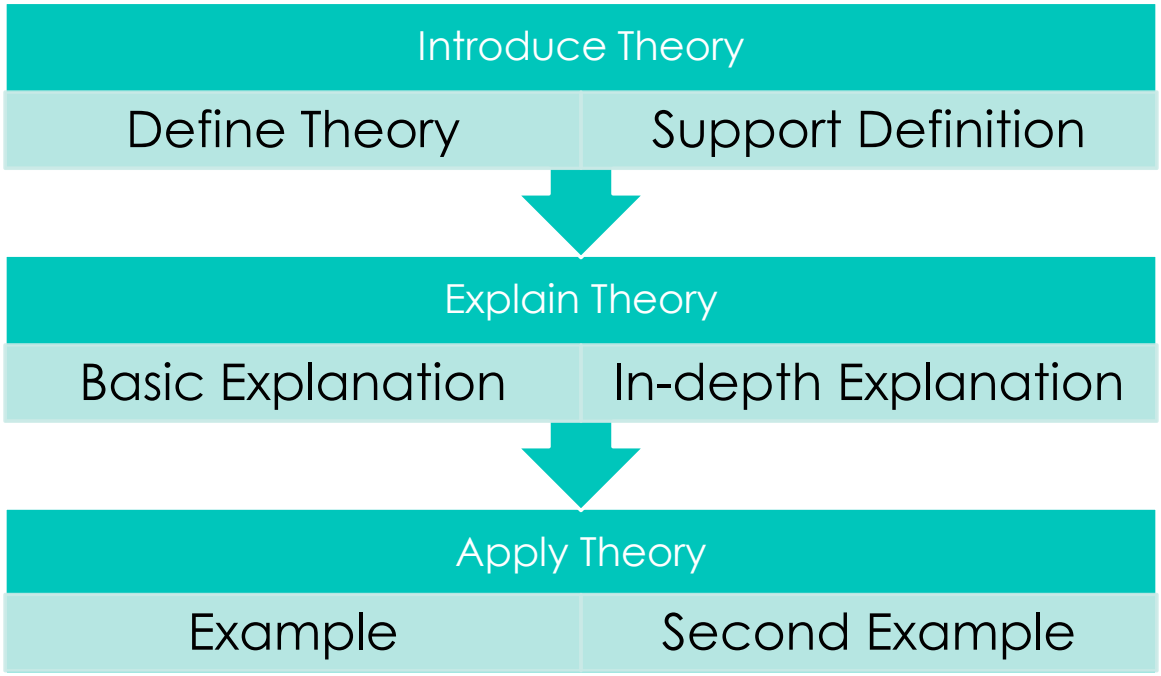
Usually if you're adding new information, you'll want to add a new paragraph. Whatever you add should be supported. A few sentences to support it should make a good paragraph.

Just remember to ***link all of the paragraphs together***, so the reader doesn't get lost in your examples and forget your main point. Use those transition sentences, and think about the flow of your paper. It's your responsibility to write a paragraph with good order, so that each sentence flows well from what comes before. Odds are if you can't follow it, the reader can't either.

PLANNING HOW YOU WILL HANDLE THE ASSIGNMENT

You might be given an assignment to define, explain, and apply a theory. The paper is on one theory, so how do you split that up into paragraphs? When possible, look at the question for help. This assignment says to "define, explain, and apply." It divides the tasks for you, so you know you can divide your paper into sections: one that defines, one that explains, and one that applies the theory. You've got it into smaller sections now, but you still need to use multiple paragraphs to keep it organized. So look at all of your information for the paper, and decide what fits together. If you can't make two facts go together, separate them into different paragraphs.

Your paper might be organized something like this, where each box is a paragraph within a section:



See how it flows? Each paragraph is focused on one point, and the paper will flow from naming and defining the theory to explaining it, and explaining it in-depth. The theory is only applied after it's been explained. This makes sense. If the reader doesn't know the theory, they can't apply it before it's explained to them. The order of the paragraphs is just as important as the content inside them. Make sure the reader can find the flow of your paper.

Another way to tell if you should use a new paragraph is by looking at it, once you're done writing it. If one paragraph is almost a page long, you may want to split it into two. Really big paragraphs can intimidate the reader, and run the risk of sounding repetitive ("On Paragraphs").

KEY: Whatever their length, each paragraph must discuss closely related points in an order that makes sense to your reader.

READY TO WRITE A PARAGRAPH?

If you keep these things in mind, your paragraphs will be strong and clear. But just in case you want a little more practice, try this exercise.

RESPONSE EXERCISE THREE

Let's test what you've learned, with two short assignments.

First: These short paragraphs have been switched around. Put them in their proper order.

1. Whatever people think about fanfiction, it has a profound effect on a lot of people. It impacts their literacy, and their emotional health. So what are you waiting for? Go read and write to your heart's content.
2. Every story you write improves your literacy. Your writing will change as you try to mimic your favorite character's speech and write things like a favorite episode would be written. Your own style will develop, and your skills will grow as a writer.
3. People can scoff when you tell them you write or read fanfiction. But there are two very different yet very important things that come of it. Fanfiction improves your literacy and helps you emotionally.
4. Fanfiction will help you emotionally. If you're mad about something that just happened to your favorite character, you can read a fanfiction about a happier time, or an altered version of events that leaves them unhurt. Reading about something you wish had happened, or even something that did happen but you didn't get the perspective of originally, can be therapeutic. Writing those things out can be even more so, because you can shape the characters and plot in whatever ways you need to. By the time you've read or finished writing the story, you'll likely feel better than you did before starting it.

Second: This paragraph is way too long. Split it up into more manageable paragraphs, each one with one main idea.

Spongebob Squarepants is a young adult famous for his eagerness and childish quirks. He has a very warm personality, evidenced by how easily he laughs. One of the main things his character teaches children is the importance of having fun. He loves his job as a fry cook at the Krusty Krab, and has fun at work. He talks to Squidward when he gives him the plate of food. He looks at the customers and says hello to his friends, when they stop by. He makes it a game, cleaning the dishes. Most people don't have a lot of fun at work. Spongebob's eager and positive attitude lets him have all the fun he wants, working at the Krusty Krab. Spongebob also has fun with more leisurely activities like jellyfishing and karate. He goes jellyfishing with his best friend Patrick, content to run around with a simple net for hours on end. They don't catch any jellyfish a lot of the time, but Spongebob never lets it take away from his fun. He's good at that. He practices karate with Sandy Cheeks. He and Sandy have a good time sparring with each other, but Spongebob makes even more of a game out of it by trying to sneak up on her. They try to surprise each other with karate moves, popping up out of nowhere to scare each other. Spongebob could just spar her. Instead, he tries to take as much enjoyment out of the process as he can. Spongebob could lead a very boring life. He has a full time job. He doesn't have his driver's license, and he lives alone with his pet snail. But he is so eager to succeed and enjoy himself that he finds the fun in every situation. He is an optimistic individual with a smile constantly on his face, and that makes a difference in his life. The optimism Spongebob has really shows how having fun impacts his life, especially when he's compared to Squidward. Squidward has a similar lifestyle to Spongebob, but tends to be more pessimistic. He doesn't find the fun in working at the Krusty Krab, or going jellyfishing, and overall seems to enjoy himself less. He is stressed a lot of the time. He is not as happy as Spongebob, mainly because he doesn't have as much fun. Children are less drawn to Squidward's character because of this, while they love Spongebob. Spongebob teaches children that it is important – and beneficial – to have fun.

HERE ARE A FEW OTHER RESOURCES ON PARAGRAPHS, IF YOU WANT MORE INFORMATION.

"On Paragraphs." The Purdue OWL . Purdue U Writing Lab. Web. 12 Oct. 2018. https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/paragraphs_and_paragraphing/index.html

"Paragraphs." The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Web. 12 Oct. 2018. https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/paragraphs/

"Paragraph Structure." Writing Commons. https://writingcommons.org/chapters/the-writing-process/drafting/paragraph-structure

Note: We are improving this handout all the time. Please send us your feedback and watch for updated versions on our Writers' Block "Handouts" page.