

# Paragraphs

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## BASICS: WHAT PARAGRAPHS ARE AND HOW TO USE THEM EFFECTIVELY

SUNY POTSDAM COLLEGE WRITERS' BLOCK

### The Heart of a Paragraph

A paragraph is a grouping of sentences that have a common theme. In academic writing, it is the paragraph that shapes your ideas and information about your topic for the reader's understanding. Proving that you understand the topic is the primary reason you write college papers. You show your understanding by how you express and organize the sentences to make clear, focused paragraphs.

You should take time to reread and revise your paragraphs. As you write a paper, your understanding grows deeper, and you're better able to write your ideas clearly. So go back and improve your paragraphs.

### The Purpose of a Paragraph

Each paragraph serves a different purpose in your paper. For example, an introductory paragraph introduces your topic to the reader, body paragraphs explain in more depth, and a conclusion sums up what you have written.

*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.*

Paragraphs stay on the same topic throughout. If you're writing a paragraph about Spongebob, you can't just start writing about Squidward in the middle of your paragraph. 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? In college papers, the flow of ideas is important. Teachers want to make sure that you can organize your thoughts and explain them clearly. Proper paragraphs require you to focus on stating and explaining one main idea at a time; your focus and explanation demonstrate your good understanding.

## The Elements of a Paragraph

Let's go more in-depth and look at how a paragraph is formed, starting with the intro. The first sentence or two should familiarize the reader with the topic they're about to read. This is called the topic sentence ("On Paragraphs"). Be sure to keep these brief and interesting to pull in your reader's attention. Here's an example of a topic sentence:

*Topic sentence: "People tie their identities with many things throughout their life -- a specific sports team, a home town, a certain club."*

The topic sentence gets the reader interested. It leads the reader toward your details that come in your supporting sentences.

Now that your topic sentence has gotten the reader intrigued about your specific point, they should be ready to learn about what comes next. Each supporting sentence builds on the one that came before, in a clear, logical order. An example of these supporting sentences for topic sentence above (in blue) can be seen below:

*Supporting sentences: "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."*

The last sentence or so of the introductory paragraph will be the thesis. A *thesis* is a statement made by the writer that they are trying to prove. What is your belief on the topic? How are you going to persuade your reader? Introduce your source here and give the reader your point of view on the matter. Like this:

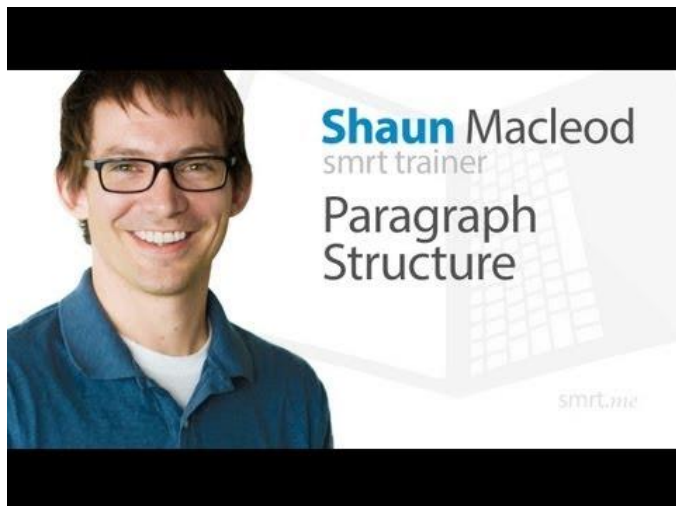
*Thesis: "My high school had a powerful impact on my life, and I will defend its merit whenever it is challenged. John Taylor Gatto's piece 'Against School' is an attack on the school system in general, a system that includes my high school. Call me the defender, because Gatto is wrong: school is completely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

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

### OTHER PARAGRAPH WRITING TIPS:

- **Start each paragraph with a strong transition sentence to connect to previous material.**
- **Avoid transitions at the end of the paragraph; put them at start.**
- **Don't worry about making long, complex sentences:** Short sentences are your friend! Long sentences can express more than one idea and become confusing. (As you advance, though, try them out.)

## RESPONSE EXERCISE ONE:



### Activity:

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

## Standard Flow of Paragraphs in your Paper

When writing paragraphs, it is good to know a basic method for mapping out your points through paragraphs. Imagine you are telling your reader a story, and the events must unfold in a way that makes sense. Ask yourself "How should my ideas unfold? What steps do I have to take to fulfill the assignment?"

Take the theme we've been talking about: Spongebob. If you're writing a paper trying to prove the thesis statement that the characters' behaviors suggest it is important to have fun, a way you might choose to organize the paper can be seen below:

- 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? There are separate paragraphs devoted to describing each character and how they behave to introduce them. Only after both characters are introduced can they be compared. This is done as a way to keep the paper organized.

**College expectations: This is a very basic model, with only three body paragraphs. Most college writing requires more than three body paragraphs.** 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. **The golden rule is to have as many body paragraphs as needed to explain your argument.**

## 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.

### When to Start a New 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 one huge paragraph that dominates the paper?

The answer is thinking through what you're trying to say. Remember, **paragraphs are contained units of sentences relating to ONE idea**. A single topic will usually have different supporting ideas. Therefore, once there is a shift in your topic, consider making it a different paragraph. Multiple, smaller paragraphs that really go into some depth are much better than a single, long-winded paragraph. They're much easier for your reader to understand.

Remember that reader! Thinking of the reader is important. Your paper is for them. As you write, you think of more things to say and better ways to explain what you have already said. You remember examples that help to prove your point. Use these new ideas to 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 to an existing paragraph? Both are good options, but you have to decide what will be most clear for the reader.

Referring to page 2, remember to use your transition sentences. Transition sentences link all your paragraphs together and help them flow. 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.

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"). When you break up a long paragraph, be sure that each of your new paragraphs is complete and focused.

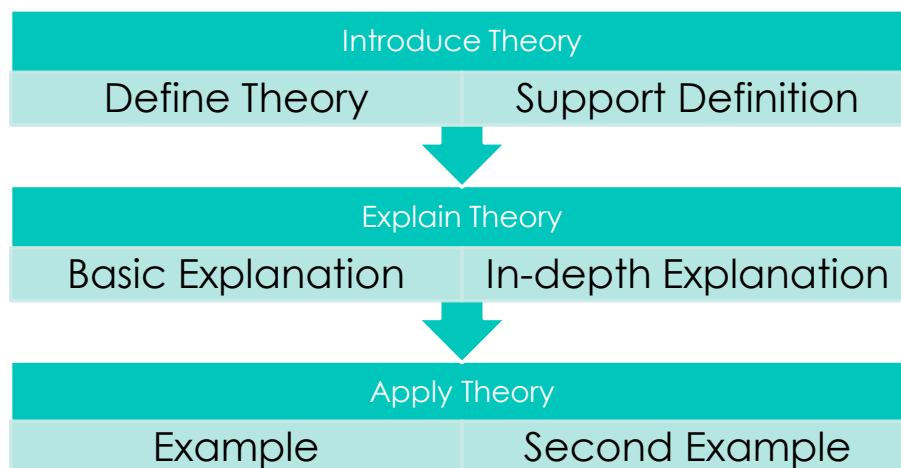
We'll help you practice this in a minute.

## Make an Organizational Plan based on the Assignment

Let's say you are 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. Analyze the assignment to make sure you understand exactly what you need to do. 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 of the six light green boxes is a paragraph within one of the three sections:



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, then giving examples. 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. The order of the paragraphs is just as important as the content inside them.

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

## **RESPONSE EXERCISE THREE**

Let's test what you've learned with two short exercises. **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.

## MORE INFORMATION

["On Paragraphs."](#) The Purdue OWL . Purdue U Writing Lab. Web. 12 Oct. 2018.

["Paragraphs."](#) The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Web. 12 Oct. 2018.

["Paragraph Structure."](#) Writing Commons.

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.

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