

# THE PARAGRAPH

Typically, writers indent the first line of a group of sentences; this indented block of sentences is called a paragraph. The 5-space indentation from the left-hand margin provides a visual clue that directs the readers' attention to the organization of the complete text. Paragraphing is an important part of the drafting and revising stages in the writing process. Writers paragraph for different reasons:

- to introduce a subject and to set the context for a longer piece of writing
- to indicate a shift in focus or to introduce a new idea that supports the essay's thesis
- to draw attention to all important claims or ideas that the writer wants to emphasize
- to break up a long paragraph so that the text can be read more easily
- to make transitions between sections of an essay or longer piece of prose, directing the reader from one point to another
- to maintain the reader's interest
- to set off dialogue or conversation
- to summarize or to conclude a text

For purposes of discussion and teaching, paragraphs can be classified as *topic sentence paragraphs* or *functional paragraphs*. *Topic sentence paragraphs*, sometimes called developmental paragraphs, are composed of groups of sentences that develop, support, and explain one main idea or "controlling" idea. All other kinds of paragraphing fall into the functional category.

## TOPIC SENTENCE PARAGRAPHS

In academic writing, topic sentence paragraphs are the most common body paragraphs in essays. Each topic sentence paragraph has a topic sentence, a sentence that states the main idea of the paragraph. The remaining sentences in a topic sentence paragraph are the support sentences that develop, discuss, and explain the main idea of the paragraph. Support sentences relate back to the idea stated in the topic sentence by providing examples, by defining terms, by explaining details, or by illustrating the point in some other way.

### Myths of Topic Sentence Paragraphs

- **Myth:** "Topic sentence paragraphs should contain X number of sentences."
- **Reality:** There is no magic number of support sentences in a topic sentence paragraph. However, some teachers may require paragraphs with at least a minimum number of sentences as a teaching device to help students learn to develop their ideas. As students become more skillful writers, they will then be able to make informed decisions on paragraph length. Also, in academic writing, a short topic sentence paragraph may suggest that the writer has not provided enough details.
- **Myth:** "The topic sentence should always be the first sentence in the paragraph."
- **Reality:** The topic sentence may be the first sentence, the second sentence of a paragraph, or the last sentence of a paragraph. The topic sentence may even be implied rather than stated directly. *However, in academic writing, the topic sentence usually comes at the beginning of the paragraph.* Your teachers and your readers may expect that placement.

## Sample Topic Sentence Paragraph

The Topic Sentence states the main idea of the paragraph.

Support Sentences provide examples and details to develop the main idea.

Concluding Sentence reinforces the topic sentence.

*Cars in the college parking lot reflect the diversity of people at the school.* There are beat-up old cars, some with no bumpers, near several vans. There are one or two new sports cars like BMWs; they might belong to the few lucky students with rich and generous parents. Other kinds include SUV s and older people's cars such as Volvos and Cadillacs. In addition, the parking lot holds a few racing cars, modified and brightly striped. What is inside the cars is as revealing as the cars themselves. Some cars have elaborate sound systems for music lovers who can't drive without pounding sound. Others must belong to parents because they have a baby stroller or baby seat inside. Many are filled with empty paper cups or food wrappers since busy students have to eat on the run. Bumper stickers also tell a story. Many cars have stickers; some are for clubs, like Morrison Athletic Club, while others have a message, such as, "Give Blood: Save Lives" or "Animals: It's Their World, Too." Some stickers brag that the driver is the "Proud Parent of an Honor Student at Grove Elementary School" or is "Single-and Loving It." *A walk through the parking lot hints that this college is a place for all ages, backgrounds, and interests.*

## FUNCTIONAL PARAGRAPHS

Writers paragraph for reasons other than to indicate a shift in ideas. For instance, a writer might separate a dense passage into two or more paragraphs so that the reader can more easily process complex information. So paragraphs can be used:

- to break up a paragraph that seems too long (or to keep all paragraphs in the piece of writing about the same length)
- to add drama to the writing, thereby keeping the reader's attention
- to serve as transitions from one point to the next
- to set off conversational dialogue
- to emphasize a point, to develop an example, or to add details **Other examples:** the path moving up the mountain, skipping over puddles; trees clinging to the steep sides; winter was fast asleep; the wind was howling; the thunder growled.

## Sample Functional Paragraph (Dialogue)

"What used to be here?" I ask a sullen girl next to me on our way ... to lunch.

"The electric chair," says she.

At night I have nightmares about the electric chair; and about all the people reputedly "fried" in it. I am afraid of the school, where all the students seem to be budding criminals.

"What's the matter with your eye?" they ask, critically.

When I don't answer (I cannot decide whether it was an "accident" or not), they shove me, insist on a fight.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Walker, Alice. "Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self." *50 Essays: A Portable Anthology*. Ed. Samuel Cohen. Bedford St. Martin's: Boston, 2007. 444.