

How Do I Write a Coherent Paragraph?

Topic Sentences

The topic sentence is not the thesis of your paper. Rather, it is the controlling idea in a paragraph.

- ✓ If you have five paragraphs in your paper, you'll have five topic sentences in your paper, one for each paragraph.
- ✓ Taken within the specific context of the paragraph, the topic sentence serves as the sub-thesis of that paragraph.
- ✓ Typically the topic sentence will begin the paragraph; the rest of the paragraph ought then to support whatever claim you've made in that topic sentence.
- ✓ Anything not specifically related to that topic sentence DOES NOT BELONG (see section on paragraph coherence/unity) and ought to be removed.
- ✓ In those rare instances when a topic sentence ENDS a paragraph, it ordinarily serves a rhetorical effect: you may choose to begin with a particularly compelling anecdote or series of facts, after which a topic sentence could serve as a conclusion drawn from the information preceding it.

Things to Watch For:

- ✓ A topic sentence gives a paragraph its "point." If you can't identify the "point" of a particular paragraph in any of its sentences, then you need to work on developing a better topic sentence.
- ✓ If there are really two ideas battling for space in the paragraph, make two paragraphs with two topic sentences.
- ✓ Avoid generalities: a topic sentence that is too broad is impossible to support in a single paragraph.
- ✓ Often, topic sentences do double-duty as transitions between paragraphs; however, a transition is not necessarily a topic sentence, nor does simply including a topic sentence at the beginning of a paragraph provide a smooth transition (see section on transitions).

Paragraph Development

Paragraph development happens as a direct result of proper formation of topic sentences.

There are several forms of paragraph development, a couple of which are discussed below:

1. Extended anecdote/example

This is the simplest, most straightforward way to develop a paragraph. Say your thesis is that seatbelts save lives. You may want to start your argument with a little morality tale about the star quarterback in high school who squandered a potential career with the Steelers because he wasn't wise enough to wear his seatbelt. You ought to be able to do this in a paragraph, and the paragraph should contain no extraneous details (like how cute he was, how many touchdown passes he threw, even where he was headed when the

accident happened—unless it has bearing on the seatbelt usage). Ideas to develop are his feelings about seatbelts, his motivations for not wearing them, what happened to him because he didn't have a seatbelt on, and what might have been had he been wearing the belt. These ideas will stand you in good stead as you move on to a broader argument (one isolated anecdote won't be enough) in favor of seatbelt usage. You'll also have some ready-made transitions to major points, because you can refer back to your example of the poor quarterback.

2. A series of facts and/or smaller anecdotes

Here you may cite, without elaboration, numerous examples: the class president, the star quarterback, the captain of the chess team, etc., all of whom failed to wear their seatbelts for one reason or another and all of whose lives were ruined. Here, the idea is not depth, as in the extended example, but breadth: look at all these lives ruined by failing to buckle up. Or you might talk about relevant statistics in a paragraph on seatbelt and non-seatbelt fatalities, using local, state, or federal studies on the relationship of seatbelt use to safety. Details, facts, examples, or arguments all go to support a thesis, and each has a distinct function in an essay, one that ought to be recognized within its own paragraph.

Things to Watch For:

- ✓ Stay on the topic introduced in the topic sentence.
- ✓ In other words, don't shift from Department of Motor Vehicles statistics to a tearful tribute to the potential athletic prowess of the star quarterback within the same paragraph. That will destroy the unity and coherence of your paragraph and obscure your "point."

Paragraph Coherence/Unity

Good topic sentences promote, first and foremost, unity. Say you're writing a paragraph about famous people who should have worn seatbelts but didn't, and then suddenly, out of nowhere, you begin sermonizing about the dangers of driving under the influence of alcohol. No one can argue the sincerity and basic truth of your point, but—here's an important thing to remember—it's not your topic in this paragraph. It may seem related, but the chances are this doesn't belong anywhere in your essay on why people should wear seatbelts. This is incoherence.

How do you write a unified paragraph?

- ✓ The topic sentence is key.
- ✓ Just as the thesis is the guide by which you may refer back and see that your entire paper is unified or coherent, so the topic sentence is the guide to which you may refer to establish that the sentence in question—within a specific paragraph—is not on a different, however related, topic.

Example:

If your PAPER is on seatbelt use, it's not enough that each of your paragraphs stays on the topic of automobile operation. Each paragraph ought to deal with a particular aspect of why wearing seatbelts saves lives, and ONLY that paragraph ought to deal with that particular aspect.

Things to Watch For:

- ✓ Within the same paragraph, transitional words and phrases like “Another consideration is...” or “Conversely” or “On the other hand” or “Additionally” signal a shift in the argument from one idea to the next: time for a new paragraph—you’ve even devised a transition.
- ✓ Transitional phrases typically designate movement not only between ideas but also between the paragraphs that contain the ideas.
- ✓ Watch especially for when you come to a sentence that has you asking “Where did that come from?” or has your wondering if that idea wasn’t what you were really getting at in another paragraph in your essay.