

Tips for Paragraph Writing

- 1) **BACKGROUND:** When writing a paragraph in isolation, you must assume that your reader has no knowledge of your topic. This does not mean that you need to give a five sentence background each time you write, but you need to identify important elements and provide your readers with the necessary background information to ensure that your paragraphs make sense.
- 2) **VARY TOPIC AND CONCLUDING SENTENCES:** Some writers prefer to list the ideas they will present in their paragraph in their topic sentence; be sure you do not list the ideas in both the topic sentence *and* in your concluding sentence. You need to provide **variety** in your sentence forms, especially in your topic and concluding sentences which often discuss the same ideas. An example of this kind of sentence is, “Important characteristics of an effective fishbowl discussion include participants who listen carefully, who are patient when waiting to speak, and who support their claims with evidence from the book.”
- 3) **BE CLEAR AND EXPLAIN YOUR IDEAS:** Make sure all of your statements are clear, thoroughly explained, and connect to your topic sentence. It will usually, though not always, take *at least* two sentences to clearly communicate your idea to a reader.
- 4) **SUMMARIZING:** Be careful that your paragraph is not a full page long. A paragraph should be five to seven sentences long (approximately 200 words). If you are writing long paragraphs, look for ways to combine sentences and summarize your ideas. You will not be able to include *every* idea that you have on a topic in one paragraph, so prioritize your ideas and choose the ones you want to include; too many ideas in one paragraph can confuse your reader.
- 5) **TOPIC SENTENCE:** Does your topic sentence include both the *subject* of your paragraph and *your claim about that subject*? Be careful you don’t fall into the trap of writing two sentences instead of one, like this: “Christopher’s mother left her family. She felt guilty, irresponsible, and regretful.” Instead, you should write, “Christopher’s mother left her family because she felt guilty...”
- 6) **PROOFREAD YOUR PAPER:** Argh. Yes, that means you. Did you *really* proofread it?
- 7) **SPACING:** Double-space your paper so that your reader has space to make comments.
- 8) **TRANSITIONS:** Use transitions to shift between ideas in your paragraph to help your reader identify your different ideas. For example, use transitions like **one example, another example, also, in addition**, etc. Also, be sure that you remind your reader what you are explaining: “Another example of a good fishbowl discussion is listening” as opposed to, “Another example is listening.” Be sure you remind your reader what you are writing about.
- 9) **CONCLUDING SENTENCE:** Be careful not to include any new information in your concluding sentence. Your concluding sentence summarizes information you have already given your reader.
- 10) **SENTENCE VARIETY:** Do your sentences have different lengths? Rhythms? How did you combine your sentences? Can any of your sentences be combined to help your paper flow?
- 11) **MATCHING ELEMENTS OF PARAGRAPH:** Be sure that your topic sentence, supporting ideas, and concluding sentence all focus on the same idea. The clearer you are about the idea you are trying to communicate, the clearer your reader will be.