

How to Survive.....

Paragraph Composition

Somewhere between the art of good writing and the science of rational argument lies the humble paragraph. When well-written, a paragraph seamlessly develops an argument, defines important issues, and excites the reader's attention. When poorly composed, a paragraph is a set of loosely connected threads; each trailing into different directions leaving the reader to find the links. In essence, poor paragraphs *raise questions*; good ones *deal with them*.

In order to write clear, coherent paragraphs, you need to establish LOGICAL and VERBAL CONNECTIONS between sentences and ideas.

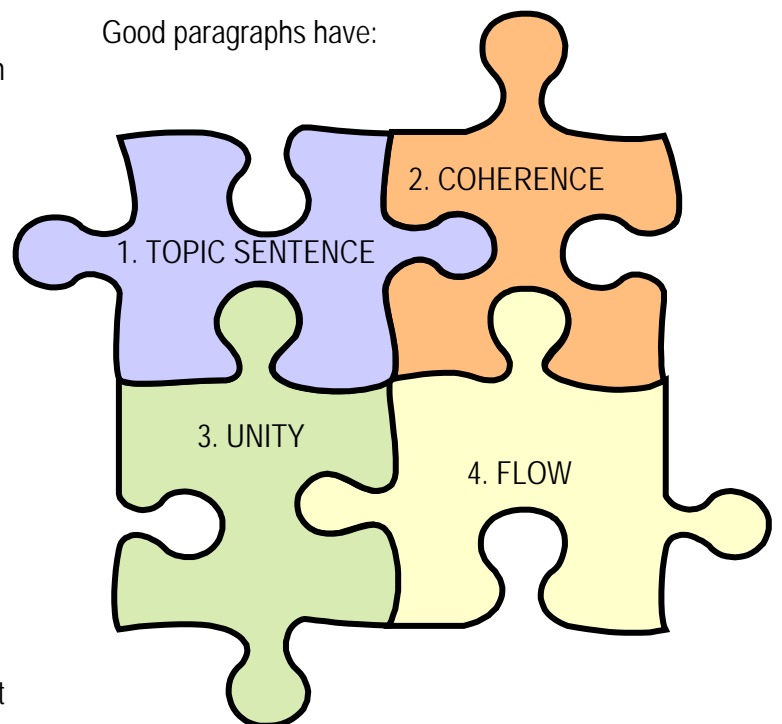
Logical connections are cognitive. This means that the **idea** of each sentence must link to and develop the **idea** of the previous one. This is how paragraphs **make sense**.

Verbal connections refer to words on the page, known as **transitions**. Transitions are words and phrases that indicate relationships between sentences.

Some useful transitions:

Consequently ... Hence ...
Thus, ... On the other hand ...
Firstly ... secondly ... and finally ...
As a result ... In addition ...
I will now consider ... That is ...
However ... Further ...

Good paragraphs have:



1. **Topic Sentence:** indicates the "main idea" by specifying what you will discuss and why.
2. **Unity:** each sentence supports and links to the main idea.
3. **Coherence:** develop a strong point by making clear, logical connections every step of the way.
4. **Flow:** paragraphs are easy to read when they use transitions to show what is happening, and what will happen next.

Use academic sources to qualify your main idea

A good paragraph uses evidence to “back up” the main idea or proposition. However, it is not enough to simply quote an author. You must first consider the validity of the source (book/article/website).¹ If your source is reputable, select a quote that is clear, succinct and relevant to your main idea. You must then integrate the quote by showing your reader why you have decided to include it. Thus, before and after a quote, always make a comment that shows the reader why the quote is there (definition/explanation/counter-argument) and include your interpretation of the quote. For example:

According to Epstein and Steinberg’s analysis of the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, “there is an explicit commitment to combat prejudice and discrimination” (Epstein 1998: 81). **By extension, I argue that**

Let’s see this quote in a complete paragraph²:

The *Oprah Winfrey Show* inspires its viewers to become compassionate, caring citizens. The power of this daytime talk-show is its assumption that improvement of the individual self correlates to the general improvement of society. According to Epstein and Steinberg’s analysis of the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, “there is an explicit commitment to combat prejudice and discrimination” (Epstein 1998: 81). By extension, I argue that the “explicit commitment” mentioned by Epstein and Steinberg is founded in the show’s attitude to social change. Rather than looking to social institutions for advances in social equality and the curbing of prejudices, *Oprah* viewers are asked to look *within*. This attitude reflects the culture of the “self-help” industry, in which individuals are encouraged to take responsibility for their own behaviour and happiness. “Self-help” depends on the idea that people can improve themselves through will and commitment, and is an idea that is only a few hundred years old. The *Oprah* show uses this ideal of individual fortune to develop its commitment to social harmony. Thus, in my view, the *Oprah Winfrey Show* is at the peak of the “self-help” phenomenon.

Topic sentence introduces main idea.

Quote is introduced and referenced (using MLA style).

The writer’s claim (position) is made clear.

Transition used to indicate a conclusion.

2nd sentence links to first by expanding the main idea

Quote is commented upon.

Discussion makes logical links between key terms “individual” ~ “self-help” and “society” ~ “social change”.

Other useful resources:

- Survival Guides: “*Writing Academic Paragraphs in 6 Steps*”; “*Structuring Academic Essays*”; “*Critical Writing*”; “*Structuring Essay Arguments*”; “*Avoiding Plagiarism*”.
- Kane, Thomas S. *The New Oxford Guide to Writing*. Oxford; New York: Oxford UP, 1988.
- McCrimmon, James M. *Writing With a Purpose*. 7th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980.
- Pirie, David. *How To Write Critical Essays*. London: Methuen, 1985. Library: LLRS EA 100

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¹ See our “Thinking Critically” Survival Guide

² This paragraph is referenced in MLA style. You must use the appropriate style for your faculty.