



Paragraph Pointers

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The following ideas may help you improve your writing, especially if you have the self-discipline to get your paper done a bit in advance, so you have time for editing your own work.

1. Topic sentences. In expository writing, the first sentence in each paragraph is almost always what we call the topic sentence—because it identifies the topic of the paragraph. But a topic sentence should do more: first, identify the subject matter of the paragraph; second, say something. A weak topic sentence loses the reader's interest; a strong one gains it. A strong topic sentence is one that is arguable or debatable, perhaps even controversial. Regardless, it commits you to support your statement—with facts, examples, quotes, logic—in the rest of the paragraph. Here's a weak topic sentence: "There are many different reasons why President Bush won the 2004 election" (says nothing). Strong: "President Bush was reelected primarily because of his successful appeals to middle-class, family-oriented voters" (now you can give your evidence).
2. Paragraph length. Nobody will admit it publicly, but the standard paragraph length in English writing (except for journalism, where one- and two-sentence paragraphs are the norm) is somewhere between 2½" and 5" (double-spaced), or roughly ¼-½ page. If your paragraph is longer, divide it in two with appropriate adjustments. If shorter, combine it with another. Check topic sentence and transitions.
3. Paragraph unity. Everything in the paragraph should relate to the topic identified in your topic sentence. Unrelated material is distracting and should be cut or moved to a different paragraph.
4. Combine short sentences. Any sentence shorter than one line (one line is the distance from the left margin to the right) should be looked at with suspicion, unless you can justify a shorty for dramatic effect ("Eek!"). Two consecutive short sentences are almost certainly going to seem choppy. Figure out a way to combine the two sentences into one. You can use semicolons, conjunctions such as *and* and *but*, subordinating conjunctions such as *although* and *because*, and transitional elements like *however* and *therefore*. Don't forget to check for correct punctuation form with each of these.
5. Transitions. Every sentence should have some kind of transition that ties it to the sentence before. Even topic sentences often have a transitional element (a word, phrase, or clause) to indicate how the new paragraph relates to the preceding one (note the difference between a sentence or a paragraph that begins "In addition" and one beginning "On the other hand,"). A common kind of transition is the use of introductory words, phrases, and clauses, such as *Thus*, *In addition*, "Opposing this argument is . . ." or "Because the evidence is lacking or incomplete, . . ." (note the required comma after most introductory elements). Other transitional devices include pronouns, both personal (*he*, *she*) and demonstrative (*this*, *that*), repetition of key terms such as "this idea" (but don't overdo it or you'll be repetitive), relative pronouns like *which* and *that*, and many others. Avoid *this* (what I call the "naked this") without a following noun, as in "This explains why...." It's always ambiguous.