

Paragraph Focus as Signposting



When is a paragraph? Arthur Stern asked this question in his 1976 article¹. He removed the paragraph breaks from a passage from a book on writing style, presented the passage to over one hundred English teachers, and asked them to identify the paragraphs. Only five chose the same paragraph breaks as the original authors.

What we learn from this is that paragraph breaks are a rhetorical choice the writer makes. Rhetorical choices convey meaning, because they're not just about following rules or adhering to conventions. When you end one paragraph and start the next one, you're telling your reader something about your ideas. Paragraphs, topic sentences, and closing sentences are all examples of signposting--telling your reader something about how your ideas fit together.

What does paragraphing tell readers? How does paragraphing work in academic papers?

- A paragraph tells your reader the ideas within the paragraph share a purpose or function in the essay, and these ideas are more connected to each other than to the ideas in other paragraphs in this essay.
- Starting a new paragraph tells your reader you've completed one purpose or function in your essay, and are beginning another one. The blank space between paragraphs gives your reader a chance to think about what they've read so far, and consider how those ideas might continue developing.
- In public persuasive writing as well as scholarly writing, each paragraph has its own function in an essay. That is, each paragraph should add something different from any other paragraph in the essay.
- A paragraph's function goes beyond its topic (what it's about) and includes why it's there (so what? why does the reader need to know that information?).
- A paragraph's function is always related to the message of the essay overall: the paragraph should contribute something to that message, and that contribution is the function of the paragraph.
- Paragraph functions might be, in general: to establish an idea that others have talked about; to explain a problem; to analyze a particular piece of data; to explain a method; to introduce a key source, text (including non-written compositions, like film or artwork), or idea.
- Both public and scholarly writing (including business writing) usually use topic sentences, though sometimes public writing leaves the topic sentence out—the message of the paragraph is implicit, rather than explicitly stated in one or two sentences you can point to.
- Topic sentences usually come at the beginning or end of a paragraph. In academic writing, it is most common for a topic sentence to occur in the first or second sentence of a paragraph, to introduce the paragraph's topic and function. See below for more details about topic sentences.
- Closing sentences are also common in public and scholarly writing, to summarize the message of the paragraph before the reader moves to the next one. See below for more details about closing sentences.
- Academic paragraphs are usually at least 5 sentences: a topic sentence that introduces the function of the paragraph, two or three sentences that establish ideas (for example, one sentence each for three sources that say something about the major idea of the paragraph; another example, one sentence with data such as a quote, and two or three sentences explaining the significance of that data to the claim in the topic sentence and also the essay's argument) and a closing sentence.

¹ Stern, A. (1976). When is a paragraph. *College Composition and Communication*. National Council of Teachers of English. Vol. 27, No. 3, pp. 253-257. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/357044>.

- Academic paragraphs in the Humanities are usually between 100 and 250 words long; in the sciences and social sciences, they tend to be shorter, concisely addressing one specific idea and staying under 100 words (often 50-75 words).

What's the deal with topic sentences?

- The topic sentence functions as a mini-argument for your paragraph. It previews the argument and evidence for the paragraph. By proving topic sentences, you prove your main argument bit by bit.
- The topic sentence need not be the first sentence of the paragraph, but for formal analytic writing, it is customary for it to be within the first one to three sentences of the paragraph.
- The topic sentence should clearly articulate a part of the argument. One way to think about this is to imagine your reader's hypothetical question "Why are you telling me this?" after reading the paragraph, and using the topic sentence to answer.
- The topic sentence should ideally transition from the previous paragraph's argument with a minimum of mental whiplash, connecting the ideas from the previous paragraph to the progression of the argument in the current paragraph.
- Once you have a topic sentence, you should filter every idea in the paragraph through the goals expressed in the topic sentence, to make sure the paragraph's ideas all coherently develop and/or support the topic sentence and, through the topic sentence, support the main argument.
- It can be helpful to use an argument list (list of points you need to prove to prove your main argument) to determine what information should be in topic sentences.
- You may also find a post-draft outline (brief summary of the ideas covered in each paragraph) helpful for determining the focus of a paragraph and how it fits into the main argument; you can then use that information in your topic sentence.

Do I need closing sentences, too?

- In the absence of an opening topic sentence, the closing sentence states the message of the paragraph, and could be called the topic sentence. This strategy is more common in public writing than in scholarly writing, though it can be found in both areas.
- If there is an opening topic sentence, usually the topic sentence connects to the thesis, while the closing sentence connects the paragraph ideas to the larger context of the main argument (the "so what" of the thesis).
- The closing sentence synthesizes the ideas of the paragraph into one neat package.
- The closing sentence gives the opening sentence of the next paragraph a place to connect, since both usually will connect to the main argument—so, closing sentence connects to argument connects to topic sentence—helping with transitions and flow between paragraphs.