

Basic Structure

Expository paragraphs deal with facts, ideas, beliefs. They explain, analyze, **define**, compare, illustrate. They answer questions like What? Why? How? What was the cause? The effect? Like what? Unlike what? They are the kinds of paragraph we write in reports or term papers or tests.

The term *paragraph* has no simple definition. Occasionally a single sentence or even a word may serve as an emphatic paragraph. Conventionally in composition, however, a paragraph is a group of sentences developing a common idea, called the *topic*.

An expository paragraph is essentially an enlargement of a subject/predicate pattern like "Dogs bark." But the subject is more complicated and needs to be expressed in a clause or sentence, called the *topic statement*, which is usually placed at or near the beginning. The **predicate**—that is, what is asserted about the **topic**—**requires** several sentences. These constitute the body of the paragraph, developing or supporting the topic in any of several ways, ways we shall study in subsequent chapters.

No one can say how long a paragraph should be. Subject, purpose, audience, editorial fashion, and individual preference, all affect the length and complexity of paragraphs. As a rough rule of thumb, however, you might think of expository

paragraphs in terms of 120 or 150 words. If most of your paragraphs fall below 100 words—50 or 60, say—the chances are they need more development. If your paragraphs run consistently to 200 or 300 words, they are probably too long and need to be shortened or divided. Numerous brief paragraphs are liable to be disjointed and underdeveloped. Great long ones fatigue readers. But **remember**—we are talking about a very broad average. An occasional short paragraph of 15 to 20 words may work very well; so may an occasional long one of 300.

The Topic Sentence

A good topic sentence is concise and emphatic. It is no longer than the idea requires, and it stresses the important word or phrase. Here, for instance, is the topic statement which opens a paragraph about the collapse of the stock market in 1929:

The Big Bull Market was dead. Frederick Lewis Allen

Notice several things. (1) Allen's sentence is brief. Not all topics can be explained in six words, but whether they take six or sixty, they should be phrased in no more words than are absolutely necessary. (2) The sentence is clear and strong: you understand exactly what **Allen** means. (3) It places the key word—"dead"—at the end, where it gets heavy stress and leads naturally into what will follow. Of course, if a topic sentence ends on a key term, it must do so naturally, without violating any rules of word order or idiom. (4) The sentence stands **first** in the paragraph. This is where topic statements generally belong: at or near the beginning.

To attract attention topic sentences sometimes appear in the form of rhetorical questions:

What then is the modern view of Joan's voices and messages from God?
George Bernard Shaw

What did Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation accomplish?

J. G. Randall

Rhetorical questions are easy ways of generating paragraphs. Perhaps too easy; so use them with restraint. Once is probably enough in a short piece of writing.

Another eye-catching form of topic statement is the fragment, the grammatically incomplete sentence, as in the second paragraph of this passage (*italics added*):

Approaching the lake from the south, spread out, high up in a great V, was a flock of Canada geese. They did not land but continued on their way, trailed by the brass notes of their honking.

Spring. How perfect its fanfare. No trumpets or drums could ever have so triumphantly announced the presence of royalty. I stood marveling in their wake until, cold, I returned to the firs to see what else I could summon up.

Ruth Rudner

But fragments, too, are effective only if they are used with restraint. Most of the time the best topic statement is a strong, clear, grammatically complete, declarative sentence.

Sentences as the Analytic Elements of a Paragraph

The sentences of a good expository paragraph reflect a clear, rational analysis of the topic. Here is a brief example, this one by Bertrand Russell. (The sentences have been numbered for convenience.)

[1] The intellectual life of the nineteenth century was more complex than that of any previous age. [2] This was due to several causes. [3] First: the area concerned was larger than ever before; America and Russia made important contributions, and Europe became more aware than formerly of Indian philosophies, both ancient and modern. [4] Second: science, which had been a chief source of novelty since the seventeenth century, made new conquests, especially in geology, biology, and organic chemistry.

[5] Third: machine production profoundly altered the social structure, and gave men a new conception of their powers in relation to the physical environment. [6] Fourth: a profound revolt, both philosophical and political, against traditional systems of thought, in politics and in economics, gave rise to attacks upon many beliefs and institutions that had hitherto been regarded as unassailable. [7] This revolt had two very different forms, one romantic, the other rationalistic. [8] (I am using these words in a liberal sense.) [9] The romantic revolt passes from Byron, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche to Mussolini and Hitler; the rationalistic revolt begins with the French philosophers of the Revolution, passes on, somewhat softened, to the philosophical radicals in England, then acquires a deeper form in Marx and issues in Soviet Russia.

Russell's nine sentences correspond to his steps in analyzing his topic:

<i>Sentence</i>	<i>Idea</i>
1	<i>Topic:</i> increasing intellectual complexity
2	<i>Plan:</i> list several causes
3	<i>First cause:</i> larger area
4	<i>Second cause:</i> science
5	<i>Third cause:</i> machine production
6	<i>Fourth cause:</i> intellectual revolt two forms qualification specification of the two forms
7	
8	
9	

Examining whether the sentences of a paragraph correspond with its ideas is a good test of the coherence of the paragraph. The correspondence need not be as exact as in Russell's paragraph (and usually will not be). But if you cannot outline a generally clear relationship, the paragraph is probably confused and confusing.

The fact that a paragraph like Russell's reveals a coherent logical structure does not imply that the writer worked from an outline. One can proceed in this way, but in writing of any length an outline is tedious and time-consuming. Experienced

writers adjust sentences to thought intuitively, without constantly thinking about when to begin a new sentence. Those with less experience must remain more conscious of the problem. Working up paragraphs from outlines provides good practice. But whether it is consciously thought out or intuitive, a well-made paragraph uses sentences to analyze the subject.

For Practice

▷ Selecting one of the general subjects listed below, compose ten topic sentences, each on a different aspect of the subject, with an eye to developing a paragraph of about 150 words. Aim at clarity, emphasis, concision. Experiment with placing key words at the end of the sentence and with one or two rhetorical questions and fragments.

The economic future as you see it

National or local politics

Popular entertainment

Sports

Sexual relationships

▷ Make an outline like that for Russell's paragraph, showing how the sentences of the following paragraph relate to its ideas. The analysis might begin like this:

Sentence *Idea*

1 *Topic:* a paradox about grammar

2 *Specification:* first part of the paradox—people regard grammar as dull

> [1] A curious paradox exists in regard to grammar. [2] On the one hand it is felt to be the dullest and driest of academic subjects, fit only for those in whose veins the red blood of life has long since turned to ink. [3] On the other, it is a subject upon which people who would scorn to be professional grammarians hold very dogmatic opinions, which they will defend with considerable emotion.

[4] Much of this prejudice stems from the usual sources of prejudice—ignorance and confusion. [5] Even highly educated people seldom have a clear idea of what grammarians do, and there is an unfortunate confusion about the meaning of the term "grammar" itself.

W. Nelson Francis