# Paragraph[[1]](#footnote-1)

Constructing clearly defined paragraphs is the *key* to a good essay. Paragraphs can be seen as being rather like the bricks in a wall. They are all interdependent but they are also independent units. They support each other but they have their own character.

Every paragraph will have its own focus and this will be different from that of any other paragraph in your essay. Each paragraph will be one element in your overall answer to the question that has been asked.

The topic of the paragraph must always be *very* clearly stated at the start. Not surprisingly, this first sentence is referred to as the *topic sentence* of the paragraph.

The topic sentence is very important for four reasons.

* Writing the topic sentence of a paragraph requires you to think very carefully about the focus of that paragraph. In other words, you will not be able to go on to develop a well-constructed paragraph without thinking very carefully about the content of that paragraph. This helps to limit any drift in the paragraph and will help you to edit out vague, unfocused writing.
* Having written the whole paragraph, you can return to the topic sentence and check whether the topic of the paragraph has in fact been clearly reflected in the writing. If you have drifted in a different direction during the paragraph, you will be able to see this very clearly.
* The topic sentences will help you to check the logical flow of your essay. A very good way to see if your essay is well constructed is to cut and paste the introduction on to a separate page, together with each of the topic sentences. When you look at your introduction and your topic sentences, there should be clear logical progression. You should be able to see the direction and development of your essay. The focus of each paragraph should be obvious. If this is *not* the case, you will need to go back and reconsider the topic sentences, the wording of your paragraphs and perhaps the structure of your essay.
* The topic sentence also guides the *readers* and enables them to follow your essay far more easily. (Very important when you want a good mark!) The topic sentences are rather like signposts leading the reader through the text.

Paragraphing is an important convention of written English. It has developed as a visual way of helping the reader to follow an extended piece of writing. Paragraphs help us to understand how the sentences are grouped together and in this way they are very useful. The sentences within a paragraph explore one specific theme while a new paragraph indicates that a new topic or idea is being addressed.

Paragraphs may be long or short, but each one will develop a particular topic point. Paragraphs are *not* a unit of length. There is no specific length for a paragraph in an academic essay, although in general we can say that three lines is too short and one full page is too long. It is very important that your paragraphs are sequenced in a logical order because they will provide the major building blocks for the argument in the essay.

In the same way that blocks are placed one on top of each other to construct a building, so your paragraphs will be placed in such a way that you gradually build up your argument. Many students make the mistake of thinking that an academic essay is merely a *description*, but this is not correct. It is an integration of facts and evidence that provides the reader with a coherent argument. Your paragraphs should be steps in the development of your argument.

A text that has been well planned has well-organized paragraphs, and the purpose of each paragraph will be clearly signposted by its layout as well as by the language.

1. First, a new paragraph will be marked out in one of two ways: either a full line is left between the paragraphs or the first word of the new paragraph is indented. Today, the majority of writers leave an empty line between the paragraphs.
2. Second, a paragraph is a series of sentences that develops one idea, and in academic writing that idea is usually stated in one sentence (although it may not be the first sentence) and this is called the topic sentence. This is the most important sentence in the paragraph. The rest of the paragraph will support and elaborate the idea, and perhaps provide examples to illustrate the topic sentence. In some ways this is similar to a newspaper article where you often find that the first sentence of each paragraph states clearly what it is about. You may have noticed that you can skim through a newspaper article by reading the first sentence of each paragraph.

The paragraph topic statement can take several different forms.

* It may tell the reader what to expect in the paragraph: *The survey results indicate that banks are failing their customers.*
* It may be a statement that will be supported with evidence: *The discovery indicates that the Bronze Age settlers built three types of houses.*
* It may make a clear statement of belief and then go on to elaborate: *Humour is one of the best ways of combating disease.*

The topic sentence *cannot* be:

* a simple statement of fact: *Paris is the capital of France*.
* a vague opinion or comment: *I think that banks in Britain are overcharging.*

After the topic sentence, the writer must provide illustrations or evidence to support the topic sentence. These are called *topic points*. There may be several topic points in a paragraph and each one will be supported by specific details. The framework of your first three paragraphs might look like this:

* Topic sentence 1
* Topic point A: specific detail 1, 2, 3 etc
* Topic point B: specific detail 1, 2, 3 etc
* Topic point C: specific detail 1, 2, 3 etc
* Topic sentence 2
* Topic point A: specific detail 1, 2, 3 etc
* Topic point B: specific detail 1, 2, 3 etc
* Topic point C: specific detail 1, 2, 3 etc
* Topic sentence 3
* Topic point A: specific detail 1, 2, 3 etc
* Topic point B: specific detail 1, 2, 3 etc
* Topic point C: specific detail 1, 2, 3 etc

Specific detail under the various topic points can comprise anything from examples, statistics, dates or description, as well as support for your argument from other writers through quotations, paraphrase or summary.

Have a look at the activity below. These sentences comprise a short description made up of two paragraphs. Pinpoint the topic sentences of the two paragraphs and then decide on the order of the remaining sentences.

Example

**Title of the essay: Keeping fit**

1. The rowing machines are always very popular and there are five different models.
2. The water is always very clean although the changing rooms are rather small.
3. In addition, it is well staffed and there is always someone there to give you assistance.
4. However, you will need to check the timetable carefully because sometimes there are special times set aside for children or families or club training.
5. It is open to swimmers from 8am in the morning until 10pm at night.
6. The Munrow Centre is in the campus of the University of Birmingham and it offers a wide range of different ways in which people can keep fit.
7. Finally, there are swimming lessons for people who cannot swim.
8. The gym provides an excellent centre for improving fitness.
9. Another very popular activity is using the cycling machines and these are also extremely popular with both men and women.
10. The 50metre swimming pool is extremely well used.
11. There are large changing rooms and showers for both men and women.
12. It is very well equipped and contains many different machines.

The correct order is as follows

**Title of the essay: Keeping fit**

1. The Munrow Centre is in the campus of the University of Birmingham and it offers a wide range of different ways in which people can keep fit.
2. The 50metre swimming pool is extremely well used.
3. It is open to swimmers from 8am in the morning until 10pm at night.
4. However, you will need to check the timetable carefully because sometimes there are special times set aside for children or families or club training.
5. The water is always very clean although the changing rooms are rather small.
6. Finally, there are swimming lessons for people who cannot swim.
7. The gym provides an excellent centre for improving fitness.
8. It is very well equipped and contains many different machines.
9. In addition, it is well staffed and there is always someone there to give you assistance.
10. The rowing machines are always very popular and there are five different models.
11. Another very popular activity is using the cycling machines and these are also extremely popular with both men and women.
12. There are large changing rooms and showers for both men and women.

Now look at the paragraph below and decide on the topic sentences and the note the different features. Write down the features of this paragraph in line with the framework of topic sentence, topic point and specific detail referred to above.

**Trees**

Trees are very important to us for many very practical reasons because of the uses to which the wood can be put. However, their value in economic terms is nothing compared to their role in helping to regulate the world's climate and providing fertile soil. The wholesale destruction of trees is a threat to us all because trees support life. A single tree can take up 1000-2000 litres of water from the ground every year, releasing most from the leaves as water vapour. This water vapour is then added to water vapour from other sources to form clouds. It eventually returns to the ground in the form of rain or possibly snow. This ability to move vast quantities of water vapour from one place to another has a significant effect on the regional climate and on local water table levels. Another factor is that the ground in a forest acts like an enormous sponge. It absorbs rainwater and holds it within the soil, releasing it gradually back into the atmosphere. Where trees have been cut down, the ground is unable to absorb water so easily and it runs off, rapidly causing flooding in other areas. A further factor is the degree to which most trees add to the fertility in the soil around them. Every year millions upon millions of leaves flutter down and rot into the soil, adding to the richness of the soil base in which other plants can grow. Insects thrive within this rich, damp environment and they are themselves a source of food for other animals up the food chain. All of them are threatened when trees are cut down in large numbers.

**Comment on the passage Trees**

Trees are very important to us for many very practical reasons because of the uses to which the wood can be put. **[Topic sentence]**  However, their value in economic terms is nothing compared to their role in helping to regulate the world's climate and providing fertile soil. **[Topic point 1**] The wholesale destruction of trees is a threat to us all because trees support life.**[Specific detail A]**  A single tree can take up 1000-2000 litres of water from the ground every year, releasing most from the leaves as water vapour. **[B]** This water vapour is then added to water vapour from other sources to form clouds.**[C]**  It eventually returns to the ground in the form of rain or possibly snow. **[D:]** This ability to move vast quantities of water vapour from one place to another has a significant effect on the regional climate and on local water table levels.**[Topic point 2]** Another factor is that the ground in a forest acts like an enormous sponge.**[Specific detail A]**  It absorbs rainwater and holds it within the soil, releasing it gradually back into the atmosphere. **[B]**  Where trees have been cut down, the ground is unable to absorb water so easily and it runs off rapidly causing flooding in other areas. **[Topic point 3]** A further factor is the degree to which most trees add to the fertility of the soil around them. **[Specific detail A]**  Every year millions upon millions of leaves flutter down and rot into the soil, adding to the richness of the soil base in which other plants can grow. **[B]**Insects thrive within this rich, damp environment and they are themselves a source of food for other animals up the food chain. **[C]**  All of them are threatened when trees are cut down in large numbers.

# Paragraph development

In what ways can you develop your argument in the paragraphs? In academic writing, the writer must decide on the best way to present the information or the argument. Several approaches will be outlined here although, in practice, the approaches may overlap to some degree.

1. The paragraph might take the form of a **comparison** and/or **contrast** between two different systems or theories. For example, you may be comparing two views on a particular play or contrasting two political views.
2. Your paragraph could take on the form of an **extendeddefinition**. For example, you may want to explain in detail what is meant by role modelling in an essay on the educational environment.
3. Your paragraph may take the form of a **cause/effect**analysis; for example, you may be analysing the causes and results of a particular event in history.

Look at the three paragraphs below, and decide which method of development the writer is using. Underline the topic sentence, and highlight the topic point and specific detail.

**Beauty**

It's an old cliché that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but we see evidence of it everywhere we look. There is little doubt that people interpret beauty in many different ways. An archaeologist will see beauty in a bone or a fragment of stone while others will see only a fragment of matter. A scientist will see beauty in a formula or a chemical reaction while others will turn away in confusion or disgust. A dog breeder will see beauty in a particular breed of dog while their neighbour will see only a drawling, smelly beast busy fouling the roadways given half a chance. A businessman may see beauty in healthy bank statement. For me, beauty does not reside in matter or other living beings, but in music. A violin being played by a talented musician can easily reduce me to tears by the sheer beauty of the sound. Beauty is not something you can touch, but something ethereal and beyond our reach. However, for me, beauty does not reside in music alone.

### A basic truth

Despite all the debate and the anguish, the revelations and the confessions, the assertive women and the new men, many women are now reluctantly being forced to draw the same conclusion: the chips are still stacked against women, and men haven't changed. Even this week a report appeared confirming what many of us have known for some time, which is that women earn a lot less than men in the course of their working lives. In fact, the women who lose out the most are the intelligent ones with a bunch of GCSE passes but without a degree. They earn around a quarter of a million pounds a year less in their working lives then men doing the same job. At a more personal relationship level, men continue to want to control and lead. They are happy to make the odd gesture with the house or the children, but fundamentally they want the women to take responsibility for the time honoured home-based tasks while they continue to go out and earn the major income. It gives them a sense of worth and a meaning to their lives, poor things. It's quite a basic truth really; how many women have you see on the front of a Yamaha 850 with a man clinging on behind? They might do it once, for a laugh, but at the end of the day, the man wants to be sitting up front with the controls in his hands. Some people say that women who can't see this are battling against a fundamental truth of evolution. However, despite the prevalence of these attitudes, change is on the way.

### Marangu

When I first visited Marangu in 1977, it was a small, sleepy village about 3,000 ft up the side of Mount Kilimanjaro. A narrow road wound up from the valley floor, passing through maize fields, then banana plantations, then banana and coffee plantations and finally a mixture of eucalyptus trees and pine trees mixed in with the bananas and coffee. It was cool and lovely. Despite the fact that the village itself was small, there were two hotels and a training college. The hotels were there because Marangu was the starting point for most of the tourists who wanted to climb the mountain. The college was there because the region had maintained a tradition of education for over a 100 years or more and the college was merely one reflection of that fact. Today, in many ways, Marangu has changed very little, although changes have certainly taken place. The road has been rebuilt and now it's wider and the traffic travels up and down faster and more dangerously than it should. There are more houses too, some of the small and simple and some of them inappropriately grandiose. The hotels are still there, unchanged apart from rewiring and repainting. The college is completely unchanged in almost every respect, and even some of the same staff members are still teaching there. One has been there since 1965 after completing his teacher training in the college. It's a beautiful college and I can still stand on the steps at the back of the main building and, on a good day, see the snow covered peak of Kilimanjaro. It brings back some striking memories.

# Making links between paragraphs

It is important to provide *links* in your writing. When writing your sentences, try to link up one sentence with another. In the same way, when writing your paragraphs, try to link up one paragraph with another. This can take two forms: ending a paragraph with a sentence that leads *forward* to the next paragraph or starting the new paragraph in a way that links *back* to the previous paragraph.

Look at the passages above (Beauty, A basic truth, Marangu) and find the sentences that provide links with any subsequent paragraphs. When you've done that, look at the notes below.

Notes:

In these paragraphs, the last line of each paragraph leads into the following paragraph.

*However, for me, beauty does not reside in music alone.*(And my next paragraph will develop this idea and explain what else exemplifies beauty for me.)

*However, despite the prevalence of these attitudes, change is on the way.*(And in my next paragraph I will outline about these changes.)

*It brings back some striking memories.*(And in my next paragraph, I will describe some of about these memories.)

One further way of making links between paragraphs is to repeat certain key words and phrases, or near equivalents, in closely related paragraphs. This ensures a strong feeling of continuity from one idea to the next. In the example below, the key words and phrases have been circled and then linked with lines to show the connections that exist between one paragraph and the preceding and following paragraphs. Notice how the writer provides the reader with links, making it easier to follow the train of the argument.

*The doctors of the law, those who developed and preserved the consensus of the community, were the nearest equivalent to a teaching authority in Sunni Islam,****and****it was essential for them to make sure that the understanding of*fiqh*and of its bases was fully transmitted from one generation to another.*

*From an early time there seems to have been a formal procedure for the transmission of religious learning. In mosques, and especially in the large congregational ones, circles of students would group themselves around a teacher sitting against a pillar and expounding a subject through reading and commentating upon a book. From at least the eleventh century,****however****, there grew up a kind of institution devoted largely to legal learning, the*madrasa*: its origin is often ascribed to Nizam al-Mulk, the wazir of the first Saljuq ruler of Baghdad,****but****in fact goes back to an earlier time. The madrasa was a school, often****although****not always attached to a mosque; it included a place of residence for students. It was established as a waqf by an individual donor; this gave it an endowment and ensured its permanence,****since****property of which the income was devoted to a pious or charitable purpose could not be alienated.*

*Some institutions were established for the teaching of the Koran or Hadith,****but****the main purpose of most of them was the study and teaching of fiqh.****To take an example****: the Tankiziyya madrasa in Jerusalem, endowed during the Mamluk period, had four halls, opening off a central courtyard, one each for the teaching of Hadith, Hanafi law and Sufism,****while****the fourth was a mosque.*

**Signposting**

'Signposts' are found in good academic essays and they will also help the reader to understand the writing more easily. They help to link what has already been said with what is about to be discussed.

Some of the words that we have already considered can be used as signposts. For example*consequently, however, similarly, moreover, in contrast* and so on. Look at the example above; the signpost words are shown in bold. In addition to these words, we can also use expressions like these:

* This programme ...
* Despite these difficulties ...
* These suggestions ...
* However, in the modern world ...
* In the next section, ...

In each case we are making reference to a point already mentioned, or we are indicating that we about to consider something new. For example, our signposts can look backwards at a point already raised:

* This suggestion ...
* These ideas ...
* This brief outline suggests ...
* Such proposals ...

Similarly, our signposts can look forwards towards issues that will be raised in the next section or in the near future:

* In this section, I will ...
* My next chapter will consider why ...
* A recent study suggests ...
* One important recent finding indicates that ...
* Some signposts look in both directions at the same time!
* Despite these reports, other writers have proposed ...
* In spite of these findings, teachers believe ...
* This view has been rejected by some authors who claim that ...
* In contrast, a recent article ...

**Task**

**Look at these passages and underline any 'signposts'. Do they look forwards, backwards or in both directions?**

Passage A:

Despite this difficulty, many theories have been proposed to explain these results, but the evidence has proved to be elusive. However, this does not mean that the theories can be discounted. The following chapter will explore the evidence in more detail.

Passage B:

In the last chapter, we examined the link between foreign direct investment and social development. In this chapter, I would like to explore the differences between this form of investment and local investment. The first section will consider the factors that encourage and discourage local investment. These factors will then be analysed in the light of recent developments in China.

Passage C:

Are these theories supported by data? The evidence, unfortunately, is inconclusive. Despite exhaustive studies, no positive identification has ever been made. This has proved to be the most difficult problem of all. However, quite recently, a new method of collecting the data has been proposed. This method relies on sub-sectional analysis, which has not been adopted before. This form of analysis has some interesting features. Firstly, ...

**Notes on the Task**

Passage A:

**Despite this difficulty** *[this looks backwards]* many theories have been proposed to explain these results, *[this looks backwards]* but the evidence has proved to be elusive.

**However, this does not mean... *- this looks backwards.***

...that the theories can be discounted.

**The following chapter will explore the evidence in more detail. – *this looks forwards.***

Passage B:

**In the last chapter, we examined** *[this looks backwards]* the link between foreign direct investment and social development. **In this chapter, I would like to explore** *[this looks forwards]* the differences between this form of investment and local investment. **The first section will consider *[ this looks forwards]*** the factors that encourage and discourage local investment. **These factors will then be analysed** *[this looks forwards]* in the light of recent developments in China.

Passage C:

**Are these theories supported by data**? *[this looks backwards]* The evidence, unfortunately, is inconclusive. Despite exhaustive studies, no positive identification has ever been made. **This has proved***[this points backwards]* to be the most difficult problem of all. However, quite recently, a new method of collecting the data has been proposed. **This method***[this looks backwards]* relies on sub-sectional analysis which has not been adopted before. **This form of analysis has some interesting features.** *[this looks forwards]* Firstly, ...

1. http://www.waylink-english.co.uk/?page=61160 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)