

DukeWrites Enrichment Suite

Paragraphs, part one

With Beth Long, Writing Studio Consultant

Hello, I'm Beth Long with the Thompson Writing Program. This module is about paragraphs. The example sentences and paragraphs used in the module are from the journal *Deliberations*, which is the journal of first-year student writing. We'll learn from previous Duke first year students' writing.

In this module we'll go over paragraphs' structure, techniques for building flow, and some myths about paragraphs. So, what is a paragraph? And why do we organize information into paragraphs?

A paragraph is a group of sentences about **one** idea. Paragraphs help us to organize information – whether the information we want to convey is all in one paragraph or if the information is part of a larger text containing more than one idea.

In a larger text, if our paragraphs are well organized, a reader should be able to scan (or look quickly) at the beginnings of each paragraph and be able to form a kind of outline of the main ideas in the text.

So, how do we structure our paragraphs according to U.S. academic standards? We structure paragraphs to follow a General – to Specific structure – or you might hear it referred to as a Broad – to Specific structure.

Each paragraph should begin Broadly or Generally– with a statement of the main idea of the paragraph – broad enough so that it relates to all of the following information in the paragraph. However, this topic sentence shouldn't be too broad or too specific.

If a topic sentence is too broad, it can seem vague or unfocused. If a topic sentence is too specific, it might not encompass all of the information and evidence provided in the rest of the paragraph.

In a paragraph that is not part of a larger text (when you are writing a single paragraph that will stand alone), paragraphs can follow a Broad – Specific – Broad pattern. The ending of the paragraph can act as a sort of conclusion for the paragraph. In paragraphs that are part of a larger text, these broader endings and concluding sentences are not always needed.

Here are some examples of paragraphs that follow the broad to specific pattern. These example paragraphs are from *Deliberations*.

The first sentence presents the idea that the green anole is well suited for studies. The following sentence provides evidence for why the green anole is well suited for studies. Even if we look at the second sentence quickly, we can see that it offers details, more specific information.

Here's another example of a paragraph following the Broad to Specific pattern:

The first sentence here presents the idea that some Southern historians promoted the idea that black domestic servants were non-threatening and devoted. The double underlined part shows the main idea for the paragraph in this first sentence.

The following sentences provide evidence - further describing these concepts and giving examples. The single underlined part show specific detailed evidence for the main idea. And the bold underlined part shows evidence in the form of examples in literature.

The end of the paragraph, the last sentence underlined in dashes, analyzes the evidence and provides a link to the main idea of the larger text.

Now that we've had a look at some of the examples of broad to specific pattern, let's take a closer look at the broad beginnings of paragraphs. These broad beginnings can be called "Topic Sentences" or you might hear them referred to as Transition Sentences. Well, what makes a good topic sentence or transition sentence?

A good topic sentence will transition the reader from the previous paragraph, will provide the reader with the main idea of the paragraph, and make sense to the reader about how this paragraph fits in with the larger text.

Let's take a look at the topic sentences of our example paragraphs: We can see that the writer refers to old information when he refers to "these studies."

The reader gets the sense that the paragraph will provide details, evidence, and/or explanations for why the green anole is well suited for these studies. It connects with the overall purpose of the text – discussing invasive species.

Let's look at the next topic sentence. This example sentence reads: After the Civil War, revisionists –Southern historians attempting to establish a more favorable version of slavery and antebellum society – latched onto this idea of a docile, devoted black domestic. The verb latched really just means to hold or grab.

Here, the writer has previously discussed black domestic servants with the reference to "this idea..." So the writer is referring to old information. We see that the main idea of the paragraph is how the idea of a "docile, devoted black domestic" was promoted. And

we get the sense the writer will provide details and/or examples of this. Also this sentence is related to the main idea of the larger text.

Now, please pause to take a short quiz about Topic sentences. Each pair of sentences is from the same paragraph. Which sentence in the pair is the topic sentence?