

Writing Paragraphs: The MEAL Plan

(Adapted from the Thompson Writing Program of Duke University)

Writing effective paragraphs is critical to writing a good essay. Paragraphs come in all shapes and sizes, though you may have learned rules along the way about how many sentences a paragraph must have or how long it must be. Suffice it to say that a paragraph should contain only one main idea. These paragraphs make up the units of your paper that should flow in a logical order supporting the larger claim (thesis) of the essay. Let us say that your paragraphs are the “bite-sized chunks” that your reader needs to digest to be able to understand your overall argument. In keeping with our analogy of eating, we will use the acronym “MEAL” to indicate the primary parts of a paragraph: the Main idea; Evidence; Analysis; and Link back to the larger claim of the essay.

The Main Idea:

The main idea of a paragraph is its central thrust—that point which you want to prove at this juncture of your essay that relates back to your essay’s larger claim. It generally comes at the beginning of the paragraph (the topic sentence), and that is the best place to put it when you are just beginning to write essays. However, it could come in the middle or even at the end if you were to build up to it. Only be sure not to confuse your reader: You do not want him or her to have to guess what the main point of the paragraph is. If it so happens that you have two or three ideas in a particular paragraph that are closely related, try to put them under an umbrella that shows how they fit together.

Evidence and Analysis:

Evidence and analysis are the MEAL’s main course. Evidence is what you use to prove or demonstrate the main idea of your paragraph. Such evidence might be the following:

- Information from books or journal articles (Be sure to cite)
- Data from research (Be sure to cite)
- Interviews which you conducted yourself (Be sure to cite)
- A quotation or paraphrase (Be sure to cite)
- An image or table of results (Be sure to cite)
- A chain of logical reasoning you have developed

However, you do not want to let your reader interpret the evidence for himself; you need to provide *analysis* of the evidence so that the reader will know how your evidence supports the main idea of the paragraph and ultimately the larger claim of the essay. The reader might engage

in his own analysis and come to a different conclusion, but do not let him walk away without knowing your particular understanding of the data.

You may sort evidence and analysis within the paragraph according to the needs of your argument. Perhaps you will first introduce all the evidence and then provide analysis; perhaps you will provide a piece of evidence with some analysis and then repeat this process as many times as necessary; or maybe evidence and analysis will be intertwined in the paragraph in a way that makes perfect sense. You want the paragraph to flow not only logically but naturally. This enhances understanding.

Link back to the Larger Claim:

You do not want your reader asking the question: “What does this paragraph have to do with the essay? How does it support the thesis?” Now you probably do not want to say, “This paragraph supports my thesis by showing: this, that, and the other thing,” which is all to say that your “link back to the larger claim” will be more implicit. The reader should see the relevance himself. If you are ever uncertain that your reader is catching all you have to say, you can always add a short paragraph midway or more through your essay telling your reader what you have proven so far and where you intend to go next.

<http://twp.duke.edu/writing-studio/resources/academic-writing/drafting>

How to Build a Paragraph

An Example: From: Joseph M. Williams, *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*, 2nd ed. (New York: Pearson Education, Inc., 2006), 54; with a MEAL outline provided by your Writing Center.

In the last several years, college costs have been rising so fast that they are now threatening the basis of our American democracy—equal opportunity for all. **During that period, tuition has significantly outpaced increases in family income.** **If this trend continues, a college education will soon be affordable only by the children of the wealthiest families in our society.** **When that happens, we will be divided as a people not only by wealth, but by knowledge and intellectual skills.** Such a divide will erode equal opportunity and the egalitarian basis of our democratic society.

M: The main idea of the paragraph that serves as a topic sentence.

E: The evidence, specifically relating to tuition. Needs source.

A: Analysis which interprets the evidence for the reader.

L: A link to the larger claim (thesis) that American democratic society is eroding.