

OWLS Writing Guides

Paragraphs: The Body of the Essay



Body paragraphs do the real work of the essay, developing, supporting, explaining, and proving the thesis. A good body paragraph has a clear beginning, middle, and end. It consists of several basic elements:

1. Transition idea
2. Topic sentence
3. Support
4. Closing idea

1. Transition idea. Unless it follows immediately after the introduction, a body paragraph should begin with a transition idea that links the paragraph with the previous one. Think of this sentence as a bridge from one body paragraph to the next that helps the discussion to move forward smoothly. Simple transition words and phrases (*in addition, furthermore*) can mark the transition from one idea to the next, but more meaningful transitions not only move to the next point, but show how the topic of one paragraph relates logically to the topic of the next. This kind of linking reinforces the logic and unity the essay as a whole.

To effect such a transition, start the new body paragraph with a 'bridging' sentence that looks back to the topic of the previous paragraph while introducing the topic of the new paragraph. Example:

(Final sentence of ¶ A)...Addressing the opposition with name calling instead of reasoned argument damages the author's credibility.

(Opening sentence of ¶ B) [transition/topic sent] Another hindrance to credibility is the author's failure to draw evidence from reputable sources.

A bridging sentence can double as the topic sentence, as above, or it can simply lead the way for the topic sentence that follows, as in the next example.

(Final sentence of ¶ A)...This arsenal of facts helps to convince the reader that the policy is should be enacted.

(Opening sentences of ¶ B) [bridge sentence] While arguing successfully with facts, the author also targets the reader's values. [topic sentence] These appeals to the values of fairness and justice make the claim more persuasive on an emotional level.

Notice that in each case, a key term is carried over from the end of paragraph A to the start of paragraph B, to make a logical link.

2. Topic sentence. A topic sentence is the most general sentence in the paragraph. It appears at or near the start of the paragraph and states the paragraph's main point or claim.

a. TS as mini-thesis: Like a good thesis statement, a good topic sentence includes both the topic and an assertion about the topic.

Topic + assertion = Topic sentence

Dwarf hamsters make great pets.

Statistics from credible sources strengthen Weld's claim that immigrants are more a benefit than a detriment to U.S. society

In an essay, the topic sentence of a body paragraph should clearly state one of the primary points or reasons that develop the thesis. If the thesis of the paper forecasts the paper's several subtopics, then the topic sentences should echo the key terms or ideas previewed in the forecast.

b. TS as aid to essay logic and order: Topic sentences are critical to helping the reader follow the logic of the essay. A reader should be able to get a good idea of the essay's argument just by scanning the opening sentence(s) of the paragraphs. Careful attention to topic sentences is also a way for the writer to check the logic, unity and organization of the essay. Because each TS should clearly state a primary supporting point or reason, highlighting and then reading through the topic sentences is one way of checking that all paragraphs relate to the thesis, that enough support has been offered to thoroughly explain or prove the thesis, and that the body paragraphs are arranged in the most logical order.

3. Support. The supporting sentences make up the body of the paragraph, just as the supporting paragraphs make up the body of an essay. While the topic sentence of a paragraph is a general assertion, its support consists of more specific information that shows, explains, or proves the topic sentence idea.

The kind of support presented depends on the nature of the claim, but among the most commonly used forms of support are details, examples, facts, opinions and testimony, along with explanation and analysis that links the support to the main point or claim and creates the argument of the paragraph. In any case, the support should be specific, relevant, and sufficient to explain the point thoroughly or prove the claim convincingly.

The body of the paragraph should also demonstrate the basic qualities of any good paragraph:

Unity: All sentences in the body serve to show, explain, or prove the main idea.

Development: It contains sufficient supporting information to explain, show, or prove the main idea thoroughly and convincingly. Any generalizations that call for support or greater elaboration are fleshed out with details.

Organization: It shows a logical sequencing of ideas, appropriate to the point and purpose of the paragraph (argument, comparison, analysis, cause-effect, and so on.)

Coherence: Ideas flow smoothly and relate to one another clearly, aided by verbal linking techniques (transition words, repetition) and logical arrangement of points.

4. Closing sentence. The final sentence of a body paragraph should conclude the discussion and perhaps look ahead to the idea of the next paragraph.

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