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Fifth Edition

At a Glance

Paragraphs



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At a Glance: Paragraphs Fifth Edition

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2010933766

ISBN-13: 978-0-495-90629-2

ISBN-10: 0-495-90629-8

Wadsworth

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Boston, MA 02210
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Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 14 13 12 11 10

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The Paragraph and Prewriting

~ The Paragraph Defined

Defining the word *paragraph* requires a bit of thought because there are different kinds of paragraphs, each one having a different purpose within an essay:

Introductory: Usually the first paragraph in an essay, the introductory paragraph gives the necessary background and indicates the main idea, called the **thesis**.

Developmental: A unit of several sentences, the developmental paragraph expands on an idea. This book features the writing of the developmental paragraph. When written by itself, as it frequently is for college writing assignments and tests, the developmental paragraph often resembles a miniature essay in structure.

Transitional: Usually a brief paragraph of one or two sentences, the transitional paragraph merely directs the reader from one point in an essay to another.

Concluding: Usually the last paragraph in an essay, the concluding paragraph makes the final comment on the topic.

Typically, paragraphs written as college assignments are easy to identify because they are indented. Each one starts with skipped spaces at the beginning of the first line. The developmental paragraph featured in this book contains three parts: the subject, the topic sentence, and the support.

The **subject** is what you will write about. At the outset, the subject is likely to be broad or general, and, therefore, must be focused. The **topic sentence** includes both the subject and the focus of that subject. The focus indicates what you plan to *do* with the subject.

The topic sentence contains the central, or main, idea of the paragraph. Everything else in the paragraph supports the topic sentence; that is, all the other sentences explain or say more about the central idea. The **support** is the evidence or reasoning that explains the topic sentence. That support can be developed according to several basic patterns. Each pattern is the subject of one chapter of this book. The following questions can help you choose an appropriate pattern or a combination of patterns for your paragraph.

Narration: Can you illustrate your point by telling a story?

Description: How does something look, sound, feel, taste, or smell?

Exemplification: Can you support your main idea with examples of what you mean?

Analysis by division: What are the parts of a unit, and how do they work together?

Process analysis: How do you do something? How is (was) something done?

Cause and effect: What are the reasons for or the results of an event, a trend, or a circumstance?

Comparison and contrast: How are two or more subjects similar and different?

Definition: What does a term mean?

Argument: What evidence and reasoning will convince someone that you are right?

These patterns are usually combined in writing paragraphs and essays, though one pattern will often provide the overarching structure. Regardless of the pattern or combination you use, the definition of the developmental paragraph remains the same. A **developmental paragraph** is a group of sentences, each with the function of supporting a single main idea, which is contained in the topic sentence. Here is a brief example by a professional writer:

A cat's tail is a good barometer of its intentions. An excited or aggressively aroused cat will whip its entire tail back and forth. When I talk to Sam, he holds up his end of the conversation by occasionally flicking the tip of his tail. Mother cats move their tails back and forth to invite their kittens to play. A kitten raises its tail perpendicularly to beg for attention; older cats may do so to beg for food. When your cat holds its tail aloft while crisscrossing in front of you, it is trying to say, "Follow me"—usually to the kitchen, or more precisely, to the

refrigerator. Unfortunately, many cats have lost their tails in refrigerator doors as a consequence.

—*Michael W. Fox, "What Is Your Pet Trying to Tell You?"*

The paragraph begins with the topic sentence: "A cat's tail is a good barometer of its intentions." The other sentences provide support for the topic sentence; they give examples to show that the topic sentence is credible. The final sentence adds humor to the writing and gives a sense of ending, or closure.

Although the topic sentence is often the first sentence of the paragraph, it does not have to be. Furthermore, the topic sentence is sometimes restated or echoed at the end of the paragraph, although again it does not have to be. However, a well-phrased concluding sentence can emphasize the central idea of the paragraph as well as provide a nice balance and ending.

A paragraph is not a constraining formula; in fact, it has variations. In some instances, for example, the topic sentence is not found in a single sentence. It may be the combination of two sentences, or it may be an easily understood but unwritten underlying idea that unifies the paragraph. Nevertheless, the paragraph in most college writing contains discussion supporting a stated topic sentence, and the instruction in this book is based on that fundamental idea.

A Sample Paragraph

The following paragraph was written by college student Cyrus Norton. The topic sentence, including the subject of the paragraph and the focus of the paragraph, have been underlined. Norton's topic sentence (not the first sentence in this instance), his support of the topic sentence, and his concluding sentence have been identified in the margin.

This is the final draft. Following it, we will back up and, in this chapter and the next, show how Norton moved during the writing process from his initial idea to this final paragraph.

Magic Johnson, an NBA Great
Cyrus Norton

Some NBA (National Basketball Association) players are good because they have a special talent in one area. Magic

Topic sentence Johnson was a great NBA star because he was excellent in shooting, passing, rebounding, and leading. As a shooter, few have ever equaled him. He could slam, shovel, hook, and fire from three-point range—all with deadly accuracy. As for free throws, he led all NBA players in shooting percentage in 1988-89.

Support for shooting While averaging more than twenty points per game, he helped others become stars with his passes. As the point guard (the quarterback of basketball), he was always near the top in the league in assists and was famous for his “no-look” pass, which often surprised even his teammates with its precision. When he wasn’t shooting or passing, he was rebounding. A top rebounding guard is unusual in professional basketball, but Magic, at six feet, nine inches, could bump shoulders and leap with anyone. These three qualities made him probably the most spectacular triple-double threat of all time. “Triple-double” means reaching two digits in scoring, assists, and rebounding. Magic didn’t need more for greatness in the NBA, but he had more. With his everlasting smile and boundless energy, he was also an inspirational team leader. He always believed in himself and his team. When his team was down by a point and three seconds remained on the game clock, the fans looked for Magic to get the ball. They watched as he dribbled once, he faded, he leaped, he twisted, and he hooked one in from twenty feet! That was magic. That was Magic.

Support for passing

Support for rebounding

Support for leading

Concluding sentence

Let's consider Norton's paragraph in the light of what we know about paragraphs in general. Magic Johnson, the subject, is what the paragraph is all about. In this example, the title also names the subject. The topic sentence, the unifying and controlling idea, makes a clear statement about what the writer will say about the subject. As usual, the topic sentence appears near the beginning of the paragraph. The support gives evidence and examples to back up the controlling idea. The last sentence, "That was Magic," echoes the topic sentence. It is usually called the concluding sentence.

The author has told you what he was going to say, he has said it, and finally he has reminded you of what he has told you. The concluding sentence is sometimes omitted. The two most common designs of developmental paragraphs in college writing are these:

Topic sentence → support → concluding sentence

Topic sentence → support

"Magic Johnson, an NBA Great" is a typical paragraph: a group of sentences that present and develop an idea. In college writing, a paragraph is usually expository; that is, its purpose is to explain. In this example, you, the reader, get the point. You're informed, and maybe even entertained, by the explanation.

If you follow certain principles and then practice, practice, practice, you too can write effective paragraphs. Success lies in following directions and using the right set of tools.

Principles at a Glance

Paragraph:	A group of sentences that present and develop an idea.
Topic sentence:	The sentence that expresses the controlling idea of the paragraph. The topic sentence mentions the subject (what the paragraph is about) and the treatment (what the writer will say about the subject).
Support:	Evidence such as details, examples, and explanations that explain the topic sentence.
Basic paragraph designs:	Topic sentence → support → concluding sentence Topic sentence → support

The Writing Process

Writing does not mean merely putting words on paper. It is a process that often involves several steps: using prewriting techniques to explore a topic, limiting and then developing the topic, making an outline, writing a draft, revising the draft as many times as necessary, and editing. Writers sometimes discover that their topic sentence or their outline does not work, and they go back and alter their original concept or design.

For flexible, systematic guidance, consider the Writing Process Worksheet on page xx. It can be copied, enlarged, and submitted with your assignment, if your instructor asks you to do so. It also can be printed from the Student Companion Site.

Prewriting: Using the Blank Sheet of Opportunity

Certain strategies commonly grouped under the heading *prewriting* can help you get started and develop your ideas. Actually, these strategies—freewriting, brainstorming, clustering, defining a topic, and outlining—are very much a part of writing. The understandable desire to skip to the finished statement is what causes the most common student-writer grief: that of not filling the blank sheet or of filling it but not significantly improving on the void. The prewriting strategies that follow will help you attack the blank sheet constructively with imaginative thought, analysis, and experimentation. They can lead to clear, effective communication.

Although the strategies can work very well, you do not need to use all of them in all writing assignments. Learn them now, and use them when they are needed. Think of this approach as carrying a box of tools and then selecting the best tools for the job.

Freewriting

Freewriting is an exercise that its originator, Peter Elbow, has called “babbling in print.” In freewriting, you write without stopping, letting your ideas tumble forth. You do not concern yourself with the fundamentals of writing, such as punctuation and spelling. Freewriting is an adventure into your memory and imagination. It is concerned with discovery, invention, and exploration. If you are at a loss for words on your subject, write in a comment

such as “I don’t know what is coming next” or “blah, blah, blah,” and continue when relevant words come. It is important to keep writing. Freewriting immediately eliminates the blank page and thereby helps you break through an emotional barrier, but that is not the only benefit. The words that you sort through in that idea kit will include some you can use. You can then underline or circle those words and even add notes on the side so that the freewriting continues to grow even after its initial spontaneous expression.

The way you proceed depends on the type of assignment: working with a topic of your choice, working from a restricted list of topics, or working with a prescribed topic.

Working with the *topic of your choice* affords you the greatest freedom of exploration. You would probably select a subject that interests you and freewrite about it, allowing your mind to wander among its many parts, perhaps mixing fact and fantasy, direct experience, and hearsay. A freewriting about music might uncover areas of special interest and knowledge, such as jazz or folk rock, that you would want to pursue further in freewriting or other prewriting strategies.

Working from a *restricted list* requires a more focused freewriting. With the list, you can, of course, experiment with several topics to discover what is most suitable for you. If, for example, “career choice,” “career preparation,” “career guidance,” and “career prospects” are on the restricted list, you would probably select one and freewrite about it. If it works well for you, you would probably proceed with the next step of your prewriting. If you are not satisfied with what you uncover in freewriting, you would explore another item from the restricted list.

When working with a *prescribed topic*, you focus on a particular topic and try to restrict your freewriting to its boundaries. If your topic specifies a division of a subject area such as “political involvement of your generation,” then you would tie those key words to your own information, critical thinking, and imaginative responses. If the topic is restricted to, say, your reaction to a particular reading selection such as a poem, then that poem would give you the framework for your free associations with your own experiences, creations, and opinions.

You should learn to use freewriting because it will often serve you well, but you need not use it every time you write. Some very short writing assignments do not call for freewriting. An in-class assignment may not allow time for freewriting.

Nevertheless, freewriting is often a useful strategy in your toolbox of writing techniques. It can help you get words on paper, break emotional barriers, generate topics, develop new insights, and explore ideas.

Freewriting can lead to other stages of prewriting and writing, and it can also provide content as you develop your topic.

The following example of freewriting, and the writing, revising, and editing examples in Chapter 2, are from student Cyrus Norton's paragraph, "Magic Johnson, an NBA Great" (p. 3). Norton's topic came from a restricted list; he was directed to write about the success of an individual. Had he been working with a prescribed topic, he might have been directed to concentrate on a specific aspect of Johnson's career, such as business, philanthropy, public service, or the one Norton chose: great basketball playing.

Sample Freewriting

great	Magic Johnson was the <u>greatest</u> player I've ever seen in professional basketball.
leader	Actually not just a player but a <u>leader</u> and
inspiration	an <u>inspiration</u> to the team so they always gave him the ball when the game was on the line. It was too bad his career was cut short when they discovered he was HIV positive. Actually he came back but then retired again.
rich	He made <u>a lot of money</u> and I guess he invested it wisely because his name is linked to the Lakers and theaters and more. Also to programs making people aware of the danger of AIDS and helping kids grow up and stay out of trouble. But the main thing about Magic is
playing	the <u>way he played</u> . He could do everything. He even played center one time in a championship
scoring	game. He always <u>scored a lot</u> and he could
passing	<u>pass</u> like nobody else. Even though he was a
rebounding	guard, he was tall and could <u>rebound</u> . He was great. Everyone says so.

After doing this freewriting, Cyrus Norton went back through his work looking for ideas to develop for a writing assignment. As he recognized those ideas, he underlined key words and phrases and made a few notes in the margins. By reading only the underlined words, you can obtain a basic understanding of what is important to him. It is not necessary to underline entire sentences.

In addition to putting some words on that dreaded blank sheet of paper, Norton discovered that he had quite a lot of information about Magic Johnson and that he had selected a favorable topic to develop. The entire process took little time. Had he found few or no promising ideas, he might have freewritten about another topic. In going back through his work, he saw some errors in writing, but he did not correct them because the purpose of freewriting is discovery, not correct grammar, punctuation, or spelling. He was confident that he could then continue with the process of writing a paper.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming features key words and phrases that relate in various ways to the subject area or to the specific topic you are concerned with. One effective way to get started is to ask the big six questions about your subject area: *Who? What? Where? When? Why? and How?* Then let your mind run free as you jot down answers in single entries or lists. Some of the big six questions may not fit, and some may be more important than others, depending on the purposes of your writing. For example, if you were writing about the causes of a situation, the *Why?* question could be more important than the others; if you were concerned with how to do something, the *How?* question would predominate. If you were writing in response to a reading selection, you would confine your thinking to questions appropriately related to the content of that reading selection.

Whatever your focus for the questions is, the result is likely to be numerous ideas that will provide information for continued exploration and development of your topic. Thus your pool of information for writing widens and deepens.

An alternative to asking the big six questions is simply to make a list of words and phrases related to your subject area or specific topic. That technique, favored by many professional writers and scholars, is called **listing**.

Cyrus Norton continued with the topic of Magic Johnson and he tightened his topic to focus on particular areas. Although Norton could have listed the annotations and the words he underlined in his freewriting, he used the big six questions for his framework.

Who? Magic Johnson
What? great basketball player
Where? the NBA
When? for more than ten years
Why? love of game and great talent
How? shooting, passing, rebounding, leading, coolness, inspiring

As it turned out, *How?* was the most fruitful question for Norton, and it led him to a list.

Clustering

Clustering (also called **mapping**) is yet another prewriting technique. Start by double-bubbling your topic; that is, write it down in the middle of the page and draw a double circle around it. Then respond to the question “What comes to mind?” Single-bubble other ideas on spokes radiating from the hub that contains the topic. Any bubble can lead to another bubble or numerous bubbles in the same way. This strategy is sometimes used instead of or before making an outline to organize and develop ideas.

The more specific the topic inside the double bubble, the fewer the number of spokes that will radiate with single bubbles. For example, a topic such as “high school dropouts” would have more spokes than “reasons for dropping out of high school.”

Here is Cyrus Norton’s cluster on the subject of Magic Johnson.



Writing the Topic Sentence

The topic sentence is the most important sentence in your prewriting and also in your paragraph. It includes two parts: the subject and the focus (what you will do with your subject). Consider, for example, this topic sentence:

Magic Johnson was a great all-around NBA player.

subject focus

It is an effective topic sentence because it limits the subject and indicates focus that can be developed in additional sentences. Another sound version is the following, which goes further to include divisions for the focus.

Magic Johnson was a great NBA star because he was excellent
subject focus
in shooting, passing, rebounding, and leading.

Ineffective topic sentences are often too broad, vague, or too narrow.

- VAGUE OR TOO BROAD Magic Johnson was everything to everybody.
- TOO BROAD Magic Johnson was fun.
- TOO BROAD Magic Johnson was a success in basketball.

TOO NARROW Magic Johnson went to Michigan State University.
Magic Johnson signed with the Los Angeles Lakers.

Usually, simple statements of fact do not need or do not allow for development.

Exercise 1 Evaluating Topic Sentences

Mark the following statements for subject (S) and focus (F), and label each as effective (E) or ineffective (I). Effective statements are those that you can easily relate to supporting evidence. Ineffective statements are vague, too broad, or too narrow.

- _____ 1. Columbus is located in Ohio.
- _____ 2. Columbus is a fabulous city.
- _____ 3. Columbus has dealt thoroughly with its housing problems.
- _____ 4. A monkey is a primate.
- _____ 5. Monkeys are fun.
- _____ 6. In clinical studies, monkeys have demonstrated a remarkable ability to reason.
- _____ 7. More than a million cats are born in California each year.
- _____ 8. A simple observation of a domesticated cat in the pursuit of game will show that it has not lost its instinct for survival.
- _____ 9. The two teams in the Rose Bowl have similar records.
- _____ 10. Michigan State is in the Rose Bowl.

Exercise 2 Writing Topic Sentences

Complete the following entries by making each into a solid topic sentence. Only a subject and part of the focus are provided. The missing part may be more than a single word.

EXAMPLE: Car salespersons behave differently depending on the car they are selling and the kind of customer they are serving.

1. Television commercials are often _____.
2. Rap music promotes _____.
3. My part-time job taught me _____.
4. I promote environmental conservation by _____.
5. The clothing that a person wears often suggests _____.
6. My close friend is preoccupied with _____.
7. Winning a lot of money is not always _____.
8. Country music appeals to our most basic _____.
9. Friendship depends on _____.
10. A good salesperson should _____.

Exercise 3 Writing Topic Sentences

Write a topic sentence for each of the following subjects.

1. Computer literacy _____.
2. My taste in music _____.
3. Bus transportation _____.
4. The fear of crime _____.
5. An excellent boss _____.

6. Doing well in college English classes _____.
7. Violence on television _____.
8. Child-care centers _____.
9. Good health _____.
10. Teenage voters _____.

Writing the Outline

An **outline** is a pattern for showing the relationship of ideas. The two main outline forms are the **sentence outline** (each entry is a complete sentence) and the **topic outline** (each entry is a key word or phrase). The topic outline is commonly used for both paragraphs and essays.

Indentation, number and letter sequences, punctuation, and the placement of words are important to clear communication in an outline. We do not read an outline expecting to be surprised by form and content, as we do a poem. We go to the outline for information, and we expect to find ideas easily. Unconventional marks (circles, squares, half-parentheses) and items out of order are distracting and, therefore, undesirable in an outline. The standard form is as easily mastered as a nonstandard form, and it is worth your time to learn it. Outlining is not difficult: the pattern is flexible and can have any number of levels and parts.

Basically, an outline shows how a topic sentence is supported. Thus it shows the organization of the paragraph. The most important supporting material, called the **major support**, is indicated by Roman numerals. That major support is developed by less important supporting material, called the **minor support**, which in turn may be developed by details or examples. Here is the outline developed by Cyrus Norton:

Magic Johnson was a great NBA star because he was excellent in shooting, passing, rebounding, and leading.

- I. Shooting (major support)
 - A. Short shots (minor support)
 1. Shovel (detail)
 2. Slam-dunk (detail)
 - B. Long shots (minor support)
 - C. Free throws (minor support)

- II. Passing (major support)
 - A. No-look (minor support)
 - B. Precise (minor support)
- III. Rebounding (major support)
 - A. Leaping (minor support)
 - B. Bumping shoulders (minor support)
- IV. Leading (major support)
 - A. Energy (minor support)
 - B. Spirit (minor support)
 - 1. Faith (detail)
 - 2. Smile (detail)

The foundation of a good outline and hence a good paragraph is a strong topic sentence, which means one with a specific subject and a well-defined focus. After writing a good topic sentence, the next step is to divide the focus into parts. Just what the parts are will depend on what you specify in the focus. Consider the thought process involved. What sections of material would be appropriate in your discussion to support or explain that topic sentence?

Among the most common forms of division are the following:

- Divisions of time or incident to tell a story
 - I. Situation
 - II. Conflict
 - III. Struggle
 - IV. Outcome
 - V. Meaning
- Divisions of examples or divisions of one example into three or more aspects
 - I. First example (aspect)
 - II. Second example (aspect)
 - III. Third example (aspect)
- Divisions of causes or effects
 - I. Cause (or effect) one
 - II. Cause (or effect) two
 - III. Cause (or effect) three
- Divisions of a unit into parts (such as the federal government into executive, legislative, and judicial branches—or Magic Johnson's all-around skill into shooting, passing, rebounding, and leading)

- I. Part one
- II. Part two
- III. Part three
- Divisions of how to do something or how something was done
 - I. Preparation
 - II. Steps
 - A. Step 1
 - B. Step 2
 - C. Step 3

Exercise 4 Completing Basic Outline Patterns

Fill in the missing outline parts. Consider whether you are dealing with time, examples, causes, effects, parts, or steps. Answers will vary, depending on individual experiences and views.

1. Too many of us are preoccupied with material things.
 - I. Clothing
 - II. Cars
 - III. _____
2. Television sitcoms may vary, but every successful show has certain components.
 - I. Good acting
 - II. _____
 - III. Good situations
 - IV. _____
3. A female who is trying to discourage unwanted sexual advances should take several measures.
 - I. _____
 - II. Set clear boundaries
 - III. Avoid compromising situations

4. Concentrating during reading involves various techniques.
 - I. Preview material
 - II. Pose questions
 - III. _____
5. Crime has some bad effects on a nearby neighborhood.
 - I. People fearful
 - A. Don't go out at night
 - B. _____
 - II. People without love for neighborhood
 - A. _____
 - B. Put houses up for sale
 - III. People as victims
 - A. Loss of possessions
 - B. _____
6. Exercising can improve a person's life.
 - I. Looks better
 - A. Skin
 - B. _____
 - II. Feels better
 - A. _____
 - B. Body
 - III. Performs better
 - A. Work
 - B. _____
7. Shoppers in department stores can be grouped according to needs.
 - I. _____
 - II. Special-needs shoppers
 - III. Bargain hunters

8. There are different kinds of intelligence based on situations.
 - I. Street-smart
 - II. Common sense
 - III. _____
9. Smoking should be discouraged.
 - I. Harm to smokers
 - A. _____
 - B. Cancer risk
 - II. Harm to those around smokers
 - A. _____
 - B. Fellow workers
 - III. Cost
 - A. Industry—production and absenteeism
 - B. _____
10. An excellent police officer must have six qualities.
 - I. _____
 - II. Knowledge of law
 - III. _____
 - IV. Emotional soundness
 - V. Skill in using weapons
 - VI. _____

Writer's Guidelines at a Glance: The Paragraph and Prewriting



1. A **paragraph** is a group of sentences, each with the function of stating or supporting a single controlling idea that is contained in the topic sentence.
2. A paragraph contains two parts: the topic sentence and the support.

- The topic sentence expresses the controlling idea of the paragraph. It has a subject (what the paragraph is about) and a focus (what the writer will do with the subject).
 - The support is the evidence (details, examples, and explanations) that backs up the topic sentence.
3. The two most common paragraph designs in college writing are these:
 - Topic sentence → support → concluding sentence
 - Topic sentence → support
 4. Prewriting includes activities you do before writing your first draft or whenever you need new ideas.
 - **Freewriting:** writing without stopping, letting your ideas tumble forth. Freewriting helps you break emotional barriers, generate topics, and discover and explore ideas.
 - **Brainstorming:** a listing procedure that helps you discover key words and phrases that relate to your topic. Simply make a list, or ask *Who? What? Where? When? Why?* and *How?* questions of your topic.
 - **Clustering:** a graphic way of showing connections and relationships. Start by double-bubbling your topic. Then ask “What comes to mind?” and single-bubble other ideas on spokes radiating from the double bubble.
 5. The **topic sentence** includes the subject (what you are writing about) and focus (what you are doing with your subject).
 6. The **outline** is a form for indicating the relationship of ideas. An outline shows how a topic sentence is supported. Thus it reveals the organization of the paragraph. Major support is indicated by Roman numerals. The major support is developed by minor support, which in turn may be developed by details or examples.

Topic sentence

- I. Major support
 - A. Minor support
 - B. Minor support
 1. Details or examples
 2. Details or examples
- II. Major support
 - A. Minor support
 - B. Minor support