

Why use paragraphs?

Paragraphs give structure to a piece of writing. They are a way to organise your thoughts, and to give clarity to your ideas. It may be helpful to think of paragraphs as signposts, telling whoever reads your work where your ideas are going, and when you are moving on to a different point. Since paragraphs are used to explain your argument in stages, it is important that you only express one idea or set of ideas in each paragraph. If you try to say too much, your reader will be confused and your argument will be clouded.

How do I structure a paragraph?

A paragraph should contain:

1. **A lead sentence** – this tells the reader what the paragraph is going to be about.
2. **The middle section** – here sentences expand on the ideas in the lead sentence. This section may add to the initial idea in any of the following ways: it can refine the idea mentioned, it can give examples that back up the idea, it may present dates, data or statistics, interpret theories or it could examine the opposing idea. [N.B. This list is *not* exhaustive – just remember that this section is where you need to support, in some detail, the idea in the lead sentence.]
3. **The last sentence** - sums up the main part of the argument in that paragraph. Having written this, you should feel that everything to do with this part of the argument has been concluded, and there should be correlation between the idea in the first line and the summing up in the last sentence.

v Here is an example of a structured paragraph:

The University of Reading is an increasingly popular choice for applicants. **[This is the lead sentence.]** Reading receives well over 20,000 applicants each year from all over the world. Our degrees have currency in blue chip, research and educational arenas. 94.5 per cent of new graduates find employment or enter higher study within six months of graduating (CAS, 2006). Recent market research (Broad, 2006) indicates how highly University of Reading degrees are rated by a range of employers. **[This is the middle section.]** Overall Reading students are highly successful in obtaining graduate jobs. **[This is the concluding section]**

How long should a paragraph be?

A paragraph should be at least three sentences long; any shorter than this and you need to question the decision to start a new paragraph. Consider whether the new idea should be attached to a previous one, or whether you have enough to say to justify isolating that idea. If your paragraph is longer than half a page, you should make sure that you are only dealing with one idea in that paragraph. If possible consider breaking it down into 2 or more paragraphs, but make sure your paragraphs can stand alone.

How should I move on from one paragraph to the next?

Each paragraph contains a separate stage, but all the paragraphs together constitute a thesis. To achieve this, it is necessary to connect one paragraph to the next. If you use a word or phrase that suggests a connection, it will be easier for a reader to follow your essay. Words or phrases that serve this purpose could be any of the following:

- v 'Thus' 'furthermore' 'hence' 'consequently' – or any word that shows direction.

Alternatively, you could use a phrase like:

- v 'On one hand' 'on the other' 'another point to consider' 'on reflection'.

There are many phrases that could indicate where your writing is going, but using directional words as signposts will help whoever reads your work.

Finally, it is worth asking yourself these questions to check whether you are using sentences and paragraphs effectively:

1. Does each sentence make sense as it is?
2. Is this sentence too complex, or too simple?
3. Does each paragraph express one idea or set of ideas?
4. Does each paragraph add to the others to build a cohesive argument?
5. Can the reader gain an overview of the content of your work, simply by reading the first sentence of each paragraph?

