

Paragraphs and Topic Sentences

A paragraph is a series of sentences that are organized and coherent, and are all related to a single topic. Almost every piece of writing you do that is longer than a few sentences should be organized into paragraphs. This is because paragraphs show a reader where the subdivisions of an text begin and end, and thus help the reader see the organization of the text and grasp its main points.

Paragraphs can contain many different kinds of information. A paragraph could contain a series of brief examples or a single long illustration of a general point. It might describe a place, character, or process; narrate a series of events; compare or contrast two or more things; classify items into categories; or describe causes and effects. Regardless of the kind of information they contain, all paragraphs share certain characteristics. One of the most important of these is a topic sentence.

TOPIC SENTENCES

A well-organized paragraph supports or develops a single controlling idea, which is expressed in a sentence called the topic sentence. A topic sentence has several important functions: it substantiates or supports an essay's thesis statement; it unifies the content of a paragraph and directs the order of the sentences; and it advises the reader of the subject to be discussed and how the paragraph will discuss it. Readers generally look to the first few sentences in a paragraph to determine the subject and perspective of the paragraph. That's why it's often best to put the topic sentence at the very beginning of the paragraph. In some cases, however, it's more effective to place another sentence before the topic sentence—for example, a sentence linking the current paragraph to the previous one, or one providing background information.

More specifically, let's look below at some functions of topic sentences, illustrated through examples:

1. announcing the topic: *A polar bear walks in a way all its own.* – Barry Lopez
2. making a transition from a previous paragraph: *Like sensations, ideas are neither true nor false.* – Mortimer J. Adler
3. asking and answering a rhetorical question: *What about motion that is too slow to be seen by the human eye? That problem has been solved by the use of the time-lapse camera*” – James C. Rettie
4. forecasting sub-topics to be dealt with in the paragraph or in a whole section of paragraphs: *Oppressed groups are denied education, economic independence, the power of office, representation, an image of dignity and self-respect, equality of status, and recognition as human beings.* – Kate Millet

COHERENCE

In a coherent paragraph, each sentence relates clearly to the topic sentence or controlling idea, but there is more to coherence than this. If a paragraph is coherent, each sentence flows smoothly into the next without obvious shifts or jumps. A coherent paragraph also highlights the ties between old information and new information to make the structure of ideas or arguments clear to the reader.

Along with the smooth flow of sentences, a paragraph's coherence may also be related to its length. If you have written a very long paragraph, one that fills a double-spaced typed page, for example, you should check it carefully to see if you perhaps need to start a new paragraph where the original paragraph wanders from its controlling idea. On the other

hand, if a paragraph is very short (only one or two sentences, perhaps), you may need to develop its controlling idea more thoroughly, or combine it with another paragraph.

A number of other techniques that you can use to establish coherence in paragraphs are described below.

Repeat key words or phrases. Particularly in paragraphs in which you define or identify an important idea or theory, be consistent in how you refer to it. This consistency and repetition will bind the paragraph together and help your reader understand your definition or description. This notion may contrast with your previous ideas about repetition in writing; however, you must now accept that in order to write academic English well, you will have to learn to approach the concept of repetition from a different point of view.

Create parallel structures. Parallel structures are created by constructing two or more phrases or sentences that have the same grammatical structure and use the same parts of speech. By creating parallel structures you make your sentences clearer and easier to read. In addition, repeating a pattern in a series of consecutive sentences helps your reader see the connections between ideas. The paragraph below shows how a few carefully placed parallel structures (CAPITALIZED) create a balanced and clear presentation of fairly complex material.

I DON'T WISH to deny that the flattened, minuscule head of the large-bodied "stegosaurus" houses little brain from our subjective, top-heavy perspective, but I DO WISH to assert that we should not expect more of the beast. First of all, large animals have relatively smaller brains than related, small animals. The correlation of brain size with body size among kindred animals (ALL reptiles, ALL mammals, for example) is remarkably regular. As we move FROM small TO large animals, FROM mice TO elephants or small lizards TO Komodo dragons, BRAIN SIZE increases, but not AS FAST AS BODY SIZE. In other words, bodies grow faster than brains, and large animals have low ratios of BRAIN WEIGHT to BODY WEIGHT. In fact, brains grow only about two-thirds AS FAST AS bodies. Since we have no reason to believe that large animals are consistently stupider than their smaller relatives, we must conclude that large animals require relatively less brain to do AS WELL AS smaller animals. If we do not recognize this relationship, we are likely to underestimate the mental power of very large animals, dinosaurs in particular.

Stephen Jay Gould, "Were Dinosaurs Dumb?"

Be consistent in point of view, verb tense, and number. Consistency in point of view, verb tense, and number is a subtle but important aspect of coherence. If you shift from the more personal "you" to the impersonal "one," from past to present tense, or from "a man" to "they," for example, you make your paragraph less coherent. Such inconsistencies can also confuse your reader and make your argument more difficult to follow.

Use transition words or phrases between sentences and between paragraphs. Transitional expressions (also known as *discourse markers* or *connectors*) emphasize the relationships between ideas, so they help readers follow your train of thought or see connections that they might otherwise miss or misunderstand. The same paragraph from above now serves to demonstrate how carefully chosen transitions (CAPITALIZED) lead the reader smoothly from the introduction to the conclusion of the paragraph.

I don't wish to deny that the flattened, minuscule head of the large-bodied "stegosaurus" houses little brain from our subjective, top-heavy perspective, BUT I do wish to assert that we should not expect more of the beast. FIRST OF ALL, large animals have relatively smaller brains than related, small animals. INDEED, the correlation of brain

size with body size among kindred animals (all reptiles, all mammals, FOR EXAMPLE) is remarkably regular. AS we move from small to large animals, from mice to elephants or small lizards to Komodo dragons, brain size increases, BUT not as fast as body size. IN OTHER WORDS, bodies grow faster than brains, AND large animals have low ratios of brain weight to body weight. IN FACT, brains grow only about two-thirds as fast as bodies. SINCE we have no reason to believe that large animals are consistently stupider than their smaller relatives, we must conclude that large animals require relatively less brain to do as well as smaller animals. IF we do not recognize this relationship, we are likely to underestimate the mental power of very large animals, dinosaurs in particular.

ibid

In order to grasp the underlying concepts and usage of coherence, it is important for you to have a chance to do some exercises that focus on topic sentences and on the creation of coherence. In the next section of this manual, beginning on the following page, you will find paragraphing exercises that will help you work on your ability to identify, define and eventually generate topic sentences. You will also be working on paragraph division and on coherence.

Although none of the exercises focuses exclusively on the placement of new and old information as in the above examples, ideally you should make a concerted effort to notice how the sentences you read begin and end. Can you find a “thread” that weaves together the writing as the author carries the reader from old and familiar towards new and important information? Do you see how what was old information in one sentence (introduced towards the end of a sentence) is transformed into new information and then often occurs at the beginning of a subsequent sentence? This sort of progressive linking of ideas and information is at the heart of clear and successful English writing and your ability to be aware of the process can make all the difference in your own capacity to write well. The ability to consciously notice this and other aspects of language use is known as *language awareness* and increasing it is one of the best ways to improve your capacity for learning.

Language awareness implies a constant curiosity about language and an active participation in your own learning processes. You mustn't ever forget that old models of passive learning focused almost exclusively on the teacher have been replaced by a model promoting active student research and exploration that is focused primarily on the learner. As writing is so clearly an active skill (in that you generate the language rather than having to understand it only), your active involvement and your level of language awareness become key factors in your eventual improvement and satisfaction.

PARAGRAPHING EXERCISES

Exercise 1

Below you will find the first part of a text discussing the White House in Washington. The first paragraph is in its original form and format, the only exception being that its topic sentence appears in **bold type**. In addition, any elements throughout the paragraph that contribute to its coherence have been highlighted in bold as well in order to help you get a feel for how the language is being used to create a unified, easy-to-follow text. As stated above, coherence can be created by the use of discourse markers, which help orient the reader towards the flow of the information, and it can also be created through the repetition of old information to link back to previous text.

For two hundred years, the White House has stood as a symbol of the Presidency, the United States government, and the American people. Its history, and the history of the nation's capital, began when President George Washington signed an Act of Congress in December of 1790 declaring that the federal government would reside in a district "not exceeding ten miles square...on the river Potomac." **President Washington**, together with city planner Pierre L'Enfant, chose the site for **the new residence**, which is now 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. **As** preparations began for **the new federal city**, a competition was held to find a builder of the "**President's House**." Nine proposals were submitted, and Irish-born **architect** James Hoban won a gold medal for his practical and handsome design.

Below you will find the second paragraph of the text, but the sentences have been separated from each other and their order has been changed. Decide which of them should be the first, or topic sentence of the second paragraph and then put the other sentences into the most logical order possible. When you feel sure about the order, write out your final version of the second paragraph in the space provided, underlining the topic sentence and also any coherency items as well. Make sure that your layout of the paragraph reflects its inherent structure; in other words, do not simply write out 4 separate sentences as shown below, changing only the order, but rather create a unified block of sentences that are clearly and instantly identifiable as a paragraph.

It was not until 1800, when the White House was nearly completed, that its first residents, President John Adams and his wife, Abigail, moved in.

It is also the only private residence of a head of state that is open to the public, free of charge.

Construction began when the first cornerstone was laid in October of 1792. Although President Washington oversaw the construction of the house, he never lived in it.

Since that time, each President has made his own changes and additions. The White House is, after all, the President's private home.

Paragraph Two

Exercise 2

Below you will find another part of the text on the White House. This time two paragraphs have been merged together to form one single paragraph. Your task is to decide where the text should be broken into two different paragraphs as it was presented in the original text. When we are revising written work, there is a symbol that is used to indicate where a new paragraph should be started within the text. The symbol looks like this ¶. Read the text below carefully and decide where to insert the new paragraph symbol in order to break up the text into two separate paragraphs. Remember that a new paragraph should begin with a topic sentence which will prepare the reader for what is coming afterwards. You should be able to relate all of the sentences which follow back to the topic sentence which has set the “theme” for the entire paragraph.

The White House has a unique and fascinating history. It survived a fire at the hands of the British in 1814 (during the war of 1812) and another fire in the West Wing in 1929, while Herbert Hoover was President. Throughout much of Harry S. Truman's presidency, the interior of the house, with the exception of the third floor, was completely gutted and renovated while the Trumans lived at Blair House, right across Pennsylvania Avenue. Nonetheless, the exterior stone walls are those first put in place when the White House was constructed two centuries ago. Presidents can express their individual style in how they decorate some parts of the house and in how they receive the public during their stay. Thomas Jefferson held the first Inaugural open house in 1805. Many of those who attended the swearing-in ceremony at the U.S. Capitol simply followed him home, where he greeted them in the Blue Room. President Jefferson also opened the house for public tours, and it has remained open, except during wartime, ever since. In addition, he welcomed visitors to annual receptions on New Year's Day and on the Fourth of July. In 1829, a horde of 20,000 Inaugural callers forced President Andrew Jackson to flee to the safety of a hotel while, on the lawn, aides filled washtubs with orange juice and whiskey to lure the mob out of the mud-tracked White House.

Exercise 3

Below is an exercise that asks you to give each paragraph in a text about pizza its own heading or title. To do this properly, you need to identify each paragraph's topic sentence and then note how its controlling idea is developed throughout the rest of the paragraph. This analysis will lead you to the overall theme of each paragraph and from there you should be able to produce a heading for the paragraph which sums up its theme.

The History of Pizza

Paragraph 1 heading: _____ .

Pizza, like so many other foods, did not originate in the country for which it is now famous. Unless you have researched the subject, you, like so many people, probably always thought Pizza was strictly an Italian creation. In reality, the foundations for Pizza were originally laid by the early Greeks who first baked large, round and flat breads which they topped with various items such as olive oils, spices, potatoes and other things. However, tomatoes were not known in Greece at that time or, very likely, the Greeks too would have used them to garnish Pizza as we do today.

Paragraph 2 heading: _____ .

Eventually the idea of flat bread found its way from Greece to Italy where, in the 18th century, the flat breads called "Pizzas" were sold on the streets and in the markets. They were not topped with anything but were enjoyed *au naturel*. Since they were relatively cheap to make and were tasty and filling, they were sold to the poor all over Naples by street vendors.

Paragraph 3 heading: _____ .

The arrival of the tomato in Italy and the visit of a queen to Naples contributed to the Pizza as we know and enjoy it today. In about 1889, Queen Margherita, accompanied by her husband, Umberto I, took an inspection tour of her Italian Kingdom. During her travels around Italy she saw many people, especially the peasants, eating this large, flat bread. The queen, who was in Naples at the time, was curious and so ordered her guards to bring her one of these Pizza breads. The Queen loved the bread and would eat it every time she was out amongst the people, which caused some consternation in Court circles. It was not seemly for a Queen to dine on peasant's food.

Paragraph 4 heading: _____ .

Despite people's scandalized reactions, the queen continued to eat the bread and at a certain point she decided to take matters into her own hands. Summoning Chef Raffaele Esposito from his Neapolitan pizzeria to the royal palace, the queen ordered him to bake a selection of pizzas for her pleasure. To honor the queen who was much beloved by her subjects, Raffaele decided to make a very special pizza just for her. He baked a Pizza topped with tomatoes, Mozzarella Cheese, and fresh Basil (to represent the colors of the Italian flag: Red, white, and green).

Paragraph 5 heading: _____ .

This became Queen Margherita's favorite pizza and when word got out that this was one of the queen's favorite foods, she became even more popular with the Italian people. She also started a culinary tradition, the Pizza Margherita, which lasts to this very day in Naples and has now spread throughout the world.

Exercise 4

The next exercise is similar in that you also have to provide each paragraph in a text with its own heading. However, here you are given a choice of headings to choose from and you have to match the most appropriate heading to each paragraph in the text, rather than inventing your own heading as you did in the previous exercise. The exercise is based on one that comes from the Reading Comprehension section of the Cambridge First Certificate Exam and you may find the level a bit more difficult than that of the previous text and exercise. If you are interested in testing your readiness for possibly taking the First Certificate Exam (and this could be a very good and motivating activity for you to think about!), then you should make sure to complete the exercise in not more than 20 minutes and without the use of a dictionary, even a monolingual one. If this proves too difficult, then take your time and check a monolingual dictionary (only!) for the meaning of words or expressions you don't know. Don't forget that the key to successfully completing the task is to pay close attention to the topic sentence and its controlling idea in each paragraph.

Instructions

You are going to read a magazine article on the next page that gives advice about how to overcome sleep problems. Choose the most suitable heading from the list **A - I** for each paragraph (**1 - 7**) of the article. There is one extra heading you do not need to use. There is an example at the beginning (**0**).

- | | |
|----------|----------------------------------|
| A | Time to get up |
| B | Put your appetite to bed |
| C | Doctors know best |
| D | Sleeping only please |
| E | Rest your weary bones |
| F | Cut down or cut out |
| G | Creatures of habit |
| H | The sleep environment |
| I | Relax the natural way |

Sleep right, sleep tight

Say goodnight to sleep problems with these effective strategies for getting a better night's sleep.

0

H

If you've had one or two bad nights lately, you can probably solve the problem by taking some of the measures below. For starters, make your bedroom a haven for sleep. Your room should be quiet and sufficiently dark, because darkness prompts the pineal gland to produce melatonin, the hormone that induces sleep. Heavy curtains can help keep the light out, and a fan can help drown out any annoying sounds. Cool temperatures help you sleep, so set your thermostat appropriately. For better air circulation, open a window or use a fan. If the air in the room is too dry, buy a humidifier.

1

A night-time routine can be very effective in letting your body know when it's time to sleep. Go through whatever rituals help you get mentally prepared for sleep. Read a few pages of your novel, spend 5 to 10 minutes on personal grooming, meditate, or stretch. It's also critical to go to bed and get up at the same time every day, even at the weekends.

2

Reserve your bed just for sleeping. Avoid working, paying bills, reading, or watching television in bed. If you associate your bed only with sleep, you'll be more likely to fall asleep when you get under the covers for the night. A bed that's too soft can cause poor sleep postures, which can also lead to muscle stiffness and back problems. Replace your mattress if it's more than 10 years old, and buy one that's as firm as you can tolerate but still comfortable.

3

Going to bed either hungry or too full can disrupt your sleep. You shouldn't have a big meal too close to bedtime as the digestion process might keep you awake. Also, if you lie down after stuffing yourself you can end up

with gastric reflux. If you're peckish, have a snack rich in carbohydrates, which trigger the release of the brain chemical serotonin, associated with relaxation. Try a cracker or a bowl of cereal.

4

Watch the caffeine. Too much caffeine throughout the day, even if it's not consumed right before bedtime, can contribute to fitful slumber. Once you hit 50, your metabolism slows down, so caffeine may stay in your system longer - up to 10 hours. Limit yourself to two cups of tea, coffee, or cola, taken at least 6 hours before bedtime. If that doesn't work, try eliminating caffeine altogether.

5

Go the exercise route. It's a simple fact: If you're physically tired at the end of the day, you'll sleep better. Outdoor exercise is especially helpful. Try jogging or a brisk walk. Remember that your body needs some time to unwind so you should exercise at least three hours before bedtime.

6

Throw away your sleeping tablets and try taking a warm bath instead. Your body temperature will slowly drop after you get out of the bathtub, making you feel sleepy. For further relaxation, investigate the benefits of camomile, valerian, or passionflower. These herbs can be taken in hot drinks or other forms. A cup of camomile tea before bedtime may be all you need to unwind.

7

Following these steps should help you to nod off with ease. But if 30 minutes go by and you still haven't fallen asleep, don't lie there feeling frustrated. Get out of bed and do something relaxing, like listening to soothing music or flicking through a magazine. Or make yourself a cup of warm milk. Then try again. Sweet dreams!

Exercise 5

Below is another exercise which utilizes a format from the Cambridge First Certificate Exam. In this case, you have a text which contains gaps for missing sentences. Your task is to choose from a list of possible sentences in order to complete the text appropriately, logically and correctly. In order to identify which sentence goes into which gap, you must pay close attention to the sentences preceding and following the gap. This is because if you utilize clues from these sentences, you will be able to see which of the possible sentences logically continues the flow of the writing. In order to complete the exercise successfully, you are required to focus on the linking of ideas and on the creation of coherence in the text so as not to create any logical gaps in the progression of the writing. Once again, if you would like to do the exercise as a preparation for the actual exam, you should attempt to complete it within 20 minutes and without the use of a dictionary.

You are going to read a magazine article about a holiday in Thailand for elephant-lovers. Eight sentences have been removed from the article. Choose from the sentences **A-I** the one which fits each gap (**15-21**). There is one extra sentence which you do not need to use. There is an example at the beginning (**0**).

- | | | | |
|----------|---|----------|---|
| A | Initially, the elephants want to follow the mahout. | F | It was the first day of my "mahout" (elephant driver) course at the Anantara resort in Thailand. |
| B | Elephants only sweat in one place - above their toenails - but they love to be hosed down with cool water. | G | And so I learned lesson one in driving an elephant: remember where you parked the night before. |
| C | After enjoying a cup of green tea in bamboo cups, it was time to get aboard. | H | Elephants, like humans, have distinct personalities and a wide range of emotions, from grumpy to giddy. |
| D | A hot breakfast awaits and you are presented with your elephant mahout license to drive. | I | Guests learn to bathe their elephants, find a good sleeping spot where food is plentiful, and drive them using mahout commands. |
| E | Our first task was to drive back to the hotel restaurant, park our elephant and enjoy a hot breakfast on the terrace. | | |

Learning to drive in Thailand

We had somehow managed to lose an elephant.

0 F Disco Inferno, our 26-year-old, two-ton charge, was simply nowhere to be found. Crashing around in 160 hectares of misty jungle at 6.30am with Khun Nan, the professional mahout, I couldn't believe he had lost her. **15**

There are four elephants at the Anantara elephant village, including Disco. They originally worked in mining and logging, but were "checked in" to Anantara in September 2003, having been acquired from the Thai Elephant Conservation Centre. **16** Those of the Anantara group are distinct: there is the eldest Pang Yom (the wise matriarch); Tantawan and Champen, inseparable and best friends from logging; and lastly Lawann (Disco Inferno). She's the cheeky elephant who is an all-night rager, hence her nickname.

The 'driving school' is the only one of its type for tourists and is modelled on the professional mahout training camp at Lampang's conservation centre. Nature ranger John Roberts, formerly an engineer in England, explains that it is the only chance for people to become well acquainted with elephants in a natural setting. **17** They can also trek and explore the resort grounds.

John finally gathered the four elephants together and we headed with the other guests to the training arena for shower time. **18** With the mahouts, we set about washing off the mud, while discussing the texture of their skin, a thick hide that feels like prickly vinyl.

19 Sitting up high with my legs behind her big, floppy ears, I felt comfortable despite the lack of climate control or seat belt! I learned the basic commands: stop (leg squeeze); go (one kick); and reverse (rocking). Trying my best to mimic the mahout's instructions, I was delighted when Disco, my elephant, obligingly started to move towards the training arena.

20 Over three days, however, a bond is built between you and your elephant, and that is the main objective of the course. On the last day, your elephant meets you at the hotel. You drive her unaided through the forest to visit a Buddhist shrine with a view across the Mekong River to Burma and Laos. **21** It may not be a vital life skill or valuable addition to your curriculum vitae, but riding astride an elephant is certainly a unique way to get off the beaten tourist track and make a friend who is distinctly larger-than-life.

Conclusion

You have now come to the end of the manual for the first-year English academic writing module. Please keep in mind however that a manual is not meant to be read once and put aside. Rather it should be thought of as a tool and a reference source that you keep nearby when you are writing and that you go back to from time to time to refresh your ideas. Some of the notions introduced in this manual may not have made a lot of sense to you the first time you were exposed to them. This could be the case for a variety of reasons. For example, it could be that until you have done a certain amount of academic writing yourself and therefore had the opportunity to put into practice some of the theory presented in the manual, you find it difficult to completely grasp certain concepts. Or it could be that you're particularly tied to your Italian writing style and so automatically or even unconsciously reject some of the stylistic conventions of the English academic style (e.g. the use of repetition, short sentences and rigidly structured sentences and paragraphs). Or it could even be that your overall level of English still needs to be raised and therefore you're unable at the moment to properly absorb all of the information in the manual, needing more time and more exposure to English (never forget how important it is to maintain a more or less constant contact with a language you're learning and also how important READING is!)

Whatever the reason for your possibly not comprehending or applying the material in a complete or even adequate way at the moment, you should remember that you are only now at the beginning of a continuing three-year process. This means that your first-year writing manual may be useful for you in the next two years of university and that, given time, you will undoubtedly improve your writing skills and your control of English in general. Although learning to write can be difficult, frustrating and even tedious at times, you will surely find that the ability to write clearly and correctly in a semi-formal style will serve you well in the future, from outlining an abstract for your degree thesis to creating a Curriculum Vitae after graduation, from preparing for international certification exams to writing e-mails at your future job.

At the end of the writing module, it is time for you to go back to review the primary objectives fixed at the beginning of this manual. Ask yourself if you have reached the objectives below before closing out your first-year writing experience.

- understanding how to use punctuation correctly
- writing clear and correct sentences
- understanding and using paragraph structure
- knowing how to place and order information in a sentence or a paragraph

I sincerely hope that you can confidently put a tick (✓) next to all four of these objectives. If not, because you still feel that you need improvement in the above areas, then you now know what to focus on in your future preparation, study and practice. You will have ample opportunity to further consolidate and refine your academic writing skills in the 2nd and 3rd year of your university degree course in Languages. Hopefully you have acquired a solid foundation for your continued writing activities in the future.