

What makes a paragraph good?

A paragraph is a group of sentences that introduce, explain, defend, or expand on the writer's thesis. Each paragraph is a microcosm of a whole paper. It must have a main point with background or supporting statements. However, each paragraph must work with the other paragraphs to advance the writer's thesis. This means that 1) each paragraph must deliver on the promise of the paper's thesis statement, 2) each paragraph must serve a unique function in the paper, 3) each paragraph has to be evaluated in terms of the whole paper.

How do you produce a good paragraph? We suggest that you:

- Write a working thesis statement for your paper.
- List the main points you want to make in support of your thesis statement.
- Identify the main point and purpose of individual paragraphs you plan to write in your paper.
- List the relevant evidence, explanations, arguments, or details to support your point and assign these to appropriate paragraphs.
- Compare the material for one paragraph with the material for another to make sure each is unique.
- Write the sentences of each paragraph until you have a rough approximation of your vision for the whole paper.
- Ask yourself: Does each paragraph make sense on its own?
Does each paragraph support my effort to convince the reader?
Does each paragraph have a clear purpose in the paper?
- Revise all the paragraphs so that they work with one another to convince the reader that you know what you are writing about.
- Edit your paragraphs for grammar, word choice, punctuation, and citation style.

Keep in mind that there are different kinds of paragraphs: opening (introductory), developing, and closing (concluding) paragraphs. Here's a brief description of each type.

Opening paragraph: In short documents (1-7 pages), the first or second paragraph serves to present the writer's main point, claim, or thesis statement. This is the opening paragraph. Sometimes a writer will give background or scene-setting information before making a thesis statement, but the momentum of the paper usually comes from the thesis statement, early in a paper.

Developing paragraph: These paragraphs develop the writer's ideas between the opening paragraph and the closing paragraph. Examples, illustrations, arguments, subpoints, carefully considered tangents, and data are presented in these paragraphs to support the writer's point. Collectively these paragraphs are sometimes referred to as the "body" of a paper. A developing paragraph may occur before an opening paragraph if the writer wishes to give a reader a good orientation to the issues prior to stating his/her position. Developing paragraphs lead the reader somewhere: to agreement on a central claim, or to a logical conclusion.

Closing paragraph: Closing paragraphs underline the main point of the paper and encourage the reader to agree with the writer, accept his/her findings, or draw similar conclusions. These paragraphs come last in a paper. They often restate the writer's thesis in light of the arguments and evidence presented in the developing paragraphs. However, they should not be used to merely repeat or list the points already made in the paper.

What makes a paragraph good? (cont.)

What follows is an example of a good opening paragraph, written by a student:

¹Capitalism is much more than an economic system: it has evolved into a way of life. ²Capitalism promotes the extraction of resources, production and manufacturing of goods, and the consumption of those goods on a massive level. ³Consumption is so embedded in our lives it has become part of our culture. ⁴According to Robbins, “Our consumption of goods obviously is a function of our culture. ⁵Only by producing and selling things and services does capitalism in its present form work, and the more that is produced and the more that is purchased the more we have progress and prosperity” (2002, 195). ⁶The impacts on the environment due to this “culture of capitalism and consumption” are devastating. ⁷The notion that consumption is socially constructed can be traced through Americans’ love affair with automobiles and the meaning they have in our culture.

What makes it good?

1. It presents the writer’s thesis statement (line 7), fulfilling its role as the opening paragraph.
2. It offers background material in the form of generalizations (lines 1-3) supported by expert opinion (lines 4-5).
3. The language used links the key ideas: (line 1) *Capitalism...* (line 2) *Capitalism promotes...consumption...* (line 3) *Consumption...part of our culture* (line 4, 5, 6) ...’*culture of capitalism and consumption*’ (line 7) *consumption...can be traced...in our culture.*
4. Grammar, spelling, word choice, and citation style are correct.

Next is an example of a poorly constructed opening paragraph.

¹As a teenager, dating can be really intense. ²The events that teenagers experience in their dating relationships can make them feel really miserable. ³Even good events like falling in love can cause problems. ⁴Teenagers say that this is even more important, more unpleasant, and less expected than family discord (Krenke, 1995). ⁵While teenagers may have many ways to deal with problems not all are good for them to use in their relationships. ⁶Bergstein, Hemenway, Kennedy, Quaday, and Ander (1996) found that out of a sample of 7th and 10th graders in Boston and Milwaukee, 17% had carried a concealed gun at some point in their lives and 73% believed that safety, threats, and revenge were acceptable reasons for carrying handguns.

What makes it weak?

1. It does not present a thesis statement that tells us where the paper is going. Will the main claim be that in line 1-2 (teenage dating isn’t always fun), or line 5 (teenagers don’t always solve problems properly)? Either way, these claims aren’t very challenging.
2. The background material and quotes (lines 3-4, 6) aren’t tied together with a main idea: will the paper deal with teenage misery or teenage violence?
3. The language is mundane (lines 1-2 *really intense* and *really miserable*) and imprecise. *teenagers* is the only common thread in the sentences. Does *dating* equal *falling in love*; does *unpleasant* imply *threats and revenge*? Are 7th graders teenagers?