

Paragraphs: The LEGO Bricks of Argumentation

LEGOs—those colorful, plastic bricks that are fun to build with but a pain to step on. Snap them together and you can bring your imagination to life. LEGO sets come with pre-made directions. Your essays do not. Like LEGO sets, however, papers are made up of discrete units. These are called paragraphs. Understanding how paragraphs function as the building blocks of your argument will help you to assemble papers with logical, coherent structures.

The Claim: Each paragraph needs to make one, and only one, claim that develops your paper’s argument. Every sentence in the paragraph must support and develop this point. (Note: a general topic like “technology in WWII” is not a claim. What will you say about WWII technology to support your thesis?) Use specific historical examples, quotes, and paraphrases as evidence of the point’s validity. Provide interpretations, analysis, and reasoning that tie these facts together. In short, develop your claim by explaining why each example that you provide supports it.

The Topic Sentence: Most LEGO bricks have round studs at the top that help them connect to other bricks. Topic sentences are the studs of your paragraphs. When you begin a new paragraph, state its claim in the first sentence. Also make sure to connect this point to the one made in the previous paragraph. Transitions clarify how the following paragraph builds on previous ideas, thus developing your argument. Here are some examples of words and phrases that can help you draw these links: *Therefore, Moreover, Indeed, However, Thus, This lead to*—the list continues. There is no need to use signposts like these in every topic sentence. Just make sure that it is clear why the claim in your previous paragraph has lead you to make the point that follows.

The Concluding Sentence: You would never get a secure link between LEGO blocks without those hollow tubes on the bottom. Similarly, each paragraph needs a concluding sentence to wrap it up. Clarify for the reader what the stakes of the paragraph are in relation to your thesis. In other words, think about what the significance of the paragraph was and state it. By reflecting on the connection between your overall argument and the point you just made, a concluding sentence can foreshadow what you will write next and, consequently, move the essay forward. Save explicitly stating your next claim, however, for your next paragraph.

The Organization: Now that you understand the general schematic of a paragraph, it is time to assemble your paper. Your thesis will provide the guide for how to put your paragraphs together. Ask yourself: What sequence of paragraphs is most effective for leading your reader to agree with your thesis? Perhaps your argument lends itself to a chronological organization: tracing events as they developed or as something changed over time, making claims about how an earlier incident caused a later one to happen as it did. Perhaps your argument lends itself to a thematic organization: approaching a historical phenomenon by identifying how forces like gender, race, religion, or ideology shaped the topic you are discussing. Perhaps you will use some combination of both. Whatever organization you choose, by thinking of your paragraphs as the building blocks of your essay, you will be able to say confidently “Lego!” (Latin for “I assemble.”)