

Paragraphs: the Building Blocks of Argumentation

LEGOs -- colorful, plastic bricks. Snap them together, and you can bring your imagination to life. LEGO sets come with pre-made directions; your essays do not. However, like LEGO sets papers are made of discrete units. These are called paragraphs. Understanding how paragraphs function as the building blocks for your argument will help you assemble papers with logical, coherent structures.

Each paragraph is composed of 4 essential elements (adapted from Dr. Leanora Neville):

1. **Claim:** Paragraphs should make one, and only one, claim to develop your paper's thesis/argument. (A general topic like "technology in WWII" is not a claim. What will you say *about* WWII technology to develop your thesis?) Put this in the topic sentence.
2. **Examples/Evidence:** Use specific historical examples, quotes, and paraphrases as evidence of the claim's validity. Paragraphs often use several small examples or 1-2 bigger examples.
3. **Explanation/Interpretation of Evidence:** Provide interpretation, analysis, and reasoning to tie evidence together. This is where you explain what the evidence *means*. Explain and interpret your evidence, so it helps to support and/or develop the paragraph's point. (Note: every quote needs immediate analysis/explanation; don't assume your reader understands why you included it.)
4. **Relation of Evidence to Argument:** Each paragraph needs a sentence to wrap up or "clinch" the paragraph's point. It can also tie the paragraph's analysis to your paper's thesis. In other words, use it to clarify the stakes of the paragraph in relation to your thesis. This element also can move the essay forward, but save stating your next point for the topic sentence of your next paragraph.

At a basic level, every sentence in a paragraph should do the job of one of these elements. That might look like a paragraph with 1 sentence for each element. But complex paragraphs often need several sentences for various elements. Here's an example of the latter:

(1) This sentence makes the claim of the paragraph. (2) The claim is supported by this textual evidence: "here is the quote" or paraphrase. (3) This is what the quote/evidence means. (2) The argument has further evidence in this quote or paraphrase. (3) This is what the second quote means. (4) This is how both examples relate to the argument. (4) This is how the evidence advances the argument.

Note: In longer papers, you might use separate paragraphs for the explanation and argument or to present and explain separate examples.

Common Paragraph Questions

"How many paragraphs should be on one page?" Always follow your Professor or TA's guidelines! But a good rule of thumb is to never make paragraphs a whole page long. Try for 2 paragraphs per page or, at most, 3 paragraphs per 2 pages.

"How should I organize my paragraphs?" What's the relationship between your points? Use a paragraph order that is most effective to develop the logic of your thesis. Two popular types - Chronological and Topical - can be used either separately or in combination, depending on your thesis' needs.