

Paragraph Writing

A successful paragraph begins with a main idea. This idea is explained, developed and reinforced in the paragraph, with evidence provided. Sentences flow smoothly, connecting to each other and to the essay as a whole. Effective paragraphs help your reader to follow your line of reasoning (or your argument).

Introduction

When you are asked to write an academic essay, you need to undertake research and think carefully about the issues and ideas discussed in the texts you read. Once you have developed an understanding of a topic and have considered evidence for your views, you are ready to begin the writing process.

One of the most common problems students face is that they have many valid ideas but they don't know how to organise them.

The first step in addressing this problem is to plan your essay, paying particular attention to the paragraphs in the body of your essay, as this is where the bulk of your argument is located.

Below is an example plan for a basic body paragraph about the health benefits of chocolate. The structural elements are listed in the boxes to the right.

Chocolate – can improve heart health

Contains flavonoids

- *relax blood vessels, lower blood pressure (Stresing 2004)*
= lower risk of stroke + heart disease

*Benefits of low cocoa consumption – similar to using
blood pressure medication (Study by Taubert et al. 2007)*

SO: research shows chocolate is healthy for the heart

Main idea / topic sentence

Explanation and development
with evidence

(Stresing 2004;
Taubert et al. 2007)

Summary / concluding statement

Having a clear plan for every paragraph can help to ensure that your argument is logical and relevant.

Main idea / topic sentence

Every paragraph needs to make one main point. This point is located in the topic sentence. Usually, but not always, the topic sentence is the first sentence of the paragraph. In the above example, the main idea is that chocolate can improve heart health. The rest of the paragraph needs to stay focussed on this idea and prove that it is true.

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Explanation, development and evidence

After you have planned your topic sentence, you need to expand upon it, explaining, developing and providing evidence for your points. To do this, firstly ask yourself a question about the topic sentence. The question could consider 'how', 'what' or 'why'. The answer to that question will lead to another, and so on.

For example, the development in the 'chocolate' paragraph plan was based on the answers to the following questions:

1. If chocolate can improve heart health, what is in chocolate that makes it healthy?

Flavonoids

2. How do flavonoids work in relation to heart health?

They relax blood vessels and lower blood pressure (source: Stresing 2004)

3. What happens if blood pressure is lowered?

Risk of stroke and heart disease is reduced

4. Are these benefits significant? Is there any evidence?

Yes - low consumption of cocoa has similar benefits to those achieved via conventional medicine (source: a study by Taubert et al. 2007)

Remember that, although a paragraph contains several sentences, only one main point is being made.

The explanation, development and evidence for your main point all need to flow smoothly and logically (i.e. be cohesive and coherent) within your paragraph. You achieve this through your ability to:

- stay on topic - repeating and substituting key words from the topic sentence, ensuring that every sentence relates to the main idea
- use pronouns (e.g. they/it/these) - referring back (and possibly forward) to terms or ideas in your paragraph
- use transition signals and links - using terms such as 'To illustrate...' and 'Therefore...'
- follow the natural patterns of English - knowing the usual order of information in sentences.

These elements are explained in more detail below.

Staying on topic and using pronouns

Here is the full version of the 'chocolate' paragraph which demonstrates these elements.

- Words in **bold** highlight where repetition/substitution of 'chocolate' occurs. Those underlined relate to the idea of 'health'. Both of these terms are key elements of the topic sentence.
- Pronouns are highlighted and explained in the boxes.

Chocolate has been shown to improve cardiovascular health. **Cocoa**, from which **chocolate** is made, contains flavonoids. The main flavonoids present in **cocoa** have been shown to relax blood vessels and lower blood pressure (Stresing 2004). When blood pressure is lowered, there is a reduced risk of health problems such as stroke and coronary heart disease. A study (Taubert et al. 2007) into the body's response to the low consumption of **cocoa** found that **these** health benefits are comparable to **those** achieved through the use of conventional blood pressure medicine. Therefore, research indicates that small amounts of **chocolate** can indeed offer heart health benefits.

Pronoun 'those' refers to 'benefits achieved through conventional ... medicine'

Pronoun 'these' refers to 'reduced risk of health problems'

By repeating/substituting key words and using appropriate pronouns, you stay focussed on the topic and avoid confusing your reader.

Using transition signals

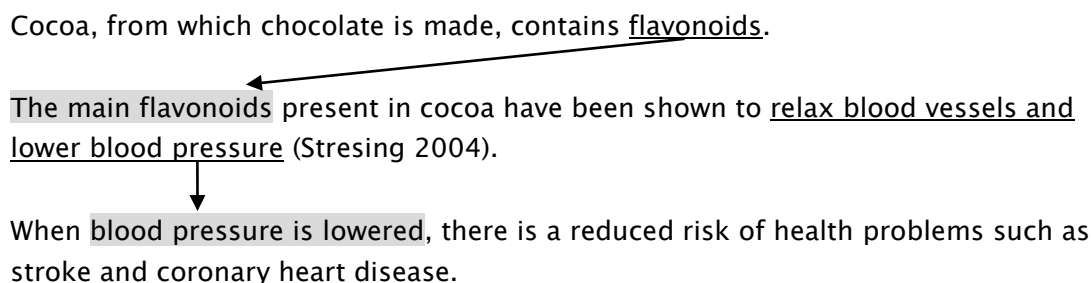
Linking or signalling terms are used in and between sentences to join ideas. In the paragraph above, you may have noticed words like ‘therefore’ and ‘such as’ that were used to make connections. Other common linking devices and their functions are listed here:

Function	Transition signal
To draw a conclusion or give a result	So, accordingly, thus
To contrast or point out a difference	However, yet, whereas, but
To provide an example	For instance, an example of this is...
To add another point	In addition, furthermore, another aspect of...

It is important that you include these kinds of terms in your writing to ensure that the points you make are logically connected. For a more comprehensive list of transition signals, refer to the sources listed at the end of this Learning Guide.

Following the natural pattern of English

Another important aspect of cohesion relates to the natural order of information in English – i.e. the position of the ‘theme’ of a sentence and the ‘new’ information that follows. This can be explained using the excerpt below:



You can see that ‘new’ information is introduced at the end of the sentence (after the main verb). This information, with which the reader is now familiar, then becomes the ‘theme’ of the following sentence.

This process does not necessarily happen with every sentence in English, but it is certainly a very common pattern. In your writing, try to make sure that your points flow in this way.

Summary / concluding statement

The final sentence of your paragraph needs to summarise and/or reinforce the point you have made. It should not simply be a repeat of the topic sentence. The ‘chocolate’ paragraph developed and supported the idea that cardiovascular health can be improved by eating chocolate.

Consider how the final sentence summarises the paragraph:

Therefore, research indicates that small amounts of chocolate can indeed offer heart health benefits.

The concluding sentence summarises the paragraph by:

- referring to ideas presented in the paragraph (in this case, 'research indicates...')
- including key terms (chocolate, health)
- reinforcing the main idea (by including words like 'indeed').

Finally...

Your paragraphs do not exist in isolation from each other, so consider making links between them. Your topic sentence might begin with a phrase such as 'Another way in which...' or 'The second key element of...' This reminds your reader of the point you made in the previous paragraph and links it to the next.

You also need to ensure that your paragraphs connect with the whole of your essay. This means you need to plan and structure your introduction and conclusion as well. Please consult the following learning guide for more information:

http://www.adelaide.edu.au/clpd/all/learning_guides/learningGuide_introductionsAndConclusions.pdf

Further help

For further practice in paragraph writing, University of Adelaide students can access paragraph and cohesive writing tutorials in MyUni:

- Login to 'myuni.adelaide.edu.au'
 - Go to the course 'Writing and Speaking at Uni'
 - From the navigation panel, choose either 'Paragraph Writing' or 'Cohesive Writing'

For information on referencing styles and integrating sources, refer to:

- http://www.adelaide.edu.au/clpd/all/referencing_guides/
- http://www.adelaide.edu.au/clpd/all/learning_guides/learningGuide_reportingVerbs.pdf

For information on various aspects of paragraphing including cohesion and signalling, refer to:

- <http://www.uefap.com/writing/writfram.htm>
- Oshima, A & Hogue, A 2006, *Writing academic English*, 4th edn, Pearson Longman, Upper Saddle River, U.S.
- Jordan, RR 1990, *Academic writing course*, 2nd edn, Collins ELT, London.
- Parks, AF, Levernier, JA & Hollowell, IM 1996, *Structuring paragraphs: a guide to effective writing*, Bedford/St. Martin's, Boston, Mass.

If you require more assistance with Paragraph Writing, please contact the Writing Centre on 8313 5771.

Visit the Writing Centre website for additional resources: www.adelaide.edu.au/writingcentre/

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