Learning Enhancement Team

University of East Anglia

STUDENT SERVICES

Using Paragraphs

This guide explains how to make effective use of paragraphs in your writing. The function and features of a paragraph are explained, together with guidelines for using paragraphs to create a clear and coherent written structure.

Related guides: *Writing an Essay*

What is a paragraph?

Writing of any length requires subdivision into a number of points and stages, and these stages are expressed in a paragraph. Paragraphs provide a structure for your writing. Each paragraph should deal with one idea or stage of an idea, and it should be clear to the reader what this main idea is, and what its purpose is in your essay. Paragraphs should link together logically into a progressive argument rather than a loose collection of points, and the links between them should also be clear to show what stage they represent in the argument. Paragraphs can be formatted in two ways. They can begin either by starting a new line and indenting the first sentence, or by leaving a blank line. A new paragraph is a signpost to the reader that the writing is about to move on to a different stage.

How long should a paragraph be?

There is no absolute rule: very short or long paragraphs can work when used by an experienced writer. However, as a guideline, paragraphs should usually be no less than 2 or 3 sentences long and there should be 2 or 3 paragraphs per page of A4. The length of a paragraph depends on the idea it discusses, but if it is shorter than 2 or 3 sentences, check to see if it is not really part of the previous or next paragraph. If your paragraph is longer than half a page, check to see if the idea would be better broken down again and explained in two or more paragraphs.
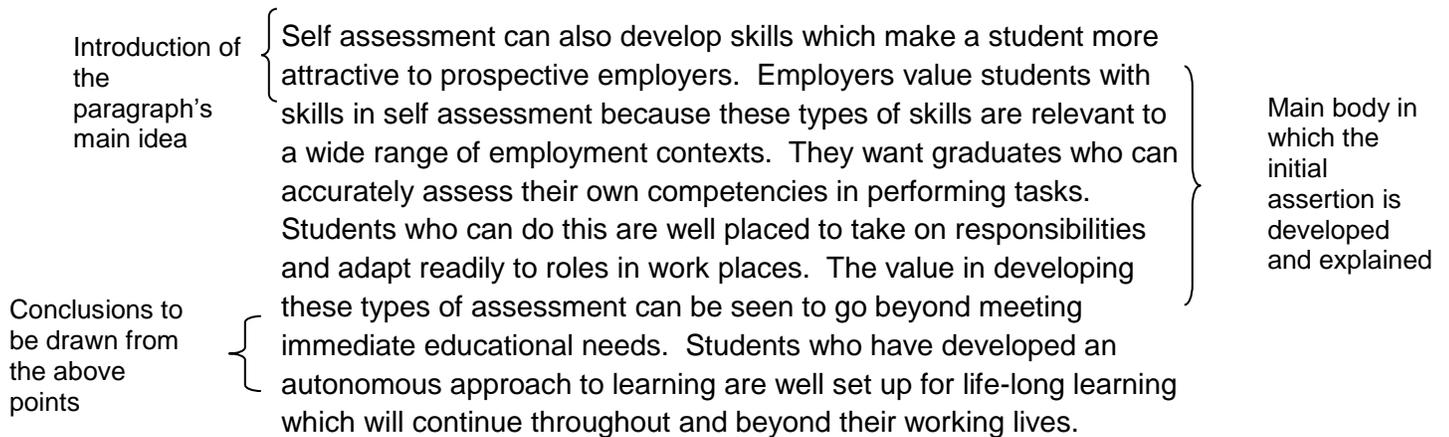
When do I start a new paragraph?

Start a new paragraph for each new point or stage in your writing. When you begin a paragraph, you should always be aware of the main idea being expressed in that paragraph and how it contributes to your argument. Be alert to digressions or details that belong either in a different paragraph or need a paragraph of their own. Do not add breaks within a paragraph by starting a new line every sentence; your text should run on to the end of the paragraph.

How do I write a paragraph?

A paragraph can have an internal structure with an introduction, main body and conclusion in the same way as an essay. The example below shows a paragraph which:

- introduces the paragraph's main point and links it to previous material;
- develops and supports the point;
- shows the significance or relevance of the point made.

Introduction of the paragraph's main idea

Main body in which the initial assertion is developed and explained

Conclusions to be drawn from the above points

Self assessment can also develop skills which make a student more attractive to prospective employers. Employers value students with skills in self assessment because these types of skills are relevant to a wide range of employment contexts. They want graduates who can accurately assess their own competencies in performing tasks. Students who can do this are well placed to take on responsibilities and adapt readily to roles in work places. The value in developing these types of assessment can be seen to go beyond meeting immediate educational needs. Students who have developed an autonomous approach to learning are well set up for life-long learning which will continue throughout and beyond their working lives.

The opening words indicate that, like the previous paragraph, this one is also about the topic of Self Assessment, but that its function is to add information about a new aspect, Self Assessment and Employment. It takes the reader from information you have already discussed to new ideas.

It is a useful rule always to have three stages in a paragraph: introduction, development and conclusion. In this way, your discussion starts with material previously given to your reader, then builds on it by adding new material, and finally summarises, ready to move on to the next paragraph.

The introduction

The introduction should be a progression from the previous paragraph. It makes the purpose of the paragraph clear so the reader can read the paragraph with this purpose in mind. It is usually necessary to show the paragraph's place in the structure of the piece as a whole. This can be done with just a signpost word (*also, nevertheless, however, furthermore*) or it may need a phrase (*another point to consider is…on the other hand…*). In an essay, this might mean showing how the main idea of the paragraph answers the essay question. In some cases when the paragraph begins a new section, it may be necessary to write a separate paragraph which explains how the following section relates to the piece as a whole.
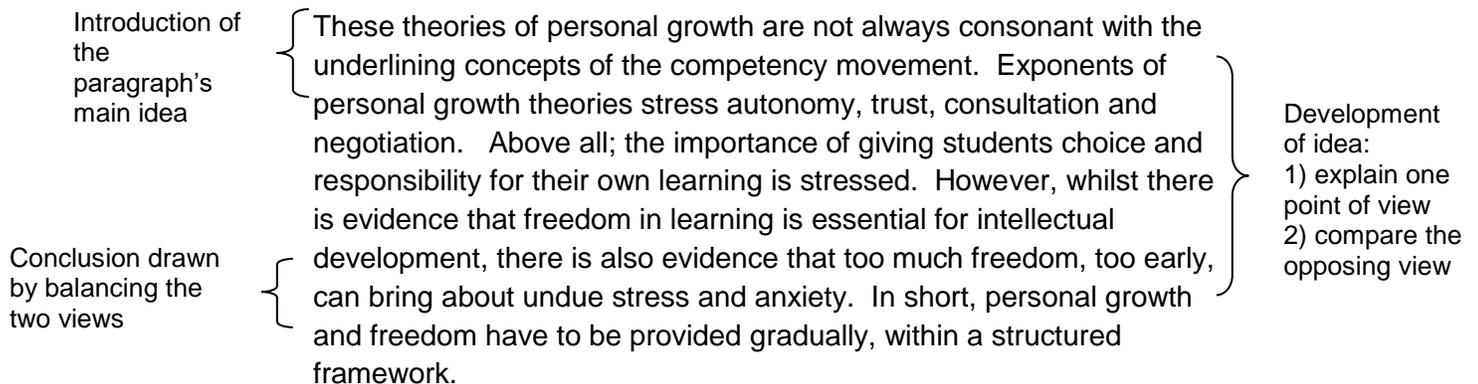
The development

The body of the paragraph should develop the idea that has been introduced at the beginning of the paragraph. This can be done by:

- refining the idea;
- giving examples;
- commenting or evaluating evidence;
- showing implications or consequences;
- examining opposing ideas.

The conclusion

The end of the paragraph can show the significance of the point, link back to the beginning of the paragraph, comment on the implications of the point as a whole, or make a link to the next paragraph. It is important not to end the paragraph with a digression or irrelevant detail. Each sentence in the paragraph should be part of the internal structure.

Another example of a paragraph using this three part structure is given below.

Introduction of the paragraph's main idea

Conclusion drawn by balancing the two views

These theories of personal growth are not always consonant with the underlining concepts of the competency movement. Exponents of personal growth theories stress autonomy, trust, consultation and negotiation. Above all; the importance of giving students choice and responsibility for their own learning is stressed. However, whilst there is evidence that freedom in learning is essential for intellectual development, there is also evidence that too much freedom, too early, can bring about undue stress and anxiety. In short, personal growth and freedom have to be provided gradually, within a structured framework.

Development of idea:
1) explain one point of view
2) compare the opposing view

Summary

Paragraphs provide a structure for your writing which enables the reader to identify and follow the developing stages in your treatment of the material. Remember that paragraphs should have their own internal structure whilst fitting into the larger structure of the whole piece of writing. Be clear what the main idea for each paragraph is, deal with it as fully as is necessary for your purpose, but be alert to digression or irrelevances. Move from old information to new and make the links clear.

Study tip

Check your own use of paragraphs by reading the first sentence to see if it outlines the paragraph's main idea and function in your argument. The effective use of paragraphs can be seen in writing when the reader can gain an overview of the content by reading the first sentence of each paragraph.

Want to know more?

If you have any further questions about this topic you can make an appointment to see a **Learning Enhancement Tutor** in **Student Services**, as well as speaking to your lecturer or adviser.

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▭	Ask:	ask.let@uea.ac.uk
☝	Click:	https://portal.uea.ac.uk/student-support-service/learning-enhancement

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