

Yuba College Writing & Language Development Center

Good Paragraphs

Good paragraphs have three characteristics.

- A good paragraph has *unity*. It focuses on a single main idea and does not wander from thought to thought. It moves purposefully to a conclusion.
- A good paragraph has *coherence*. The ideas are clearly expressed and clearly connected to each other; the reader does not have to puzzle out what the author is getting at.
- A good paragraph has sufficient *development*. This means the author has included enough supporting evidence to be convincing to even a skeptical reader.

Unity

To create unity, first decide what each paragraph will be *about*. It should only be about one thing. State what this main thing is in the form of a topic sentence. Your paragraph will probably make several points, but each one has to be related to this topic sentence.

Remove or re-work any sentences that do not clearly connect to the topic sentence. But rather than deleting them, cut and paste them to the bottom of your document; they may fit somewhere else in your essay. Later you may find that sentences you have cut are related enough that you can group them into a new paragraph.

Coherence

Coherence is understandability, and understandability is *your* responsibility as the writer. You need to establish progressive, logical relationships between ideas. To do this, imagine your reader, someone about as smart as you, but without much knowledge of the topic you are writing about. You are the expert and must use language and images that are familiar, appropriate, and understandable *to this reader*. For simple ideas, this isn't so hard, but for complex ideas, you have to work harder.

Repetition and transitions are signals that help create coherence. Repetition keeps the reader's mind focused by repeating and using synonyms for the key words of the topic. Other signals, *transitions*, tell the reader what is coming next. For example, *first*, *next*, and *last* signal where readers are in the progression of ideas. Other transitions (*nevertheless*) can tell readers to expect an opposing or conflicting idea; still others (*consequently*) signal them to expect effects or results.

The effort you put into writing coherently should make understanding almost effortless for your reader.

Adequate development

To convince your imaginary reader, you must add as many explanations, examples, proofs, and details as you need to support your point. If you have several points, each should be developed as thoroughly as the last.

How you develop paragraphs differs depending on your purpose. A personal narrative, for example, would develop chronologically, using sensory details to recreate events, but it might not use expert testimony or analysis. A discussion of philosophy, on the other hand, may develop by defining terms, and thinking about causes and consequences.

Contributed by Rosemary McKeever



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