

Paragraphing: The MEAL Plan

Effective paragraphing is a central skill in academic writing. Many writers have been told a paragraph should contain a single idea; many have heard paragraphs have to be a minimum length—three sentences, for instance. In reality, paragraphs come in different shapes and sizes, and some so-called “rules” may put writers in a straightjacket that unnecessarily hampers their ability to convey their ideas as needed in a particular piece of writing. Nevertheless, grasping the general form of a paragraph provides a good foundation. Once you have this basic building block at your command, you can vary from it by conscious choice when needed.

One way to envision a body paragraph is as a “complete MEAL,” with the components being the paragraph’s Main idea, Evidence, Analysis, and Link back to the larger claim.

The Main Idea

The *main idea* is the paragraph’s central message. In academic writing, that message is often argumentative: a paragraph makes an assertion that’s part of the writer’s larger claim. Often the main idea appears in the paragraph’s first sentence, where it is sometimes called the “topic sentence.” However, some paragraphs offer their main idea in the second, third, or last sentence; some don’t have a single sentence that encapsulates the main idea. That said, your reader should come away from each paragraph with a clear understanding of its main idea. He or she shouldn’t have to stop and reread the paragraph to figure out what it’s saying.

It’s true that a paragraph should usually focus on a single idea—paragraphs are, after all, the bite-sized chunks into which you break your argument so that your reader will be able to digest it easily. But keep in mind that, to some degree, you can bring unity to a paragraph that seems to contain two or three ideas by showing how those ideas really fit under the same umbrella. The way a paragraph conveys its claim, in other words, dictates whether your reader will see it as a coherent idea or as a hodge-podge of different points.

Evidence and Analysis

Evidence and *analysis* are a paragraph’s main course; they are what allow you to prove that your paragraph’s main idea is plausible. Your evidence could be information from newspaper articles you’ve found in the library; it could be data from research or interviews you’ve conducted yourself; it could be a quotation or paraphrase from a work of literature; it could be an image; it could be a chain of logical reasoning you have developed; in some types of papers, it might be an anecdote or personal experience.

Generally, evidence is external to us: it goes beyond mere opinion. In contrast, how you *analyze* evidence depends on your internal reasoning.

Evidence shouldn’t be plopped down in a paragraph and left to “speak for itself.” If you leave your evidence unexplained, your reader may interpret it differently than you intended, and if that happens, your main idea doesn’t get the support it needs. Therefore your paragraph should carefully *analyze* the

evidence it provides; it should, in other words, explain exactly how the evidence you've cited proves what you think it proves. Often a paragraph's "E" and "A" are hard to separate: you might provide some evidence, analyze it, and then provide more evidence and analysis. Sometimes individual sentences will contain both evidentiary and analytic elements. But in most academic writing, both evidence and analysis are essential to a paragraph's well being.

Link Back to the Larger Claim

A paragraph's *link back to the larger claim* is often implicit—it can be awkward to wrap up a paragraph with a really heavy-handed link ("This idea is important to my claim because of X, Y, and Z"). Nevertheless your reader should get a good sense of how your paragraph fits into the larger scheme of your paper's argument. He or she shouldn't finish reading the paragraph and think, "Why did the writer put this paragraph in this paper? I don't see how this idea is relevant!" An effective paragraph will clarify its own place in the essay's (or section's) larger claim.

Some Examples

1. Improving School Lunches

Changing the public school lunch menu to include more fresh fruit, vegetables, and grains would both improve our students' health and raise their academic performance. Our school lunches, though tasty, are quite unhealthy. They are mostly made up of fried and highly processed foods, with very few fresh fruits or vegetables. While the cafeteria offerings might offer students a quick boost, they lack the nutrients needed to sustain energy levels. Let's face it: there's a big difference in how you feel after eating a bowl of french fries and how you feel after eating a bowl of fresh fruit. Foods with little to no nutritional value make students sleepy and apathetic. Students who eat better tend to be more focused and attentive. Indeed, studies have shown a connection between eating well and school achievement. The school lunch also affects students' overall health. In fact, poor lunch choices may be the primary reason why North Carolina is ranked fifth in the nation for teen obesity. What better place to start educating ourselves about improving our diets than in our public schools?

2. How I Would Feel If There Were an Earthquake in Durham

I would feel mildly surprised if there were an earthquake in Durham, North Carolina. According to the Durham County Hazard Mitigation plan, most of the earthquakes recorded in North Carolina since the year 1698 have had epicenters along the Eastern Tennessee Seismic Zone (32). Seismic activity in this zone might be felt in Durham, but the effects of even the most damaging surface waves would likely be only slight to moderate this far east. I would feel shocked, and I confess perhaps a little thrilled, were the intensity of an earthquake in Durham to measure more than IV on the Modified Mercalli Intensity Scale. Were Durham actually at the epicenter of a quake, I would try to relish what would be a once-in-several-generations experience. If the earthquake originated within the Eastern Tennessee Seismic Zone, I would worry most about the well-being of my cousins in Asheville, where the damage would likely be greater due to the mountainous terrain and the proximity to the epicenter.

Works Cited:

Durham County, North Carolina. "Hazard Mitigation Plan." Sept. 2006. 1 Feb. 2009.

<http://www.durhamcountync.gov/departments/emgt/Documents/HMP/Durham_County_Mitigation_Plan_ALL.pdf>.

Questions to ask:

- Can you identify the *main idea*?
- What *evidence* does the author provide to support that message? Is there any *analysis* of the evidence?
- Does the author *link back* to the main idea? If so, how?
- Do you find any weaknesses in the paragraph? How would you revise the text to make it stronger?