

Paragraphs (page 1 of 2)

By Dr. Karen Petit

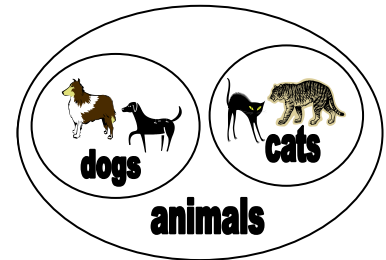
Readers like to understand a paragraph with a single reading, rather than having to waste their time reading a paragraph two or three times in order to try and figure out the meaning. To make our readers happy, all of our paragraphs should include these components:

1. general and specific ideas
2. a topic sentence
3. supporting points
4. specific details
5. organized ideas
6. idea connections



General and Specific Ideas

Every paragraph should have both general and specific ideas. A general idea depicts a larger area than a specific idea does. For example, “animal” would be general, “dog” would be half-way between general and specific, “collie” would be more specific than “dog,” and “Lassie” would be very specific. Most paragraphs are composed of sentences that depict at least three different levels of generality and specificity.



A Topic Sentence

A topic sentence states a general idea and can appear anywhere in a paragraph, but readers usually like the topic sentence to appear early in a paragraph. One method of creating a topic sentence is to write it in the form of a grammatical sentence: the subject (or focused topic) is followed by the predicate (or what the author is saying about the focused topic). A topic sentence:

1. states the main idea of a paragraph
2. should contain the author’s opinion, feeling, or attitude on a topic
3. is not a statement of fact
4. is not an announcement
5. should be focused enough so that it can be supported with details in the rest of the paragraph
6. often (but not always) previews the paragraph’s main points
7. might include one or more of the following words: “should,” “reasons,” and “because”
8. might include one or more adjectives that help to state an opinion on the topic
9. might indicate a paragraph’s method of development (narration, description, examples, definition, comparison/contrast, process, division/classification, causes/effects, problem/solution, and argument)

Here are three examples of topic sentences:

Playing with a pet can improve its life through mental stimulation, physical activity, and companionship.

Alligators and crocodiles should be outlawed as pets for several reasons.

Fish are great pets because they are cute, quiet, fun to watch, and inexpensive.

Supporting Points

Each paragraph should have at least two (preferably three or four) supporting points that connect the topic sentence to the details. Supporting points show the reader what part of the topic sentence will be supported in each section of the paragraph.



Paragraphs (page 2 of 2) By Dr. Karen Petit

Specific Details

Each supporting point should have very specific details that illustrate, explain, support, or develop it. The details may take one or more of these forms:

1. specific examples
2. narrative or descriptive details
3. analysis or explanations
4. details from the author's own memories, experience, or knowledge
5. statistics or other kinds of facts
6. quotations, summaries, or paraphrases (In all cases when information comes from a source different from the author--such as from an Internet source, a book, a cereal box, a friend, or a relative--documentation must be used to tell readers where they can find the original source of the information.)



Here is an example of a topic sentence with supporting points and details:

Topic Sentence: Children should be taught positive ways to interact with their pets.

Supporting Point: One positive way of interacting with a pet is to hold it correctly.

Details: Multiple sentences that describe how to hold a pet will appear here.

Another Supporting Point: Another positive way of interacting is to feed the pet correctly.

Details: Explanation about how to feed a pet will be placed here.

Organized Ideas

Organization is important in helping people to find items and to see how the parts of an item are connected to each other, to the whole item, and to other items. Organization is needed not only in paragraphs but also in many areas of our lives. For example, when we put items into a closet, most of us do not just throw all of the items into a pile. We might hang some clothes on hangers, arrange other items on a shelf, put some objects in a box, and arrange shoes in a row on the closet's floor. Likewise, in a paragraph, the parts should be organized into some kind of logical order.



Idea Connections

Our ideas need to be connected to each other so that readers will follow the flow of our ideas from one into another. Because readers read from left to right and from top to bottom, our ideas need to progress in that same order. For example, readers reading the following two sentences will try to connect both of the ideas together:

Eating at the restaurant was fun. The people at the table next to us had a big fight.

If our sentences do not have enough connections, readers often will make up their own connections, which may result in confusion if the ideas are connected differently from what we want. Some ways to connect ideas together are conjunctions, conjunctive adverbs, transitions, repeated words, and repeated ideas. Here are some examples of idea connections:

Eating at the restaurant was fun, **and** the people at the table next to us had a big fight.

Eating at the restaurant was fun **although** the people at the table next to us had a big fight.

Eating at the restaurant was fun **because** the people at the table next to us had a big fight.

Eating at the restaurant was fun; **however**, the people at the table next to us had a big fight.

Eating at the restaurant was fun; **as we were leaving**, the people at the table next to us had a big fight.

Eating at the restaurant was fun; **our enjoyment was ruined when** the people next to us had a big fight.

