

Learning About Paragraphs

What Is a Paragraph?



A *paragraph* is a section of text focused on a *main idea*. Usually a paragraph is part of a longer piece of writing. In an essay about summer camp, for example, one paragraph might focus just on the meals. Other paragraphs in the essay would each focus on another aspect of camp, such as the outdoor activities, adding up to create an overall picture of the experience.

Why Use Paragraphs?

As writers and readers, we often seem to take paragraphs for granted. Imagine, though, a piece of writing with no paragraphs. As a reader, you would face huge blocks of uninterrupted text, giving your eyes no chance for a break until the end. As a writer, you might think it would be nice not to worry about where to start a new paragraph or when to indent; however, paragraphs help you get your message across to readers. They show readers that you are moving from one idea (or setting, or speaker) to another. Showing where paragraphs begin and end is like holding the reader's hand and walking him or her through your piece. Paragraphs make it easier for readers to get where you want to take them.

What Are the Parts of a Paragraph?

Most paragraphs that focus on a *main idea* have a *topic sentence* and *supporting sentences*. Many also include a *clincher sentence*.

The Main Idea

Whether they stand alone or are part of a longer piece of writing, paragraphs usually have a main idea. The *main idea* is the overall point of the paragraph. The following paragraph is from an article about the United States 2000 census, on which nearly seven million people identified themselves as belonging to more than one race. In this paragraph the main idea is in the first sentence.

Many multiracial kids glide easily between their mixed cultures. Kelly Dubé, 12, of Los Angeles is half Korean and half French Canadian. His mother takes him to a Buddhist temple, where he has learned how to meditate. He can understand and speak some Korean and knows a little French. Most of the time, though, he doesn't think about his bi-racial status: "If anything, I think I'm more American."

Ritu Upadhyay, "We, the People..."
TIME for Kids

The Topic Sentence

Location of the Topic Sentence

The main idea of a paragraph is often stated in a *topic sentence*. You may find it at the beginning of the paragraph, in the middle, or even at the end. In the paragraph above, the topic sentence is the first sentence: *Many multiracial kids glide easily between their mixed cultures.*

In the following paragraph, the topic sentence is last. This sentence makes clear that the villagers are preparing for a battle. The other sentences lead up to that point.



SKILLS FOCUS

Identify the main idea.
Identify the topic sentence.

Quickly, quickly we gathered the sheep into the pens. Dogs barked, and people shouted out orders to one another. Children rushed through the village gathering firewood to pile inside the homes. Men and women scooped up pots and pots of water, filling cisterns and containers as rapidly as possible. People pulled the last ears of corn from the fields and turned their backs on the dry stalks. Finally, we all stood together in the plaza in the center of the village for just a moment before the fighters went to stand near the walls and the wide-eyed children were coaxed inside the houses. We were prepared for the coming battle.

Importance of a Topic Sentence

Although not all paragraphs have topic sentences, it is helpful to use them when you are writing. Topic sentences may help you focus on your main idea. They also help the reader find the main idea and know what to expect from the paragraph. However, paragraphs that relate a series of events or that tell a story often lack a topic sentence. When a paragraph has no topic sentence, the reader must figure out the main idea by determining what all of the sentences have in common. Read the following paragraph. Although it has no topic sentence, all the sentences are about one main idea—the unexpected reactions of a poor woman toward her wealthy friend.

“Oh, Lottie, it’s good to see you,” Bess said, but saying nothing about Lottie’s splendid appearance. Upstairs Bess, putting down her shabby suitcase, said, “I’ll sleep like a rock tonight,” without a word of praise for her lovely room. At the lavish table, top-heavy with turkey, Bess said, “I’ll take light and dark both,” with no marveling at the size of the bird, or that there was turkey for two elderly women, one of them too poor to buy her own bread.

Dorothy West, *The Richer, the Poorer*

NOTE When a writer includes no topic sentence, readers must determine the main idea of a paragraph from its supporting details. In paragraphs like the one from *The Richer, the Poorer*, the main idea is implied, rather than directly stated.

Exercise 1 Identifying Main Ideas and Topic Sentences

Finding a main idea is like detective work: Both require a keen eye for detail. Look for the main idea in each of the following paragraphs by looking for a topic sentence and by studying the paragraph's details. Remember that the main idea is the overall point of the paragraph. If the selection has a topic sentence, write it down. If the paragraph has no topic sentence, write the main idea of the paragraph in your own words, using details from the paragraph.

1. He turned and looked back at the stand of raspberries. The bear was gone; the birds were singing; he saw nothing that could hurt him. There was no danger here that he could sense, could feel. In the city, at night, there was sometimes danger. You could not be in the park at night, after dark, because of the danger. But here, the bear had looked at him and had moved on and—this filled his thoughts—the berries were so good.

Gary Paulsen, *Hatchet*

2. Like lots of other kids her age, eight-year-old Auralea Moore plays baseball, swims, and skis. She also has a favorite plaything: a 19-inch doll named Susan, who was handcrafted to look like her. Auralea was born with spina bifida, a birth defect that has left her paralyzed from the waist down. Her look-alike doll, equipped with a pair of blue and silver “designer” braces, helps her remember that although she may be handicapped, she is definitely not out of the action.

“A Doll Made to Order,” *Newsweek*



COMPUTER TIP



Use the cut and paste commands to find the best placement of a topic sentence within a paragraph. You can always move or replace the sentence if you change your mind.

3. Personally, I thought Maxwell was just about the homeliest dog I'd ever seen in my entire life. He looked like a little old man draped in a piece of brown velvet that was too long, with the leftover cloth hanging in thick folds under his chin. Not only that, his long droopy ears dragged on the ground; he had sad wet eyes and huge thick paws with splayed toes. I mean, who could love a dog like that, except my brother Joji, aged nine, who is a bit on the homely side himself.

Yoshiko Uchida, *A Jar of Dreams*

Exercise 2 Writing a Topic Sentence

For each of the following paragraphs, write a topic sentence that communicates the main idea.

1. A bottle of nail polish can cost as little as a dollar and last for months, depending on how much you use. You can find it in every color in nature and any unnatural color you can imagine. Best of all, if you get tired of a color, you can easily change it.
2. This movie is packed with action. I have never seen so many chases and explosions before. It also has an important lesson about friendship. The two main characters always look out for each other. Maybe the best thing about it is the music. The soundtrack will certainly be a bestseller.
3. First, you need some supplies. These include a roller or brush, a ladder tall enough to reach the roof, and enough paint to cover the whole house. You should have already scraped off the old paint. Start at the top of a section and work your way down to avoid dripping wet paint on a finished part.

Supporting Sentences

Supporting sentences are the details that expand on, explain, or prove a paragraph's main idea. These details can include *sensory details*, *facts*, or *examples*.

- *Sensory details* are what we experience through our five senses—sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell.
- *Facts* give information that can be proved true by direct observation or by checking a reliable reference source. For instance, it is a fact that great herds of buffalo once roamed the western plains. You can prove this fact by checking an encyclopedia or history book.
- *Examples* give typical instances of an idea. An example of a creature with protective coloration is a chameleon, a lizard whose coloring changes with its surroundings.

The following chart shows the kinds of details you can use to support the main idea of a paragraph.

Kinds of Details	Supporting Sentences
Sensory Details	
Sight	The bright sun glared off the front windshield of the car.
Hearing	Thunder boomed down the canyon, echoing off the walls.
Touch	My hands felt frozen to the cold, steel handlebars.
Taste	Thirstily, she gulped down the sweet orange juice.
Smell	The sharp, unpleasant odor of asphalt met his nose.
Facts	In 1974, Hank Aaron slammed his 715th career home run to break the record held by Babe Ruth.
Examples	Fierce windstorms occur worldwide. For example, tornadoes have wind speeds over 200 miles per hour.

Reference Note

Supporting details help you elaborate on your ideas. For more information and practice on **elaboration**, see page 490.

SKILLS FOCUS

Identify supporting sentences. Support, develop, and elaborate ideas in writing.

Exercise 3 Collecting Supporting Details

When you write paragraphs, you have to collect details that support your main idea. You can practice with the following topic sentences. List at least two details to support each topic sentence.

EXAMPLE 1. The appliance that toasts our bread has changed over the years.
1. *Details: It originated in the early 1900s. It consisted of bare wires with no thermostat. The first pop-up toaster appeared in 1926.*

1. The time I spend with my friends on Saturday nights is my favorite time of the week.
2. My dream is to spend two days in a shopping mall.
3. One person's actions can make a difference in the lives of others.
4. When I feel hungry, I can just imagine my favorite meal.

The Clincher Sentence

Once you have written a topic sentence and developed well-organized details that support your main idea, the only thing left to do is to wrap it all up. Some writers do this by using a *clincher sentence*, also known as a *concluding sentence*. Notice how the last sentence of the following paragraph pulls together the preceding information by echoing the topic sentence.

Helping the homeless helps the community. When homeless people are given housing assistance and job training, they can become our neighbors, co-workers, and friends. Not only do they find work and learn to support themselves, but they also pay taxes and share their skills with others. Every person we help out of homelessness is one more person who can enrich our neighborhood and community.

SKILLS FOCUS

Summarize main ideas.
End with a clear conclusion.

Although many paragraphs have no clincher sentence, you may want to use one to cement your main idea in readers' minds.