

Constructing Body Paragraphs

The paragraphs between the introduction and conclusion of an essay are often the most productive and flexible paragraphs available to a writer. They are the place where you begin to work through your sources, where you generate ideas, and take the most risks. Often it's in the process of revising those body paragraphs that you develop the thesis or theory that will get moved up to your introduction, and where you test and expand on that theory by seeing what new aspects of particular example it reveals. Similarly, it's often in working through the transitions, the logical connections from paragraph to paragraph that you figure out the most effective ways of organizing and presenting the points you want to make.

Because body paragraphs do different kinds of work, they come in all shapes and sizes. Some paragraphs include quotations from two different sources in order to demonstrate an important contrast or comparison or in order to explore what one source reveals about the other. Some paragraphs follow through on a previous point or connection between readings by offering a further exploration of its significance or by introducing an additional comparative or contrastive source. Because of this, there is no single grid for constructing successful paragraphs in an academic essay. However, most effective paragraphs in W031, W130, and W131 contain some combination of the following elements:

- An opening sentence that signals a transition from the previous paragraph and establishes the topic, main idea, or central claim to be explored in the paragraph.
- Introduction of new evidence/examples from one or more of the readings that helps to explain and develop that topic, idea, or issue (normally this evidence is presented through a combination of summary and direct quotation--see "A Guide to Using Quotations").
- A discussion of that evidence that explains it, unpacks it, analyzes it, interprets it, shows your readers why it is significant.
- A follow-through sentence or two that tells your readers what they have learned from that particular evidence and how it connects to/builds on the thesis or theory of the essay.

A Further Note on Transitional/Topic Sentences: The first sentence in a paragraph is normally doing two different jobs: identifying the specific idea or issue you will be discussing in that paragraph and signaling how that particular idea or issue relates to/follows from the previous paragraph. By calling this sentence the "topic" sentence,

writing teachers often emphasize the first job more than the second, but both jobs are equally important. An effective opening sentence can often do both jobs at the same time (though a writer might also choose to separate these two jobs into two sentences).

For example, the following sentence sets up a well-defined topic for a paragraph but tells us little about how this might connect to the previous paragraph:

Both McKnight and Allen experience “double consciousness” when they are singled out at school for the way they speak.

Whereas the revised example makes an effort to gesture back toward the previous paragraph:

Both McKnight and Allen experience this struggle with “double consciousness” when they are singled out at school for the way they speak.

Here, the writer established the same topic for the paragraph but uses “this struggle” to hint at the work accomplished in the previous paragraph—probably a definition of the term “double consciousness.” If the writer said “McKnight and Allen also experience... we might guess that the previous paragraph offered examples of the way these same two writers experienced “double consciousness” in settings other than school.

In establishing a topic for each paragraph, the writer usually tries to narrow down the larger subject matter of the paper to a specific claim that might reasonably be explored in the length of a paragraph. For instance, where the previous example identified a point of commonality between two essays, an additional paragraph might address a point of contrast:

Unlike McKnight, Allen learns an entirely new way of speaking and behaving in order to fit in at school, yet she is far more successful than McKnight at “performing” this new identity.

This paragraph might bring in new evidence from both essays that helps to demonstrate the key differences, but, more likely, it focuses on specific evidence from the Allen essay in order to explore the level and quality of her success.