

PARAGRAPHING

How long is a paragraph? That depends, in part, upon what kind of writing you're doing. In journalism, paragraphs are often very short: 1-3 sentences. In academic writing, they're often longer. For many college papers a good paragraph might be 1/3 to 1/2 page long (double-spaced), or around 80-150 words.

The most important thing about any paragraph in the body of your paper is that it should do **one** particular job. A reader should be able to scan over it and say "this paragraph is about what happened in the first five minutes after the car crash," or "this paragraph presents the first problem with parking at ISU," or "this paragraph explains how the experiment was set up."

That information should appear nowhere else in the body of your paper, because every paragraph in your paper has a separate job to do. Everything about that topic should be in this paragraph, and everything in this paragraph should be about that topic.

But what if a paragraph starts getting too long? Often, it's possible to look at a very long paragraph and see that it's actually discussing two different aspects of the same thing. When that happens, you can usually divide it into separate paragraphs. For example, instead of a page-long paragraph about the ongoing costs of car ownership, you could have one paragraph about gas prices and a second paragraph about tires, oil changes, and windshield repair.

If a paragraph seems too short, you have two choices: either combine it with another short paragraph before or after it, or add more detail or discussion to make it longer.

There are several ways of organizing the information in a paragraph. A general-to-specific paragraph may start with a claim and then give many examples of evidence that support that claim. A specific-to-general paragraph could start with those examples and tie them all together with a claim at the end. In a narrative paper or lab report, a paragraph may be organized by time (first this happened, then that happened) or space (this was on our left, that was on our right). This handout discusses three kinds of paragraph structure: **basic**, **TRIAC**, and **general-to-specific**.

■ Basic Paragraph Structure

In formal academic writing a body paragraph usually has (at least) a three part structure:

Topic Sentence → Evidence → Analysis

It starts with a claim (a **topic sentence**), then gives **evidence** that supports that claim, and then gives an explanation (an **analysis**) of exactly how that evidence supports that claim.

Topic Sentence. The first sentence of a paragraph tells the reader what to expect, and it makes a point that the rest of the paragraph will back up. For example, if a topic sentence talks about the expenses of car ownership, then everything in that paragraph should be about costs—not about time spent waxing the car or vacuuming its floors.

Each of your topic sentences supports the thesis statement at the beginning of your paper. In fact, some readers will try to follow the argument your paper is making by reading only your thesis statement and your topic sentences! For example, if your thesis is that buying a car is an expensive commitment that people should not jump into, some of your topic sentences might look like this:

- A car loan can end up being much more expensive than it first appears.
- In addition to a monthly loan payment, the car owner has to pay insurance.
- Owners also have to be prepared for regular maintenance expenses.
- Even with regular maintenance, any car can develop costly mechanical problems.

As you can see in the examples above, the topic sentence often includes some **transition** word or phrase that connects it to the ideas in the paragraph or paragraphs that came before it. See our "[Transitions](#)" handout for more information.

Evidence. Your readers won't necessarily agree with the claim you make in your topic sentence, so you have to convince them. To do so, you'll usually use one or more quotations, statistics, or examples. If you can't think of any, or you can't think of enough to make a good-sized paragraph, then you may want to go back and do some more research. You can't simply repeat your claim in different words; you have to give your reader a reason to believe it. If your paragraph is about the cost of insuring a car, for example, some of your readers may not realize how expensive insurance can be. To show them, you might include things like:

- a quotation from an article you read on the cost of insurance.
- the cost of insuring a new red Toyota Tacoma driven by an unmarried 20-year-old man.
- a description of how much your cousin spent every month on insuring his car.

Analysis. Evidence, however, is never enough by itself. After you give a quotation or fact or example, you always have to show *how* it backs up your claim. Your cousin spent \$120 every month on insurance? That may sound like a lot to you, but one of your readers might think that was cheap. Another reader might wonder *why* your cousin paid \$120: had he gotten a speeding ticket? Was he also insuring his car against theft or damage? You might include things like:

- what percentage of your cousin's small monthly income \$120 really was
- what kind of car your cousin was insuring and how that affected his insurance rate
- how your cousin's age and driving history may have affected his insurance rate
- what kind of insurance he bought and what kind of company he bought it from.

The same thing is true when you are writing about literature. If you say that a poem is sad in your topic sentence and you quote one of its lines as evidence, you still have to explain *why* you believe that line seems sad. What words make it sad, and why? Is it something about the rhyme? Or where the line stops? Someone else may believe that the same line is hopeful, so you have to explain your thinking clearly. The more carefully you analyze and explain the evidence you chose, the more convincing your paper will be.

■ TRIAC Paragraph Structure

Some teachers ask their students to write paragraphs based on the **TRIAC model**, which is a more detailed version of the basic paragraph structure described above. It has five parts:

T	Topic Sentence	Introduces the topic and includes an idea that relates to the thesis.
R	Restriction	(or Restatement) Limits the topic sentence's focus.
I	Illustration	(= Evidence) Includes one or more quotations, facts, or examples.
A	Analysis	Explains how the quotation or example relates to the restriction.
C	Conclusion	Paraphrases the topic sentence or sums up analysis.

For example, let's imagine that essay on the costs of owning a car again. Here's what the paragraph on routine expenses might look like in a TRIAC format:

The biggest expenses associated with car ownership may be the loan payment and insurance, but other ongoing expenses have to be considered too. Gas, of course, is what usually costs most. If your car averages 28 m.p.g. and is driven 12,000 miles in a calendar year, that's 428.6 gallons of gas. Multiply that by \$3.50 a gallon, and that's \$1,500 every year on gas alone. But what if your car is smaller and more fuel efficient? A hybrid gas/electric car will get much better gas mileage, but it will cost you more to buy. And while an older, heavier car may be less expensive, it will need more gas. There's no real way, therefore, of getting away from these costs.

In the example above, notice that:

- (T) This topic sentence also includes transitions from issues (loans, insurance) presumably discussed earlier in the paper. It doesn't have to: the topic sentence could just say something like, "Car ownership involves significant ongoing expenses."
- (R) This restriction narrows down the wider topic of all routine expenses to the one this paragraph focuses on: gas. One or more paragraphs after this one could talk about other routine expenses.
- (I) This illustration is specific without requiring a lot of research; some of it was simple math. The writer could also have used a quotation from an article about gas prices or data from a government website about the average fuel efficiency of American cars.
- (A) This analysis considers other situations in which the illustration might not apply.
- (C) This conclusion ties the paragraph together, but it doesn't provide a transition to the next paragraph. If the next paragraph was on a very similar topic, that topic could be introduced here by saying something like "There's no real way, therefore, of getting away from these or the many smaller costs associated with car ownership." Then the reader would be ready for a new paragraph about those smaller costs.

The TRIAC format can be flexible, and many different combinations are possible. A TRIAC paragraph might include two illustrations (TRIIAC), or two illustrations and two analyses (TRIAIAC). It can even start with the illustration and work its way towards a claim about that how that illustration supports a paper's main point (IATC).

The different parts of a TRIAC paragraph are sometimes signaled by transition words and phrases:

Restriction	<i>that is, in other words</i>
Illustration	<i>for instance, for example</i>
Analysis	<i>although, because, however</i>
Conclusion	<i>thus, therefore, as a result</i>

■ General-to-Specific Paragraph Structure

The general-to specific paragraph opens with a topic sentence and then backs up that sentence with many specific examples. It's an effective way of presenting a lot of evidence to back up a single claim.

Car owners also have to be prepared for regular maintenance expenses. Gas, of course, is the biggest: if your car averages 28 m.p.g. and is driven 12,000 miles in a calendar year, that's 428.6 gallons of gas. Multiply that by \$3.50 a gallon, and that's \$1,500 every year on gas alone. But what if your car is smaller and more fuel efficient? Unfortunately, a light, fuel-efficient car will probably slip and slide on ice, so you'll need an extra set of studded snow tires (\$550 or so) for Idaho winters. If you buy them off the rims, that's another \$50 every time they're changed in fall and spring. If you buy a separate set of rims, the tire store will change them for free---but that's because the rims cost almost \$300. You'll also need to change the oil at least twice (about \$50 each time) and you may need a new air filter (another \$20). And that chip in the windshield? Better get it filled (\$25) before it spreads into a crack that blocks your vision.

In an informal essay, it may be fine to stop there. In formal academic writing, however, the reader will still be waiting for your analysis of the evidence you've given. A paragraph like this is often followed by another paragraph in which that evidence is discussed... and that second paragraph often follows a basic or TRIAC structure.