

Thesis Paragraph

The first paragraph of the paper is the most important—and probably the most difficult to write, as it describes the focus of your argument and your reason for making it. If you know what your argument is before you write your first paragraph, you'll feel like you have something to say and be less nervous about staring at a blank screen.

BACKGROUND MATERIAL AND CONTEXT

An exhaustive summary of the subject matter relating to your argument will be time-consuming for you and tiresome for your reader. Assume that your reader is well educated and can understand an argument about a book or event with which he or she is unfamiliar. Give only the most relevant background information in your first paragraph.

STATE YOUR MOTIVE AND THESIS

Your introductory paragraph should tell your reader why your paper is relevant. Typically, you'll want to make your thesis statement in the final sentences of the introductory paragraph.

EXAMPLE OF A STRONG THESIS PARAGRAPH

Almost as soon as the Civil War ended, Americans began to search for a way to understand the reasons for the bitter conflict. Even today, strong feelings and personal bias influence debate over the causes of the war. Because the years leading up to the war were characterized by growing conflicts over a series of political and economic disagreements between the Northern and Southern states, it is difficult to isolate individual causes of the war. It is easy to assume that the main cause of the war was disagreement over slavery simply because the outcome of the war had such dramatic effects on the institution of slavery. In fact, disagreement between the North and South over tariffs and states' rights was a more significant cause of the Civil War than were opposing views about slavery.

1. Relays background information that is concise and clearly related to the main argument

2. Author explains motive for writing by showing how his argument relates to contemporary discussion of war

3. Thesis statement makes an unusual claim about the topic

PERSONAL ESSAYS

Like the thesis paragraph of a persuasive essay, the introductory paragraph of a personal essay makes a claim, explains a motive for writing, and gives relevant background information. In a personal essay, the claim, or thesis, often involves a life change or a newly acquired perspective. The motive of a personal essay establishes the significance of the main claim, and the background information often takes the form of a short anecdote.

EXAMPLE OF A PERSONAL ESSAY INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH

On the day I was supposed to receive my grade for the first paper I wrote in my English literature class, my teacher announced that he had written comments on the class's papers, but had not yet given letter grades. He said he believed we were better writers than our papers showed and invited us to meet individually with him as we continued to work on our drafts. At first, his statement struck me as a sly tactic to get us to write multiple drafts of a paper, but as I read over his comments, I understood that his concern was sincere. In many ways, he had taken my paper more seriously than I myself had; he had asked detailed questions about ideas he found unclear and suggested further reading. His attention to detail and careful thought introduced me to what it might mean to be a teacher. His commitment to making me a better writer was heartfelt and went beyond the punishment or reward of grades. His personal commitment to improving our writing inspired me eventually to become a teacher, a profession I had never previously considered.

1. Establishes subject and background of essay with personal anecdote

2. Explains process of changing point of view

3. Relates anecdote and revelation to claim, or thesis

Body Paragraphs

Use the body paragraphs of your paper to develop your argument. Some standardized assignments, such as AP tests, expect you to write three body paragraphs between your thesis paragraph and your conclusion. For most essays, however, you should use as many paragraphs as you need to express your ideas effectively. Each paragraph should develop a single, specific

component of your argument. A paragraph should not explore two separate ideas unless it explicitly tells why they are related to each other.

TOPIC SENTENCES

- Each paragraph should begin with a sentence that develops your these is statement.
- Topic sentences should introduce new information that confirms or complicates the argument that you state in the first paragraph.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

- Within the paragraph, you should use specific evidence to support the idea stated in your topic sentence.
- Evidence may include historical events, passages from a fictional text, statistics, or arguments that other people have made about your topic.
- Analysis sentences explain why this evidence supports the argument that you are making.

TRANSITIONS WITHIN PARAGRAPHS

- The ideas within each body paragraph should come in a logical sequence. This sequence can explain, complicate, or develop the idea of the topic sentence.
- Transitional words help your reader understand how you are developing your main idea. These words indicate contrast, provide examples, explain results, or establish a sequence.
- Common transitional phrases include “furthermore,” “in contrast,” “for example,” “as a result,” and “soon after.”

EXAMPLE OF AN EFFECTIVE BODY PARAGRAPH

Disagreements between the North and South regarding cotton tariffs created a divisive political atmosphere that was instrumental in states' decisions to secede from the Union. Vice President John Calhoun proposed that individual states had the right to nullify specific acts of Congress in order to protect the welfare of the states against the federal government. When Calhoun proposed this doctrine of nullification, it became clear that the South worried that the North was wielding power in order to damage the South's economy. This worry influenced the Southern states to consider separation from the North. In short, the economic issue of cotton export, separate from moral concerns over slavery, marked the initial split between North and South.

1. Topic sentence states argument which relates to thesis statement

2. Specific evidence supports claim of topic sentence

3. Analysis relates evidence to topic sentence

4. Concluding sentence conveys broader significance of the paragraph's argument and evidence

TRANSITIONS BETWEEN PARAGRAPHS

- Just as the ideas within the paragraph should come in a logical sequence, so should the paragraphs themselves.
- Each paragraph should relate explicitly to the preceding and following paragraph.
- Phrases like “also important,” “in addition,” or “we should also note that” are weak because they fail to explain the relationships between ideas in consecutive paragraphs.
- Example: In a paper on *Huckleberry Finn*, you might need to transition from a paragraph about Pa's attitude toward Jim to a paragraph about the townspeople's attitude toward Jim.
 - The transition “The townspeople's prejudice against black people is also important” is weak because the relationship it shows between the two ideas is obvious.
 - The transition “Whereas Pa's racism is based in ignorance and stupidity, the townspeople's racism is calculated and thought out” is stronger because it evaluates the link between the two ideas.

Concluding Paragraph

A conclusion should explain the significance of your thesis statement in a larger context. Although a conclusion should provide a sense of closure, it should not make broad

generalizations that imply that you have supplied an absolute solution to the problem your paper addresses.

TECHNIQUES FOR CONCLUDING

- One of the most effective ways to provide a sense of closure is to cite a relevant quotation from the text you are working with and to explain how to interpret that quotation using your argument.
- Another technique is to explain a term that you bring up in your thesis statement.
- Ending your paper by showing that your argument can be applied to a related topic reiterates the relevance of your ideas.

EXAMPLE OF A STRONG CONCLUDING PARAGRAPH

In 1876, after the end of the Civil War, Confederate General Robert Hunter asked, "Had the South permitted her property, her constitutional rights and her liberties to be surreptitiously taken from her without resistance and made no moan, would she not have lost her honor with them?" Understanding that the South feared not only a loss of slave labor, but also a loss of honor, can make the root causes of the Civil War a bit clearer. In referring to "her constitutional rights and her liberties," Hunter does refer to the institution of slavery. However, he also refers to the pride of economic productivity, which the South feared would wither and die under the economic policies of the North. Although an absolute understanding of the causes of the Civil War is unattainable, identifying the interactions among various causes is an ongoing project.

1. Incorporates quotation that relates to essay's thesis

2. Explains how an idea from that quotation, "honor," can be understood differently after reading that author's essay

3. Suggests areas for further discussion

Using Words Effectively

Transitional Phrases

Cause and Effect:

therefore, then, as a result, thus, and so, as a consequence, hence, since, because, consequently, accordingly

Examples:

for instance, as an example, for example, one example of this is, that is, especially, frequently, specifically

Comparison of Two Similar Items:

similarly, in a similar fashion, another way of looking at this is

Contrast:

but, however, and yet, still, even so, in contrast, on the other hand, nevertheless, on the contrary, notwithstanding

To Show Contrast Between Points:

although, nevertheless, instead, nonetheless, on the other hand, whereas, but, however, in contrast, on the contrary, in spite of, despite

Agreement:

of course, it is true that, admittedly, certainly, no doubt

Addition to What Has Gone on Before:

and, again, also, in addition, furthermore, moreover, equally important

Sequence in Time:

first, second, finally, ultimately, eventually, last, meanwhile, afterwards, now, simultaneously, concurrently, at this point, while, before, to begin with, previously, after, following this, then, later, next, subsequently, during, presently, from time to time, sometimes

Movement in Space:

nearby, on the other side, next to, over, in the distance, above, below, beyond, to the left, to the right, to one side, across

To Emphasize or Repeat a Significant Point:

in fact, indeed, certainly, undoubtedly, in other words, as he has said, that is to say

To Summarize or Conclude:

in brief, on the whole, in summary, in short, to conclude, in conclusion, last, therefore, as a result, finally

Connection Words

accordingly
additionally
after
after all
afterwards
again
although
also
and
and yet
as
as a consequence of
as a result of
as before
as if
as mentioned previously
as though
as well as
aside from
at any rate
at present
at the outset
because
before
besides
briefly
but
but then
certain/certainly
consequently
despite
despite the fact that
earlier
equally important
especially
even if
even though
except for
finally
first
first of all
for
for example
for instance
for this reason
foremost
formerly
further
furthermore

generally
generally speaking
granted that
hence
heretofore
hitherto
how
however if
in addition
in addition to
in brief
in comparison
in conclusion
in consequence
in contrast
in effect
in fact
in like manner
in my opinion
in other instances
in other words
in particular
in short
in some cases
in spite of
in sum
in summary
in the future
inasmuch as
indeed
initially
instead
just as
last/lastly
later
many times
moreover
most important/more importantly
nevertheless
next
no matter how
no matter what
nor
not to mention
often
on account of
on the contrary
on the other hand
or

otherwise
perhaps
provided
put simply
second
secondly
similarly
since
so
so far
so that
sometimes
still
subsequently
that
then
therefore
these days
third
though
thus
to begin with
to conclude
to illustrate
to sum up
to summarize
to this end
today
tomorrow
unless
until
what
whatever
when
whenever
where
whereas
wherefore
whether
which
while
who/whom
whoever/whomever
whose
why
with the exception of
yet

Verbs Describing Author's Attitude

Verbs that indicate the source author's attitude or approach to what he or she is saying:

Author is Neutral	Author Infers or Suggests	Author Argues	Author Agrees	Author is Uneasy or Disparaging
comments	analyzes	claims	admits	belittles
describes	asks	contends	agrees	bemoans
explains	assesses	defends	concedes	complains
illustrates	concludes	disagrees	concur	condemns
notes	considers	holds		deplores
observes	finds	insists		deprecates
points out	predicts	maintains		derides
records	proposes			laments
relates	reveals			
reports	shows			
says	speculates			
sees	suggests			
thinks	supposes			
writes				

Adapted from Aaron, J.E. (1995). *The Little, Brown Compact Handbook* (2nd ed.). New York NY: HarperCollins. p. 220.