

2 The Structure of a Paragraph

In this unit, you will learn ...

- the definition of a paragraph.
- the parts of a paragraph.
- how to identify and write topic sentences.

○ What is a paragraph?

As you learned in Unit 1, a paragraph is a group of sentences about a single *topic*. Together, the sentences of the paragraph explain the writer's *main idea* (most important idea) about the topic. In academic writing, a paragraph is often between five and ten sentences long, but it can be longer or shorter, depending on the topic. The first sentence of a paragraph is usually indented (moved in) a few spaces.

Understanding a paragraph

- 1 Read this paragraph. It is the beginning of an article about Switzerland in a student newspaper. Then answer the questions.

Switzerland — Something Interesting at Every Turn

By Ken Jones

If you dream of travelling to a country with beautiful mountains, delicious food, wonderful places to go sight-seeing and polite people, you should visit Switzerland. If you look at the map, the first thing you notice is that



Switzerland has many mountains, including some of the highest in Europe. Climbing or skiing down the mountains is great fun. Another thing you will notice is that Switzerland shares its borders with five different countries: France, Germany, Italy, Austria and Liechtenstein. In fact, there are four official languages in Switzerland: German, French, Italian and Romansch. All these groups of people make Swiss culture very interesting. Finally, Switzerland has many cities and interesting places to visit. Cities such as Bern have modern buildings like the Paul Klee Zentrum, yet the traditional alpine refuges in the mountains show that the country's old traditions are still alive. All the people, places and things to see definitely make Switzerland a great place for a holiday.

a. What is the topic of the paragraph?

.....

b. What is the main idea about the topic?

.....

c. What ideas help explain the main idea?

.....

.....

.....

Paragraph organisation

What makes a paragraph?

A paragraph has three basic parts:

1. **The topic sentence.** This is the main idea of the paragraph. It is usually the first sentence of the paragraph, and it is the most general sentence of the paragraph.
2. **The supporting sentences.** These are sentences that talk about or explain the topic sentence. They are more detailed ideas that follow the topic sentence.
3. **The concluding sentence.** This may be found as the last sentence of a paragraph. It can finish a paragraph by repeating the main idea or just giving a final comment about the topic.

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- 2 Read the paragraph about Switzerland in exercise 1 on page 11 again. Circle the topic sentence, put one line under the supporting sentences, and put two lines under the concluding sentence.
- 3 Put a tick (✓) next to the group of sentences that makes a good paragraph. Why are the other groups of sentences not good paragraphs?

a. ☐

My best friend has many different hobbies, such as skiing, cooking, and playing the piano, and she is very good at all of these activities. For example, she has played the piano for ten years and has won three piano competitions. She also likes to spend time travelling, and she has been to many different countries in the world. She grew up speaking Spanish and English, but now she can also speak French and Italian. I like my best friend very much.

b. ☐

Classes in literature are useful no matter what job you intend to have when you finish university. Books are about life. People who study literature learn the skill of reading carefully and understanding characters, situations, and relationships. This kind of understanding can be useful to teachers and business people alike. Literature classes also require a lot of writing, so they help students develop the skill of clear communication. Of course, a professional writer needs to have this skill, but it is an equally important skill for an engineer. Finally, reading literature helps develop an understanding of many different points of view. Reading a novel by a Russian author, for example, will help a reader learn more about Russian culture. For anyone whose job may bring them into contact with Russian colleagues, this insight can help encourage better cross-cultural understanding. Studying literature is studying life, so it is relevant to almost any job you can think of.

c. ☐

One good way to learn another language is to live in a country where that language is used. When you live in another country, the language is around you all the time, so you can learn to listen to and speak it more easily.

The topic and the main idea

3 The topic sentence ...

- usually comes first in a paragraph.
- gives the writer's main idea or opinion about the topic and helps the reader understand what the paragraph is going to talk about.

4 Circle the topic of the sentence. Underline the main idea about the topic.

- (Switzerland) is a very interesting country to visit.
- Dogs make excellent pets.
- A really good place to study is the library at my school.
- Learning a foreign language creates job opportunities.
- Football is my favourite sport because it is exciting to watch.
- One of the most valuable tools for students is the computer.
- My sister and I have very different personalities.
- Summer is the best time to travel in my country.
- My hometown is a friendly place to live.

5 For each of these paragraphs, choose the sentence from the list below that would make the best topic sentence.

a.

.....
..... When Ken wanted to enter a good university, he studied hard to pass the examination. The first time he took the exam, he did not do well, and he felt very discouraged. But he knew he wanted to study at that university, so he studied more. The next year, he tried taking the exam again. The second time, he did very well, and now he is studying engineering. I believe Ken is a good role model for me, and he has taught me that never giving up is the best way to succeed.



1. One of my closest friends, named Ken, is a person I can trust.
2. My friend Ken is a very successful student.
3. I admire my friend Ken because he doesn't give up.

D.

..... Many children begin learning to play football when they are very young. You can often see them playing at school or in the streets around their houses. At secondary school, students may play football in a team and compete in championships. If a player is very good, he might go on to play for a professional team. People in my country love watching football on television and also go to matches whenever they can. Many people have a favourite team or player, and everyone loves to talk about matches and competitions. Football is really like a national sport in my country.



1. I love playing football, and I hope I can become a professional player one day.
2. There are many popular sports in my country, but the most popular sport is football.
3. Football is a difficult sport to learn to play well.

6 Write a topic sentence for three of these topics.

- a. a favourite place to relax
- b. a grandparent
- c. a pet I have known
- d. a favourite food to eat
- e. playing a musical instrument

topic:

.....
.....

topic:

.....
.....

topic:

.....
.....

Review

- 7 These sentences are mixed up parts of one paragraph. Number the parts in order: 1. topic sentence, 2. supporting sentences, and 3. concluding sentence.

What should I study at university?

- a. *It wasn't an easy decision, but for the reasons listed above, I have decided to study journalism.*
- b. *It can be difficult to choose a subject to study at university because there are so many choices, but by considering my skills and interests, I have decided to study journalism.*
- c. *I have always enjoyed writing, so it is sensible to choose a subject that involves writing. When I begin working, I would like to have the opportunity to travel, and travel is often an important part of a journalist's job. Finally, I am also interested in photography, and pictures are very important in journalism.*

- 8 Use words or phrases in the box to complete the sentences.

concluding sentence	indented	main idea	paragraph
supporting sentences	topic	topic sentence	

- a. The is usually the first sentence in a It gives the and the
- b. The first sentence of a paragraph can be
- c. The come after the topic sentence, and they explain the topic sentence.
- d. The comes at the end of a paragraph.