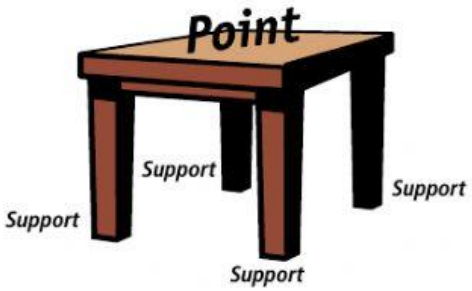
4 Main Ideas and Supporting Details in Writing

A **paragraph** is a series of sentences that support a main idea, or point. A paragraph typically starts with the main idea or point (also called the **topic sentence**), and the rest of the paragraph provides specific details to support and develop the point. The illustration below shows the relationship between point and support.



Outlining

An outline is a helpful way to plan a paper or to analyze it. An **outline** shows at a glance the point of a paper and a numbered list of the items that support the point. Here is an example of a paragraph and an outline of the paragraph.

> [1]People in my family love our dog Punch. [2]However, I have several reasons for wanting to get rid of Punch. [3]First of all, he knows I don't like him. [4]Sometimes he gives me an evil look and curls his top lip back to show me his teeth. [5]The message is clearly, "Someday I'm going to bite you." [6]Another reason to get rid of Punch is he sheds everywhere. [7]Every surface in our house is covered with Punch hair. [8]I spend more time brushing it off my clothes than I do mowing the lawn. [9]Last of all, Punch is an early riser, while (on weekends) I am not. [10]He will start barking and whining to go outside at 7 a.m., and it's my job to take care of him. [11]When I told my family that I had a list of good reasons for getting rid of Punch, they said they would make up a list of reasons to get rid of me.

Point: I have several reasons for wanting to get rid of Punch.

Supporting detail: 1. He knows I don't like him.

Supporting detail: 2. Punch sheds everywhere.

Supporting detail: 3. Punch is an early riser.

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PRACTICE 1

Look at each of the following five paragraphs and then complete the outline for each paragraph. Notice that words such as *first, also, another,* and *finally* often signal each new item of support.

1. [1]Being a celebrity is often difficult. [2]First of all, celebrities have to look almost perfect all the time. [3]There's always a photographer ready to take an unflattering picture of a famous person looking dumpy in old clothes. [4]Celebrities also sacrifice their private lives. [5]Their personal struggles, divorces, or family tragedies all end up as front-page news. [6]Last, and most frightening of all, celebrities are in constant danger of the wrong kind of attention. [7]Threatening letters and even physical attacks from crazy fans are things a celebrity must contend with.

Point: _____

_____

Supporting detail: 1. _____
Supporting detail: 2. _____
Supporting detail: 3. _____

_____

2. [1]People lie for different reasons. [2]One common reason is to avoid hurting someone's feelings. [3]For example, a friend might ask, "Do you like my new haircut?" [4]If you think it's ugly, you might still answer, "Yes." [5]Another common reason for lying is to avoid a fight. [6]Say a friend angers you and then asks, "Are you upset with me?" [7]You might answer, "No," to avoid an argument. [8]People also lie so that they'll fit in, as when you listen to a boring person and politely say, "That's interesting." [9]In addition, people lie to avoid spending more time with someone. [10]For instance, you might lie, "I have to go now."

Point: _____

_____

Supporting detail: 1. _____
Supporting detail: 2. _____
Supporting detail: 3. _____
Supporting detail: 4. _____

3. [1]You don't have to scare your family with statistics about heart attacks. [2]There are several positive ways to encourage your family to exercise more often. [3]To begin with, get them to exercise more often by emphasizing how good they'll feel and how much better they'll look if they work out on a regular basis. [4]A second method you can use is to set an example. [5]If they see you walking to stores rather than driving, they might be encouraged

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to do likewise. [6]Finally, make exercise a family activity. [7]Suggest that the whole family go hiking or camping together, take up early morning jogging, or join the Y at the group rate.

Point: _____

_____

Supporting detail: 1. _____

Supporting detail: 2. _____

Supporting detail: 3. _____

4. [1]Serious depression, as opposed to the fleeting kind we all feel at times, has definite warning signs. [2]One symptom of depression is a change in sleep patterns—either sleeplessness or sleeping too much. [3]In addition, abnormal eating patterns may develop, either eating too much or loss of appetite. [4]A third sign is trouble in thinking or concentrating—even to the point of finding it difficult to read a magazine or newspaper. [5]And last of all, a general feeling of hopelessness may signal depression. [6]People feel indifferent to their families and jobs and may begin to think that life is not worth living.

Point: _____

_____

Supporting detail: 1. _____

Supporting detail: 2. _____

Supporting detail: 3. _____

Supporting detail: 4. _____

5. [1]Several factors can interfere with having a good memory. [2]For one thing, there can be a lack of motivation. [3]Without a real desire to learn or remember something, you probably won't. [4]Also a factor is a lack of practice. [5]To stay sharp, memory skills, like any other skill, must be used on a regular basis. [6]Yet another factor that can hurt memory is self-doubt. [7]If you're convinced you won't remember something, you probably won't. [8]In addition, distraction can interfere with memory. [9]If you're distracted by a television or by conversation nearby, try to find a quiet environment before trying to commit something to memory.

Point: _____

_____

Supporting detail: 1. _____

Supporting detail: 2. _____

Supporting detail: 3. _____

Supporting detail: 4. _____

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A Note on Topics

As you learned in Chapter 2, the **topic** is a general subject. A good reader looks for the topic of a selection and then the idea that is expressed about that topic. A good writer starts with a topic and then decides what idea to advance about that topic. In the outlines you have just considered, it is easy to identify the topics and the ideas about the topics:

Topic	Topic sentence (main idea)
My dog Punch	I have several reasons for wanting to get rid of Punch.
Celebrities	Being a celebrity is often difficult.
Why people lie	People lie for different reasons.
Exercise	There are several possible ways to encourage your family to exercise more often.
Depression	Serious depression has definite warning signs.
Memory	Several factors can interfere with having a good memory.



PRACTICE 2

Here are fifteen topics. See if you can write main ideas about any five of them. Put your topic sentences in the spaces provided.

Examples

Teacher	My senior business teacher, Mrs. Catherine, was the best teacher I ever had.
Fast-food restaurants	Given a choice, I prefer a fast-food restaurant to a diner.
My dog	Rusty, my golden retriever, has some odd habits.

Living at home	College classes	Night person
TV commercials	Boss	My dog (or cat)
Fast-food restaurant	Exercise	Texting
Teacher	Landlord	Alcohol
Drivers	Sleep	Bad habits

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1. _____

_____

2. _____

_____

3. _____

_____

4. _____

_____

5. _____

_____

Staying on Point



One common mistake in writing a paper is to go off point. Think of your point as the bull's-eye in a target. Every sentence and detail in a paper should be **relevant**, meaning that it hits the bull's-eye—it supports your point. Otherwise, your paper will not be convincing. Instead of hitting the target and proving your point, your "support" will be **irrelevant**. In other words, it will miss the point completely.

Let's say you decide your point is going to be that your family car is a lemon. If you then provide details about the car's good features, you are going off point. Or perhaps your point is that your aunt is a generous person. If you provide details about her sense of humor or odd habits, you are going off point. Or your point could be that your apartment is not a good place to live. If you provide details about the convenient location of the apartment, you're missing the target.

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Look at the following outline of a paragraph. The point is followed by six facts, only three of which are on target in supporting the point. The other facts are irrelevant to the point. See if you can check the three **relevant** statements of support—the ones that hit the bull's-eye.

Point: My dog Otis is not very bright.

___ 1. He's five years old and doesn't respond to his name yet.

___ 2. He cries when I leave for work every day.

___ 3. He always gets excited when visitors arrive.

___ 4. He often attacks the backyard hedge as if it's a hostile animal.

___ 5. He gets along very well with my neighbor's cat.

___ 6. I often have to put food in front of him because he can't find it by himself.

Now read the following comments on the six items to see which ones you should have checked and why.

Explanation

1. Most dogs know their names. Otis's unfamiliarity with his own name reveals a weak memory, and memory is one aspect of intelligence. You should have checked this item.
2. Even an intelligent dog might be sad when its companions leave the house.
3. Both bright and not-so-bright dogs are happy to see old and new human friends.
4. The inability to distinguish between a bush and an animal—friendly or hostile—suggests a lack of analytical skills. You should have checked this item.
5. Dogs of all degrees of intelligence have been known to be friendly with cats.
6. Most dogs recognize food much more often than their owners would like them to. Otis's inability to find food clearly indicates poor problem-solving skills. You should also have checked this item.

As illustrated on the previous page, you want all the details you provide in a paper to be on target and hit the bull's-eye in support of your point.

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PRACTICE 3

Each point is followed by three statements that provide relevant, on-target support and three that do not. In the spaces, write the letters of the three **relevant** statements of support.

1. **Point: I'm a perfect example of someone who has "math anxiety."**
   - A. I feel dread every time I sit down to take our Friday math quiz.
   - B. Fear of math is almost as widespread as fear of public speaking.
   - C. During my last math test, I "froze" and didn't even try to answer most of the questions.
   - D. I also have a great deal of anxiety when I sit down to write a paper.
   - E. I turned down a summer job as a salesclerk because I would have had to figure out how much change customers should get back.
   - F. I used to be afraid to raise my hand in class, but now it's easier for me to answer questions.

   Items that logically support the point: _____ _____ _____

2. **Point: Elephants are very intelligent animals.**
   - A. For years, hunters shot elephants to obtain the ivory from their tusks.
   - B. Like chimps, elephants can recognize their reflections in mirrors.
   - C. Elephants tear off branches of trees to use as fly swatters.
   - D. Elephants have been seen keeping vigil over their dead companions.
   - E. An elephant can live as long as sixty-five years.
   - F. Elephants should not be forced to perform in circuses.

   Items that logically support the point: _____ _____ _____

3. **Point: Drinking coffee can be bad for people.**
   - A. Some people don't like the taste of decaffeinated coffees.
   - B. Coffee in the evening can interfere with sleep at night.
   - C. As addictions go, coffee is less dangerous than tobacco.
   - D. Too much coffee can cause the hands to shake.
   - E. Drinking too much coffee can lead to a faster heartbeat and light-headedness.
   - F. Most coffees cost under five dollars a pound.

   Items that logically support the point: _____ _____ _____

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4. **Point: If you think school is difficult, it's even harder for older students.**

   A. Studies show that more and more adults are returning to school.
   B. It takes a lot of work to re-learn study habits.
   C. Many older students have family and job responsibilities in addition to classes.
   D. Some older students are afraid of not "fitting in."
   E. It is never too late to gain new knowledge.
   F. Older students can contribute to class discussions by talking about their "real-world" experiences.

   Items that logically support the point: _____ _____ _____

5. **Point: Workers in early American factories led difficult lives.**

   A. The average work day was twelve hours long.
   B. Early factory workers were paid pennies an hour.
   C. Female factory workers often worked in textile mills.
   D. The first American factories were built in the late 1700s.
   E. All workers on power machines risked accidents that could maim or kill.
   F. Labor unions have greatly improved conditions in today's factories.

   Items that logically support the point: _____ _____ _____

6. **Point: Schools should eliminate the summer vacation.**

   A. It costs too much money for school buildings to remain empty in the summer months.
   B. Students have more energy than adults.
   C. Year-round school can better prepare students for year-round work in the adult world.
   D. During summer classes, schools should be air-conditioned.
   E. Students will learn more and forget less if they attend school twelve months a year.
   F. Students won't be able to take summer jobs that would provide money for college.

   Items that logically support the point: _____ _____ _____

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7. **Point: Some people have very poor telephone manners.**

   A. They never identify themselves, but just begin the conversation.
   B. They often make their calls on cordless phones.
   C. They have an unlisted telephone number.
   D. They conduct conversations with people around them at the same time they're talking on the phone.
   E. Some people don't like to talk on the phone.
   F. They often call around 6 p.m., which is most people's dinner hour.

   Items that logically support the point: _____ _____ _____

8. **Point: My father's boss is an unpleasant man to work for.**

   A. He barks orders and never asks for an employee's opinion.
   B. His fashion-plate wife is said to be even nastier than he is.
   C. His office is decorated in dull browns and grays.
   D. Even when he invites employees out to lunch, he expects them to pick up their own checks.
   E. He changes his mind so often that an employee who pleased him on Friday can be in the doghouse by Monday.
   F. He once accumulated so many parking tickets that the police actually came to his home to arrest him.

   Items that logically support the point: _____ _____ _____

9. **Point: There are some simple ways to save money at the supermarket.**

   A. Avoid products which charge extra for packaging, such as cheese wrapped individually by slice.
   B. Buy store brands of basic items instead of expensive name-brand products.
   C. Some people organize a shopping list alphabetically; others group items by categories.
   D. Shop when you are not hungry, so that you won't be tempted to buy pricey treats.
   E. Go to the store at odd hours or on weekdays to reduce the time you spend in lines.
   F. Buy locally grown fruits and vegetables, which are often better for you than canned or frozen ones.

   Items that logically support the point: _____ _____ _____

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