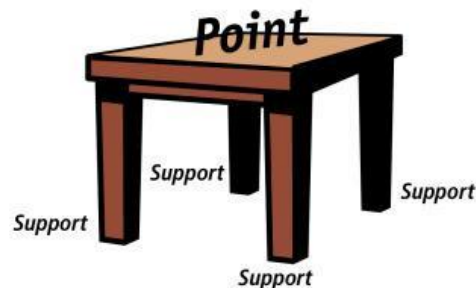


4

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.

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

**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. ¹Being a celebrity is often difficult. ²First of all, celebrities have to look almost perfect all the time. ³There's always a photographer ready to take an unflattering picture of a famous person looking dumpy in old clothes. ⁴Celebrities also sacrifice their private lives. ⁵Their personal struggles, divorces, or family tragedies all end up as front-page news. ⁶Last, and most frightening of all, celebrities are in constant danger of the wrong kind of attention. ⁷Threatening 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. ¹People lie for different reasons. ²One common reason is to avoid hurting someone's feelings. ³For example, a friend might ask, "Do you like my new haircut?" ⁴If you think it's ugly, you might still answer, "Yes." ⁵Another common reason for lying is to avoid a fight. ⁶Say a friend angers you and then asks, "Are you upset with me?" ⁷You might answer, "No," to avoid an argument. ⁸People also lie so that they'll fit in, as when you listen to a boring person and politely say, "That's interesting." ⁹In addition, people lie to avoid spending more time with someone. ¹⁰For instance, you might lie, "I have to go now."

Point: _____

Supporting detail: 1. _____

Supporting detail: 2. _____

Supporting detail: 3. _____

Supporting detail: 4. _____

3. ¹You don't have to scare your family with statistics about heart attacks. ²There are several positive ways to encourage your family to exercise more often. ³To 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. ⁴A second method you can use is to set an example. ⁵If they see you walking to stores rather than driving, they might be encouraged

to do likewise. ⁶Finally, make exercise a family activity. ⁷Suggest 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. ¹Serious depression, as opposed to the fleeting kind we all feel at times, has definite warning signs. ²One symptom of depression is a change in sleep patterns—either sleeplessness or sleeping too much. ³In addition, abnormal eating patterns may develop, either eating too much or loss of appetite. ⁴A third sign is trouble in thinking or concentrating—even to the point of finding it difficult to read a magazine or newspaper. ⁵And last of all, a general feeling of hopelessness may signal depression. ⁶People 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. ¹Several factors can interfere with having a good memory. ²For one thing, there can be a lack of motivation. ³Without a real desire to learn or remember something, you probably won't. ⁴Also a factor is a lack of practice. ⁵To stay sharp, memory skills, like any other skill, must be used on a regular basis. ⁶Yet another factor that can hurt memory is self-doubt. ⁷If you're convinced you won't remember something, you probably won't. ⁸In addition, distraction can interfere with memory. ⁹If 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. _____