

Paragraphs, Poetry, and Prose: Elementary Writing

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Paragraph Basics

Lesson 1: What is a paragraph?

In every book or article you read, you can spot paragraphs. They are everywhere. Most people can identify a paragraph, but writing a cohesive one is different. So, what exactly is a paragraph?

A paragraph is a group of related sentences about a topic. It has three parts:

1. Topic sentence—tells what the paragraph is about
2. Sentences to support the topic—give more details on the topic
3. Closing sentence to sum up the topic—reminds the reader what the topic is

Now that we know what a paragraph is, it looks like a paragraph should have three sentences, right? Close, but not quite. For beginning writers, a strong paragraph contains between five and seven sentences. It breaks down this way:

1. One topic sentence
2. Three to five sentences to support the topic
3. One closing sentence to sum things up

If you read a story, article, or essay, you'll discover that some paragraphs contain less than five sentences or more than seven. My standard for this course is that paragraphs be between five and seven sentences. Once you master the basic paragraph, you can vary your sentence count. All the assignments will require five to seven sentences in a paragraph.

We know that a paragraph requires sentences, but do you know what a sentence is? It's a complete thought with a subject and a predicate. I won't go into grammar rules (that's another course), but we will take a closer look at sentences.

Every sentence you write must be a complete thought. Each complete thought builds upon the previous complete thought, much like stacking Legos to build a house. We can equate the house to a paragraph and each brick as a complete thought. What would happen if you left some bricks out in the middle of the house, or failed to snap them together properly? The house would fail. Just as a paragraph fails without correct sentences.

Now that you know the importance of sentences, let's practice writing a simple paragraph. Write three paragraphs—five to seven sentences each—with a central thought. Don't worry about topic or closing sentences, we'll address those later. Focus on writing complete, correct sentences on one topic.

*PARENTS: Use the following rubric to score your child's paragraphs.

_____ Paragraph has a minimum of five sentences. (10 points)

_____ All sentences are a complete thought. (5 points)

_____ Paragraph makes sense (all sentences relate to each other). (10 points)

_____ /25

Lesson 2: The importance of a topic sentence

In the previous lesson, we looked at a paragraph as a whole. A paragraph includes:

- A topic sentence
- Several descriptive sentences
- A closing sentence

Now, let's look at each of these parts individually. First is the topic sentence.

The topic sentence in a paragraph is a very important sentence. It tells the reader what we're going to write about. If your topic sentence is about airplanes but the rest of the paragraph is about trains, the reader will be confused.

To expand on that topic sentence, you must have supporting sentences, or sentences that give more information on your topic. For example, let's say you're going to write a paragraph describing your pet. The topic sentence lets the reader know you're writing about your pet, and the supporting sentences tell more information about your pet. Here's an example:

***I have the prettiest dog in the world.** Her name is Sadie, and she's a shaggy, black dog. Sadie has chocolate-brown eyes. She has a pink tongue with a black heart-shaped spot on the tip of her tongue. Everyone compliments Sadie on her beauty.*

In the above paragraph, you see the topic is how pretty Sadie is. I then describe attributes that show why she is pretty, and I close the paragraph by referencing the topic sentence.

So, the closing sentence wraps up your paragraph and ties back to your topic sentence. It's actually a restatement of your topic.

Every paragraph—no matter its length—contains a topic sentence. A topic sentence tells the subject of the paragraph. It lets your reader know what you're describing in the paragraph.

Assignment

Since you now know what a paragraph is, let's practice spotting topic sentences. Look through your reading books, textbooks, lessons, or newspapers and identify topic sentences. Read a minimum of five paragraphs and write down the topic and topic sentence of the paragraph. Also, write two paragraphs, which are five to seven sentences each, about your pet or a friend's pet. If you prefer, you may use two of the paragraphs from the previous lesson and create a topic sentence for that paragraph. Remember, you are limited to five to seven sentences.

*PARENTS: Use the following rubric to score your child's paragraphs.

- _____ Paragraph has a minimum of five sentences. (10 points)
- _____ Paragraph has an opening topic sentence. (5 points)
- _____ Paragraph makes sense (all sentences relate to the topic sentence). (10 points)
- _____ /25

Lesson 3: Supporting the topic sentence

Topic sentences are an important part of the paragraph. The sentences that follow are also very important. They give more detail about the topic.

Let's go back to the sample paragraph (and, yes, this is really about my dog Sadie):

I have the prettiest dog in the world. Her name is Sadie, and she's a shaggy, black dog. Sadie has chocolate-brown eyes. She has a pink tongue with a black heart-shaped spot on the tip of her tongue. Everyone compliments Sadie on her beauty.

The topic sentence lets us know we're talking about a pretty dog. The next three sentences explain her appearance—or why she's pretty. Those sentences reinforce, or strengthen, our statement in the topic sentence. Let's look at another paragraph about my kitty, Scout.

Scout, a silky black cat, has beautiful fur. His yellow-green eyes stare at me while I work, and his tail swishes. Before I know it, he sinks his teeth into my arm. Later, he'll come back and want love. Sometimes he can be really mean.

Although the above paragraph is about Scout, it's not cohesive, or connected. The first sentence talks about his beautiful fur, but the rest are random thoughts about him. Simply rewording the above paragraph will make it more cohesive.

Scout is a very temperamental cat. Soft, silky, black fur invites you to pet him. He'll rub his head against your hand and purr. Just when you think he's content, his tail begins to twitch. Suddenly, he sinks his sharp teeth into your hand and then runs away. Just when you forget his mean actions, he's back for more stroking. You never know if he wants love, or a nibble.

The first sentence states the cat is "temperamental," or unpredictable. The next few sentences describe the encounter. He approaches, shows signs of contentment, then attacks, and the cycle begins over again. Each sentence moves the paragraph forward, unlike the previous paragraph filled with random facts.

Assignment

Select two paragraphs from a previous lesson and revise them to have supporting sentences that move each paragraph forward. Make sure you have five to seven sentences. If you'd like, you may create new paragraphs on any topic. Pets, friends, and family are the easiest topics.

*PARENTS: Use the following rubric to score your child's paragraph.

- _____ Paragraph has a minimum of five sentences. (10 points)
- _____ Paragraph has an opening topic sentence. (5 points)
- _____ Paragraph makes sense (all sentences relate to the topic sentence). (10 points)
- _____ Paragraph contains three to five sentences that support the topic sentence (move paragraph forward). (10 points)
- _____ /35

Lesson 4: Strong closing sentences

For the past few weeks, we've looked at what makes a paragraph. This week, we'll complete this unit with closing sentences.

Closing sentences are like putting a bow on a wrapped gift. It ties everything together and gives the reader a satisfying ending. Think about this: have you ever read a story or book that just ended? It makes you wonder what the rest of the story is. A great example would be Cinderella. If the fairytale ended when she ran from the ball, you'd be left wondering about the prince, the