

Effective Writing Center – Student Resources

Paragraph Structure

Effective paragraphs are important in all types of writing. Your paragraphs guide your reader through the paper by helping to explain, substantiate, and support your thesis statement or argument. Each paragraph should discuss one major point or idea. An effective paragraph has three parts: claim, evidence, and analysis.

1. **Claim:** This is also sometimes called a **topic sentence**. This will be your way of announcing the main focus of your paragraph; it should tell the reader what your paragraph will be about.

It may be helpful to think of your claims as mini arguments that support the paper's main argument or thesis. Just as in the thesis statement, your topic sentences should be debatable. In other words, they should be arguable claims that you will try to "prove" with your evidence.

If you get stuck developing these claims, try to think of reasons why your thesis is true. Each claim should be a reason why the reader should believe your paper's main idea. For example, perhaps you're writing an essay about whether people should drink soy milk instead of cow's milk. Your "reasons" for this might include health benefits, environmental benefits, cost-effectiveness, and safety, so you would focus one paragraph on each of these topics.

One of the most common mistakes is to present a topic sentence that is actually an observation of facts or a description of events rather than an active argument. When you make a claim based on a fact or event in your topic sentence, you aren't presenting an arguable claim that you can back up with your evidence in that paragraph.

Here are some sample claims for the "health benefits of soy" paragraph:

Claim based on a fact or event (weak): *Soy milk contains healthy isoflavones and nutrients.*

Claim based on an active argument (stronger): *The isoflavones and nutrients in soy milk help to protect the body from disease and promote good health, so soy is a better choice.*

The first example is weak because it presents facts that cannot be disputed; the second example is stronger because it uses those facts to make an argument. As you can see, the second example not only tells the reader that soy contains healthy isoflavones and nutrients, but it also argues that these facts make soy milk a better choice.

To evaluate whether your paper contains effective claims in each paragraph, read only the first sentence of each paragraph. You should be able to follow the development of the paper's thesis by reading only the claim sentences. These should tell you the main points that you are making throughout the paper. Your claims will also prepare the reader for the second section of your paragraph.

2. **Evidence:** This is how you support, or back up, your claims. The evidence will help to "prove" each claim to the reader.

In a paper that incorporates research from secondary sources, your evidence may include information from articles, books, electronic sources, or any of the research you gathered. The evidence may take the form of a direct quotation, paraphrased material, statistical data, or any other information from one of your sources that helps to support your claim.

Try to incorporate information from several sources into each paragraph. Avoid just “retelling” the information from a single author or article. Aim to represent a variety of opinions and views. This way, you’re not just telling the reader what one expert says, but you’re explaining how your claim is supported by research from several experts in your field. Here are some examples of weak and strong evidence sections:

Evidence that includes information from one source (weak evidence):

According to Collins, soy milk has more protein than cow’s milk, and doesn’t contain the saturated fat or cholesterol (1). Soybeans are “complete protein” because they contain all eight amino acids (Collins 1). Collins points out that “as little as 25 mg of soy protein a day may decrease levels of LDL cholesterol and Triglycerides” (1) and this may reduce the chance of heart disease. Since soy is a “low-glycemic index” food, it may help people trying to lose weight “feel more satisfied and less hungry until your next meal, which is beneficial for weight management and control” (1).

Evidence that includes information from a variety of sources (stronger evidence): *Scientists believe that soy milk has the potential to balance cholesterol levels in humans: “A diet with significant soy protein reduces Total Cholesterol, LDL cholesterol (the “bad” cholesterol) and triglycerides” (Tsang 1). Since soy milk is one of the easiest ways to incorporate soy into the diet, this is a good choice for people seeking to lower their LDL and triglycerides. Soy milk also may reduce the potential for heart disease. Asian countries, which traditionally consume more soy protein, have a much lower incidence of heart disease and many types of cancer (Berkeley 4). The benefits of soy aren’t just limited to the heart, however. Soy milk and cheese made from soy milk may help with weight loss since they contain less saturated fat than regular dairy products, although they contain about the same amounts of fat as reduced-fat milk and cheese (Collins 1). Some researchers even believe that soy may help to stimulate the metabolism (Duke 4).*

Note that the second example seems more “balanced,” because the author demonstrates knowledge of the subject and incorporates several expert opinions to back up the claim.

Sometimes your assignment will not require you to conduct research into secondary sources, and you may need to use your own ideas or experiences as evidence to back up your claims. Try to be very specific. If you include detailed examples and explanations, your evidence will be more interesting and more persuasive to the reader, and you will seem like more of an authority on your topic:

Evidence that isn’t specific (weak evidence):

My mother’s cholesterol was bad, and the doctor said that soy might help with this. Our family started eating more soy and soy milk, and her levels eventually got much better. During this time, all of us also lost quite a bit of weight.

Evidence that is specific (stronger evidence):

Two years ago, my mother’s LDL (“bad”) cholesterol level was 242, and her HDL (“good”) cholesterol was 37, so she was considered “high risk.” Since she was hesitant to take cholesterol-lowering medications, her internist suggested that she try to incorporate more soy into her diet. He believed that it was worthwhile to try this before placing her on medications. In order to support her, our entire family started drinking soy milk and walking in the evenings. After six months, her LDL dropped to 198 and her HDL rose to 45, which was a dramatic improvement. Our family all lost quite a bit of weight, as well: my mother lost fifteen pounds and my father lost more than twenty. Her doctor tells her that if she continues this lifestyle change, she will significantly reduce her chance of heart problems in the future.

The second example not only contains more information, but it presents it in a believable and interesting way. By including specific details, the author appears to be an “expert,” so the evidence is more persuasive.

3. **Analysis/Concluding Observation:** Your analysis or concluding observation is your way of “wrapping up” the information presented in your paragraph. It should explain why the evidence supports your claim and why this supports the main thesis in your paper.

It’s important to end with your own analysis of the information rather than with evidence. This keeps you “in control” of the paper; if you end with evidence, you’re emphasizing ideas from your sources rather than your own.

The reader relies on you to analyze the evidence in the paragraph and explain why it matters to the claim and to the rest of the paper. Here are some examples of weak and strong analysis/concluding observation sections:

Analysis that is really evidence (weak): *Experts at Duke University’s School of Medicine agree that soy milk is a healthy choice.*

Analysis that doesn’t relate evidence to claim and thesis statement (weak): *Soy milk therefore prevents disease.*

Analysis that explains why evidence supports the claim and why this is important to the paper’s thesis (strong): *The disease-fighting and health-promoting components of soy milk have the potential to change people’s health and to improve their lives by affecting both cholesterol and weight. This makes soy milk an important factor in heart health, so people should consider switching to soy milk.*

Resources

Hamilton College - Paragraph Structure (PDF format)

<https://my.hamilton.edu/academics/resource/wc/Paragraphs.PDF>

Purdue University Online Writing Center (OWL) - The Paragraph

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_pgrph2.html

UNC-Chapel Hill Writing Center - Paragraphs

<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/paragraphs.html>