



TEACHING PARAGRAPH WRITING

Students are ready to learn paragraph structure once they've learned to construct a sentence. A paragraph is the fundamental building block of essay writing. It is a group of sentences about one topic or main idea, with the first sentence indented to signal its start. In expository writing, a basic paragraph generally consists of a topic sentence, three or more supporting or detail sentences, transitional words and phrases, and a concluding sentence.

- The topic sentence states the main idea.
- The supporting sentences elaborate on the topic by adding information, expanding on ideas, or giving illustrations or examples. These form the body of the paragraph.
- Transitional words and phrases like in addition, for example, and further make the sentences within the body of the paragraph flow more smoothly.
- The concluding sentence wraps up the paragraph by restating the main idea, drawing a conclusion, summarizing, or giving an opinion.

When teaching paragraphs, repeatedly reinforcing the general idea of a paragraph helps students understand and internalize this approach to organizing information. Showing students the shape of a paragraph (figure 5) adds a visual element to their understanding and sets the stage for graphically presenting the specific paragraph components as they're taught.

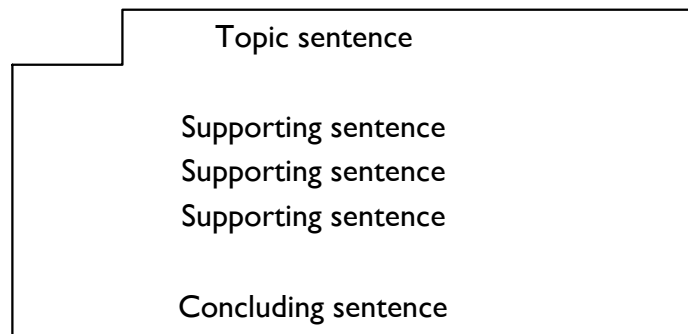


Figure 5. Paragraph shape.



Teaching Paragraph Structure

Paragraph Modeling and Analysis

Paragraph modeling and analysis is essential to building students' understanding of paragraph structure. Once students know the basic components of a paragraph, they can examine model paragraphs to see how they're put together and develop a mental image of what we expect them to produce. Linking model paragraphs to content units develops this language arts skill while reinforcing classroom topics.

Figures 6 and 7 show sample worksheets for paragraph modeling and analysis. The first is on the topic of Greek gods and goddesses; the second, on fascism, is more sophisticated.

Manipulatives

Manipulatives are another effective way we can teach and practice paragraph structure. This hands-on, interactive teaching strategy:

- gives students a break from pencil-and-paper tasks
- varies the mode of instruction from teacher- to student-directed, allowing students to work in pairs or small groups and share their ideas
- allows us to move around the room, observing and listening to students' thought processes and offering cues or redirection
- involves little risk (particularly for students who are reluctant to attempt a task and risk a mistake), since students move information from one place to another rather than erase wrong answers
- promotes metacognitive growth by prompting students to think about how a paragraph is put together and why



Directions for an exercise using manipulatives are provided below. Students can do this exercise individually or in pairs.

Sample Exercise Using Manipulatives

1. Select or write a highly structured paragraph that addresses current class content.
2. Type each sentence of the paragraph separately, using a large font.
3. Cut the sentences into strips, then attach them with a clip or put them in an envelope.
4. Have students spread the sentences out on their desks and read them.
5. Ask students to arrange the sentences into a paragraph with a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence.

A post-exercise discussion helps students explain their decisions about the paragraph. For example, in some paragraphs, like enumerative paragraphs, the order of the details may not matter; in others, like cause-and-effect paragraphs, the sequence is specific to the paragraph's meaning. Questions like these help structure the conversation:

- How did you differentiate between the topic and concluding sentences?
- What does the concluding sentence do that the topic sentence did not?
- How did the transitional words and phrases guide your sequencing of the detail sentences?
- Did the details have to be in a specific order? Why?
- Could the paragraph be improved in any way?



Greek Gods and Goddesses

Directions: Read the following paragraph; then, complete the section below it.

Gods and goddesses of Greek mythology shared similar characteristics. They all lived on Mount Olympus. Each was ranked by their power with Zeus, the most powerful, as leader. Further, they looked like humans and could experience human emotions such as jealousy and anger. Finally, unlike humans, these Greek gods and goddesses were believed to be immortal. Such specific traits distinguish the Greek deities from those of other cultures.

1. Underline the topic sentence in the paragraph above.
2. Write the two parts of the topic sentence:
topic: _____
controlling idea: _____
3. How many supporting sentence are used in the paragraph? _____
4. Do each of the supporting sentences support the controlling idea of the topic sentence?
YES NO
5. List the supporting points in note form (do not rewrite the supporting sentences):

6. Circle any transitional words or phrases used in the paragraph.
7. Underline the concluding sentence.
8. Does the concluding sentence (check one):
 restate the controlling idea
 draw a conclusion
 state an opinion
 summarize the information

Figure 6. Analyzing a model paragraph on Greek gods and goddesses.