Office of Academic Writing and Publishing Support
WSC 5-Minute Mini Lesson
Topic: Paragraph Structure

Purpose: To discuss basic elements of effective paragraphs.

Definition: A paragraph is a group of sentences related to one topic.

Effective paragraphs are:

1. Clearly focused on one idea

   In other words, an effective paragraph is unified around one main point.

   Tips:
   - State the main point in the topic sentence by answering the question, What is the most important idea that I am trying to convey to my reader?
   - If answering a question given by a course instructor, read the question carefully. The question should help you identify the main point of your answer.
   - After writing a draft of a paragraph, take a break (e.g., 1 hour or 1 day). Re-read the paragraph and delete information that is off point.

2. Well-organized

   In other words, an effective paragraph (a) starts with a topic sentence, (b) has several supporting sentences to explain the topic sentence, and (c) ends with a concluding sentence that summarizes the main point of the paragraph.

   Tips:
   - Think of a burger:

     The top bun is your topic sentence.
     The sentences that come next are your supporting detail.
     They are like the lettuce, tomato and hamburger patty in the middle.
     Holding everything together is the bottom bun of the hamburger. It is a concluding sentence.

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(From http://schoolworkhelper.net/2010/06/paragraph-structure-and-types/)

- If you are telling a story, narrate in a chronological order, from the beginning to the end of the story.
- If you are providing a description of a phenomenon, provide specific details about the phenomenon (e.g., elements, connections among the elements, factors affecting the phenomenon, etc.)
- If you are explaining a process, provide the elements of the process step-by-step; use words *first, second, third*, etc.)

3. Well-developed

In other words, an effective paragraph provides an adequate discussion of the main topic.

Tips:

- Use examples and illustrations
- Cite data (facts, statistics, evidence, details, and others)
- Examine testimony (what other people say such as quotes and paraphrases)
- Use an anecdote or story
- Define terms in the paragraph
- Compare and contrast
- Examine effects and consequences
- Describe the topic
- Offer a chronology of an event (time segments)
- Beware of paragraphs that have only 2-3 sentences

(from http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/606/01/)

*Exercise:* In the paragraph below, identify the topic sentence, supporting sentences, and the concluding sentence.

There are three reasons why I want to learn English. One reason is that English has become an international language. It is now used by most international companies, including the company where I work, for business communication. Another reason why I want to learn English is so that I can travel to English-speaking countries. The United States, England, Australia and many other countries all use English as their primary language. Finally, I want to learn English because I plan to move to the U.S. in the future. I will become a manager for my company soon. For all these reasons, I am very excited about learning English.