

Paragraphs: Academic writing

Academic paragraphs are the **body paragraphs** of your essay and account for about **90% of your word count and marks**. They may also be the structure of short answer questions in other types of writing. Academic paragraphs contain the points you want to make with supporting arguments and evidence. These paragraphs use a basic pattern (recipe) you can follow. The sentences in your body paragraphs may include citations from information sources, examples and anecdotal evidence. Each support sentence must contribute to the argument you are developing in the paragraph and the rest of the essay. You will need to know about:

1. Paragraph structure
2. Checklist for writing a paragraph

NOTE: APA referencing style is used in used in this fact sheet.

1. Paragraph structure

A paragraph consists of a topic sentence, a number of support sentences and an optional concluding sentence.

Topic Sentence
Support Sentence 1
Support Sentence 2
Support Sentence 3
Support Sentence n
Concluding Sentence (optional)

EXAMPLE OF AN ACADEMIC PARAGRAPH

A number of problems associated with the traditional routines of handover practices have been identified. Baldwin and McGinnis (1994, pp. 61-64) find that many handovers are unnecessarily lengthy which means that there is an unacceptable period of time during each shift when nurses are not available in the ward or unit. Another area that has received attention is the content and presentation of handover information. Wills (1994, p. 36) observes that “an unprofessional approach has been noted among some nurses, with derogatory comments about patients or their families”. Lastly, there is the issue of what information nurses actually pass on during the handover. It appears that:

Nurses frequently report on their own activities over the shift rather than providing patient centred information. Information obtained from discussions with relatives is rarely relayed onto other nursing staff, and of the patient information reported, most is described from a medical perspective rather than focusing on the discussion of nursing related information. (*Professional Nurse*, 1997, p. 637)

Thus, many serious problems have been identified in traditional handover practices which may reflect on the professional standing of nurses in this profession.

Note the use of in-text references, paraphrases, short & long direct quotes to support the writer's argument.

The topic sentence

In most cases, the first sentence of a paragraph is the topic sentence. The topic sentence tells you what the paragraph will be about. From a good topic sentence, you should be able to predict the content of the paragraph.

The support sentences

The topic sentence is followed by the support sentences. Support sentences expand on the topic sentence. The material in the support sentences should be presented in a systematic way. Order of importance, chronological order, order of operations or space order are most frequently used.

The concluding sentence

The concluding sentence summarises the main point of the paragraph. It often re-states the idea in the topic sentence using different words. Not all paragraphs have a concluding sentence.

2. Checklist for writing a paragraph

Step 1 – Write the topic sentence

The best starting point for a paragraph is a topic sentence. If you are writing the paragraph in response to a specific question, this should not be a difficult task because the wording of the question will assist you.

Step 2 – Brainstorm

Once you have written the topic sentence, you need to think of ideas to support it. Try brainstorming. Jot down anything that relates to your topic sentence: facts, details or examples. This might only take a few minutes, but it is an important part of the writing process.

Step 3 – Plan

Brainstorming will probably provide you with more ideas than you require. Read over what you have written, and cross out those ideas which do not obviously relate to the topic sentence. Arrange the remaining ideas in the order you wish to present them in your paragraph.

Step 4 – Write the first draft

The first draft should include all the ideas in your plan. It is a good idea to use every second line if you are writing the first draft on paper. This makes revision and editing much easier. Once you have finished writing the first draft, think about what you have written. You might consider a concluding sentence. Write one if you think it is necessary to complete the paragraph.

Step 5 – Revise and edit

Revising and editing your paragraph means rethinking and rewriting. It may involve making additions or corrections, rewriting sentences or rearranging details. Ask yourself the following questions

1. Is the topic sentence clear and relevant?
2. Do the facts, details and examples explain/develop the topic sentence?
3. Is there enough support?
4. Is the material presented in a systematic way?
5. Does one sentence lead smoothly to the next?

Step 6 – Check grammar, spelling and punctuation

Step 7 – Write the final draft

Step 8 – Proofread your paragraph

For more detailed information on academic paragraph writing, go to the Academic Skills website. Click on Academic skills online and select from the academic writing online workshops
WRITING BASICS