

A Word on Paragraphs and Arguments

To develop a compelling and unique storyline in your paper, think of paragraphs as the most important unit of writing, not the sentence.

There should be one main idea in a paragraph expressed in the first sentence (thesis sentence). The main point of each paragraph should be your unique idea or observation about the literature you are reviewing or the topic about which you are informing the reader. The rest of the sentences in the paragraph support or extend the main idea. (It is possible to have the thesis sentence at the end of the paragraph, but for now, place it at the beginning.)

Be sure sentences at the end of a paragraph don't just repeat the point of the thesis sentence. A paragraph has a purpose; it builds on the main point of the thesis sentence; by the end of the paragraph, the reader has new knowledge about the main idea. When you support your main idea well, the reader believes your main point is credible.

Carefully plan the main point of each paragraph as a building block of the overall argument or storyline you want to convey to the reader.

You should be able to identify the main idea of each paragraph (independent of the support provided in the rest of the paragraph) and string those ideas together. Together the thesis sentences represent a logical and compelling argument developed over the entire paper.

If a paragraph is very long, it is likely that it has more than one main idea and should be broken up into more than one paragraph.

However, even if all sentences beyond the thesis sentence support or enhance the thesis sentence, it can still be helpful to the reader to have the paragraph broken up. For example, if the thesis sentence says there are three major components of an effective substance abuse intervention, it is fine to describe the first two components in the first paragraph and then start a new paragraph to describe the third aspect. A strong connecting sentence ties the new paragraph to the former one. For example, "The third component of an effective intervention is ..."

Avoid very short and very long sentences. Vary sentence length. Choppy or convoluted sentences distract the reader from the content of the paragraph. You want the reader to be engaged in the content, not confused or angry about distracting writing problems.

Use transitional words or phrases to link sentences within a paragraph and to link paragraphs together. Above, the word "however" links the paragraph to the previous paragraph. See the APA Style Manual for other mechanisms that highlight relationships within and across paragraphs.

Related to transitional strategies, remember that headings are a gift you give your reader to indicate shifts from one topic to the next; they help the reader to know where they are in the paper, where they have been, and where they are going.