Paragraphs

paragraph: a subdivision of a written composition that consists of one or more sentences, deals with one point or gives the words of one speaker, and begins on a new usually indented line

As it says above, a paragraph is nothing more than a small part of a larger piece of writing that deals with one point or one speaker. Paragraphs are very important because they group the writer's ideas together in a logical fashion. If every sentence in a piece of writing dealt with a different topic, the reader would constantly struggle to figure out what was being said. Paragraphs clear up that confusion. Paragraphs appear in both fiction and nonfiction writing. The content might be different from piece to piece, but the *structure* is very similar.

The definition above states that paragraphs have "one or more sentences", but we're going to change that definition a bit. In our class, a paragraph will be **no fewer than five and no more than ten sentences**. Paragraphs are always indented using the "Tab key". We're also going to expand the idea of *when* you need a new paragraph. You need a new paragraph:

- when you begin a new topic
- when you start a new idea
- when you change the focus of your writing
- when a new person speaks

There are four different **types** of sentences in a paragraph. Each type of sentence found in a paragraph has its own special job. *All* of these sentences don't *always* appear in *every* paragraph. As the writer, you determine which types to include in which paragraphs. Those four types are:

1. **Topic sentence (TS)** – For our purposes, the topic sentence will be the first sentence in a paragraph. It informs the reader about the topic that the entire paragraph is going to deal with. This is the setup sentence. *There is no actual information or detail in the topic sentence!* Information and detail are revealed in the sentences that follow.
2. **Subtopic sentence (SS)** – This is another type of topic sentence. It narrows the focus of the topic sentence *without giving specific facts*. The SS always comes after the TS and it can only be the second sentence in a paragraph. It can't appear anywhere else. When you are deciding if you have a SS, you have to ask yourself two questions. First, is it the second sentence in the paragraph? If the answer to that question is *yes*, then you have to ask yourself if the sentence contains any specific information or facts. If the sentence DOES contain specific information or facts then it can't be a SS…it has to be an elaboration sentence.
3. **Elaboration sentence** – These sentences *follow topic or subtopic sentences* and they add *detail* and *explanations* to the sentences that come before them. In a nonfiction piece, these sentences are *critical* because they add *specific facts* to your paper. In a fictional piece, elaboration sentences add sensory detail or characters' thoughts. When a teacher tells you that your writing "needs more detail", it's these kinds of sentences that your writing is missing.
4. **Concluding / transition sentence** – These will always be the last sentence in any paragraph. A *transition sentence* is used to move easily from one topic to another. In nonfiction writing, transition sentences have two parts. First, they refer to the information that you've just given, and second, they introduce the new information that you are about to discuss. In fictional pieces, these sentences are not as obvious or clear-cut. Fiction writers try to create a last sentence that lets the reader know that one topic is over and that a new topic will begin in the next paragraph.

Fixing a Flawed Paragraph

How do you fix a passage that is too short and that has fewer than five sentences? There are three ways:

1. **Delete it**. If there's not enough to say, then maybe you don't need those sentences.
2. **Absorb it**. Find a paragraph that has *similar information* and let that paragraph absorb the orphans.
3. **Expand it**. Add more detail/researched facts to build the passage into a proper paragraph.

Examples in Fiction

The Giver by Lois Lowry (p. 26)

Topic sentence (TS) – We know this whole paragraph will be about "becoming an Eight".

Subtopic sentence (SS)– This sentence gives us basic info about what Eights are like.

Elaboration sentence – This sentence adds very specific info that builds on the detail sentence before it about what Eights are like. It deepens our knowledge.

Transition sentence – This sentence finishes ideas of what it's like to be an Eight. In the next paragraph, Jonas thinks about the Elevens.

He remembered when he had become an Eight, as Lily would do shortly, and had been faced with that freedom of choice. The Eights always set out on their first volunteer hour a little nervously, giggling and staying in groups of friends. They almost invariably did their hours on Recreation Duty first, helping with the younger ones in a place where they still felt comfortable. But with guidance, as they developed self-confidence and maturity, they moved on to other jobs, gravitating toward those that would suit their own interests and skills.

Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIHM by Robert C. O'Brien (p. 65)

Topic sentence (TS) – We know this whole paragraph will be about the thorn bush.

Subtopic sentence (SS) – This sentence gives us basic info about the thorn bush. There are no specific details about it.

Elaboration sentence – This sentence adds very specific info that builds on the detail sentence before it about exactly how big and dense this bush is. It's VITAL detail!

Transition sentence – These two sentences set up a transition. The topic changes from describing the bush to how to get into it. The next paragraph discusses just that.

The thorns, of course, helped to discourage trespassers. Mrs. Frisby had never realized until that moment, standing next to it, how very big the bush was, how dense, how incredibly thorny. It was bigger than the tractor shed, and its branches were so densely intertwined that as small as she was, Mrs. Frisby could find no easy way to crawl into it, though she walked all the way around it looking. She remembered approximately where she had seen the rats go in, and she studied that part of the bush carefully. How had they done it?

The Story of Edgar Sawtelle by David Wroblewski (p. 30)

Topic sentence (TS) – We know this whole paragraph will be about Almondine looking for something.

Subtopic sentence (SS) – The other half of the sentence is the basic info about the search.

Elaboration sentences – These sentences add very specific info that builds on the detail sentence before them about *exactly* what Almondine's search looks like. Awesome!

Transition sentence – This sentence transitions from this paragraph about Almondine's early searching to a new paragraph about her advanced searching.

All that winter and all through the spring, Almondine had known something was going to happen, but no matter where she looked she couldn't find it. Sometimes, when she entered a room, there was the feeling that the thing that was going to happen had just been there, and she would stop and pant and peer around while the feeling seeped away as mysteriously as it had arrived. Weeks might pass without a sign, and then a night would come, when, lying nose to tail beneath the window in the kitchen corner, listening to the murmur of conversation and the slosh and clink of dishes being washed, she felt it in the house again and she whisked her tail across the baseboards in long, pensive strokes and silently collected her feet beneath her and waited. When half an hour had passed and nothing appeared, she groaned and sighed and rolled onto her back and waited to see if it was somewhere in her sleep.

Life in a Medieval Castle by Joseph & Frances Gies (p. 130)

Topic sentence (TS) – We know this whole paragraph will be about preparing a falcon for training.

Subtopic sentence (SS) – There is no clear subtopic sentence here. The authors get right into the elaboration.

Elaboration sentences – These sentences all add very specific info that informs the reader about the steps to prepare a falcon for training.

Transition sentence – This sentence transitions very smoothly from the topic of preparing the bird for training to the first steps of her actual training, the topic of the next paragraph in the book.

The falconer's first task was to have the bird prepared for training. The needle points of the talons were trimmed, the eyes usually "seeled" - temporarily sewn closed - and two jesses, strips of leather with the rings at the end, were fastened around the legs. Small bells were tied to the feet to alert the falconer to the bird's movements. She was then tied to the perch by a long leather strap called a leash. At the same time, whether seeled or not, she was usually introduced to the hood, a piece of leather that covered her eyes, with an opening for the beak. Now, blinded, she had to be trained through her senses of taste, hearing, and touch.

Plot by Anson Dibell (p. 8)

Topic sentence (TS) – We know this whole paragraph will be about what a scene does for a story.

Subtopic sentence (SS) – This sentence is the basic info about what a scene MUST do. It's a *telling* sentence that has no specifics.

Elaboration sentences – These sentences all add very specific info that informs the reader about what scenes do within a story.

Transition sentence – This sentence concludes the idea of what a scene does to a new paragraph that further describes what scenes look like. One topic ends and a new one begins.

A scene can contain many things: moods, attitudes, a sense of place and time, an anticipation of what's to come, a reflection of what's past. But first and foremost, a scene must advance the plot and demonstrate the characters. You may not fully know what a given scene's job is, whether simple or complex, until you've written it. You may need to go back then and cut away the things that would mislead a reader, and add things to support, lead into, and highlight that scene's special chores in the context of the whole story. But when the story is finished, no matter how many rewrites it takes, you ought to be able to name to yourself what each scene brought out, how it developed the characters, how it showed action or lead toward consequences.

Survival of the Sickest by Dr. Sharon Moalem (p. 46-47)

Topic sentence (TS) – We know this whole paragraph will be about species' adaptations.

Subtopic sentence (SS) – This sentence is the basic info about adaptations and how they are both a good *and* a bad thing. There is no specific info here so it's a subtopic sentence.

Elaboration sentences – These sentences all add very specific examples of what the detail sentence was talking about.

Transition sentence – This sentence concludes the main idea of how adaptations can be good or bad and transitions into a new paragraph that gives an example of how species adapt when new situations occur.

Remember, evolution is amazing – but it isn't perfect. Just about every adaptation is a compromise of sorts, an improvement in some circumstances, a liability in others. A peacock's brilliant tailfeathers make him more attractive to females – and attract more attention from predators. Human skeletal structure allows us to walk upright and gives us large skulls filled with big brains – and the combination means an infant's head can barely make it through its mother's birth canal. When natural selection goes to work, it doesn't favor adaptations that make a given plant or animal "better" – just whatever it takes for it to increase the chances for survival in its current environment. And when there's a sudden change in circumstances that threatens to wipe out a population – a new infectious disease, a new predator, or a new ice age – natural selection will make a beeline for any trait that improves the chance of survival.