

Paragraph Composition and Unity

Paragraphs are unified by following the MEAL plan and exhibiting sentence continuity.

Unified paragraphs must contain four elements. Follow the **MEAL** plan:

Main point (stated somewhere in the first three sentences of your paragraph, sometimes in a topic sentence)

Evidence (this is a statement of what you need to prove your point, such as a reference to a secondary source or an example from your primary text)

Analysis (this is where you elaborate on your evidence by using textual evidence such as quotes or paraphrases, specific examples of your evidence, etc.)

Link (Use the closing sentence of your paragraph to “wrap things up” by linking your analysis back to either the main point of your paragraph or the thesis of your paper.)

Paragraphs are unified through **sentence continuity** (i.e., the proper “flow” of ideas from one sentence to the next). There are two main ways to achieve sentence continuity:

Use **key words, phrases, and pronouns** (words/phrases that are repeated from one sentence to the next or otherwise used consistently throughout a paragraph; and words that refer to the subject or content of a previous sentence (this, its, his, her, these, their)

Use **transitional words and phrases** such as: conjunctions and comparisons that announce connections between different ideas such as yet, however, likewise, rather, unlike, in addition, but, in turn, therefore; **turns of phrase** such as “on the one hand...on the other hand,” “not only...but also,” “while...not,” etc.; and **terms of summation** such as “thus” and “after all.” See your grammar handbook for a list of transitional expressions and further explanation for how to use them.

You can also use key words and transitional words and phrases to make transitions between paragraphs.

These are called **paragraph transitions**. After all, ideas do not need to be connected only between sentences; the topics of each of your successive paragraphs must be connected as well so that your essay reads like a logically developing argument.

A good paragraph transition will use key words and transitional words and phrases to do two things: to refer back to the topic of the previous paragraph, and to then shift the reader’s attention to the new topic of the present paragraph.

Sentence continuity and paragraph transitions in action:

If words are the atoms of our writing then sentences are the molecules. Like molecules, they must be strung together to form the body of a paragraph. The question then is, how do we connect our sentences to compose a coherent paragraph? The answer is that we must write with good sentence continuity. Sentence continuity is the ‘molecular glue’ for our written ideas. When we write with good sentence continuity we actually repeat a lot of what we’ve already written so that our reader stays on topic. We refer to subjects we’ve already discussed by using key words such as pronouns that refer back to the subjects of previous sentences. When we are not doing that, we may use transitional phrases such as “consequently” to connect our ideas. Consequently, by doing all of these things, our sentences read with what we call good flow, even when all they may be doing is listing a bunch of things that we should do to achieve good sentence continuity.

Although the judicious use of repetition, key words, and transitions works well to link sentences, it works even better to link paragraphs. Transitional phrases are especially good at this. For instance, we could have used another familiar transitional phrase to write the first sentence of this paragraph as “Not only does the use of repetition, key words, and transitions work well to connect sentences within a paragraph, but it also works well to connect paragraphs within an essay.” After all, we may use the same gluey tool kit for both tasks. However, there is a difference. While these tools can be used to connect sentences within a paragraph, when connecting paragraphs within an essay they must actually do two things: they must refer back to the topic of the previous paragraph, and then they must shift the reader’s attention to the new topic of the present paragraph. Thus, perhaps it is best to think of paragraph transitions not so much as bits of molecular glue but rather as big joints within the body of an argument. They are built of the same wordy material, but they do much bigger jobs.