**Paragraph Plan**



***A single paragraph explores a single idea. It is complete in itself.***

Paragraphs are the building blocks of papers. Many students define paragraphs in terms of length: a paragraph is a group of at least five sentences, a paragraph is half a page long, etc. In reality, though, the unity and coherence of ideas among sentences is what constitutes a paragraph. A paragraph is defined as "a group of sentences or a single sentence that forms a unit" (Lunsford and Connors 116). Length and appearance do not determine whether a section in a paper is a paragraph. For instance, in some styles of writing, particularly journalistic styles, a paragraph can be just one sentence long. Ultimately, a paragraph is a sentence or group of sentences that support one central, controlling idea.

**What to put in a paragraph:** Before you can begin to determine what the composition of a particular paragraph will be, you must first decide on a working thesis (i.e. the main point you want to make). A thesis is like a road map to guide you through the paragraph. The information in each paragraph must be related/connected to that idea. This is called unity. Think of it like an umbrella. Every other sentence must fit inside the umbrella (ie the topic sentence). In other words, your paragraphs should remind your reader that there is a recurrent relationship between your thesis and the information in each paragraph. A working thesis functions like a seed from which your paper, and your ideas, will grow. The whole process is an organic one—a natural progression from a seed to a full-blown paper where there are direct, familial relationships between all of the ideas in the paper.

The decision about what to put into your paragraphs begins with the germination of a seed of ideas; this "germination process" is better known as prewriting or “brainstorming”. Building paragraphs can be like building a skyscraper: there must be a well-planned foundation that supports what you are building. Any cracks, inconsistencies, or other corruptions of the foundation can cause your whole paper to crumble.

After you come up with a controlling idea or subject for your paragraph, you must let the idea develop from this thesis sentence with some type of support or evidence and sufficient examples to demonstrate this evidence. These examples must be relevant.

Lunsford, Andrea and Robert Collins. *The St. Martin's Handbook, Annotated Instructor's Edition*. 5th Ed. New York: St. Martin's, 2003.

**A good paragraph has the following components:**

A. *Beginning*

1. This is an abstract or general statement called the topic sentence. It limits and controls the paragraph. It is NOT a fact.

2. A qualifying statement or restatement of the topic either for clarity or for emphasis.

3. A definition of terminology, if necessary.

B. *Middle*

1. Concrete (specific) fact, detail, example, reason or supporting evidence #1.

2. Additional comment which explores point #1, perhaps giving a reason why the point is significant.

3. Concrete (specific) fact, detail, example, reason or supporting evidence #2.

4. Additional comment relevant to point #2.

5. Concrete (specific) fact, detail, example, reason or supporting evidence #3.

6. Additional comment relevant to point #3.

 C. *End* - A concluding statement, probably one of the following:

a. A logical conclusion based on evidence

b. A single sentence summary

c. A restatement of your original assertion or opinion

d. A plea for change (if suitable for the topic)

Follow the **MEAL** plan:

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

Unified paragraphs must contain four elements.

* **M**ain point (stated somewhere in the first three sentences of your paragraph, sometimes in a topic sentence)
* **E**vidence (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)
* **A**nalysis (this is where you elaborate on your evidence by using textual evidence such as quotes or paraphrases, specific examples of your evidence, etc. )
* **L**ink (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).

**Sentence continuity and paragraph transitions used in a paragraph:**

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.

**Here is a look at a completed "model" paragraph:**

Slave spirituals often had hidden double meanings. On one level, spirituals referenced heaven, Jesus, and the soul, but on another level, the songs spoke about slave resistance. For example, according to Frederick Douglass, the song "O Canaan, Sweet Canaan" spoke of slaves' longing for heaven, but it also expressed their desire to escape to the North. Careful listeners heard this second meaning in the following lyrics: "I don't expect to stay / Much longer here. / Run to Jesus, shun the danger. / I don't expect to stay." When slaves sang this song, they could have been speaking of their departure from this life and their arrival in heaven; however, they also could have been describing their plans to leave the South and run, not to Jesus, but to the North. Slaves even used songs like "Steal Away to Jesus (at midnight)" to announce to other slaves the time and place of secret, forbidden meetings. What whites heard as merely spiritual songs, slaves discerned as detailed messages. The hidden meanings in spirituals allowed slaves to sing what they could not say.

**Two Types of paragraphs:**

**Narration:** (Tell a story. Go chronologically, from start to finish.)

One North Carolina man found quite a surprise last year while fishing in the Catawba River: a piranha. Jerry Melton, of Gastonia, reeled in a one pound, four ounce fish with an unusual bite. Melton could not identify it, but a nearby fisherman did. Melton at first could not believe he had caught a piranha. He said, "That ain't no piranha. They ain't got piranha around here." Melton was right: the fish is native to South America, and North Carolina prohibits owning the fish as a pet or introducing the species to local waterways. The sharp-toothed, carnivorous fish likely found itself in the Catawba River when its illegal owner released the fish after growing tired of it. Wildlife officials hope that the piranha was the only of its kind in the river, but locals are thinking twice before they wade in the water.

**Description:** (Provide specific details about what something looks, smells, tastes, sounds, or feels like. Organize spatially, in order of appearance, or by topic.)

Piranha are omnivorous, freshwater fish, which are mostly known for their single row of sharp, triangular teeth in both jaws. Piranhas' teeth come together in a scissor-like bite and are used for puncture and tearing. Baby piranha are small, about the size of a thumbnail, but full-grown piranha grow up to about 6-10 inches, and some individual fish up to 2 feet long have been found. The many species of piranha vary in color, though most are either silvery with an orange underbelly and throat or almost entirely black.

Rosen, Leonard and Laurence Behrens. *The Allyn and Bacon Handbook, Annotated Instructor's Edition*. 4th Ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000.