

Putting together an essay – or any other piece of written work – can be daunting, particularly if you aren't used to doing it. However, the process is made much simpler by breaking down an essay into its constituent parts. At a basic level, every piece of written work is made up of a series of paragraphs linked together by an idea or a theme. Gaining an understanding of how to build a paragraph will provide you with a valuable perspective on the process of creating an essay. You might like to use the advice here with the information provided in our other guides on related topics. (The following information is intended only as guidance; you might like to adapt the way you currently produce written work to include some of this advice.)

Paragraphs: purpose and function

What is a paragraph? Paragraphs represent the building blocks of your essay (or piece of written work). In this way, paragraphs provide your work with a structure, which allows you to organise your points effectively. They also provide the means by which you communicate knowledge, understanding and analytical skills to your tutor. However, more than this, paragraphs are the building blocks of *your argument*.

Each paragraph forms a layer of your argument; as you add paragraphs to your work, you are gradually building and adding depth to your argument.

In most pieces of work, each paragraph expresses a single point or aspect of your argument. But paragraphs – and their organisation within a piece of work – should also assist the reader in following and understanding your argument. The first and last sentences, for example, should steer the reader from one point to the next in a seamless and logical way.

Paragraphs fulfil an important function in signposting to the reader each point or aspect of your argument.

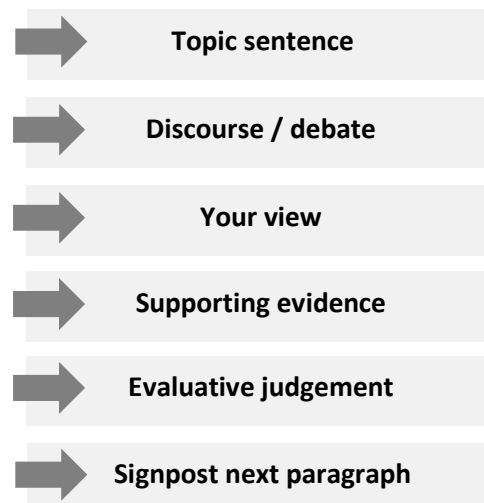
It is therefore very important that you have a clear idea of the essay's overall structure before you begin writing. Try to organise your paragraphs clearly and logically, in a way that heightens the impact of your argument.

Paragraph structure

A paragraph doesn't need to have a complicated structure for it to be effective, but it does need to do several things:

- i. get across the point you are trying to make clearly – and, thus, your argument;
- ii. convey the depth of your own knowledge and understanding;
- iii. locate the point within academic discourse (where possible);
- iv. highlight supporting evidence;
- v. demonstrate analytical skills, such as analysis and evaluation;
- vi. introduce the next point in the argument.

In order to meet this criteria, the following structure is suggested:



Topic sentence

The topic sentence is the *headline* of the paragraph. In other words, in its opening sentence, you must make it very clear to the reader what the paragraph is about. You need to be specific; remember, each paragraph deals only with an aspect or element of your argument, rather than the whole thing. Focus on the point you are trying to make.

Discourse / debate

Following the topic sentence, in one or two sentences, set out the discourse or debate on this particular point (i.e. the perspectives of academics or published authors). Together, these sentences frame your own viewpoint, which comes next.

Writing techniques: Constructing a paragraph

Your view

Having set out the academic context in the discourse / debate section, it is now time to express your own view. You are usually expected to express your view in a scholarly and objective way. This might be achieved by using the third person and commenting on the views highlighted in the discourse debate section. (E.g. 'However, whilst this may be true, it can be argued that . . .'.')

Supporting evidence

Your own view should always be supported by relevant and appropriate evidence. Depending on your subject, this may take the form of statistics or it may consist of the views of academics.

Evaluative judgement

The evaluative judgement differs from the statement of your own viewpoint because it should be more explicitly linked to the key issue of the question. Thus, if your question began with 'To what extent', the evaluative judgement will address the issue of 'extent'. Alternatively, you might be addressing the relative significance of the point discussed in the paragraph next to other factors considered in the essay.

Signpost next paragraph

Ideally, a paragraph will end with a sentence that steers the reader to the next point. This is a difficult skill to develop; it is much easier to do if you have planned the overall structure of your essay clearly and carefully.

Example: paragraph structure in action

Here is an example of a paragraph written using the structure outlined above.

Social media provides a highly effective way of reaching new customers. While the potential impact of social media as a marketing tool has been widely acknowledged (Hoffman and Fodor, 2010), there is little data reflecting consumers' attitudes towards the effectiveness of social media-led marketing campaigns (Akar and Topçu, 2011). However, its potential impact cannot be denied: Twitter has over 300 million active users each month, while

Facebook currently has over 1.5 billion active users (Statista, 2016). Yet the effectiveness of social media in a marketing campaign depends on a number of factors, including the choice of platforms. Indeed, selecting platforms that are appropriate to the target audience is crucial to exploiting social media's marketing potential fully.

This paragraph reads quite well and it wasn't difficult to put together using the structure suggested above.

Topic sentence

Social media provides a highly effective way of reaching new customers.

Discourse / debate

While the potential impact of social media as a marketing tool has been widely acknowledged (Hoffman and Fodor, 2010), there is little data reflecting consumers' attitudes towards the effectiveness of social media-led marketing campaigns (Akar and Topçu, 2011).

Your view

However, its potential impact cannot be denied:

Supporting evidence

Twitter has over 300 million active users each month, while Facebook currently has over 1.5 billion active users (Statista, 2016).

Evaluative judgement

Yet the effectiveness of social media in a marketing campaign depends on a number of factors, including the choice of platforms.

Signpost next paragraph

Indeed, selecting platforms that are appropriate to the target audience is crucial to exploiting social media's marketing potential fully.

Tips

- i. Paragraphs are the building blocks of an argument, not only an essay.
- ii. Plan your essays carefully and clarify your argument before beginning.
- iii. Structure your paragraphs clearly (try using the structure suggested here).