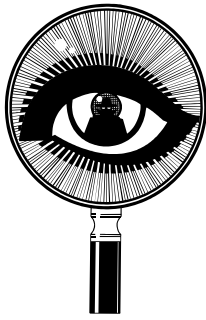


# PARAGRAPHS



**Paragraphs** are just the visual units that divide up a piece of writing. The *paragraph breaks* promise relief from being continuously bombarded with information.

For the reader, **paragraphs** should correlate with units of thought or action in the writing. They should provide digestible blocks of information or narrative, by which the reader can cumulatively absorb the whole. Ideally (at least in informative and argumentative writing) the **paragraphs** begin with a *topic sentence*, which signals in general terms whatever the **paragraph** is to focus on. The following **paragraph** shows the relationship between the topic sentence and the rest:

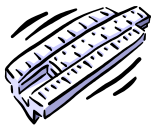
*In Sydney it's commonly said – and perhaps believed – that Melbourne is a wetter place. The facts are quite different. Sydney's rainfall in an average year is almost twice that of Melbourne, and in a bad year, a lot more than that. Suburban flooding is a much more frequent problem in Sydney than in Melbourne .....*



The first sentence says what the paragraph is about, the notion that Melbourne is a wetter place (than Sydney). Note that the second brief sentence in fact combines with it to show what the paragraph is intended to do, and also works as a kind of topic sentence. Following the statement of the topic, there are specific points to back it up, and so the *paragraph* forms a tightly knit unit around a particular idea.

Readers (especially busy ones) are grateful to writers who provide regular topic sentences. And for writers it's a good habit to get into, because it obliges you to identify the topic of each *paragraph*, and reduces the tendency to shift on to other matters which really deserve a separate *paragraph*. It makes writers much more conscious of the structure of their argument.

➤ **HOW LONG SHOULD A PARAGRAPH BE?** What is considered normal in length varies with the context. Many newspapers are one-sentence **paragraphs** in their ordinary reporting – presumably because they are conscious of the visual effect on longer ones, and are less concerned about giving their readers information in significant units. In scholarly writing and in institutional reports, **paragraphs** are often quite long – as if shorter ones might imply only cursory attention to an issue. For general purposes, **paragraphs** from 3 to 8 sentences long are a suitable size for developing discussion, and some publishers recommend an upper limit of 5/6 sentences. **Paragraphs** which threaten to last the whole page certainly need scrutiny, to see whether the focus has actually shifted and a new *paragraph* is needed.



➤ **CONTINUITY OF PARAGRAPHS.** **Paragraphs** need to be in an appropriate order for developing the subject matter. The connections between them can then be made unobtrusively – often embedded in the topic sentence. In the following example, a small but sufficient link with what's gone before is provided by means of the word *different*:



*A different approach to marketing fiction paperbacks might be to develop automatic vending machines for them, to be install on railway platforms.....*

The use of *different* is a reminder to the reader that at least one other “approach” has already been discussed, and a sign that a contrasting strategy is coming up. The one word achieves two kinds of *cohesion* with what went before.



Some people advocate including a cohesive or transitional device at the end of each *paragraph*, as well as at the beginning. This can become very tedious if done in every *paragraph*, and is not necessary if there is adequate cohesion at the start of the *paragraph*.