

The Paragraph

You are required to write self-contained paragraphs and short multi-paragraph compositions. There's no time like the present to make sure you understand the basics of writing these paragraphs.

The Functions of a Paragraph

There are basically two functions for paragraphs that you might write.

The Serial Paragraph

A multi-paragraph composition deals with a large topic supported by a number of ideas. A **serial paragraph** is a major building block in this type of composition.

Serial paragraphs connect to those before and after, much as Lego blocks connect to each other. Serial paragraphs do not have conclusions; instead, they have a transition linked to the next paragraph.

The Self-contained Paragraph

A **self-contained paragraph** conveys information about a specific topic with a narrow focus. A self-contained paragraph—complete on its own, rather than part of a longer composition—requires a concluding sentence.

Example

In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the Capulets are quarrelsome, right from the beginning of the story. When Samson and Gregory see Montague servants approaching, they go on the offensive. Samson tells his partner to "quarrel" with the Montagues, and Gregory replies that he will "frown as I pass by," obviously in the hope of getting a fight started. Samson continues that he will bite his thumb at the Montagues, which is an insult in fifteenth-century Verona, and Abraham (a Montague servant) takes the bait, asking if Samson is biting his thumb "at us, sir?" The conversation rapidly degenerates, leading to Samson's challenge, "Draw, if you be men!" At this point, the swordplay begins. Samson, who was spoiling for a fight, has succeeded in starting one. The Capulets are the aggressors whose nasty attitude continues throughout the play.

Here are some points that help to conceptualize a self-contained paragraph's structure:

The **topic** is "what the paragraph is about." Usually it occurs in the first sentence of the paragraph, which is called the **topic sentence**. All of the statements in the paragraph must connect to, and support, this topic sentence.

The easiest way to structure a paragraph is to begin with a topic sentence.

The remaining sentences, called the **supporting sentences**, supply the details. Usually, these details will be reasons that show why the topic sentence is true. Often, a paragraph about a work of literature will include one quotation from that work for each supporting sentence.

Writing a Paragraph: the seven-step solution

Writing a self-contained paragraph that persuades or explains requires some prewriting, just as in earlier English courses. You will now review an example of the seven-step solution.

This paragraph will be a persuasive piece of writing that asks the reader to adopt the viewpoint of the author. Seven steps are involved.

Step one: Find a topic

The suggested topic will deal with some skill that every North American teen should develop in order to be a complete person. For demonstration purposes, the skill will be riding a bicycle, but the student doing this should pick a skill that reflects personal convictions.

Step two: Brainstorm Ideas

Once a topic has been identified, it's necessary to brainstorm. One way is simply to jot down ideas, which might look like the following:

bike riding:

- fresh air
- exercise
- get out of metal and glass cocoon • economical transport
- no emissions
- cheap to buy compared to a car
- more personal
- easier on environment
- cuts down on need to build roads

Step three: Make an organized list

From here, one goes to an organized list:

Advantages of bike riding:

- personal include fresh air, exercise, healthier
- inexpensive to buy, inexpensive to operate, doesn't need expensive freeways
- easy on environment—no emissions, industries that build don't pollute as much because smaller scale than auto factories

Step Four: Write the topic sentence

The topic sentence of a self-contained paragraph summarizes what the author is going to tell the reader about the topic. It also has to capture the reader's interest so firmly that it's difficult to stop reading.

All Canadian teens should ride a bicycle for everyday transportation, both for their benefit and for the good of the environment.

Avoid starting topic sentences by stating directly what you will talk about. Let the piece speak for itself.

Avoid

- My topic for this paragraph is to show you how the British nearly lost the Battle of the Plains of Abraham.
- In this composition I am going to tell you about my best friend who goes to the same school I do. His name is Jiv Sandhu, and he is a good athlete.
- A retired politician by the name of Pierre Trudeau died and I am going to tell you why he is important.

Instead

Here is a set of improvements on the three sentences above:

- The British should have lost the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, by all the rules of war.
- My friend Jiv is a magician with a basketball, a wizard on the soccer field, and in every sense of the word my best friend.
- “Just watch me!” is a phrase that rang in the memory of every middle-aged Canadian watching the funeral of Pierre Elliot Trudeau.

Each of these improved topic sentences describes the writer’s attitude towards the topic of the paragraph and gains the reader’s interest. After reading any of these, the reader should be interested in reading the rest of the composition.

Step 5: Provide the evidence

Now it’s time to persuade readers that the main idea is a good one, which they should adopt. They need specific reasons, with details and examples why they should adopt the viewpoint stated in the topic sentence. A list of specifics drawn from the brainstorm serves as the basis for these reasons.

example

Riding a bicycle has these benefits:

1. personal rewards include exercise in the fresh air
2. a cardiovascular workout at no extra charge
3. inexpensive to acquire
4. inexpensive to operate
5. inexpensive roads to drive on, not costly freeways
6. easy on environment—no omissions, built by relatively low-pollution industries

Step six: Write the First draft

Now that the topic has been limited to a main idea and the topic sentence is written, you are ready to prepare the first draft.

example

All Canadian teens should ride a bicycle for everyday transportation, both for their benefit and for the good of the environment. An important personal benefit is the chance to get daily exercise in the fresh air, which includes a cardiovascular workout at no extra charge. *Why pay a health studio for a chance to huff and puff on an indoor stair climber, when a brisk five-mile bicycle ride will yield the same benefits?* Also, bicycles are

inherently easy on the pocketbook, unless the everyday rider chooses to make a statement by buying something far more upscale than everyday transportation patterns require. Financial benefits include low operating costs. *How many miles per gallon of gas does a bicycle yield? A greater than infinite amount, because bicycles use neither gas nor oil.* Admittedly, tires wear or go flat, and brakes need adjusting, but the cost of bicycle operation is nothing like that of operating a car. An overriding benefit, as well, is that bicycle riders are saving the environment for their old age and for their children. A bicycle has no emissions (except for a little rubber scuffed off its tires), and manufacturing it does not require mega-sized industrial plants with *belching stacks that load the atmosphere with greenhouse gasses.* Clearly, the personal and environmental benefits of riding a bicycle far outweigh the inconveniences for the socially conscious youth of today.

The italicized sections are the specific examples, often with visual images, that support the ideas of the paragraph.

Step seven: Write the clincher or conclusion

The last sentence, or clincher, echoes and restates the topic sentence.

This paragraph, if treated as a template for single-focus persuasive/ expository writing, will see a student right through grade twelve into first-year university courses.