

Paragraphs make reading easier by providing visual cues. Each new paragraph shows the reader that a new idea is being presented.

- The first line may be indented, but, if it is not, then an extra line space indicates the start of a new paragraph.
- Paragraphs should relate to one another, as well as to the central theme of the essay.
- They should be linked by using **transitional words**.

A paragraph is a unified piece of writing. It is unified because it has one central idea, a topic, which is expressed in a **topic sentence**. Each sentence in the paragraph should relate, either directly or indirectly, to the **controlling idea** of the topic sentence.

The topic sentence usually comes at the beginning of the paragraph (though it may also come in the middle or at the end). It contains a **controlling idea** which directs the reader to the rest of the paragraph. All the sentences in the paragraph should be related to the subject (main idea), or topic, mentioned in the topic sentence.

For example:

<p>Convenience foods are easy to prepare</p> <p>↑</p> <p>controlling idea</p>	<p>This topic sentence tells us that the writer will talk about convenience foods and their preparation. The topic is convenience foods. The controlling idea says that they are easy to prepare.</p>
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<p>Animals can be classified into two groups.</p> <p>↑</p> <p>controlling idea</p>	<p>This topic sentence tells us that the author will write about the classification of animals. The topic is animals. The controlling idea tells us that they will be classified into two groups.</p>
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A controlling idea may include phrases such as the following:

<i>two main types</i>	<i>three groups</i>	<i>two classes</i>
<i>several ways</i>	<i>two aims</i>	<i>the following results</i>
<i>several reasons</i>	<i>four steps</i>	<i>these effects</i>
<i>three main causes</i>	<i>three characteristics</i>	<i>three disadvantages</i>

The controlling idea may also be expressed as an adjective:

<i>suitable</i>	<i>unsuitable</i>	<i>good</i>	<i>bad</i>
<i>successful</i>	<i>unsuccessful</i>	<i>beautiful</i>	<i>ugly</i>
<i>fortunate</i>	<i>unfortunate</i>	<i>healthy</i>	<i>unhealthy</i>

Sometimes, however, the controlling idea does not follow this pattern. The important thing is that it gives us an aspect or aspects of the topic which we know the writer will develop. It gives focus to the paragraph.

Here are some more examples. In each case the topic is underlined and the **controlling idea** is written in bold type.

1. **Spectacular beaches** make Trinidad a tourist paradise.
2. The Caribbean island of Trinidad attracts tourists because of its **calypso music**.
3. Trinidad is an extremely popular tourist destination, attracting **tourists from all over the world**.

In each of the above examples the topic is Trinidad. The controlling idea, however, is different. In the first sentence, the controlling idea contains an adjective ('spectacular'). In the second sentence, the phrase 'calypso music' indicates what aspect of the island will be described. In the third sentence the phrase 'tourists from all over the world' shows what the paragraph will talk about. Obviously, the controlling idea does not always follow a pattern.

EXERCISE 1:

Can you identify the controlling idea and the topic in the following sentences?

1. Driving on freeways demands skill and alertness.
2. Driving on freeways requires an aggressive attitude.
3. Speed and driver fatigue are the main problems when driving on freeways.
4. A major problem for international students is taking written examinations.
5. Participating in class discussions is difficult for international students.
6. International students contribute a lot more than finance to Australian universities.

(This exercise is adapted from Parks, AF, Levernier, JA and Hollowell, IM 1996, *Structuring paragraphs: a guide to effective writing*, Bedford/St. Martin's, Boston, pp. 22 – 23. The first three pages of this leaflet are adapted from Brent, J 1981, *Practising the paragraph*, ACT Schools Authority, Canberra; and Oshima, A & Hogue, A 1999, *Writing academic English*, 3rd edn, Addison Wesley Longman, New York.)

ANSWERS TO EXERCISE 1: The topic is underlined and the **controlling idea** is in bold print.

1. Driving on freeways demands **three main skills**.
2. Driving on freeways requires **an aggressive attitude**.
3. **Speed and driver fatigue** are the main problems when driving on freeways.
4. A major problem for international students is taking **written examinations**.
5. **Participating in class discussions** is difficult for international students.
6. International students **contribute a lot more than finance** to Australian universities.

ANSWERS TO EXERCISE 2:

Sentences (3), (4), (5), (6) and (9) do not support the controlling idea, that **education should be equitable**. In fact, they spoil the unity of the paragraph. With each sentence we wonder what the writer is saying. We may even stop reading, as we lose track of the idea we thought we were following.

Paragraph rewritten:

(1) **Education should be equitable in order to be fair.** (2) This means that everyone should have equal access to education. (7) Both boys and girls should have the same educational provision. (8) This does not mean that they have to be taught together in the same classroom. (10) Boys and girls may need to have a separate curriculum. (11) The important thing is that everyone should have the same opportunities.

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