

Paragraph Organization

How should I organize my paragraphs?

While I am not going to give a big grammar lesson here, I will take a moment to show you one effective way to organize your paragraphs. The second page of this handout contains two paragraphs I wrote as an undergraduate that follow this structure even though they are far from perfect.

Paragraphs are actually structured much like persuasive papers are. Just like a paper has a thesis statement followed by a body of supportive evidence, paragraphs have a **topic sentence** followed by several sentences of support.

Topic sentences serve two purposes: they let your reader know what the paragraph is going to be about, and they also highlight the type of connection between its paragraph and the one that came before. Just like all the paragraphs in your paper should connect to your thesis statement, all the sentences in your paragraph should connect to the topic sentence. If you notice your paragraph has suddenly switched topics, you likely have two paragraphs that need to be split up.

Topic sentences should not be quotations. They should be written in your own words.

Here is an example of a topic sentence from the following page:

However, this updated version of PTSD still cannot account for the wide range of human reactions to trauma, nor does it include many individuals who are indeed traumatized.

What do you think this paragraph is about? If the next sentence was about OCD, would you be surprised?

Likewise, can you tell how this paragraph would connect to the one that came before it? There's a transition word (however) that is meant to clue you in. Transition words and phrases—such as moreover, nonetheless, additionally, in contrast—are one easy way to demonstrate this connection. One important note: do not feel pressured to always use a transition word or phrase. If the train of thought connecting the paragraphs is clear without one, you don't need to throw one in. Like all good things, use transition words with moderation.

Please look at the following page to see topic sentences at work.

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While trauma can cause a host of psychological and physical ills for an individual, mother figures throughout literature are widely affected by two very different types of psychological disorders due to their trauma: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and a proposed (as of 1995) addition to the DSM called Disorders of Extreme Stress Not Otherwise Specified (DESNOS). The definition of PTSD changed during the last few decades, evolving from the DSM III-R's portrayal, which states that an individual must have "experienced an event that is outside the range of human experience" in order to be diagnosed with PTSD (Brown 100). Since 1987, when the DSM III-R was published, the criteria have become more inclusive for traumas resulting from events such as rape, which is not considered to be outside such a range. The DSM IV also places more emphasis on the perceptions of the individual than those of society as a whole, a change that allows a wide range of experiences to be considered the cause of PTSD.

However, this updated version of PTSD still cannot account for the wide range of human reactions to trauma, nor does it include many individuals who are indeed traumatized. PTSD is generally considered to be caused by isolated events of severe trauma and as such it often excludes individuals who have been affected by trauma over a longer period of time. These people, who have endured not only chronic long term trauma but also the effects and ramifications of that trauma, may not experience the flashbacks or other psychological reactions that have become characteristic of PTSD. As such, they would often go unnoticed before the proposal of DESNOS, unheard of and undiagnosed simply because there was no suitable label for their symptoms.