

ORGANIZING PARAGRAPHS WITH THE MEAL PLAN

PURPOSE

Well-organized paragraphs guide readers logically through an essay's development, adding to the effectiveness of the argument and the credibility of the writer. Paragraphs vary in length and structure based on context, but they should focus on only one idea. Most paragraphs also include the following elements: a statement of the paragraph's main (M) idea, evidence (E) to support that main idea, analysis (A) of that evidence, and some link (L) to the paper's thesis. The MEAL Plan is an easy, effective strategy to help you organize paragraphs.

MAIN IDEA

All paragraphs should have a main idea or point. Typically, this main idea is expressed in a topic sentence—a sort of mini-thesis statement for the paragraph. Often, a topic sentence is the first sentence of the paragraph, though it may come after or within a transition statement.

If you have trouble identifying the main idea of a paragraph, try writing “This paragraph is about...” and then finish the sentence. You can cross out the phrase and revise the rest into a clear, strong topic sentence:

- *This paragraph is about* why Steelman is a better superhero than Green Muscle.
- ~~*This paragraph is about*~~ Why *is* Steelman a better superhero than Green Muscle?
- Steelman's ingenuity makes him a better superhero than Green Muscle because this quality allows him to reason and make decisions based on his intellectual abilities.

EVIDENCE/EXPLANATION/EXAMPLES

This next section of the paragraph elaborates on the main idea. Depending on the type of assignment, the paragraph might require one or more of these “E”s:

- Evidence—What does the main idea of the paragraph need to support it? Make sure to cite outside information.
- Explanation—Do you need to explain key terms, concepts, or events? What information in the paragraph may be especially complex or unclear?
- Examples—Other main ideas are best suited to examples, either from personal experience or research, to illustrate or highlight elements of the main idea.

ANALYSIS

Once the main idea has been stated and supported, it is time to break that information down and analyze it. What more do your readers need to understand about the evidence or examples you provided? How can you make it clear that you are interpreting this information in a certain way? In other words, this is the section of the paragraph where the *HOW? WHY? or WHO CARES?* of your evidence is explained.

LINK

Linking refers to the link between a paragraph and the paper's thesis. Ask yourself *how does this paragraph contribute to the overall effectiveness of the paper?* You may not end up including that answer as part of the paragraph, but you must make sure you have made the connection clear. Too often writers assume readers automatically will recognize the link on their own, but your job as a writer is to make it impossible for a reader to miss how each paragraph supports your overall goal for the paper. Think about this connection to your thesis as a way to develop a smooth transition to the next paragraph.

EXAMPLE OF A PARAGRAPH USING THE MEAL PLAN

¹ Steelman possesses qualities that make him a more effective superhero than Green Muscle.

² As Steelman, Tawny Stork chose the life of a superhero. Stork, a genius engineer and the mastermind behind the steel suit, uses reason and brains to defeat villains. Impulsive as he may be, Steelman uses his intellectual abilities to overcome obstacles. Green Muscle, however, reached superhero status accidentally. Brace Bunner, the human form of Green Muscle, is an equally intelligent physicist; however, he only reaches superhero status through anger. ³ Once Brace Bunner becomes Green Muscle, his intellect ceases to exist. While Green Muscle may possess great strength, his inability to control this strength weakens him. Steelman's intellectual and reasoning skills and the fact that he chooses to protect the world from super villains gives him an advantage over Green Muscle. ⁴ Green Muscle and Steelman make a great team if fighting together. Steelman would outsmart Green Muscle any day, but this would only make Green Muscle angrier and therefore stronger. If the two were to fight each other, it would be a close brawl.

¹ *The topic sentence expresses the **MAIN IDEA** of the paragraph. The rest of the paragraph should relate to the qualities Steelman possesses that make him a more effective superhero than Green Muscle.*

² ***EVIDENCE** supports the fact that Steelman possesses qualities that make him a more effective superhero than Green Muscle are contained in the sentences following the topic sentence.*

³ *These sentences explore how Steelman's qualities make him a more effective superhero than Steelman; therefore, these sentences provide **ANALYSIS** of the evidence that the writer has included in this paragraph.*

⁴ *The final sentences of this paragraph explicitly **LINK** everything that the author has discussed in the paragraph back to the thesis.*

ADDITIONAL TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE PARAGRAPHS

When you finish writing a paragraph, read through it again and make sure that every single sentence has something to do with the main idea. If it doesn't, the sentence doesn't belong in that paragraph. You may need to start another paragraph, move that piece of information elsewhere in your paper, or delete the information because it may not be relevant to your paper.

*To assess your organization and paragraphing further, create a reverse outline of your paper. See the KSU Writing Center's **Reverse Outlining** handout for more information and detailed instructions.*