

# Structuring Paragraphs

In his 1909 text, "Composition: Oral and Written," Charles Baldwin defined the essay as follows: "An essay is an exposition by paragraphs of a single controlling idea... [using] orderly, logical, development... [to] carry a reader through a definite course of thought to a definite conclusion." This single controlling idea is expressed in two ways: through a thesis and a plan.

A thesis is a proposition laid down in a declarative sentence or two, which establishes an essay's theme. Placed near the beginning, a thesis defines the essay as an argument. Such essays are generally based upon pro-con, problem-solution, part-whole, or cause-effect critical thinking, and use information, analysis, narration, and description for support or evidence. The thesis is usually accompanied by a plan that previews and organizes the essay point by point. In some essays, this includes even the type or character of evidence to be presented.

In addition to the thesis and plan, an essay includes several other features that set it apart from other forms of writing. Particularly, there is a topic sentence in each paragraph that connects to the thesis either by implicit suggestion or explicit statement. As the essay progresses from one main point to another, the author must include summaries to indicate whenever one point is ending, and transition phrases or sentences to show that another topic is about to begin. Finally, the introduction and conclusion set the essay in a proper context.

Essays are composed of paragraphs, which have their own structure, content, and logic. According to Maurice Fulton, "Judicious paragraphing is an important element in successful exposition. Each paragraph should contain only such material as is logically justifiable as a unit by itself. It must have one central thought [located in the topic sentence] to which all the ideas and facts making up the development of the paragraph shall be properly subordinated." (XXV)

Perhaps most useful was his categorization of paragraphs, which holds for essays of any length:

- 1) introductory paragraphs in which the subject of the composition is stated
  - 2) outlining paragraphs in which a proposed line of treatment is briefly set forth
  - 3) developing paragraphs which treat in detail a certain part of the subject
  - 4) transitional paragraphs used to pass from one part of a discussion to another and to show the connection of parts
  - 5) summarizing paragraphs in which a review or recapitulation of points discussed is given
  - 6) concluding paragraphs which gather into themselves the force of preceding paragraphs
- Type (3) is encountered most frequently, and is the "normal form" of a paragraph. (74)

A typical 5-paragraph essay is: [1, 3, 3, 3, 6]. Paragraphs type 2, 4, and 5 would be sentences. A 14-paragraph essay (4 pages) could be: [1, 2, 3, 4, 3, 4, 3, 4, 3, 4, 5, 5, 6]. (See essay template.) A book chapter (10 pages) might be: [1, 1, 1, 2, 2, 2, 3, 3, 4, 3, 3, 4, 3, 3, 4, 5, 5, 4, 5, 5, 6, 6].

Understanding paragraph form and order will help you to write more effectively.