

IMPROVE YOUR WRITING

Paragraphs

Imagine that you are standing at the edge of a lake that is a kilometre across. You are planning to swim over to the other side. Quite a task, even for a good swimmer. But now imagine that there is a series of buoys at regular intervals across the lake. Suddenly the task isn't as difficult anymore. The distance is the same, but now you can stop on the way and take a breather. It's much the same with a piece of writing. Even keen readers can sense a fear of drowning when confronted with page after page of unbroken print! Paragraphs provide a way of portioning out a text.

But there is a difference between lakes and texts. In the case of the lake the buoys can be placed to fit in with the needs of the swimmer. (Perhaps it might be a good idea to have them closer together towards the end of the crossing ...) In the case of the text it is the *content* that decides where the breaks come. A paragraph is not just a chunk of text – it is a chunk of text *about a particular thought or topic*. If you look back at this text so far, you'll see what we mean. In the first paragraph we used the metaphor of swimming to discuss the paragraph as a way of dividing up a text. This is the second paragraph. What is *this* one about?





This is a good question to ask when you are writing a paragraph: *What is this one about?* If you are not able to answer, then the chances are that it is not a very good paragraph. For a paragraph to work well, it needs to have a topic that holds it together. Often, but not always, there will a sentence in the paragraph that clearly states what this topic is. (Look back at the last paragraph. What *is* it about? And which sentence expresses this?)

We call the sentence that contains the main idea or topic of a paragraph *the topic sentence*. In paragraph 2 the topic sentence was the fourth one (“A paragraph is not just ...”). This is where the main idea of the whole paragraph is expressed. Very often it is the first sentence in the paragraph, but, as you see, not always. When you are writing you should be able to relate the topic sentence to one of the bullet points in your plan (see *Improve Your Writing: Introduction*, p. 58). If you can’t, it either means your plan needs changing or that you have lost the thread of what you are writing about!

If one of the sentences in a paragraph is the topic sentence, what are the others doing? If you look again at paragraph 2, you’ll see that the other sentences support the topic sentence, by explaining (using the comparison with the lake) and by giving examples (referring back to the text itself). These are typical functions of supporting sentences. If they weren’t there the text would seem very bare and schematic. But it is important that they don’t start competing with the topic sentence by introducing new ideas or topics. The rule is: One main idea or topic for each paragraph.

Different sorts of text require different sorts of coherence. If you are writing a story, for example, or a report, using topic sentences is not going to be very useful. Then you will probably want to divide up your text according to the sequence of events you are describing. But if you are writing an essay (either expository or persuasive), thinking in terms of topic sentences is very useful. It gives you a link between your essay plan and the actual essay – with each topic sentence expressing a “bullet point” in your plan – and it helps to keep your writing focused.

1 FIND THE TOPIC SENTENCE

Which sentence in the paragraphs below do you think is the topic sentence? What are the other sentences doing in relation to the topic sentence?

- a Jimi Hendrix was perhaps the most influential guitarist of his generation. Technically he took the instrument to new heights, using distortion and feedback for creative effect. He broke new ground in improvisation, gaining the admiration of jazz greats like Miles Davis. He blended blues and funk influences in new ways and paved the way for a generation of rock musicians.
- b Flooding has become a regular feature of the summer in Europe. Meanwhile Australia is struggling with its seventh consecutive year of drought. The Arctic Ocean is rapidly becoming ice-free and hurricanes are threatening to make the coast of the Caribbean a permanent disaster area. Can there be any doubt that climate change is not a distant threat, but that it is already upon us?
- c I fail to see why cricket is not made an Olympic sport. After all, it is the second-largest sport in the world, played by millions of people all over the globe. It has a long and honourable history and its principles of fair play are perfectly in line with the Olympic spirit. It may be incomprehensible to many, but the same could be said of other Olympic sports like synchronic swimming and track cycling.

2 IDENTIFY THE SENTENCES

In each of the paragraphs below there is a topic sentence, but there is also a sentence that doesn't really belong there. Either it is competing for attention with the topic sentence or it is out of character with the other supporting sentences. Identify both the topic sentence and the sentence that doesn't belong.

- a A holiday on Shetland is perhaps not the thing for the average package tourist. The beaches are beautiful and sandy, but the water is freezing. The coastline is crowded, but with

seabirds rather than humans. The weather changes from day to day, even from hour to hour. The capital Lerwick lies on the largest island called Mainland.

- b I have absolutely no intention of paying this bill. In the first place, the goods look nothing like those shown in the advertisement. Not only that, but I had to wait six weeks for them to arrive. Apparently they were held up in Birmingham. When they did arrive they were damaged and repairing them will cost at least as much as the original price.
- c He has played the lead in several Shakespeare plays, as well as in many other classics of the stage. He has been nominated for four academy awards, twice as actor, once as director and once for a screenplay for Hamlet. Born in Belfast, he was brought up partly in England. All in all Kenneth Branagh is quickly becoming a "grand old man" of the British stage and screen.

3 RECONSTRUCT THE PARAGRAPHS

The sentences below are all topic sentences taken from paragraphs. Reconstruct a paragraph for each of them. Remember that the sentences you add should support the topic sentence, for example by giving examples, by explaining or defining. You may change the topic sentence slightly to fit the context.

- a The Gruesome Ones are without doubt the worst death metal band ever to come out of Norway.
- b Visitors to Norway are warned to wear boots and long trousers when walking in the woods.
- c Traditional Norwegian cooking is losing ground these days to more international dishes.