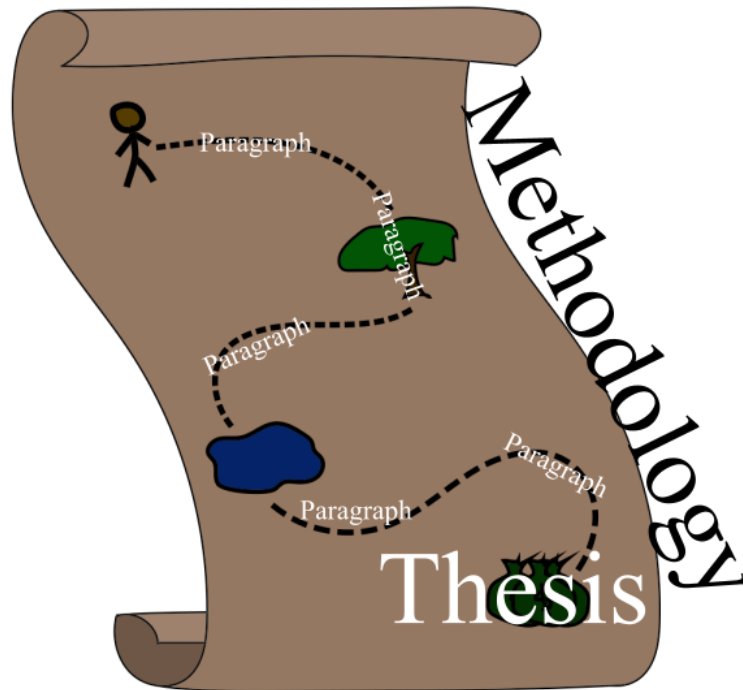


the Writing center



PARAGRAPH ORGANIZATION

Paragraphs are the foundation of your argument. Imagine a map. Your thesis statement is your destination, the end goal of your journey. The methodology is the route you take to get there. However, your paragraphs are the steps along that route. As it says in the *Tao Te Ching*, “the journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.” Without logical paragraphs, your argument will never arrive at its destination.



Maximizing the Power of your Paragraph

To get the most out of your paragraph, you need to examine the internal logic of your paragraph and the external connections with the surrounding paragraphs. I will start with the internal logic and then discuss how to make your paragraphs flow together. In both sections, I will provide a description, example, and some common pitfalls. For more discussion about overall cohesion and argument flow in your papers, see the [Outlining Papers handout](#).

Internal Logic

Paragraphs have standard structure regardless of length: topic sentence, supporting sentences, and concluding sentence.

- The **topic sentence** is typically the first sentence and drives the entire paragraph. A good topic sentence clearly states the point of your paragraph.
- The **supporting sentences** provide evidence for the topic sentence. This is where citations and logical arguments convince your readers of your topic sentence.
- The **concluding sentence** uses the supporting sentences to summarize and advance the argument proposed in the topic sentence.

Example:

In the book of Ezra, the term Israel is used to identify who belongs to the community of returnees (**topic sentence**). The author uses identifies members of Israel as those who can show their genealogy (2:59), join to rebuild and worship at the temple (3:1; 4:3; 6:17; 8:35; 10:1-2, 10), and returned from exile (6:21; 7:28; 8:25) (**support**). These descriptions identify Israel as opposed to the people who are excluded from the community whether by failure to present genealogical records or explicit exclusion from the temple community by the leaders of the community identifying as Israel (**conclusion**).

Common Pitfalls:

- **Unclear topic sentence.** Sometimes the topic sentence is vague or unable to be argued. A statement like “I think the Bible is good” is difficult to argue with supporting sentences. Make sure the topic sentence makes a specific and arguable claim.
- **Supporting sentences overlapping with the topic sentence.** Make sure that your supporting sentences add evidence and arguments to your topic sentence and are not simply rephrasing the topic sentence.
- **Unrelated conclusions.** The conclusion should mirror the topic sentence but with additional details. In the example, the conclusion reiterates the topic sentence but adds information about how the term Israel is used from the support sentence.

External Connections

Internal and external considerations work together to make a clear paragraph. Generally, the organization of paragraphs in the argument flow happens when you are outlining the paper. That is, the outline should mark the topic of each paragraph so that you know they are building upon each other. However, paragraphs should also flow smoothly at a literary level.

- Topic and concluding sentences should connect with the preceding and succeeding paragraphs.
- Numbering (first, second, third) or succession (next, then, finally) markers in your topic sentences can help your reader follow the argument.
- The seams between paragraphs show how your paragraphs are making distinct arguments and ensure the distinct arguments are still building upon each other.

Example:

First, in the book of Ezra, the term Israel is used to identify who belongs to the community of returnees (**topic sentence**). The author uses identifies members of Israel as those who can show their genealogy (2:59), join to rebuild and worship at the temple (3:1; 4:3; 6:17; 8:35; 10:1-2, 10), and returned from exile (6:21; 7:28; 8:25) (**support**). These descriptions identify Israel as opposed to the people who are excluded from the community whether by failure to present genealogical records or explicit exclusion from the temple community by the leaders of the community identifying as Israel (**conclusion**).

Second, Israel is used to divide between laity and cultic personnel (**topic sentence**). This division of the people of Israel is present within name lists. The list of returnees in Ezra 2 begins with “the number of men of the people of Israel” (2:2), and the people are listed either by genealogy (“sons of”) or location (“men of”). After this, the list identifies the priests (v. 36), the Levites (v. 40), the singers (v. 41), the sons of the gatekeepers (v. 42), the temple servants (v. 43), and the sons of Solomon’s servants (v. 55). All these specialized groups are subdivided by genealogy (“sons of”). This same division is found in the list of people who intermarried in Ezra 10. However, it is reversed, it begins with the priests (v. 18), Levites (v. 23), singers and gatekeepers (v. 24), and ends with Israel (v. 25) (**support**). These lists show a division between Israel and the cultic personnel (**conclusion**).

Common Pitfalls:

- **Overuse of transitions.** Numbering or transitional phrases are not always necessary. Not every sentence or paragraph needs to begin with “therefore” or “also” or “in addition.” Sometimes paragraphs are better without these transitional phrases.
- **Too much topic sentence overlap.** Read the topic sentences of your paragraphs together and make sure that they do not conceptually overlap. With just the topic sentences, you should be able to understand the outline of your argument.
- **Too much focus on other paragraphs.** Connecting paragraphs together is helpful, but the connection should not obscure the argument of the paragraph. Do not conclude paragraphs with “My next paragraph will argue. . .” The conclusion should summarize the argument being made in the paragraph, not point the reader elsewhere.¹

¹ This is true for content paragraphs but is a little different for the thesis and methodology paragraph. In that paragraph, the topic of the paragraph is the content of your paper. So, concluding with what is coming in the next section fulfills the topic of the paragraph (i.e., identifying your thesis and methodology).