The Body Paragraph

Academic papers usually include:
- An introductory paragraph
- Body paragraphs
- Conclusion paragraph

What is the purpose of a body paragraph?

The body paragraphs include the major and minor supporting elements of the paper. These details, descriptions, and examples help to prove or support the main idea (thesis statement) of the paper. You can think of a body paragraph as a focused mini discussion where stories, examples, description, and more reveal information about your topic. If the thesis statement is the brain of the paper, the body paragraphs are the muscles.

When should I begin a new paragraph?

Anytime the focus of the discussion shifts, you will include a new body paragraph. This shift could occur for many reasons:

- Beginning a new idea
- Emphasizing a particular point
- Changing speakers in dialogue
- Allowing readers to pause
- Breaking up lengthy text, usually moving to a subtopic

What should a paragraph consist of?

A paragraph should consist of a topic sentence and support. The topic sentence reveals the focus or main point of the paragraph. Typically, it will also include a transition to help establish the relationship or change in direction from the previous paragraph.

The supporting points in a body paragraph usually follow a specific pattern of development. For instance, a paragraph could provide examples, description, narration, or the steps of a process to clarify and illustrate the major supporting points.
**Should I consider anything else?**

**Length!** Paragraph lengths should invite readers in, neither seeming too daunting to read through nor appearing incomplete. Paragraphs of more than one typewritten page scare readers away: the paragraphs appear too dense and too long to be inviting. Short paragraphs make it appear as if ideas are not fully developed.

**Sentence Variety!** Once the content of your writing is solid, revise, paying attention to sentence variety. When you read your paragraph out loud, if the language seems dull, repetitive, and monotone, check the structure of your sentences. Are they all simple sentences (subject – verb – complement)? If so consider using compound or complex sentences and an inverted sentence order to create a smoother, more intricate feel to the paper.

**All simple sentences with the same structure**
Social media is changing the way people communicate. Social media includes platforms like Facebook, My Space, and Twitter. Social media allows people to express themselves. Social media allows people to practice writing skills in a comfortable setting.

**Sentence variety**
Social media is changing the way people communicate. Expressing themselves through Facebook, My Space, and Twitter, users can practice writing skills in a comfortable, informal platform.

**Which example appeals to you more?**

**Focus!** Make sure that each sentence in the paragraph contributes to the focus of that paragraph. One way to help stay focused is by using transitions within paragraphs between minor supporting details. Also, try to avoid bunny trails. **A bunny trail occurs when an author gets off topic and begins a new discussion unrelated to the original focus of the paragraph.** The information and examples in your paragraph might be interesting, but if they are not focused on one major supporting point, the reader might get distracted. Consider this paragraph:

Not only does community supported agriculture provide economic benefits to the farmers; they also benefit the individuals in communities. It may seem that small, local growers would charge more for products than large chain grocery supermarkets. However, shoppers who buy organic produce might find the opposite true. One study found that consumers rated the value of produce at a CSA in Illinois nearly double its actual price. My local Harris Teeter grocery store seems to charge exorbitant amounts for organic foods. In fact, all of their grocery prices seem to be higher than other stores in the area. The high prices along with the parking issues make it my least favorite place to shop. Another study showed that consumers in a Canadian CSA saved 39% from what they would pay at the grocery store for organic produce (Brown & Miller, 2008, pp. 1298-1299). Because there are fewer “middle men” in the process of CSA growing and distribution, savings can be passed on to consumers along with the fresh produce.

- **Can you spot the bunny trail in this paragraph?**
- **Where does the author get off topic in the paragraph above?**
Example body paragraph

Examine the body paragraph below. **As you read, consider the topic sentence.**

- It is effective?
- Does it provide not only a transition from one idea to the next, but does it also clearly state the focus of the paragraph?
- What type of organizational pattern does the author use to support the topic sentences?
- Do you notice examples, description, narration or some other pattern?
- Is the paragraph length appropriate? Is the paragraph focused?

The local economic benefits of community supported agriculture certainly support their existence, and so do the health benefits. Fresh, local foods are a welcomed addition to the dinner tables of many urban American families. Variety seems to be a natural desire for the human palate, and after a while, processed foods and restaurant meals tend to all taste the same. According to Ostrom (2007), “CSA shareholders in Minnesota and Wisconsin said that their CSA participation led to eating more, fresher, and a greater variety of vegetables, shopping less, and changing to healthier eating habits” (as cited in Brown & Miller, 2008, p. 1298). An organization called Sustainable Organic Upton Local (SOUL) in Harlem came to similar conclusions about the benefit of their CSA program. The SOUL program was a food cooperative that provided fresh produce to the residents of Harlem at prices they could afford. "There is a big discrepancy in foods that are available," said Vanessa Cabrera, coordinator of the 2-year-old co-op (Mfuni, 2005, para. 2). The members of SOUL are able to transform their eating habits into more healthy ones because of the access to fresh fruits and vegetables (para. 14-15).

**With your next project, what techniques will you practice to create interesting, rich body paragraphs?**

Use the checklist below as you revise paragraphs.

**Paragraph Checklist**

- I have read this paragraph out loud.
- This paragraph contains a strong topic sentence that includes a transition from the previous paragraph.
- Each sentence in this paragraph supports the focus established in the topic sentence.
- This paragraph is long enough to discuss the major supporting idea, but it is not too long as to overwhelm the reader.
- The sentence variety creates an engaging paragraph.