

How to employ unified paragraph structure

Before you begin

What you need:

Related text: **“Cranes Fly South” by Edward McCourt**

Approximate time this exercise should take you: **30 minutes**

Reminder

Remember: one idea, one paragraph

In your essay of about five paragraphs, each paragraph should discuss **only one idea**, which is clearly identified in **the topic sentence**. The paragraph should develop that idea through **relevant support** and give **coherence** to its discussion by using a **logical sequence** and **appropriate transitions**.

How long are paragraphs?

There is no set length to a standard paragraph, but we usually think in terms of six to eight quality sentences of various lengths that might also display some variety in sentence structure. The paragraph length is not affected by whether you are writing about an essay or a short story. A one-sentence transition paragraph may also be used on occasion within the body of the essay.

Other paragraphing hints

Graders are looking for paragraphs that are well structured, coherent and focused. Remember to make your paragraph breaks (indentations) clear. While the structure and content of the opening and closing paragraphs of your essay are easier to define, differing lengths and structures can be appropriate for the three or four body paragraphs.

Instructions

In the following exercise, you will learn more about unified and coherent paragraphs, anchored with a strong topic sentence. Remember that although there is no standard paragraph length, you should aim for at least six to eight sentences per paragraph.

Read the following samples and decide whether or not they are unified and coherent paragraphs of sufficient length and with a proper topic sentence. Look for problems in:

- 1) unity (one paragraph, one topic)
- 2) coherence (sensible ideas, logical sentence sequence, good paragraph flow)
- 3) development (sufficient length and/or good organization)
- 4) topic sentence

Exercise

EXAMPLE: (student reacting to an essay about people and their favourite pets)

There are many types of pets in an average household. People will often even choose pets according to their personalities. Some people like small dogs that are easy to take care of and do not demand a lot of attention. Some owners prefer strong or vicious dogs, like bulldogs for example. Other people might like cats because they are independent and really need no attention at all. Birds provide people with a lot of company, if you like bird songs, but their cages need a lot of cleaning. A fish tank is great to look at but the tanks must be cleaned often as well. Some people even treat their plants like pets and talk to them. In a zoo, large animals, like polar bears, are left to themselves in their cages.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable X

ANSWER: The paragraph is all about house pets and why people have different types of pets and even prefer different types of pets. The last sentence about animals in a zoo introduces a new topic and breaks the paragraph unity, because even though it is also about animals, it is no longer about house pets. Remember: one topic, one paragraph.

1. McCourt has written a very realistic story overall. His description makes the characters seem real and, from the way they talk, we believe such a family could exist. His description of the farm setting also makes the place come alive in our minds. I can almost feel like I am there with them at times. When Lee talks with his grandfather we get the impression he cares about the old man and his feelings. We can feel for him and his problem of trying to please everyone at the same time. It never works.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

2. The story is full of symbolism. The title starts the whole thing by making us think of both a real trip south to a warmer climate in winter (time of death?) while at the end it symbolizes the trip to heaven and the next life for the grandfather. The trip to see the rare crane by sled symbolizes an answer to a dying man's prayers, and here Lee makes it happen. It could also be a death-march symbol, a last voyage. The old man even says "Great God in heaven" on two occasions. This might even be a symbol of what is going to happen for him soon. Finally, both Lee and his father say, "He's gone south," and we know what this symbolizes at the end of the story. It means he is dead.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

3. Lee is clearly responsible for his grandfather's death. His mother even says "Oh Lee, you shouldn't have..." At the same time, life on a farm is a harsh life for most people who have ever lived on a farm. I am glad I never was forced to. The grandfather is clearly a little senile; he says he has not seen a bird in forty years and that is just not possible, especially on a farm. Even Lee's father agrees with him. When Lee tells his father the old man was a little crazy, his father says, "I know, son."

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

4. "Cranes Fly South" is all about family relationships and growing old before your time. The grandfather probably knows he will die before he ever sees a whooping crane again on this earth; he is wrong about that. His grandson comes through in the end. The winter always wins in the end.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

5. In conclusion, we have seen that life is full of surprises, and this is what happens in "Cranes Fly South." The grandfather never expected to die, his son is surprised, his daughter is angry, and his grandson is sad and happy at the same time. Another surprise is that the story is really easy to read. It took me less than fifteen minutes. I never expected to see such a short story on such an important exam but I really liked it. I always liked farm stories, but I don't like stories where everyone dies; I am sure the crane never made it south.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

Answer key

1. **Acceptable.** As indicated in the topic sentence, this paragraph is supposed to be all about realism in the story and that is what it centres on: realism in characterization, in description, in McCourt's portrayal of what motivates Lee in the story. Detailed support explains how description and dialogue contribute to the realism of the characters and setting. The story's realism is even linked to the universal theme of family relationships as it appears in the story.
2. **Acceptable.** This paragraph says from the start it will be all about the symbolism in the story and it is. Every sentence deals with the symbolism in the story, even though there is a little repetition. While some of this symbolism might seem a little obvious at times, this does not detract from the value of picking out meanings and parallels. The paragraph stays on topic.
3. **Unacceptable.** The paragraph lacks unity and a topic sentence, and it talks about too many different things. The quotations used out of context also contribute to a lack of coherence. The old man says he has not seen a crane in forty years, not any bird. He is most likely tired, not senile. After the first two sentences, most of the paragraph displays poor reading and inaccurate interpretation. The paragraph goes off-topic.
4. **Unacceptable.** This paragraphs has a great start with a good topic sentence, but then it just stops in midstream. This does not even work as a short transition paragraph. There is insufficient paragraph development despite a good start. There is no unity.
5. **Unacceptable.** This paragraph (supposedly an essay conclusion paragraph) starts off well and then completely loses focus. By the time it ends, the paragraph is way off topic and no longer makes much sense. Getting excited about what you are reading is not enough. What you write must also make sense. The first two sentences of the conclusion focus on a theme of the story, but the writer then changes the subject by discussing (rather trivial) reactions to the style and plot elements of the story.