

How to employ unified paragraph structure

Before you begin

What you need:

Related text: **“Dance with a Giraffe” by Christine Jurzykowski**

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 for 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 by a strong topic sentence. Remember: although there is no standard paragraph length, you should aim for 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. Jurzykowski uses a very personal narration with extensive use of the “I” speaker in her essay. She begins with “I grew up in” and continues this personal focus all the way through the text. It is all about her very personal feelings and reactions to the death of the giraffe and this makes it all very appropriate. She also writes using very simple diction in most of the essay. In terms of use of techniques, the personal tone established by the “I” narrator is what makes it work.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

2. The essay is the story of the author’s reactions to the death of a giraffe and the emotional impact it had on her. She was also very amazed to see the reactions of the other animals to what was happening. These events made her realize how all living things deserve love and attention; we are all part of the life cycle in the end. She makes us care about what she was feeling as the giraffe was dying and the theme of “you will be taken care of.” The dance with death she describes is all part of a very emotional experience; it is difficult not to feel for her and the suffering animals she had to deal with. It brings a tear to the eye for a sensitive reader.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

3. The main theme of the Jurzykowski essay is the need to protect and care for animals that are sick or apparently abandoned by society. I wonder how a giraffe and rhino and a cheetah can end up on a Texas ranch. They must have come from zoos. Animals like Old Nick deserve a better fate and we need to take note. It is clear animals have feelings too and deserve the same respect as sick and injured humans for that matter. What makes us think we are so important or more important? Everyone has ancestors who matter, even a giraffe. This sad tale should make us think about how we abuse animals. Everyone deserves to be taken care of, as she says.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

4. It is always sad to see someone or something die. If you have experienced the death of a loved one you know what I am talking about. I once had a pet dog which was killed by a car on the street and it took me weeks to get over the loss. Eventually I got another dog that I liked even better. We also had two cats at home, which were always fighting with the dog. These animals did not respect each other, but cats are like that, I guess. Now I even prefer cats to dogs because they need less attention.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

5. Jurzykowski has clearly over-reacted to the death of an old giraffe which no one seems to care about. Her feelings are not realistic because the animal was sure to die soon anyhow and she is a little too emotional as far as I am concerned. Everything and everyone will die eventually, and the sooner she accepts that the better it will be for everyone and the better she will feel. It is strange how she reacts.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

Answer key

1. **Unacceptable.** The paragraph is supposed to be all about the author’s use of narration and the “I” speaker, and it is for the most part. But the paragraph also loses focus and unity when it starts discussing diction at one part and not narration. This breaks paragraph unity. Try to keep in mind: one paragraph, one idea.
2. **Acceptable.** This paragraph touches on many ideas, but they are all centred on the emotions experienced by the author and conveyed to the reader. It is a good summary of the main ideas in the essay and even takes some distance from the original text. Every sentence deals with the emotions that are part of the essay, the emotions of the narrator and the emotional reactions of the reader to the story that unfolds.
3. **Acceptable.** The paragraph jumps around a little but if you look at it in detail, you will see that **everything is related to the topic of respect** for animals and mistreatment of animals. The student is attempting to react to issues raised by the author and give some personal reactions to issues raised. This is acceptable if the reactions stay on topic.
4. **Unacceptable.** While this paragraph makes some interesting points in the first two sentences and introduces an acceptable topic—the impact of death—it jumps around from one idea to another as it continues. It certainly goes off topic and loses unity (and even perhaps coherence and focus) when it introduces ideas unrelated to the emotional reaction to the death of a loved animal.
5. **Unacceptable.** This does not appear to be a very sensible reaction to the essay as a whole, but one is allowed to disagree with what a writer is saying. On the other hand, one has to take the essay as presented and here the giraffe is clearly a symbol of all living things, of how all living things are part of the life cycle, and how all living things deserve respect because of this. Also, if this is a whole paragraph, it is clearly too short. Is the topic sentence the first sentence, and if so, what does it mean? Is this a reasonable interpretation of the reading?