

How to employ unified paragraph structure

Before you begin

What you need:

Related text: **"Powder" by Tobias Wolff**

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: 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. In “Powder,” Wolff has written a wonderful story all about skiing and the joys of being outdoors on a nice winter’s day with your father. What he does not realize is that skiing is one of the most expensive sports around and is certainly not available to everyone. But during the December holidays there are other things they could have been doing. Skating is a good workout too, as is snow shoeing. Just taking a walk outdoors can be a great day or you can go sliding on a hill near where you live. You don’t need to be risking your life all the time in sports. Why can’t you just have fun?

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

2. Wolff has written a very well structured story, especially in his use of first-person narration and simple, easy-to-read diction. The narrator is not named and remains a typical teenager reacting to his father's decisions.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

3. "Powder" starts with a short description of the father and son skiing. They stay longer than they had planned. When they decide to head home, a storm has started. The police closed the roads but the father wants to get home where the mother is waiting. He convinces his son to wait until the police leave, and then they remove the road barrier and start towards home. The trip is an adventure where a father and son come to know themselves a lot better.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

4. The decisions taken by the father throughout the story do not make him a very credible character. He knows he is supposed to get home but then he stays there anyhow. He then leaves late and gets caught in the storm. He probably calls his wife and makes up a story about why they are late. He gets his son to go along with the trip home, fooling the police and moving the road barrier aside. What kind of message is this to give your child? This father is certainly not a role model here for anyone. The mother and son can be considered minor characters.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

5. The mother will be really happy they made it home and she might even come to better terms with the father when they get there. But there is no evidence the father will not continue to bend the rules when it comes to his son's behaviour. The way that he speaks to him in the story makes that clear. They like to push the limits! The son tells us what he is thinking throughout the story and this makes it more interesting. It would have been a safer trip had they had a better car, like an SUV for example. You have to be careful in the winter.

Acceptable _____ Unacceptable _____

Answer key

1. **Unacceptable.** This paragraph starts with an acceptable topic sentence but then, rather than talking about skiing, it talks about all kinds of other winter activities. The paragraph is off-topic in terms of a sensible response to the story, and it also lacks coherence. It also introduces too many new ideas as it unfolds, jumping around far too often from one idea to another, from one sport to another.
2. **Acceptable/Unacceptable.** It depends on the context. This could be an acceptable short transition paragraph somewhere in the middle of the essay where there is a switch from talking about story themes to literary techniques used. This paragraph is clearly under-developed and too short on its own, but if the next paragraph in the essay deals with the techniques mentioned here, then it is entirely acceptable.
3. **Acceptable.** Here we have an excellent summary paragraph where the main plot elements are all listed. Note that the topic sentence actually comes at the end of the paragraph and not at the start.
4. **Unacceptable.** The start of the paragraph tells you it will be all about the characterization of the father. It does consistently explore the father's character (whether or not you agree with the ideas expressed) but the final sentence switches from the father to another topic and breaks paragraph unity.
5. **Unacceptable.** There is no clear topic sentence and the paragraph jumps from one topic to another. There is no unity or coherence.