

## How to employ unified paragraph structure

### Before you begin

#### What you need:

Related text: **“Seven Wonders” by Lewis Thomas**

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 by 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 if it is about animals, it is no longer about house pets. Remember: one topic, one paragraph.

1. Thomas uses enumeration well in his essay because from the very start he talks of the seven wonders of the world, and even mentions this in the title. He then says he will list his seven wonders but then changes from the standard one-to-seven list by saying he will keep number one for the last and start with number two. This change keeps us more interested until the end. Thomas then lists bacteria, a beetle, a virus, a cell, a termite, and ends with a human child. Then he finally goes back to number one, the planet Earth. He also uses excellent description when he talks of the termite.

Acceptable \_\_\_\_\_ Unacceptable \_\_\_\_\_

2. In conclusion, we see that Thomas has clearly centred his choices of seven wonders in the scientific world, on cells and a virus for example, on the smallest living things. However, he has also gone to the other end of the scale with his choices of the human child and the planet Earth. Most readers would probably agree with the last two choices, and even with most of the other choices as well, because he is convincing in his arguments. Just thinking of the development of Earth could keep us busy a long time. My choices would likely include the modern automobile or jet plane, I think. What would your choices include? Just making us think about it all means he has written a successful essay.

Acceptable \_\_\_\_\_ Unacceptable \_\_\_\_\_

3. It is not clear whether Thomas wants the child or the planet Earth as his top choice. This makes the essay confusing and leaves us with unanswered questions. This is not the way to impress a reader.

Acceptable \_\_\_\_\_ Unacceptable \_\_\_\_\_

4. It is true that we like to wonder about the world around us, and this is what Thomas writes about. He contrasts things as great as the planet Earth with bacteria. He clearly thinks we need to be more careful about our environment; if we don't, we are threatening our future. Even a casual dinner party will sometimes find people talking about very scientific things like a virus or beetle. I had a pet dog that died after a virus attack of some kind. All children grow old and are different from one another because of genetics. That's the way it is.

Acceptable \_\_\_\_\_ Unacceptable \_\_\_\_\_

5. Every human likes to wonder by nature. We wonder where our next meal is coming from or whether we have enough money to go out the next weekend. We wonder whether we might all catch a virus or disease if we are not careful, but what can we do? We also need to take care of our environment and car pollution is a major problem. Most large cars are gas guzzlers and the gas is even getting more and more expensive. Who can afford a car anymore? Who needs a car anymore? We must control our natural resources. No wonder we are unhappy.

Acceptable \_\_\_\_\_ Unacceptable \_\_\_\_\_

# Answer key

1. **Unacceptable.** The paragraph is supposed to be all about the author's use of enumeration (numbering) as a literary technique. The paragraph stays on topic until the last sentence where the student shifts to the author's use of description. This breaks paragraph unity by introducing new off-topic subject matter. The topic of the paragraph is enumeration and not description.
2. **Acceptable.** This conclusion paragraph is unified and all about choices: Thomas's choices, the student's choices, and even the grader's choices. All the sentences in the paragraph are related to the topic of choices. The paragraph includes some comments suitable for an essay conclusion in asking the reader what he or she thinks.
3. **Unacceptable.** This paragraph is too short, even though it centres on one idea, once again, the choices made by Thomas. It also doesn't make much sense and lacks focus in that the student has clearly misread the opening paragraphs where Thomas says he will keep his top choice for the end and start with number two. It is important to make sure you clearly understand the original text before you begin writing.
4. **Unacceptable.** While this paragraph makes some interesting points, it jumps around far too much from one idea to another. It contains five or six potential topic sentences, each of which could anchor a paragraph of its own. It is too general to be an introduction paragraph. It clearly lacks unity and coherence. Remember, one idea, one paragraph.
5. **Unacceptable.** Here the paragraph moves from one idea to another, lacks focus and is even incoherent at times. The sentences jump from one idea to another and get too far away from the original text and from the wonders Thomas presents to us.