



A guide to paragraph writing

This is a basic guide designed to help students with writing paragraphs as part of longer assignments, like essays and reports.

1. Basic structure

All paragraphs have a basic structure, no matter what they are written about. There are a few 'rules' you should follow when constructing and writing paragraphs – and these go for any paragraph, whether in a letter, an essay or a PhD thesis.

1. Paragraphs contain only **one** main or big idea, and they explain and justify this idea.
2. Each paragraph in a piece of writing needs to develop these ideas as part of developing an overall main idea for the whole piece of writing, whether it's a cover letter about you for a job application or an argumentative essay for your degree courses.
3. Paragraphs develop ideas by using evidence, from research, and explanation of that evidence, which you as the writer provide the reader
4. Paragraphs are more than 3 sentences long
5. Paragraphs should not be overly long – choose the information you include carefully, because it is most relevant for what are you writing about, rather than just writing about everything you can find on that one idea.
6. A useful 'tool' to use for writing paragraphs that do all of this is **the P E E structure** – or POINT (main idea), EVIDENCE (from your reading and research) and EXPLANATION (where you connect the idea in your paragraph to the overall essay by explaining why you have included that idea and what it means in the context of your whole essay).

2. Example

It makes more sense to talk about paragraphs in relation to an essay, which they usually form part of. This is a fictional essay I have made up, and all the sources I have cited are made-up – they don't actually exist. This 'essay' has been created just for the sake of this example. Also note that I have put the parts of the example in bold, but you must not type your essays in bold. Only heading and cover pages would be typed in bold.

If you were writing an essay about climate change being caused by human behaviour, you would need to have a main idea for the whole essay. Some people call this a *thesis statement*. It tells your reader what your whole essay is about – this sentence goes into your introduction, and this would be the point of your whole essay. So you might have a thesis statement for your essay that says:

Climate change is believed to be caused by both human behaviour and natural factors, but this essay argues that human behaviour is more likely to be causing rapid climate change.

This essay, then, to defend and elaborate on this claim, will need a series of connected paragraphs that tells the reader why you think this is true.

So, you might have 4 or 5 paragraphs in the 'body' or main section of your essay, each developing one main idea. The first paragraph's main idea, logically, would have to be about what climate change is, because you need to define and explain this concept in some detail. So you would write this main idea into the first sentence – some people call this the *topic sentence* because it contains the topic of your paragraph.

Climate change is characterised by a range of natural phenomena, like changes in the weather and in the earth's atmosphere.

Then as the reader I know that you are going to be defining and explaining climate change in this paragraph. This sentence is your P or POINT or topic sentence.

The next part of the paragraph has to be your first E or EVIDENCE. So you will have done some reading and research on climate change, and you will select information that gives details about what the scientists and experts say climate change is.

Martin and Shane (2010) argue that the concept of climate change has been around for a long time, and that the earth's climate has gone through several big changes in the last 250 million years. For example, they argue that we have had four ice ages, and that we are currently in another ice age. Murray (2011) also argues that climate change, or changes in the earth's atmosphere, temperature and weather patterns is part of the way the earth behaves naturally and occurred before there were humans on the planet. However, scientists, while agreeing that climate change is a natural phenomenon, also seem to agree that human behaviour is currently playing a major role in the rapid changes to the earth's atmosphere and temperature in recent years (Kane et al 2010; Marks and Spencer 2012). Human activities like deforestation, consumption of non-recyclable materials, overfarming leading to soil erosion, pollution and overpopulation in many areas are all contributing to the increases we have seen in climate change since the 1970s (Kane et al 2010; Marks and Spencer 2012).

You will see that all of these points come from readings and from the research.

Now, you need one or two sentences on the second E – EXPLANATION, where you, in your own words, explain what the overall point of the paragraph is in relation to your thesis statement:

Thus we can see from the research that while climate change is a natural phenomenon to an extent, the behaviour of humans in many parts of the world, in both rich and poor countries, is a major factor in increasing the rate of climate change, and also the severity of it.

If you put it all together, this is your first paragraph after the introduction of your fictional essay:

Climate change is characterised by a range of natural phenomena, like changes in the weather and in the earth's atmosphere. Martin and Shane (2010) argue that the concept of climate change has been around for a long time, and that the earth's climate has gone through several big changes in the last 250 million years. For example, they argue that we have had four ice ages, and that we are currently in another ice age. Murray (2011)

also argues that climate change, or changes in the earth's atmosphere, temperature and weather patterns is part of the way the earth behaves naturally and occurred before there were humans on the planet. However, scientists, while agreeing that climate change is a natural phenomenon, also seem to agree that human behaviour is currently playing a major role in the rapid changes to the earth's atmosphere and temperature in recent years (Kane et al 2010; Marks and Spencer 2012). Human activities like deforestation, consumption of non-recyclable materials, overfarming leading to soil erosion, pollution and overpopulation in many areas are all contributing to the increases we have seen in climate change since the 1970s (Kane et al 2010; Marks and Spencer 2012). Thus we can see from the research that while climate change is a natural phenomenon to an extent, the behaviour of humans in many parts of the world, in both rich and poor countries, is a major factor in increasing the rate of climate change, and also the severity of it.

You will see that I have only talked about my one main idea, which I have indicated in the first sentence. I have not started talking about the pros and cons yet. This is important. Each idea must be developed, one at a time, in paragraphs that fully develop these ideas with the relevant evidence and explanation.

We hope you will find this guide useful as you work on your academic writing.

If you would like to talk to a peer writing tutor about your writing, and get advice and guidance, please contact the UWC Writing Centre for an appointment. You can call 021 959 2390 between 9am and 4pm Monday to Friday, email Mrs Daries on gdaries@uwc.ac.za, or drop in and see us on the ground floor of the Old Arts building, opposite the side entrance to B Block.

You can also find out more here:

<http://www.uwc.ac.za/Students/WrC/Pages/default.aspx>

or on Facebook : 'The UWC Writing Centre'.