

## Reader-Friendly Paragraphs: Shaping and Focusing

Paragraphs serve as another aid to readers by separating the text on the page into more manageable chunks and giving visual cues about how the various parts of your paper relate to each other. You might think of yourself as a chef and your paper as a multicourse meal: you probably wouldn't serve appetizer, soup, salad, pasta, vegetable, fish, wine, fruit, cheese, cake, and coffee by throwing everything together in a big pot and plunking the whole mess in front of your horrified guests. Some of the flavors wouldn't blend; others would be entirely lost in the jumble. And aside from this assault on the taste buds, the mere size of the concoction would make most diners queasy. Organizing your paper into paragraphs is a bit like serving a meal in courses: each dish contains only ingredients that work well together; the sequence of different foods creates an interesting variety; and each portion is big enough to be satisfying but small enough to be easily digested.

So how do you become a skillful chef of the written word—what makes a paragraph a paragraph? Paragraph divisions are often described as a way to indicate a “new idea,” but this definition can be more confusing than helpful. If every paragraph truly introduced a brand-new idea, the paper would have lit-

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the focus. So if everything in the paper clearly relates to a central point (as it should in the direct style), then how can you tell where one idea ends and a “new” one begins? Often, especially in academic papers, you'll need to discuss a complex idea that requires lengthy explanation: Does that mean that you just keep going without a paragraph break for as long as it takes to explain the point? In this situation, writers following the “new idea” definition of the paragraph can end up with paragraphs two or three pages long! The “new idea” test can also lead to the opposite problem—short, choppy paragraphs. Since every sentence should add a little new information (otherwise a paper will never get anywhere), writers who interpret very slight shifts of direction as “new ideas” can end up with a string of one-sentence paragraphs.

It's more accurate, and more useful, to think of a new paragraph as a graphic aid that tells readers to pause for a moment before reading on; all you need is a reason to pause and a sensible place to do it. Let's take a closer look at why and where you might make a paragraph break.

FRAMEWORK  
Colombo, Lisle & Mano  
Boston: Bedford Books 1997

### *Why Paragraph?*

*To highlight relationships between ideas.* When you cluster a series of sentences into a paragraph, you're saying that they relate to each other in a particular way. So beginning a new paragraph may indicate that you want readers to stop and notice a change in the direction, focus, or emphasis of the essay, or to reflect on one point before moving on to the next. Any slight shift of attention in the text can be a logical place to begin a new paragraph: a change in time or place, a movement from general discussion to specific example (or vice versa), a shift of focus from one example to a different one, from one aspect of a topic to another—all of these present possible places to start a new paragraph. But just because a new paragraph is possible, that doesn't mean it's always necessary.

*To emphasize a particularly important point.* By putting a crucial definition, question, description, or statement in a paragraph by itself, you effectively call readers' attention to it, especially if this paragraph is noticeably shorter than those that surround it.

*To provide a visual break.* You may simply pause in order to give readers' eyes and attention a brief rest in a lengthy discussion. The length of the “average” paragraph depends on the context you're writing in. Newspaper journalists typically write very short paragraphs to make it easy for casual readers to skim a story and pick up the essential information quickly. Scholars writing in academic journals usually compose much bulkier paragraphs because they can assume that their readers are more willing to devote time and effort to keeping up with new ideas in their field.

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*To conform to a typographic convention.* Finally, there are times when you insert a paragraph break simply because it's customary and expected—after the greeting in a letter, for example. Also, when you're writing or transcribing a conversation, it's conventional in English to begin a new paragraph each time the speaker changes—it helps readers keep track of who's saying what.