

HOW TO WRITE BODY PARAGRAPHS

Lesson Objective

In this lesson you will practice writing a body paragraph. This is the meat of your paper or essay. You'll learn how to form topic sentences and write transitional phrases. Let's start by thinking about sandwiches...

Writing Warm-Up

Get a blank piece of paper and freewrite for five minutes about sandwiches or hamburgers. What makes a sandwich or hamburger delicious? What's your favorite kind of sub or sandwich?

1. What kind of sandwich did you write about?
2. Share an example of what goes into a good sandwich.
3. How can an essay be like a paragraph or sandwich?

Vocabulary Preview

Match these words to their correct definitions.

- | | |
|------------------------------|---|
| _____ 1. transitional phrase | a) already mentioned or suggested, not necessary |
| _____ 2. evidence | b) flows well from one place to the next |
| _____ 3. choppy | c) a general principle or guideline |
| _____ 4. smooth | d) a few words that connect a section of writing to another |
| _____ 5. declarative | e) proof that supports a point or statement |
| _____ 6. take a stand | f) to state one's personal viewpoint |
| _____ 7. testimonial | g) doesn't flow smoothly, rough |
| _____ 8. rule of thumb | h) a reference used and formally noted |
| _____ 9. citation | i) related to a statement, opposite of interrogative (a question) |
| _____ 10. redundant | j) a person's review or reference, an observer's account |

Components of Body Paragraphs

The middle of an essay is often described as the meat of a sandwich or burger. It's also like the body (torso) of a person. You can't live without your heart and lungs. A traditional five-paragraph essay typically has three body paragraphs. This is a guideline, not a rule.

Main Idea

Each body paragraph should focus on a single main idea. This is sometimes called the *controlling idea*. The main idea is a subtopic of your thesis. Each main idea should be mentioned briefly in your introduction.

TASK 1

Imagine you are going to write an essay on *the dangers of smoking*. Think of three separate dangers that you could base a whole paragraph on. Write your ideas in point form.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Main Components

A single body paragraph should only contain the following parts:

- a) a transition from the previous paragraph
- b) a topic sentence containing the main idea (may be combined into one sentence with a transition)
- c) a few sentences containing supporting evidence
- d) analysis of the evidence
- e) a summary sentence (optional)

Did you know...

Unnecessary writing is also known as "fluff". Editors and readers use this word to describe unnecessary text in fiction, too. A paragraph may have too many details. It may also have too many long words. Sometimes an entire book is described as "fluff".

TASK 2

Read the following body paragraph. This paragraph comes immediately after an introductory paragraph.

In the US, approximately 15,000 children are hospitalized each year due to secondhand smoke exposure. Secondhand smokers are children or adults who inhale smoke from other smokers. Thousands of non-smokers die from lung cancer in the US each year. Prohibiting smoking in public places improves the health of smokers and non-smokers.

Which components from the list to the left are **missing**? Which components are **included**?

- | | |
|----------|----------|
| a) _____ | d) _____ |
| b) _____ | e) _____ |
| c) _____ | |

Components of Body Paragraphs, continued

Transitions

In a well-organized essay, the end of one paragraph and the beginning of the next paragraph connect together. If the writing doesn't connect, it feels choppy. Writing that flows well is easier to read than choppy writing. Connections are important between paragraphs and within paragraphs.

Transitions Between Paragraphs

A new paragraph does not mean a new mini essay. All of your paragraphs belong to the same whole. One way to connect a previous paragraph to a new one is to highlight an important point that you previously made. This helps readers pay attention to what's important. Another way is to use repeated words or synonyms mentioned previously. Note how a tour guide does this:

Tour Guide: "And that takes us to the end of the Jurassic period exhibit. We're going to move into the east wing now, so please follow me." *Tourists follow and walk. Transition begins.* "Like the Jurassic dinosaurs, creatures from the Cretaceous period had to deal with hot and humid conditions."

TASK 3

Imagine a tour guide is taking tourists on a mountain hike. All of the hiking has been uphill until now. Now it's time to head downhill. Come up with a line for guiding the tourists down the mountain. The tour guide's line should offer a smooth transition from a previous part of the tour. Think of a connected idea such as "safety tips" that a tour guide might use. Work together as a class. Can you think of a few possible transitions that the tour guide could use to begin the descent?

Components of Body Paragraphs, continued

Topic Sentences

Your topic sentence identifies the main point of a paragraph. A topic sentence is usually a declarative sentence. Ask yourself this question before you write it: What point am I trying to make in this paragraph? Your answer is your topic sentence. This sentence may or may not be the first sentence of a paragraph. If it is the first sentence, it should be combined with a transitional phrase. It may also come after a transitional sentence. The transitional sentence acts as a bridge.

Each topic sentence must be connected to your main thesis.

Example 1: The Dangers of Smoking

As well as being a danger to a smoker's own health, cigarette smoking poses a danger to others. *Secondhand smoke is linked to health problems in non-smoking children and adults.*

Example 2: Cloth Diapers Vs. Disposables

In addition to caring for their baby's health, parents who choose cloth diapers have their child's future in mind. *Cloth diapering is a more eco-friendly choice than diapering with disposables.*

TASK 4

Go back to TASK 1 and write your point form ideas as topic sentences.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Transitions Between Ideas

Maintaining a connection is just as important within a paragraph. In English, there are a number of words and expressions designed specifically for this purpose. Some are one-word adverbs, called conjunctive adverbs. Others are multi-word transitional phrases.

Different transitional expressions are used for different purposes. They can be placed in a variety of places within a sentence. A transitional phrase used at the beginning of a sentence is followed by a comma.

Components of Body Paragraphs, continued

Transitions Chart

BUILD IDEAS	SHOW TIME	COMPARE	CONTRAST	GIVE EXAMPLES
in addition	meanwhile	similarly	on the other hand	for instance
furthermore	subsequently	likewise	in spite of this/that	to illustrate
moreover	following that	by/in comparison	unlike	for example
of equal importance	previously	at the same time	however	such as
CLARIFY OR REFRAME	INTENSIFY	SHOW RESULTS	SHOW ORDER	CONCLUDE
in other words	above all	consequently	first	finally
again	furthermore	therefore	from there	overall
as mentioned	naturally	as a result	eventually	in conclusion
in short	undoubtedly	hence	gradually	in summary

EXAMPLE SENTENCES USING TRANSITIONS:

- **As mentioned**, secondhand smoke has been linked to a variety of cancers.
- Your knees, **for example**, take a hard beating when you hike downhill. (Note that this comma offsets unessential words.)
- **At the same time**, many girls who played with Barbies showed few signs of having a negative body image in adulthood.
- Taking into account the environmental factors is **of equal importance**.

Overkill: Carefully placed transitions in a piece of writing are important. Don't be tempted to overuse them. This is called "overkill". The trick is to use a variety of transitions naturally as you would in speaking.

TASK 5

Find a partner. Spend some time studying this chart. Take turns quizzing each other. Partner A looks at the chart and asks the questions below about certain words or phrases. Partner B puts the chart away and answers without looking. Switch roles.

1. Spell a transitional word or phrase. (e.g., Spell "furthermore".)
2. Classify a word or phrase. (e.g., Q. What do we use "in spite of" for? A. To contrast.)
3. Use a transitional word or phrase in a sentence. (e.g., Use "naturally" in a sentence.)

Components of Body Paragraphs, continued

Evidence

When you write a topic sentence, you take a stand. You declare a general fact, argument, or personal opinion in writing. The next thing to do is back up your claim with evidence. You will need facts, testimonials, statistics, quotations, or real-life examples to prove your point to your reader.

In the transitions chart on page 5, you'll find a number of transitional phrases that you can use in this part of your essay. After you provide your evidence (statistic, quote, etc.) analyze it for your reader in another sentence. In other words, explain to your reader *why* this evidence proves your point.

Example 1:

Secondhand smoke exposure in children can result in respiratory infection and hospitalization. In the US, approximately 15,000 children are hospitalized each year due to secondhand smoke exposure. (*statistic*) Hundreds of thousands of cases of bronchitis and pneumonia could be prevented if parents smoked outside. This includes smoking outside one's vehicle. (*analysis*)

Example 2:

Cloth diapering reduces the amount of waste that goes into landfills. In a house that uses disposables, approximately 50% of household waste is made up of single-use diapers. (*statistic*) While cloth diapers can be passed down through many children, it takes hundreds of years for disposable diapers to decompose. (*fact*) In other words, disposable diapers will live much longer than the baby who wore them. (*analysis*)

TASK 6

Choose one topic that interests you from the list below. Provide evidence to back up the claim made in the topic sentence. This task will require some research. Your teacher may ask you to do your research outside of class time.

Topic sentences to choose from:

Smoking: In addition to being physically addictive, smoking is a social habit.

Hiking: Hiking downhill is hard on the body in a different way than hiking uphill.

Diapers: Like disposables, cloth diapers are harmful to the environment.

Body image: Barbie dolls cause girls to become self-conscious about their body image.

1. Fact:

2. Statistic:

3. Quote or Testimonial:

4. Real-Life Example:

Components of Body Paragraphs, continued

Quotations

In writing and speaking, you will often use somebody else's words to help support your main points. In a literary or research essay, you will use quotes frequently. In other types of essays, you won't use as many.

Direct Quotes:

A direct quote refers to the exact words written or spoken by someone else. Direct quotes are set within double quotation marks.

- "The fact is, quitting smoking is hard," said President Obama.
- President Obama said, "The fact is, quitting smoking is hard."
- President Obama asked Americans to join the Great American Smokeout: "The fact is, quitting smoking is hard."

Note: In a formal research paper, you will also have to cite your sources, whether you use direct or indirect quotes.

TASK 7

Work with a partner. Gather a few texts such as magazine articles, newspaper articles, or books. Take turns introducing quotations orally from these texts. Quote the author indirectly and directly out loud. The more you practice this orally, the easier it will be to use direct and indirect quotes in your writing. Try not to use "said" or "says" every time.

Alternatives to "says":

declares	argues	adds	states
claims	writes	remarks	suggests

Indirect Quotes:

An indirect quote is a summary or paraphrased (put into your own words) version of another person's words. Quotation marks aren't used. It is a good rule of thumb to use more indirect quotes than direct quotes in an essay.

- President Obama said his children motivated him to quit smoking.
- According to President Obama, his children motivated him to quit smoking.
- The president often remarks that his children motivated him to quit smoking.

Example:

(looking at an article about dolphins)

Frank Fish claims that dolphins are ten times stronger than human athletes. (*indirect quote*) Fish has done a lot of research on dolphin speed. He says, "The flukes are essentially wings." (*direct quote*)

Note: When you say a quote out loud, you can say the word "quote" or the phrase "and I quote" before it starts: "He says, and I quote, 'The flukes...'" Alternatively, you can make air quotes with your fingers.

Components of Body Paragraphs, continued

Summary or Closing Sentences – Optional

Some teachers will ask you to include a closing sentence for each body paragraph. This should be a short sentence that restates the main point of the paragraph.

A closing sentence is necessary if you are only submitting a one-paragraph assignment. In a well-organized, full-length essay it is optional, and may seem redundant.

Examples:

- People who are exposed to secondhand smoke are essentially passive smokers.
- Cloth diapers are the most eco-friendly choice.

Comprehension Check-In

Work with a partner and answer the following questions based on the lesson so far.

1. How is an essay like a sandwich or a human body?
2. What is a *controlling idea*?
3. What are the main components of a body paragraph?
4. Where does a topic sentence belong in an essay?
5. What are some transitional phrases that can be used to introduce examples that support a main point?
6. What should you do after you provide a statistic or fact in a body paragraph?
7. What alternatives can you use beside “says” when writing indirect or direct quotes?

A Checklist

BEFORE STARTING YOUR BODY

- ☒ Does each body paragraph have one main focus?
- ☒ Did you use transitions between paragraphs?
- ☒ Did you include a topic sentence for each paragraph?
- ☒ Did you use a good balance of transitional words and phrases within paragraphs?
- ☒ Did you provide enough evidence to support your claim in each paragraph?
- ☒ Did you provide an analysis of your supporting evidence to ensure that your reader understands your point?
- ☒ Does each paragraph relate to your thesis?
- ☒ Did you format direct and indirect quotes correctly?
- ☒ Did you include a summary sentence at the end of each paragraph if your teacher requested one?

Length

Every sentence must count in a paragraph. Read your paragraphs carefully to make sure there aren't any extra words or sentences. Can any of your long, wordy sentences be broken into two shorter ones? It is a good idea to vary your sentence length in order to keep your reader interested.